Communication in Transition: Telecommunication Technology in British and American Literature 1880–1913

Sara Keel

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Communication in Transition: Telecommunication Technology in British and American Literature 1880–1913

by

Sara Dirksen Keel

Under the Direction of LeeAnne M. Richardson, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century new modes of communication created a wide variety of problems and concerns for their users. In addition to simple cases of mistaken identity and missed messages, telecommunications made possible previously inconceivable feats of instantaneous distance communications, which caused in some users crises of place and person as well as confusion and/or interruption in their understanding of location, distance, and even embodiment. These concerns are visible across texts and genres, appearing in novels, short stories, mystical narratives, and journalism. Moreover, as the telegram and telephone became more prevalent, authors also employed telecommunications within their texts as indications of character types and stereotypes. Combined, these elements helped to generate an unprecedented sphere of intrigue and concern around telecommunication and invention. I argue that understanding turn-of-the-century telecommunications is critical because of its role in the era’s historic sociological changes and how literature displays that relationship. In addition, this project shows how these technologies differ from the other developments of the time, evidenced by instantaneous (and in the case of the telephone, voiced but faceless) communication causing feelings of disembodiment and displacement for users and the birth of concerns over disruption, information overload, and miscommunication. Ultimately, this project will show that the use of telecommunications in the fiction is symbolic of major socio-historic changes taking place at the turn of the century and that the technology itself created many changes, including individuals’ conceptions of time, space, and place.

INDEX WORDS: Telegraph, Wireless telegraph, Marconigraph, Telephone, Nineteenth century, Twentieth century, Turn of the century, Fin de Siècle, Transitional literature, Late Victorian, Early modern literature
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Georgia State University
December 2022
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my husband Geoffrey Keel, who has been a constant support and who believed in me even when I didn’t, and to my parents Doctors Carolyn and Murl Dirksen, whose incredible generosity made this possible and whose dedication to life-long learning set me on this path.
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1 INTRODUCTION

British and American literature between 1880 and 1913 marks a key turning point in the content, form and style of Western fiction. While critical, fiction from these transitional years is often lost in the shadows of the major literary moments on either side: Victorianism and Modernism. There is, therefore, a less rigorous assessment of the distinct elements of literature from this intermediate time. This proves unfortunate, as understanding how literature evolves from one major movement to another is a key to understanding the whole – and is particularly true of the move between Victorian and Modern literature. Elements of Victorian Literature that begin to shift put into clearer relief what makes the previous works truly Victorian. Additionally, one comes to understand how Modernism built atop Victorianism and was created, in many ways, to be a contrast to it. Thus, understanding the link between these major periods gives readers a better understanding of both. These transitional works offer a complex mélange of Modern and Victorian elements in the same text, making the texts at the heart of this study a most interesting genre for analysis.

Additionally, the extant literary criticism on the era’s budding and developing telecommunication technologies almost exclusively focuses on one or the other monoliths on either side of the transitional period. Certainly, these critical texts often include a chapter or so on the transition; however, there remains a noticeable lack of criticism centering on the development and growth of telecommunications as reflected in the literature of the time. There is no published criticism that examines precisely the relationship between telecommunications and British and American literatures of the 1880s through to the outbreak of the First World War. This gap in the research is surprising, as it is in this period that the popularity of the telegraph reached its apex and public use began to transition between the telegraph and the telephone; this
period also witnessed the introduction of the Marconigraph, or wireless telegraph. By 1880, the telegraph was broadly used and widely available. While research exists on the early introduction of the telegraph, fewer works examine its normalization. What we can see in the last decades of the century is how the telegraph began to play a role in a variety of activities. This, then, paved the way for the wireless telegraph and the telephone.

John Durham Peters opens his book *Speaking into the Air* with the following statement: “Though humans were anciently dubbed the ‘speaking animal’ by Aristotle, only since the late nineteenth century have we defined ourselves in terms of our ability to communicate with one another” (1). As Peters here shows, this moment in history is an important turning point in human communications, yet scholarship often overlooks it. Communicative technologies such as the telegram and telephone have become an integral part of human connection – not only because of their practical applications but also in the ways we understand and think about communication. The study at hand will focus on telecommunications and their representation in literature at the turn of the century as informed by but separate from other moments of literary or technological development.

While other scholars have discussed the importance of telecommunications, they generally include telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone among other new technologies from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the bicycle to the internet. This study endeavors to elevate these three interrelated communication technologies from the menagerie of inventions and examine them in more detail and from a variety of angles. Due to their uses and effects, the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone are similar to each other yet different from other innovations of the time such as the penny post, the camera, the phonograph, and the broadcasting radio. All three work to collapse the distance between individuals by allowing a
near-immediate ability to communicate, which led to a wealth of symbolic and interpretive resonance in a variety of fields. In this way, we can best see what is extraordinary about these technologies and how they fit into or defy the broader claims made about them. Like Peters above, some see the telegraph and telephone as the source of our modern conception of communication and miscommunication. This study seeks to take that historical argument and observe how it works in the literature – in texts like *Howards End* by E.M. Forster, *The Octopus* by Frank Norris, *In the Cage* by Henry James, and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by William Dean Howells, to name a few.

Of particular note in this study is the interplay between budding telecommunications and other sociological movements of the era. In addition to providing verisimilitude for realist authors, the uses of these technologies in the literature are intertwined with criticisms and observations on the rise of the business class and the entrance of women into the workplace. In the fiction, one will see that the telegraph and telephone are integrated into these events in tangible ways. For example, in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, Melmotte’s meteoric rise is in part indicated by his use of telecommunications. Melmotte employs telegrams as a part of his business ventures, using them to grow his accounts; his use of telegraphs is in direct contrast to characters like Sir Felix Carbury, who is incautious with his inherited wealth and engages telegraphic services frivolously. Through this contrast, we see that the use of telegrams in the text plays an important role in the development of these characters, who for Trollope represent the power shift he saw happening in England. In this way, authors use the technologies both as practical aspects of real life and simultaneously as symbols of change.

These new modes of communication also created a wide variety of problems and concerns for their users. In addition to simple cases of mistaken identity and missed telegrams,
the previously inconceivable feats of instantaneous distance communications caused in some users crises of place and person, in which users experienced confusion and/or interruption in their understanding of location, distance, and even embodiment. As H. G. Wells writes in *Anticipations: of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*, “The world grows smaller and smaller, the telegraph and telephone go everywhere” (199). Readers today may see this description as metaphorical, but to many users in the nineteenth century, the world literally felt to them like it was shrinking. Distance was measured, informally, by length of travel. But how far away is somewhere if a message or even a voice can be relayed instantaneously? These concerns often play out in the form of spiritual narratives and ghost stories. As Jill Galvan shows in *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies 1859-1919*, it is no coincidence that the rise in spiritualism coincides with the growth of telecommunications. This is particularly evident in Kipling’s story “Wireless,” with the parallel narratives of spiritual channeling and wireless telegraphing.

Moreover, as the telegram and telephone became more prevalent, other concerns over the uses, overuses, and misuses of the technologies grew as well. Like many new inventions, individuals fretted over their ability to be used as objects of vice. Readers can see this in *In the Cage* where the telegram is used between Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen as a means to arrange their illicit love affair. All of these elements, combined, helped to generate an unprecedented sphere of intrigue and concern around communication and invention that has never been replicated. I argue that understanding turn-of-the-century telecommunications is critical because of their role in the era’s historic sociological changes and how literature exhibits that relationship. In addition, this project shows how these technologies differ from the other
developments of the time, evidenced by instantaneous (and in the case of the telephone, voiced but faceless) communication causing feelings of disembodiment and displacement for users and the birth of concerns over disruption, information overload, and miscommunication. Ultimately, this project will show that the use of telecommunications in the fiction is symbolic of major socio-historic changes taking place at the turn of the century and that the technology itself created many changes, including individuals’ conceptions of time, space, and place.

1.1 Why Telecommunications?

This study began as a simple question: In *Howards End*, what does Forster mean when employs the phrase “telegrams and anger”? The answer proved to be more complex than I imagined and, more importantly, indicative of larger and critically important trends in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature. In both the past and present, authors often present the telegraph and telephone for consideration alongside other inventions, technologies, or influences as part of discussions on change. As we shall discover, turn-of-the-century telecommunications both are and are not unique. Emerging telecommunications sit at the crossroads of a variety of technological and social developments and cultural shifts of this transitional period.

In the introduction to *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1913*, Stephen Kern begins his work by asserting that, “From around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space. Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation” (1). Kern’s opening lines are both an assertion on the impact of the telephone and wireless telegraph on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century culture, as well
as a clear example of the ways in which these technologies tend to be associated with other advancements. In *Victorian Soundscapes*, for example, John Picker includes the telephone alongside a myriad of other sound-centric inventions of the nineteenth century (some more evergreen than others), writing that the Victorian period gave rise to “the electric telegraph and the microphone, the telephone and the phonograph, technical apparatuses such as Hermann von Helmholtz's vowel resonators and John Tyndall’s singing flames, and specialized short-hand systems like Isaac Pitman’s phonography and Alexander Melville Bell’s Visible Speech” (10). Likewise, Mark Goble brings telecommunications alongside recorded sounds in *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* in order to explore modernist aesthetics of mediation through a backwards-looking analysis. And while Richard Menke’s *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* does, as the title suggests, focus largely on telegraphy, he too places telecommunications in a context of new media technologies and other connections including a variety of advancements from the growth of print culture to the postage stamp. Galvan’s study *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies 1859-1919* offers a unique but likewise collective perspective, including the “telegraph girl” and switchboard operator in the same company not only as the office typist but also the female automatist and other metaphysical channellers.

Within turn-of-the-century texts, telecommunications also appear alongside other contemporary themes. In Martha Rayne’s 1885 *What Can a Woman Do? Or, Her Position in the Business and Literary World*, for example, the chapter on women telegraphers falls between “coloring photographs” and “Lady Book Canvassers,” and is included alongside other public professions such as hotel clerk, journalist, government clerks and post office clerks, and the Profession of Nursing (5-9). (There is also, of course, a large section on “The Kingdom of the
Home.” In Forster’s *Howards End*, the Wilcoxes are often characterized by their use of telegrams, but also by “newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs” (26), along with a variety of other modern accoutrement and philosophies.

What makes telecommunications unique then – and primely situated for fruitful study – is not its exception from these lists but the opposite: the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone are ubiquitous and found across genres of discourse, placing these technologies at a unique intersection of important socio-historical and philosophical transitions. This dissertation, as a collective work, explores the intersectionality of turn-of-the-century telecommunications within these historic and literary moments.

1.2 The Importance of Place

Geography often plays an integral role in representations of telecommunications. The Victorian era of England is well known for its extreme changes: the growth of industrialization, the rise of science and fall of religion, and the introduction of new technologies including the automobile, bicycle, passenger train, electric motor, telegraph and telephone. Likewise, the end of this era marked the death of Queen Victoria, and the installation of her son Edward represents the passing of one of the last remnants of “Old England.” This social upheaval helped to foment the nation’s complicated relationship with the past and future: many individuals strove to find a balance between the safety of Victorian standards and the fears and promises of modernity, and writers were no exception. Authors often integrated these developments into their texts through the introduction of telecommunications. For many British texts, particularly those written in the first decade of the 20th century, the appearance of telegraphy and telephony displays the tension between past and future. We see the crisis of change echoed in many of the literatures’ concerns over developing technologies and the changes they engender in everyday life.
The United States, at the same time, was undergoing its own major changes: the great push west had exponentially grown the size of the country, and people and cities were more spread out than ever before. The development of the railroad helped to connect the now-large nation, and with the railroad came telegraph lines. For those writing about the expansion of the nation, the ways in which pioneers maintained connections or were disconnected from the rest of the country were a common concern. This is evident in such texts as *The Octopus* by Frank Norris in which characters are both connected and disconnected from the rest of the nation due in large part to their access to telegraphy. Meanwhile, for those living in cities and along the East Coast, communication was no less of a topic. Though American urban literature seems to have much more in common with its British counterpart than expansion literature and uses the themes of telegraphy and telephony in similar ways to London writers, American urban literature also provides unique insights including commentary on American industrialization, issues of slavery and race, and Puritanism. The growth of Naturalism as a form of literary theory and style also ensured a focus on the plight of the poor in American city centers.

The differences in the ways telecommunication technologies were used and organized in England and America mirror ways in which the two nations were developing and changing. In both nations, telecommunications became a resource for the business class. In England, this class found itself in conflict with the nobility, each vying for the same space at the top. In comparison, commercial telegraphy was, for decades, managed by the British government. In both cases, the old structures stultified the growth of new areas of work and invention. In America, however, successful businessmen were able to rise to the top, and families such as the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers became the American version of nobility. Telegraphy, similarly, was privatized, thus integrated into American capitalism, and allowed to grow and expand to every corner of the
nation. Telegraph wires became part of the American landscape, just as telegraphic narratives became part of American storytelling.

1.3 A Brief Overview of Extant Scholarship and Methods

As mentioned above, existing scholarship tends to look at this transitional period as either the beginning or the end of one of the larger movements on either side. Victorian Soundscapes by John Picker, The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-Line Pioneers by Tom Standage, and Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems by Richard Menke, for example, all address literature after 1880 in only one or two chapters. Transitional works are presented almost as a postscript, a decline from high Victorianism, instead of a distinct and interesting period. On the other side, Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life by Mark Goble focuses on Modernism and includes pre-World War I works mainly as stage-setting for Goble’s main argument. Many secondary texts, too, discuss the telegraph and telephone as part of a large string of technological developments. The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918 by Stephen Kern as well as Picker’s Victorian Soundscapes, Goble’s Beautiful Circuits, and Peters’ Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication all discuss the telegraph and/or telephone by placing these technologies in the context of other developments such as the creation of the penny post, the camera, and the phonograph or radio, even sometimes the bicycle or hot air balloon. While these works are certainly important and will play a critical role in the present discussion, their broader scope inherently means that they pay less attention to what makes telecommunications unique, which is the emphasis of this project. There are critical texts of narrower scope, such as Galvan’s The Sympathetic Medium, that are more comparable to the research proposed here. However, Galvan’s text still covers a broader timeframe, and splits the focus of the text between
technology and spiritualism. The relationship between these two elements is certainly interesting and helps to inform projects such as this one, though this study seeks to employ a more pin-pointed scope.

In contrast to the works discussed above, I will focus on a narrow thirty-three-year time frame and devote the focus of this project specifically to the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone. By doing so, the research will offer a more comprehensive view of the uses and effects of these telecommunications as displayed in the fiction. These technologies play a pivotal role in modern concepts of communication and function as symbols of other sociological changes at an important turning point in history.

Specifically, this study evaluates both English and American texts, with an emphasis on novels and short fiction, and analyzes a variety of works to highlight literary inclusion of the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone in order to better understand how these technologies were used as narrative devices and how they integrate into or challenge the daily lives of characters and authors alike. In some texts, such as the short story “Wireless” or the novella In the Cage, telecommunications play a central role. However, there are many more works in which telecommunications are on the periphery or where the use of such technology is metaphorical. These texts are of equal interest to this study as they display the ways in which the technologies were becoming normalized and integrated into lives and thought.

While preparing this study, I came to appreciate the methodological approach of “surface reading.” My intentions and goals for this study greatly aligned with this critical practice as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus describe it in “The Way We Read Now”: surface reading is a critical act that addresses “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts” (9), and that Margaret Cohen describes as a “return to the archive” (51). My approach to this project involved
what Best and Marcus identify as “as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts” (emphasis omitted), in which readers “locate narrative structures and abstract patterns on the surface, as aggregates of what is manifest in multiple texts as cognitively latent but semantically continuous,” and where the critic becomes “a taxonomist arranging and categorizing texts into larger groups” (11). This particular type of surface reader attends to “what is present rather than privilege what is absent” (11), which also echoes the path of this study. Frederik Van Dam et al. see surface reading as part of a group of movements that represent a growing shift in current scholarship and that “aim to foster an engagement with aspects of literary culture which are easily overlooked as utterly ordinary, but which nonetheless carry important meanings. Their interest lies not so much in the ideological ramifications of the literary text, as in the more tangible aspects of its composition, be these formal or contextual” (1). Similarly, this study places emphasis on texts as artifacts, examining the language itself as well as the cyclical power of text and context.

1.4 An Introduction to the Chapters

Chapter Two, titled “Transgressive Imagination, Reality, and The (Im)mutability of Class in James’ In the Cage,” offers an analysis of In the Cage that serves as an introductory example of the sociological and historical impact of telegraphy. It brings together topics of socio-economic boundaries, women in the workforce, and characterizations/critiques of telegraph users, particularly the wealthy. This analysis will serve as an introduction for the following chapters, particularly Chapters Three and Four. In the Cage works well to establish the study at hand as it brings together the uses and effects of telegraphy between various classes. The overlapping lives of the telegraph operator, known only as “the girl,” and the telegraph sender Captain Everard is a prime example of the interplay of class. Issues of class relate directly with
The increase of women in the workplace, as readers will see in the experiences of “the girl,” and prepares readers for the broader discussion of this subject in Chapter Four. Though many elements addressed in *In the Cage* are ubiquitous enough to be treated to individual chapters, the ways in which they coalesce and interact in *In the Cage* make this text one of the strongest sources for the research project at hand and serves as a useful gateway into the other arguments of this dissertation.

The following two chapters address literary representations of telegraphy as socio-historic markers within a cross-section of sample texts. The variety of sources, both in medium and quality, indicate the commonness of these issues. These chapters draw from novels, short stories, poems, letters, and news articles from canonized authors, professional writers, and novices alike. Chapter Three, “Dangerous Connections: Complex & Critical Standards for Women Telegraphers,” examines the use of telecommunications by entrepreneurs and businessmen in the literature of the defined time period and shows how characters use and misuse the technology with a goal of financial success. I draw examples from a variety of well-known British and American texts—*Howards End* by E. M. Forster, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* both by William Dean Howell, *The Octopus* by Frank Norris, and the *Way We Live Now* by Anthony Trollope. This chapter both explores the verisimilitude uses of telegraphy within the sample texts and questions the subtext inherent in the use of telecommunications by certain characters, what that means to the reader, and how some authors utilize these assumptions to subvert expectation.

Chapter Four, “The Business of Communicating: Telegraph Use as Character Trope and Social Commentary” explores the history and literary representations of women’s increased numbers in the public and semi-public workplace and its relationship to telecommunications as
an industry. Thomas Jepsen’s *My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office 1846-1950* helps to situate the conversation within a historical framework, while the chapter examines writings by canonical authors as well as women working in the field of telecommunications, namely Anthony Trollope’s short work “The Telegraph Girl,” Ella Cheever Thayer’s *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes*, and a selection from W. J. Johnson’s anthology *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom*. By comparing various representations, this chapter illuminates the delicate social balance and the professional in-betweenness of the professional woman telegraphist.

The final two chapters turn from historical to experiential elements of the telegraph and telephone, exploring how these communicative technologies created a new set of concerns and disconnects in their users. Chapter Five, “Telegraphic Relativism: Displacement & Disembodiment in Turn of the Century Texts,” focuses on telecommunications’ impact on individuals’ perceptions of time and space, manifesting in the literature often as displacement of or disembodiment, and explores the ways in which authors experimented with language in order to represent these new feelings and experiences for which there was hitherto no vocabulary. The first section of this chapter addresses the primarily English experience of convergence. For this, we turn to *Anticipations* by H.G. Wells and “The Pleasure Telephone,” a news article by Arthur Mee. This is followed by an analysis of conceptions of expansion and frontiers, with discussions on the relationship between telegrams, telephones, and trains, as well as the spread of corporate and government power via these three interrelated inventions. This section examines both American expansion through an analysis of *The Octopus*, and English colonialism by way of the Easter Rising and its associated texts. The chapter closes with a conversation on feelings of disembodiment engendered by telecommunications manifesting as supernatural tales, with an
examination of “Wireless” by Rudyard Kipling and “You May Telephone from Here” by Algernon Blackwood.

Finally, Chapter Six, “Anger and Pain: Telecommunications and Relational Disconnection” turns to concerns for what is lost through telecommunications: the human ability to connect relationally. This chapter examines two texts: E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* and Ford Madox Ford’s *A Call: The Tale of Two Passions*. Both published in 1910, these texts productively round out this research project, coming as they do on the precipice of the first World War, and presenting collectively the uses of both telegraphy and telephony. Focusing primarily on the novel’s refrain of “telegrams and anger,” this chapter will explore *Howards End*’s display of how telecommunications moves from the tangible into the metaphorical, indicating a move past solely concrete thinking about these technologies. In Ford’s *A Call*, a character’s extramarital dalliance is interrupted by a phone call, causing the character to have a mental breakdown that disrupts the relationships of the novella’s characters. The analysis of these texts shows not only how communicative technologies become normalized to the point of abstraction but also how the telegraph and telephone become metaphors for other actions and ideas – in this case, a decrease in personal connection.

The dissertation concludes with a brief discussion of the impact on the Western world of the changes wrought by telecommunication, particularly in the lead up to and conceptualization of the first World War. It also reiterates how these critical contemporary interpretations of telecommunications continue to inform our modern language and suggests further avenues for study.
1.5 Modern Exigencies for the Study of Early Telecommunications

Though there have been a handful of excellent studies on the use of technologies in Victorian Literature and American Modernist works, more research is required. The assessment of these past telecommunication concerns seems particularly important now. We live in a time of developing technologies, and many are concerned with how these technologies will affect their lives. Adults often say how grateful they are that social media did not exist when they were children, and writing students frequently choose to write on topics like the effect of technology on attention spans, children’s development, language skills, or personality. We talk about the chemical reaction our bodies have to Facebook “likes” and about phantom vibration syndrome. We are worried about technology. The concerns surrounding telecommunications in the literature from 1880-1913 are strikingly familiar and echo many of the questions we have today. In *Howards End*, for example, the Schlegels’ use of the phrases “telegrams and anger” and “panic and emptiness” echoes some of the disconnectedness that individuals feel today concerning cell phones and social media. The phrase mirrors the mental clutter created by contemporary inventions that were supposed to make life easier but now require one to be available at all moments. Captain Everard’s use of telegraphs to arrange dalliances and liaisons in *In the Cage* by Henry James foreshadows our fears about a culture where OK Cupid and Tinder are the primary ways for couples to meet and mirrors the social concerns of catfishing and putting child locks on web browsers to protect children from online predators. Like the Schlegels, we fear what the increased speed of information does to ourselves and our ability to connect, and like James shows, we worry that new technology creates new opportunities to follow one’s vices. For a contemporary reader, this study will not only illuminate the concerns and fears of technology in
the texts as it relates to the texts’ historical and cultural source, it will also provide useful context and parallel for the contemporary reader.

In addition to the many similarities between contemporary telecommunications and its forebears, there are also intriguing elements that seem to be unique to the telegram and telephone, and to this period compared to other telecommunications at other points in time such as the mobile phone or internet. For this work, I have chosen to focus on the unique elements, which is a step past the comparative work from which this study grew. By examining what is different, I believe that the similarities will also become apparent, while ensuring that we do not oversimplify the situation by forcing parallels too far.

As a whole, this project seeks to bring together disparate styles and forms of texts around central themes of telecommunication technologies, particularly those new to writers working between the years 1880 and 1913. By analyzing and synthesizing particular literary employments of telecommunications and by classifying them by type, we can come to understand the impact of the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and early telephone on society at the turn of the century, their variety of applications in literature, and the technology’s general importance and ubiquity. I hope that this knowledge will add to our general understanding of the present texts and the time period in which they were written, as well as enlighten future critical analysis and interpretations.
2 TRANSGRESSIVE IMAGINATION, REALITY, AND THE (IM)MUTABILITY OF CLASS IN JAMES’ *IN THE CAGE*

Henry James’ enthusiasm for the uses and possibilities of telegraphy is well documented. Currently over a thousand telegrams sent by the author exist, and works like *In the Cage* show how this interest extended into his fiction writing. James’ 1898 novella provides detailed information on the inner workings of telegraphy, the responsibilities of a professional telegrapher, and sketches of the types of customers one might encounter. Conceptually, the text invites readers to make observations on the intersection of telegraphy and greater social questions: One issue of concern in the novella is the liminal border space between public and private spheres and how these are transversed by telegraphy – and the telegrapher in particular. The novella also highlights questions of space and distance: physical, socio-economic, and between imagination and reality. Ultimately, the text begs questions about the relationship between burgeoning technology and the influences of income and class.

*In the Cage* centers on the life and experiences of an unnamed young woman most often referred to by James simply as “the girl.” Having suffered an undescribed financial calamity in her youth described only as the “great misery” (230), the telegraphist now works at Cocker’s, a grocery-cum-post office in Mayfair, one of London’s higher-end neighborhoods. She alone

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1 From here on, the unnamed main character will be identified as “the telegraphist.” James gives her a number of names from “our young lady” (232) and “our heroine” (242), to “our young critic” (246), and even “[t]he betrothed of Mr. Mudge” (247). Most often, for James and his readers she is simply “the girl.” Most researchers, however, have chosen to focus on the woman’s profession by calling her “the telegraphist.” As Ball points out, James never attributes this title to the main character himself (94). I have chosen to continue the academic tradition of referring to her as “the telegraphist.” Though I had some concern that I was trading one title that reduced the character simply to her gender to one that reduced her to a profession (or that identified her only as the part she played within a capitalist construct), I concluded that, as we shall see moving forward in this text, the social and cultural connotations of being a telegraphist were many and complicated and that “our heroine” here embodies many of those features. Therefore, “the telegraphist” becomes a useful moniker in that it represents not simply a profession but a complex web of knowledge and expectations.
works to sustain her all-female family. James writes that the elder sister has “succumbed to all but absolute want” and that the mother “never rebounded any more at the bottom than on the way,” resulting in her “smelling much of the time of whisky” (231). The office at Cocker’s, then, is the telegraphist’s last line to her old life. In her position at the post office, she comes into contact with many customers of a high station. The first lines of the story relate this idea: “It had occurred to her early that in her position — that of a young person spending, in framed and wired confinement, the life of a guinea-pig or a magpie — she should know a great many persons without their recognising the acquaintance” (229). The “great many persons” are also often “great persons,” due to the location of Cocker’s and the expense of telegraphs themselves. The telegraphist often reflects on her customers, those “profligate rich” (239), that they “scattered about them, in extravagant chatter over their extravagant pleasures and sins” (239) an abundance of money. When the telegraphist’s fiancé Mr. Mudge requests that she move to an office in Chalk Farms, closer to the grocery he runs and out of her current location, she is reluctant to give up what she perceives as the last, tenuous connection she holds to her old life, even while her customers’ profligate spending continues to “twist the knife” (239). Although the telegraphist insists throughout the novella that she hates her customers, she also sees their stories as a “positive excess of light, a perverse melancholy, a gratuitous misery” (236) to which she is simultaneously drawn and repulsed. Mudge’s suggested move inspires “a reason she might almost put forward for a policy of procrastination. It sounded silly, of course, as yet, to plead such a motive, especially as the fascination of the place was after all a sort of torment. But she liked her torment; it was a torment she should miss at Chalk Farm” (231).

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2 The lack of a family patriarch would suggest that this absence has something to do with the women’s financial calamity, though the details are not revealed.
This connection to her former life is also why the telegraphist maintains her friendship with the otherwise not altogether pleasant Mrs. Jordan. James describes the friendship between the two women as one based in status: “Mrs. Jordan, handed down from their early twilight of gentility and also the victim of reverses, was the only member of [the telegraphist’s] circle in whom she recognised an equal” (232). As these examples show, and as we will continue to discover, the telegraphist views herself for most of the novel as existing in a liminal, limbo space between her past and future, between two ways of life and two social classes. Mudge and Chalk Farms represent the tedium of her future – and as Ball points out, the name “suggests sterility rather than growth” (86) – Mrs. Jordan the last vestiges of her old life, and the telegraph office at Cocker’s a temporary stop-gap that allows her to delay her future and imagine new connections to her otherwise lost class status.³ In this way, the telegraphist’s growing interest and ultimate rejection by one of her customers, Captain Everard, first creates an opportunity to imagine class transgression, then reifies the boundaries of social class, informing modern readers of the importance of class in James’ London and the mobility and immobility between them.

At the introduction of the novella, reality and fiction are two relatively distinct realms. Yet the telegraph office – the eponymous “cage” – serves as a nexus between them. On one hand, it is a daily reminder of the telegraphist’s situation and her need to work. The physical descriptions of Cocker’s solidify this sense of reality, as the novella’s first paragraph includes a description of Cocker’s highlighting “the presence of hams, cheese, dried fish, soap, varnish, paraffin and other solids and fluids that [the telegraphist] came to know perfectly by their smells without consenting to know them by their names” (229). Eric Savoy makes note of this, calling it “the story’s telegraphic milieu and decidedly down-market setting in a grocery” (32). It is also in

³ Although both the novella’s characters and readers see the telegraphist as decidedly lower class, she herself still holds tightly to her former identity as part of the upper class.
this context that the telegraphist meets the practical Mr. Mudge. However, for the telegraphist, the telegraph office is also a place for imagination. James informs us that the telegraphist often, during the quiet of the lunch hour, reads “a book from the place where she borrowed novels, very greasy, in fine print and all about fine folks, at a ha’penny a day” (231) and that her finely tuned “sympathies” would sometimes lead to “odd caprices of curiosity” (231). The scene, then, is already primed for the entrance of Lady Bradeen and Captain Everard, and for their illicit affair to spark the imagination of the story’s protagonist. The tale that the telegraphist constructs from her fragmented glimpses into Bradeen and Everard’s relationship ignites her authorial creativity and inspires a hope for a better future for herself. Jill Galvan writes that the telegraphist “significantly shifts in her own mind the dimensions of her relationship to the aristocracy, from a physical to non-physical, even spiritual, plane of connection” (298). Through the stories she tells herself, the telegrapher begins to believe in these multiple planes of connection. In this way, for the telegraphist the office becomes not only a place to read ha’penny novels, but where their contents can come to life.

The use of telegrams and the telegraph are inextricable from the events of the novella, and these uses help to reiterate the overall class-consciousness of the work. The ready example of this, as previously noted, is the expense of the telegrams themselves, which leads to an inherent divide between who has the capital to use the technology contrasted with those who operates it. Additionally, the content of the messages reiterates to the telegraphist the great rift between herself and her customers: “It was just the talk — so profuse sometimes that she wondered what was left for their real meetings — of the very happiest people” (233). Even the central affair between Everard and Bradeen, into which the telegrapher is drawn by the couple’s correspondence, seems to be a risk they can “afford” to take.
Having once been of a higher station, the telegraphist sees herself as still on the descent, able to be reinstated by a willing party such as Everard. It seems clear to everyone else, however, that she is not *on her way* to being of a lower class but solidly a part of it already. The telegraphist’s profession, her engagement to a grocer, and her overall financial and social situation signal to the rest of the world, including Everard, that she is, if not *of* the working class, now certainly a member of it. In fact, her family’s great fall happened so early in her life, that the telegraphist no longer has even a complete understanding of what it means to be wealthy, “for the experience of poverty had begun, in her life, too early, and her ignorance of the requirements of homes of luxury had grown, with other active knowledge, a depth of simplification” (243). Nevertheless the telegraphist, along with her family members and Mrs. Jordan, still cling to their old identities and the hope that comes with them: “It had been a questionable help, at that time, to the ladies submerged, floundering, panting, swimming for their lives, that they *were* ladies; but such an advantage could come up again in proportion as others vanished, and it had grown very great by the time it was the only ghost of one they possessed” (243). While falling from a higher class seems easy enough, the telegraphist eventually discovers that moving back up the ladder is much more fraught, and that the ghost of her former status has no meaning to the other characters, excepting herself and Mrs. Jordan.⁴

This, then, makes it clear that the novella is a text about class, where the telegraphist stands between two worlds. Telegraphy is interwoven throughout and plays a role not just in the plot but in the meaning of the novella as whole: The use of telegraphy and the ways in which the infrastructure of telegraphy uses and is used by people is inextricable from the overall argument

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⁴ – though Mrs. Jordan’s status as a former “lady” only matters to the telegraphist as long as the two are of the same social standing. When the telegraphist discovers that Mrs. Jordan is going to marry a butler, there becomes a status rift between them that the telegraphist is not willing to traverse.
of the text. Telegraphy enables the telegraphist to believe that class transcendence – and more specifically class *ascendance* – is possible.

Scholars have written much on the topic of the telegraphist’s creative abilities and her role as an author within the text itself. Richard Menke calls it “her authorlike critical faculty,” arguing that it is this skill, along with her imagination that “holds the tale together” (“Telegraphic Realism” 975), and later concludes, “The story cages the soul of an authorial narrator … in the focalised and ironized figure of the telegraphist” (983). Hilary Ball similarly describes the character’s writerly characterization as “the telegraphists’ role as surrogate author figure” (81). Even James calls the novella “the girl’s ‘subjective’ adventure” (“On ‘In the Cage’” 415). As this shows, the telegraphist’s narrative ability is critical to the text. She serves less as a stand-in for the author as an individual and more as a representation of authorship – or the productive or creative process. While based on mere slivers of information and only tenuously related to reality, the telegraphist’s tale is at times surprisingly prescient and at other times begins to shape the world around her. As Savoy notes, “The telegraphist’s ‘knowledge’ is a queer mixture of fact and fancy generated both by her acute perspicacity and … by her clear calculations and the operations of her intense longing to somehow be recognized and valued by the Aristocrats whom she serves” (286). The telegraphist uses this mix of fact, fiction, and surprisingly skilled insight to construct a narrative for herself in which anything is possible and the lines of class are mutable. The various points of multi-class contact that the telegraphist experiences and which her profession facilitates combine to show that the telegraphist is, in truth, balanced not between classes but between reality and fiction. Through the telegraphist and her experiences, James explores how telegraphy and imagination intermingle and serve to test the

5 Quotes from Menke are taken from his 2000 *PMLA* article unless otherwise noted by a “TR” in the parenthetical citation.
boundaries of the seemingly immutable line between classes. Ultimately, the telegraph office becomes a location where anything seems possible – a nexus point between fiction and reality – that grants the telegraphist the ability to dream of class ascendancy.

2.1 Critical Context

In the preface to the novella, James writes that his story “speaks for itself, I think, so frankly as scarce to suffer further expatiation” (154). Despite the author’s stance, many scholars have undertaken the challenge. Of the most notable contributors is Richard Menke. Though perhaps best known for his 2008 work *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*, Menke utilizes the same theoretical framework in his 2000 *PMLA* article “Telegraphic Realism: Henry James’ *In the Cage*.” Here, Menke displays the relationship between telegraphy and Victorian realism, positing that the telegraph had “provided Victorian writers with a powerful technological analogue, and even a kind of working model, for Victorian realism … As invoked by novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, the image of the telegraph suggests some of the formal and ideological properties of mid-Victorian realism” (976). In contrast, Menke shows, James undercuts this usage. Just as the precepts of realism started to come into question in the later quarter of the century and authors like James began to experiment with new ideas within the genre; telegraphy, by the late 1800’s was also taking on new and more complex social significance. According to Menke, James draws parallels between these maturations in *In the Cage*. “James’s new attention to the mechanics of telegraphy and to the psychosocial content of the telegraphic exchange indicates how the imaginative possibilities of a medium may change as newer technologies emerge and suggests the significance of media transitions for literary history” (979). Menke shows James’ experimentation within his works,

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6 A version of this article reappears in “Winged Intelligence,” a chapter of *Telegraphic Realism*. 
particularly through characters’ familiarity with and uses of new media technologies and the implementation of a type of adapting realism that is simultaneously realistic and representational, and notes that *In the Cage* “treats telegrams as texts demanding intricate interpretation” (980). Menke also highlights the use of narration and the story’s point of view as support for an authorial reading of the telegraphist, and ends with a discussion on the uses of telegraphic language throughout the novella and across locations. Menke concludes that, “To James, telegraphy is an everyday experience of the modern. It is also an evolving technology whose fictional representation marks the differences between his realism and that of mid-Victorian writers who found in telegraphy a figure for their own practice” (987). Ultimately, Menke shows, James’ “telegraphic realism” stands apart from High Victorian writers, a point made clear in *In the Cage*.

Like Menke, Galvan’s work on the interaction of telegraphy and literature also highlights the topic of mediation; however unlike Menke, Galvan focuses her research not on realism but on the metaphysical and supernatural. Her 2011 text *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* opens with a chapter on James’ novella. Galvan begins by placing the chapter within the context of her book’s overall goal; she writes, “My aim is to spotlight the nineteenth-century gendering of human mediation, explicating it as a strategy for addressing the type of communicative concerns at issue here” (24). Galvan shows that the introduction of women into the professional field of mediation was an attempt to minimize said middle space: Women, with their perceived softness and domesticity, made mediated transactions more comfortable and the expectation of female automation made the communications feel more private, doing away with many of the early annoyances. She

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7 This chapter, titled “Sympathy and the Spiriting of Information In the Cage,” appears to be a revision of her 2001 article “Class Ghosting in ‘In the Cage,’” published by *The Henry James Review*. 
writes, “female media mitigated that annoyance by seeming to offer special virtues that aided interpersonal contact. The feminization of mediation is, precisely, a response to that annoyance: it attempts to maximize the connecting powers of the apparatus while, conversely, minimizing its existence as a hindrance” (24). Galvan goes on to address James’ telegraphist specifically, identifying that the character fails to act as the automated mediator expected of her within the profession:

It is not that James’s heroine does not try to be a good, true girl, but rather that her efforts in that line continually run up against the material and moral shortcomings in her way of life. What results is a rendering of female mediation in which the medium’s sympathy is fully exposed as a gilding of her troublesome curiosity about others’ life stories, a curiosity fueled by her deep-seated repudiation of her class status. (33)

The telegraphist’s denial of her class status drives her imagination, leading her to break professional expectations and explore new creative possibilities. While Galvan shows how the telegraphist and her vocational peers were expected to be mentally and emotionally “absent,” other scholars have focused on their physical presence in the public sphere and the relation to other presence-oriented professions such as prostitution. Galvan shows that James’ telegraphist rejects both sets of expectations – absence and presence – through her rejection of her current class standing and her desire for class transcendence.

Also on the subject of presence and physicality, the extant scholarship offers a rich discourse concerning sexuality in James’ novella. Mark Goble dedicates a chapter of his book Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life to the subject of “pleasure at a distance” in the works of Henry James, of which In the Cage serves as an introduction to the concept. He posits that In the Cage “signals a particular intensification in the way James renders some of his
most intimate fascinations as powerfully technologized by the modern world” (32), situating James’ increasing interest in telecommunications within a larger framework of the author’s interests in connectivity and intimacy. Goble concentrates his argument on “the dramas of ‘connexion’” – a concept which James employs regularly, particularly in his later works – and is defined by “a type of relationship that is thick with equal measures of epistemological mystery and illicit sexuality” (34). Drawing from a similar interpretation of James’ text, in the article “‘In the Cage’ and the Queer Effects of Gay History,” Savoy argues for “the text’s fundamental queerness, which arises from James’ displacement of fin-de-siècle homosexual panic into the narrative economies of hetersexual transgression” (287). He identifies the telegraphists’ interest in and nearness to the illicit affair between Everard and Bradeen, as well as the telegraphists’ artistic and authorial insertion into the events, as a type of “queerness,” a term which Savoy argues for James “signifies the uncanny, the circuitous, the displaced that more often than not are locatable in proscribed sexualities and their discursive marking” (284). Sexuality and its many forms continue to be a dynamic source of discussion on James’ oeuvre, and his later works in particular. Other excellent works on this subject include Nicola Nixon’s “The Reading Gaol of Henry James’s In the Cage,” and "The Double Life in the Cage: The Queering of the Social in Henry James’s Late Short Fiction." by Thomas Laughlin.

While some scholars emphasize the sexuality of James’ text, others address similar points of discussion while examining the work through the lens of gender. Among many on the theme, works by Hilary Ball and Jennifer Emery-Peck are particularly apt for the discussion at hand. Ball’s 2018 article “Blooming Girls and Bad Girls: ‘In the Cage’ and the Ha’penny Novel”

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8 While this delineation between themes of sexuality and gender is useful for offering some organization to the current scholarly discourse, these works regularly interact in ideas and arguments. Like Ball, Savoy addresses the telegraphist’s participation in various gender tropes, and like Savoy, Ball speaks to the sexual nature of women’s professions in the public eye, for example.
examines James’ characterization of the telegraphist as informed by the article’s two titular “female types.” Ball identifies the “blooming girl” as the heroine of the domestic novel and the “bad girl” as the central character of the sensational novel and goes on to examine these two character types within the historically contemporary context of the emerging New Woman. She concludes that while the telegraphist may embody certain elements of both the blooming girl and the bad girl, as a modern woman, she eschews being classified as entirely either. By doing so, Ball shows, the telegraphist represents for James a contemporary emergence of female agency – a new mode that denied traditional characterization. Emery-Peck also explores definitions of the telegraphist’s character type and how she adheres to and frustrates attempts to be fit into a specific role. In “As She Called It”: Henry James Makes Free with a Female Telegraphist,” published in 2010, Emery-Peck explores the telegraphist’s positions as woman, author, and reader through a detailed reading of the early pages of the novella and a careful analysis of form. She posits that James’ use of experimental form including free indirect discourse and his insistence on leaving the character unnamed not only brings the reader along a process of decoding – much like the telegraphist decodes and authors the stories around her – but does so to portray the tension inherent between the character’s various social and narrative roles. Emery-Peck writes that James “continually emphasizes the telegraphist’s pride in her own readerly expertise — her ability to decipher the coded messages and actions of others — while simultaneously challenging the reading abilities of his readers” (289) and ultimately shows that by “analyzing the complex narrative tensions of James’s construction of the artist-as-a-young-female-telegraphist, we can see how he ‘made free’ with his protagonist to explore the positions of woman as author and woman as reader and to frustrate complete narrative access to both” (295).
While the importance of the telegraphist’s gender on interpretation is often related to the profession of telegraphy, some have looked, instead, at the importance of the telegraph itself. Hazel Hutchison’s 2013 “‘An Embroidered Veil of Sound’: The Word in the Machine in Henry James’ *In the Cage*” examines the sounds of the novel and posits a comparison to James’ own necessity to dictate to a typist. Hutchison explores themes of communication and mechanization for James as an author, his writing, and the woman telegraphist at the center of his novella – one of the earliest works he completed through dictation. In comparison, Haley Larson also looks to the interplay between author, character, and emerging technology in her 2018 publication “‘The Spirit of Electricity’: Henry James’s *In the Cage* and Electric Female Imagination at the Turn of the Century.” However, where Hutchison examines the mechanical instruments that inspired and influenced James’ writing, Larsen addresses the source of telegraphy’s power – electricity. Reading *In the Cage* in the context of historically contemporary scientific discourse, Larsen argues for an interpretation of James’ telegraphist as a successful transgressor of her cage via her “electric imagination” (357). Larsen also examines the interplay of science, telegraphy, and telepathy within the novella and its historical context. Ultimately, Larsen suggests that James’ novella “represents a broader, transatlantic cultural moment during which both scientists and novelists wondered how women would experience an increasingly electric world” (359).

*In the Cage* is clearly popular among literary scholars, even if the general public considers a lesser-known work. This popularity is due in part to its complexity and generative source of ideas and interpretations. In its overt address of new media technologies, the novella has in recent years seen a wellspring of critical analysis and exploration, particularly in relation to the growth of twenty-first-century interests in historical perspectives on emergent technologies and forms of communication.
2.2 Creative Knowledge

Knowledge plays a key role in *In the Cage*, and the telegraphist reiterates this importance throughout the story, repeating the phrase “I know” with regularity. There is a clear critique of the act of assuming, as the telegraphist fills in the gaps of her body of knowledge largely incorrectly, and the novella draws a clear distinction between *imagining* one knows something and actually knowing the fact of it. When all is revealed at the end of the novel, one could easily draw the conclusion that where the telegraphist thought she knew “all,” she in fact knew nothing. Certainly, few of the details of Everard and Bradeen’s story align with what the telegraphist imagined. However, it would be reductive to conclude that the telegraphist goes from one extreme to the other. Instead, knowledge plays a dynamic role in the novella, and readers see that “knowing” can be fraught with pitfalls.\(^9\) When it comes to knowledge, “the cage” becomes a place where the telegraphist can imagine the means to transcend her current reality and class status in particular. For the telegraphist, the office at Cocker’s is both where she intakes the messages that become her knowledge base and where she daydreams and imagines how the gaps in her knowledge may be filled in. Even more, in the office the line between reality and fiction first blurs for the telegraphist and she begins to believe that her fictitious gap-fillers and decryptions are as factual as the messages themselves.

The telegraph grants the telegraphist access to customers of a higher social status, inspiring her belief that the border between classes is mutable and can be crossed – particularly, in her case, by way of a romantic relationship. One example of this is the telegraphist’s idea that

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\(^9\) Savoy argues that “while it is true that the telegraphist’s objective knowledge eventually trails off into unreliable speculations about the glamor of upper-class life, it never evaporates nor is it undermined by the narrative’s ultimate disclosure” (290). He draws this conclusion from the historical context of the novella’s publication, a series of publicized sexual scandals, writing that because “critical reception of ‘In the Cage’ has failed to situate the tale historically, it has tended to neglect the telegraphist’s function as ‘spy’ and her consequent threat to upper-class privacy, emphasizing instead the limits of her knowledge and the excess of her fantasy” (290).
because she “knows” some of the details and secrets of the lives of her wealthy patrons, she therefore is connected to them. Even before their park meeting, the telegraphist regularly refers to Everard as her “friend,” though their relationship “— she would have called it their friendship” (255) – is nothing more than that of customer and telegrapher. It seems, in fact, that although at other points the telegrapher is effusive about her hate for her wealthy patrons, she also, at times, extends this friendship to the economic class as a whole. When Mudge asks her to move to Chalk Farms, the telegraphist denies him, saying “I can’t give up my friends” (252). Despite what the rest of the world sees, the telegraphist continues to consider herself in some small ways as a member of their class, and her access to both the mundane details of their lives as well as some insight into more scandalous secrets through her position as telegrapher reinforces this idea.

If telegraphy serves as a point of contact in the novella between the telegraphist’s reality and her imagination, it also blurs the line between the two, creating a space where class transcendence seems possible. While the telegraphist does clearly stretch her imagination past the bounds of reality, drawing conclusions based more in her ha’penny novels than in reason, it is important to note that there are things happening. Ball suggests that by “portraying the telegraphist as both potential reader of and character from sensation fiction, James partakes in that same blurring of boundaries between reader and text for which sensation fiction was condemned and feared, thus both enacting and complicating nineteenth-century perceptions of young female readers’ impressionability” (88). The events of James’ novella serve as fuel for the telegraphist’s creativity, but she does not create her narratives entirely out of fiction. Readers can see that in many ways the telegraphist is actually quite practical: She is the only member of her family who has managed to hold a job, she continues her relationship with the practical Mr.
Mudge despite her growing interest in Everard, and even as she tells Everard that she will do “anything” for him, she holds back from any real action that would make her seem like less of a “lady.”

For readers, it is easy to characterize the telegraphist as someone flighty and detached from reality – or to read the bars of “the cage” as creating a definitive barrier that delineates the telegraphist’s realm of imagination from the reality outside. However, the situation that the novella presents is more complicated. Yes, the telegraphist reads too much into situations, driven by hope and a strong imagination. Yes, she applies the drama learned from reading ha’penny sensational novels to the people and situations around her. However, there are instances when the telegraphist’s reality does in fact cross the boundary between fact and fiction: Everard and Lady Bradeen actually are carrying on an affair, Everard does show an interest in the telegraphist when they meet outside his house, and in both instances when the telegraphist crosses the line professionally to assist Lady Bradeen and then Everard, the information she provides is correct and does in fact prove helpful.

Savoy places the text within a historical context in which a series of public sexual scandals drew the nation’s attention less than a decade earlier and argues for the telegraphist’s awareness of these events. In particular he points to the 1889 Cleveland Street scandal in which telegraph messenger boys worked also as male prostitutes in a homosexual male brothel, the patrons of which were rumored to include a member of the royal family. Notably, one of the telegraph messengers was the key to uncovering the scandal. While Savoy’s argument is enticing, there is no acknowledgement of this either in the text or in James’ preface to the novella. However, whether or not the telegraphist has knowledge of this precedent, it is clear that both she and the couple are eventually aware of their nearness to scandal and of the power the
telegraphist could yield should she so choose. For the telegraphist, her professional position at Cocker’s, the information she gains by mediating telegraphy, and her knowledge of telegraphic coding and decoding all serve to create a liminal space within “the cage,” where what is real and what is imagined, as well as what is possible and what is impossible, begin to overlap.

Adding to the confusion of what is “real” and what is not is the fact that many of the messages the telegraphist relays between Everard and Bradeen are themselves layered with falsehoods, encoded language, and even numerical codes. Hazel Hutchison writes that “there is a good deal to be gained by thinking about In the Cage as a story in which James lays bare the function of language – especially in its reliance on constructed systems and its vulnerability to ambiguities and misreadings” (154). Though these communiques between Bradeen and Everard are more representative of the characters’ reality than the telegraphist’s imagined tale, in that they contain real information somewhere within them while simultaneously fostering the telegraphist’s inaccurate deductions, they are not “true.”

The pseudonyms, false friends, and strings of numbers that are intentionally included to obfuscate the truth contribute to the muddy waters of reality and imagination within “the cage.”

What the telegraphist desires, and what telegraphy starts to make seem possible for her, is to regain her former social standing. Although the gray area between fact and fiction manifests in different ways across the novella, Captain Everard plays a crucial role in almost all of them. Even for the protagonist, whose imagination has convinced her of unlikely possibilities, there

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10 Hutchison sees the many codes in the novel as representative of the connection between author and reader. She writes that making sense “out of, and sometimes reading sense into, the seeming chaos of the Victorian sound-world is precisely what the reader of In the Cage must do, tuning in to the many different kinds of codes, ciphers, and signals that the novel presents” (153-54).

11 It is interesting to note that these informational misdirections, though conceived to trip up interlopers, are not written with the telegraphist in mind. Even though, apart from the sender and receiver themselves, the telegraphist is the only one likely to read the messages, she is not only not a primary source of concern but not a concern at all in terms of interception, due to the social expectation of professional automatism from telegraphers.
seems to be no options for the social advancement of a young woman outside of marrying up – and Everard is the most likely subject. Mrs. Jordan encourages this idea, though without knowledge of the specific object of the telegraphist’s attention, by boasting about her own professional success as a personal florist and suggesting that work offers private access to eligible young men. She goes on to imply her own romantic achievements by this route (though it is later revealed that she is marrying the butler of one of her aristocratic clients and not the client himself) and invites the telegraphist to come work for her, in hopes that the telegraphist will find her own suitable match. On this subject Ball writes, “Vacillating between loyalty to her fiancé and jealousy of her friend [Mrs. Jordan], the telegraphist apparently perceives ‘rescue’ as achievable for any girl who follows the sweet scent of roses into the homes of wealthy young men” (86). In addition to seeing Everard as the potential source of her own social improvement, he also embodies and exemplifies these desires. Everard is a captain (as far as we know) who is having an affair with the wife of a Lord. One can imagine how this connection might advance him socially, and eventually it does. If Everard can connect himself to Bradeen, why should the telegraphist, then, not think that she could be of interest to Everard, especially within a context where she continues to consider herself an only temporarily displaced member of society. The information the telegraphist gains on the existence of an affair between Everard and Bradeen drives her belief that the fiction from her ha’penny novels can exist in the real world; and seeing this, she begins to dream of new prospects for herself. Larsen writes that the telegraphist’s “persistent imagination and insistent desires illuminate the cages – of invisible social powers, of a lasting but elusive connection with Everard, of bodily discomfort – that she longs to transcend” (360).
Class plays a critical role in the knowledge of the novella, particularly when we begin to discover from what corner accurate information is actually acquired. At the end of the story, Mrs. Jordan reveals the truth of the affair between Everard and Bradeen. What’s more, she reveals her source of information: Mr. Drake, Bradeen’s future butler and Mrs. Jordan’s fiancé. The telegraphist is taken aback that the final details should be settled by the butler. She has valued her own information so highly that to discover it was largely incorrect is a significant blow, and that the person holding the real knowledge is of the lower classes adds salt to the wound. The telegraphist, upset with this blow to her transgressive imagination and resentful of the source of the truth, concludes that “It was better surely not to learn things at all than to learn them by the butler” (298). The novella closes with the telegraphist, now at peace with the results of the affair, reflecting again at the surprising source of that resolution. The final lines show the telegraphist with her head “full of thoughts” as usual, one of which “was that it was strange that such a matter should be at last settled for her by Mr. Drake” (302). Though always off screen, Drake ultimately plays a critical role within the plot of the story and in the life of the telegraphist. That the truth comes from someone of a lower class – lower even than the telegraphist considers herself to be – reinforces the idea that private and even illicit information can pass between the classes. While the telegraphist did not always intuit the right conclusions, she was right in believing that she had access to a facet of the personal lives of her aristocratic clients. The part she gets wrong, which Drake’s revelation clarifies, is the transgressive power of that information. While the telegraphist believes that her knowledge is the key to her social climbing, Drake knows even more than she does, and we see that he is firmly situated in his professional and social positions. What the telegraphist has avoided accepting until now is the fact that she is not privy to this secret
information because she is part of Bradeen and Everard’s circle but because she means so little to them that her interloping does not even register as a threat (until she makes it one).

Much has been said about the novella’s protagonist as author and about the influence of her ha’penny novels. Less has been said, however, about the content of these novels. There is only one title included in the story: Picciola, the full title of which is Picciola, the Prisoner of Fenestrella: or, Captivity Captive by X. B. Saintine. Picciola tells the story of the comte de Charney who while in prison develops two loves: One for the daughter of his cellmate (the woman’s name is Theresa), and one for a flower – the eponymous Picciola. Charney begins to imagine Picciola as a woman, with a woman’s face. He also grows fond of Theresa, largely from what her father says of her, though she and Charney have never met. Upon Charney’s release from prison, he meets Theresa for the first time and discovers that she has the same face as his imagined Picciola! For Charney, while trapped in a cage, the lines between reality and imagination blur, spurred by the stories he is exposed to during his imprisonment. The plot of this novel draws clear parallels with the experiences of James’ protagonist. James does not take the easy route by offering one-to-one parallels, but there are clearly overlapping themes. In this way, the telegraphist is not only influenced by her ha’penny novels to concoct her own passion narrative, she also experiences the story of Picciola, even in ways unintentional.

2.3 Transgressive Romance

A notable way in which the telegraphist’s imagination helps her traverse the class divide is through her two romantic interests: the enticing Captain Everard and the ever-practical Mr. Mudge. With Mudge, James is almost Dickensian in the characterization. Mudge is an up-and-coming grocer focused on the direct and narrow path to promotion. A careful planner, he leaves no room for the vagaries of chance (much to the chagrin of his fiancé), keeping all plans and
tabulations in a “very greasy but most orderly little pocket-book” (272). James goes on to say that, “Preparation and precaution were, however, the natural flowers of Mr. Mudge’s mind” (273), and that he exercised “a rigour of economy so great” that even a “little fee” for some entertainment “had to be balanced against other delights” (273). This is not to say that Mudge is a complete miser. He not only pays for the couple’s holiday by the sea, he also purchases a small house for them with room for the telegraphist’s mother, in preparation for when it is time for the couple to marry. For most of the story, Mudge seems to be little more than a hand-wrangling number-cruncher, with “a constant gift of inexorable inquiry as to where and what they should have gone and have done if they had not been exactly as they were” (273). This is the image the reader sees, and, as the story is told in third-person free indirect speech, we can know that it is by-and-large how the telegraphist herself feels about her fiancé. However, Mudge does at times show surprising decisiveness, a trait of which the telegraphist approves. She recalls a time early in their acquaintance when Mudge “collared” a drunk soldier who was acting belligerent. “She had been proud of him at that moment, and had felt that if their affair had not already been settled the neatness of his execution would have left her without resistance” (249). It is this quality that the telegraphist returns to when her desire to marry Mudge otherwise falters, and the occasional display of this positive quality keeps her on.

Narratively, Mudge plays an important role as a tether for the protagonist’s flights of fancy. He may be boring, but he is also dependable and real – and is subject to neither the capriciousness of the upper class nor the telegraphist’s imagination. Even his name, which sounds like a blend of “mud” and “drudge,” gives insight to the role he plays in the narrative.\(^{12}\) He is representative of labor: of the daily drudgery of the working class and the laborious,

\(^{12}\) Ball also suggests the word “sludge” (86).
incremental advancements of a carefully-calculated life. While he also has a little “mud” in him – not that he is sullied, but that he is “down to earth” – he represents the telegraphist’s reality while she lives in a world of her imagination. Ultimately, when the telegraphist’s “winged intelligence” (“Preface” 416) and visions of another world fail, the reliable Mudge provides her with a safe place to land.¹³

The transcendence the telegraph seems to make possible is not wholly lost on Mudge, however. When the telegraphist attributes her desire to stay at Cocker’s to her wealthy patrons, Mudge is overtaken by his own visions of prosperity.

She gave him, she could see, a restless sense that these might be familiarities not to be sacrificed; germs, possibilities, faint foreshowings — heaven knew what — of the initiation it would prove profitable to have arrived at when in the fullness of time he should have his own shop in some such paradise. What really touched him — that was discernible — was that she could feed him with so much mere vividness of reminder, keep before him, as by the play of a fan, the very wind of the swift bank-notes and the charm of the existence of a class that Providence had raised up to be the blessing of grocers. (252)

Even Mudge’s imagination, which is usually reserved for comparing his actions against those not taken, is brought to life by ideas wrought by the economics of the telegraph. His visions, however, are more practical: though unlikely, they still hold at their foundation the aspirations of a grocer. This stands in stark contrast to the telegraphist’s dreams of class transcendence, and illuminates the differences in the two characters’ personalities and priorities. For Mudge, even in

¹³ Larsen cautions against a reductive reading of the conclusion, arguing that although the telegraphist “ultimately resigns to a middle-class marriage with the aptly named grocer Mr. Mudge, scholars have perhaps overemphasized this eventual marriage and thereby neglected to give credit to the power of her imagination that courses through the last scene of the novella” (360).
“paradise,” what he pictures is a way to advance his career as a grocer. Just as the telegraphist observes that despite an overall pleasant appearance Mudge ultimately has “the beauty of a grocer” (249), it seems that he has the imagination of a grocer as well. “What it came to therefore for Mr. Mudge was that all enjoyments were, as might be said, inter-related, and that the more people had the more they wanted to have. The more flirtations, as he might roughly express it, the more cheese and pickles” (252). This clearly delineates the telegraphist from her betrothed. She is flirtatious, and he is, well, cheese and pickles. The idea of flirtation is based in a liminal space between reality and imagination. It begs questions about how much is said and how much is left unsaid – and of course what intention is trying to be communicated in those negative spaces and what is interpreted. Cheese and pickles, on the other hand, are tangible, practical, and economical. Cheese and pickles leave little to the imagination. Even if Mudge can envision a way in which these concepts are interrelated, the reader is left questioning the level of magical thinking required to do so.\(^\text{14}\)

On the other side of the novella’s romantic divide sits the seemingly wealthy Captain Everard. As we shall see, Everard is a chameleon and shape shifter. As the telegraphist sees him, “He was somehow all at once very bright and very grave, very young and immensely complete” (237). Everard, with his various telegrammatic personas and cloak-and-dagger missives (not to mention his good looks) piques the telegraphist’s interest and fans the flame of her imagination. To her, he represents the bridge over which she may regain her place in society as well as the muse that sparks her imagination into believing that it is possible.

\(^{14}\) This contrast between Mudge and the telegraphist is reiterated in Mudge’s response when the telegraphist confesses that she “sat” with Everard (275). The passion of the telegraphist’s ha’penny novels do not impress themselves upon Mudge as they do upon his fiancé; in fact, it only vaguely occurs to him to consider that the telegraphist would act inappropriately or be unfaithful. His imagination is so rooted in reality, it does not leave room for the abstractions necessary for jealousy.
As for the reader, it seems that we are expected to take a more realistic view of Everard. The telegraphist’s overblown estimations of the Captain – he is “the most magnificent of men” (237), all questions are “stupid after his – all faces ugly” (236) – invites cynicism on the part of the reader. Though, like the telegraphist, we are not privy to the actual details of Captain Everard’s affairs until the final pages, unlike the telegraphist, we are encouraged to look past the glow of perfection that the protagonist’s affection casts upon Everard. It becomes increasingly clear that the telegraphist’s imagination does not reflect Everard’s reality. While Mudge has just one name that perfectly expresses his personality, Everard has many. This volume reflects the various roles he is playing:

He was sometimes Everard … and he was sometimes Captain Everard. He was sometimes Philip with his surname and sometimes Philip without it. In some directions he was merely Phil, in others he was merely Captain. There were relations in which he was none of these things, but a quite different person – “the Count.” There were several friends for whom he was William. There were several for whom, in allusion to his complexion, he was “the Pink ‘Un.” Once, once only by good luck, he had, coinciding comically, quite miraculously, with another person also near to [the telegraphist], been “Mudge.” (238)

That the reader sees what the telegraphist does not, concerning Everard, becomes increasingly clear as the novella progresses. Everard’s many pseudonyms display the idea that the boundaries of his identity are fluid, especially his telegraphic identities.\(^\text{15}\) What’s more, Everard is not only

\(^{15}\) Much can be made of names in the text. The telegraphist’s lack of a name has been widely speculated upon, and like Everard, though to a lesser degree, Lady Bradeen also takes on a variety of monikers: “Mary was very handsome, the handsomest woman, she felt in a moment, she had ever seen — or perhaps it was only Cissy. Perhaps it was both” (233). She also continues to do so within the telegraphist’s own imagination as she continues to cycle through Bradeen’s different identifiers. Certainly, the question of names invites a larger discussion than is possible within the scope of the discussion at hand.
different from what the telegraphist imagines him to be, he is different with each of his acquaintances. We see here that Everard is regularly hiding behind pseudonyms long before he walks into Cocker’s for the first time. This naming and renaming is part of the air of mystery that intrigues the telegraphist, and it reinforces her interest when she believes that only she has access to or knowledge of the multitude. Ultimately, however, her conviction that she alone knows all leads her to erroneous conclusions.

In this litany of names, of particular note of course is Everard’s use of the name “Mudge” on at least one occasion. By using it, Everard imposes his fiction over Mudge’s reality and obscures the line between the two men and between fact and fiction. Everard’s co-opting of Mudge’s name and his use of it as false identity adds a sheen of fiction atop the otherwise stolid and reliable name. In a subtle and fleeting way, by taking on Mudge’s person, Everard also breaks the class delineation. Through this act, Mudge is more successful in upwardly transgressing class than the telegraphist.

What neither the telegraphist nor reader knows until the end of the novella is that Everard is destitute – and that Bradeen has been keeping him financially afloat. In this way, the reality of the telegraphist and Everard’s situations is even more parallel than the fiction. Neither of them has money, and there is a large financial gap between themselves and the object of their romantic attention. Ultimately, Everard accomplishes what the telegraphist cannot: He marries up. However, reality takes a grim hold over the dreamed ideal when it is revealed that, by paying off his debts, Bradeen is strong-arming Everard into a marriage that he does not necessarily want. Even while achieving social ascendance, the reality of Everard’s situation is less glamorous and far less happily-ever-after than one would hope for and what the telegraphist imagined. Although much of the ending of the novella closes the door on dreaming, this information, as James would
Everard’s forced marriage dispels some higher thoughts of true love and gallant princes, but it does leave the question, “would he have chosen differently if given the chance?” This question seems to hang in the air around the telegraphist during her conversation with Mrs. Jordan. Though in most ways the imaginings of the novella reshape themselves into reality by the final pages, this thought – that things could have been different – leaves room for the telegraphist to dream again.

If Mudge represents reality and Everard represents imagination, the telegraph office is the point at which these two spheres converge, creating a place where anything seems possible. Though the novella focuses on the telegraphist’s introduction to Everard and their subsequent relationship, the reader is informed through the telegraphist’s recollection that this is also where the telegraphist and Mr. Mudge first met. Mudge’s promotion has since moved him away from the grocery/post office at Cocker’s, and he encourages the telegraphist to follow. Regardless, it is important to note that the telegraphist first meets both Mudge and Everard through her work as a telegraphist. Again, then, it becomes clear that the telegraph office is the place at which “reality” and “imagination” converge. Not only is the office where both Mudge, as “reality,” and Everard, as “imagination,” both come into the telegraphist’s life, they also, briefly, overlap through Everard’s use of Mudge’s name.

In one way, then, we see the telegraphist as she imagines herself: as poised between these two romantic options. However the reality of her situation is more complicated, and we are left to wonder how much of her reality filters through the bars of her cage. For instance, if she considered it a real likelihood that Everard would save her from her current situation, she could have thrown off Mudge entirely, but she does not. Does she still see something in him that makes

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16 There is much door open and closed imagery in the novella that would foster a very interesting discussion on thresholds.
him romantic competition to Everard? Or does reality retain enough of its grasp to keep her from ruining her future based on assumptions that turn out to be false? Ball posits that it is the telegraphist’s practical class awareness that keeps her from acting more drastically: “In her working-class cage of windows, the telegraphist can see both ways, up into aristocratic domesticity and down into criminality and transgression, but she is too aware of her own highness to stoop to pleasure and too aware of her lowness to reach for a rose” (93).

Additionally, though the telegraphist comes across as a dreamer in the text, it is important to remember that she is the only person keeping her family out of complete destitution, suggesting that she is perhaps more practical at times outside the events of the story. Ultimately, however, despite some hints of practicality, within the narrative the telegraphist has authored in her imagination, she stands romantically between the two men.

When it comes to the intersection of reality and the telegraphist’s imagination, it is also important to remember that Everard does in fact show some interest in her. When they meet outside his boarding house, he calls out to her. Everard also initiates their only physical contact, and when the telegraphist considers reciprocating, she changes her mind before following through. While the reason why Everard makes any of these advances is only ever contextually implied, that they happen is critical to our understanding of the events of the novella as well as our understanding of how the telegraphist interprets and defines these events in her imagination.\(^\text{17}\) The end of the novella reveals that Everard will marry Bradeen in order to save himself financially, and his actual desire for the union is left in question. Can we let our

\(^\text{17}\) Many scholars including Savoy and Ball convincingly argue that Everard initiates contact with the telegraphists out of sexual interest and assume that Everard would have followed this line of pursuit to its natural conclusion had the telegraphist not fled the bench scene. However, Everard does not state this explicitly, and the telegraphist continues to disallow herself from accepting this as the case.
imaginations carry us away and envision what could have happened if he had not been beholden to Lady Bradeen?

2.4 The Safety of the Cage

Though the telegraphist embraces, and even pursues, the excitement of Everard’s affairs while she is safely tucked away “in the cage,” the situation becomes less tenable for her when she extends her story into the real world. The first step into reality that the telegraphist takes is to discover where Everard lives. Once she determines this, she makes a daring maneuver in order to discover his apartment number. “It was as if, in the immense intimacy of this, they were, for the instant and the first time, face to face outside the cage. Alas! they were face to face but a second or two: she was whirled out on the wings of a panic fear that he might just then be entering or issuing” (257). Here the telegraphist carries the narratives she has authored into the real world, and while it still offers appealing possibilities, reality begins to rear its head manifesting in “a panic fear.” The telegraphist notes that it is “as if” they are face to face for the first time, and she imagines it as an intimacy. Then however, the reality of how she and Everard might actually meet on the steps of his building, which is to say that she would be caught, frightens her enough to run away. Here we see a recurring pattern where, beyond the safety of the cage, the telegraphist’s blend of fact and fiction proves dangerous. While most scholars who take on this topic address the threat the telegraphist poses to Everard and Bradeen – Savoy for example writes that it is “important to recognize, once again, that while the telegraphist’s rich fantasy life, framed by her reading of popular romantic fiction, embroiders her more objective knowledge, it does not in any way eliminate that knowledge or its dangerous potential uses” (292) – less is said about the ways in which the telegraphist’s actions threaten her own livelihood, social standing, and future. Throughout the remainder of the novella, the telegraphist continues to vacillate
between brash actions driven by imagination and moments of clarity in which she seems to fear her own potential.

Although the undetected but potentially scandalous act of trespassing into Everard’s building seems to satisfy the telegraphist for a time, she continues to carry her created narrative out of the safety of the telegraph office and into the reality of the street as she “adhere[s] to the most ridiculous circuit she could have made to get home” (262) in order to pass Everard’s home at Park Chambers. Despite doing this, the reality of the telegraphist’s situation seems to stay more-or-less intact, and she recognizes her daydreams and wishes for what they are – fiction. However, when the telegraphist finally meets Everard in the street face to face, and her dreams do become a reality, the possibility of imagined scenarios coming to fruition proves to be too much for her. As her time with Everard progresses, the telegraphist grows increasingly anxious, she falls back into the language of telegraphy, understanding between the two falters, and eventually the telegraphist abandons the scene.

This interaction signals an important turning point in the novella, and the scene plays out in layers of imagination, subtext, and miscommunication. The different modes of communication come in waves, reaching a crescendo and then reverting. When the telegraphist and Everard first meet in the open, their intentions are communicated nonverbally while their spoken discourse, the content of which is only described as “other things” (264), is inconsequential. “She never knew afterwards quite what she had done to settle it, and at the time she only knew that they presently moved, with vagueness, yet with continuity, away from the picture of the lighted vestibule and the quiet stairs and well up the street together. This also must have been in the absence of a definite permission, of anything vulgarly articulate” (263). In this phase of the conversation, the important information is communicated without the so-called vulgarity of
articulation. Here, meaning is conveyed through encoded subtext, though it is unclear how much Everard understands of what the telegraphist imagines she is communicating effectively.\textsuperscript{18} Certainly the two move together from the street to park without commenting on it, so there is \textit{some} understanding between them.

However, there is another layer to the telegraphist’s unspoken wishes that perhaps Everard does not decode as easily. “She felt … above all a conscious joy in testing him with chances he didn’t take. She had an intense desire he should know the type she really conformed to without her doing anything so low as tell him, and he had surely begun to know it from the moment he didn’t seize the opportunities into which a common man would promptly have blundered” (264). The “type” the telegraphist is trying to convey nonverbally is one in contrast to what she personifies as the “shop girl,” someone, it is suggested, that would progress this meeting in a sexual or transactional direction. The telegraphist thrills at the idea that Everard would instinctively understand that she is “above” such things. The reader, however, sees that such a distinction is not necessarily apparent to Everard and in fact that he may not realize that such a distinction even exists between these types of women – both of a lower class than his own. Additionally, the telegraphist’s imagination and reality come into conflict at this point: where she \textit{believes} that Everard knows the difference, but she also chooses to continue to test him, suggesting that she is not as certain of his understanding as she convinces herself that he is.

Eventually, the subtext begins to bubble up, and the formerly encoded messaging comes to the surface in fragments. Each type of discourse takes on a different element of telegraphy: where the first resembles the incomprehensibility of Morse Code to the uninitiated (and it is not

\textsuperscript{18} Larsen attributes this insinuation vs. articulation to the telegraphist’s profession. She writes, “That the telegraphist conflates telegraphy with telepathy establishes the central tension and climax of the tale, illuminating a time in history when electricity and mysticism were not easily distinguished” (360).
at all clear what side of the divide Everard stands on), the second wave of the conversation imitates the style of telegraphy; it is syncopated and full of pauses and dashes. When the telegraphist attempts to verbalize all that she thinks and feels for Everard, her ability to communicate falters. She says to him, “‘But I’ve walked so much out of my way with you only just to show you that — that’ — with this she paused; it was not after all so easy to express —’ that anything you may have thought is perfectly true’” (266). The repetition of the word “that,” paired with the em dashes has a clear relationship to the repetitive dots and dashes of the telegraphist’s sounder. When she then completes her statement, she draws on the same inferences from their earlier nonverbal communication. The telegraphist again assumes that Everard is able to distinguish her internalized level of propriety (which it is not at all clear that the telegraphist herself is entirely assured of) and that she will do “anything” for Everard, while not agreeing to do that.

The climax of this scene comes when the telegraphist ultimately reveals everything she knows – or believes she knows – about Everard’s affairs. Here the stilted echoes of Morse’s code leave off, and the telegraphist’s passionate imagination takes center stage.

“To be perfectly fair I should tell you I recognise at Cocker’s certain strong attractions. All you people come. I like all the horrors.”

“The horrors?”

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19 In other places in this work I discuss the idea of “telegrammatic” language, a style of speaking derived from the language of telegrams and which has the same staccato style as I describe here. In this case, however, there is not the same economy of language that mirrors the expense of telegrams. The telegraphist’s speech in this scene, and Everard’s responses, display simply broken language, not a fully-realized style of discourse.

20 Hutchison writes that the job of minding the sounder is “an important metaphor for the girl’s intuitive nature but is also a constant reminder within the text of the technological sound-scape of the Victorian age” (153).

21 The telegraphist tells Everard, “I’d do anything for you. I’d do anything for you”, then goes on to internally reflect that “Never in her life had she known anything so high and fine as this, just letting him have it and bravely and magnificently leaving it. Didn’t the place, the associations and circumstances, perfectly make it sound what it wasn’t? and wasn’t that exactly the beauty?” (272).
“Those you all — you know the set I mean, your set — show me with as good a conscience as if I had no more feeling than a letter-box.”

He looked quite excited at the way she put it. “Oh they don’t know!”

“Don’t know I’m not stupid? No, how should they?”

“Yes, how should they?” said the Captain sympathetically. “But isn’t ‘horrors’ rather strong?”

“What you do is rather strong!” the girl promptly returned.

“What I do?”

“Your extravagance, your selfishness, your immorality, your crimes,” she pursued, without heeding his expression.

“I say!” — her companion showed the queerest stare.

“I like them, as I tell you — I revel in them. But we needn’t go into that,” she quietly went on; “for all I get out of it is the harmless pleasure of knowing. I know, I know, I know!” — she breathed it ever so gently.

“Yes; that’s what has been between us,” he answered much more simply. (270-71)

Everard is clearly out of his depth in this conversation. He continues on in short fragments while the telegraphist’s language begins to flow, filling the gaps of the conversation just as she does with the information that comes to her in the cage. While the language here still utilized em dashes and is not so fluid as to be a monolog, there is a fluidity in this section that is missing in the conversation before and after. Here, the telegraphist seems to be in her element. She is finally articulating all that she has learned, felt, and imagined while working in the cage. This wave of the conversation, then, takes on a different aspect of telegraphy, that of interpretation or
decoding. Here the telegraphist reveals to Everard how much knowledge she has gained acting as mediator. She also gives him a glimpse into the workings of her imagination by referring to this information flow as “the horrors” and revealing that she “revels” in what she has learned.

In this interaction, the content of the telegraphist’s imagination is brought to light – to adverse effects. Emery-Peck writes that “That practice of telegraphic communication enables the telegraphist’s fantasies of power and authorship as she uses her position to hold her clients and their messages. Her ‘mean function’ of counting out their words allows her to read their messages and attempt to crack their codes of communication and retain their meanings” (294). She goes on to argue, “In addition to storing up their messages in her remarkable mind, the telegraphist also imagines herself as controlling the situation during her face-to-face encounter … by asserting her power and control of the situation at key moments in the story’s plot” (294). While this assertion of power does, to a degree, work at other times in the story, here the telegrapher’s disclosure of knowledge – and by consequence power over the couple – backfires. Following her testimony, the discourse reverts back into fragments and unspoken cues. As the scene breaks apart, and the light changes from “summer twilight” (264) to “vulgarly animated gloom” (271), “It was as if then for a minute they sat and saw it all in each other’s eyes, saw so much that there was no need of a pretext for sounding it at last. ‘Your danger, your danger — !’” (271). James draws the reader’s attention back to the telegraph with the word “sounding,” while here again the couple’s communication moves from encoded “looking” to fragmented repetition. Following the telegraphist’s outburst, Everards face grows “strange” (271), so strange in fact, that it drives the telegraphist to stand up and move away. Everard’s behavior suggests that there was, perhaps, not as much understanding being sent between them as the telegraphist believed.
The scene closes with more disjointed dialogue, before the telegraphist gets “away from him as fast as she could” (272).

Ultimately, this scene shows what happens when the telegraphist’s dreams and imaginative storytelling leave the safety of the cage and venture forth into reality – they fall apart. By reveling in the “horrors,” the telegraphist brings preconceptions to her conversation with Everard that results in the telegraphist’s revelation of much of what she has been taking in, interpreting, and writing to fill in the gaps – and it deeply disturbs him. His reaction, in turn, deeply disturbs her. Although it is unclear how much Everard’s response impacts the telegraphist, she gets at least a glimpse into how wrong she has been. However, she does not want to believe it, so while she afterwards decides that she will give up Cocker’s and move to Chalk Farms (even though she tells Everard that she won’t abandon him), she continues to imagine conversations with her clients at Cocker’s. In these ways, the telegraph office and “the cage” in particular are shown to be a safe place for the telegraphist to explore the interconnectedness of fact and fiction and to dream of possibilities. But when removed from the cage, fact and fiction are forcibly divided (and to assume otherwise leads to misunderstanding and heartbreak) and the dreams of possibility become “vulgar” in the light of reality.

Following this encounter, the telegraphist goes on vacation with Mudge. While there, she ostensibly puts the whole affair behind her. “She liked having done with them, as she assured herself she had practically done” (273). However, the telegraphist is not perhaps as done with the clientele at Cocker’s as she tries to convince herself that she is. In the same paragraph, she goes on to consider her skill of feigning interest in Mudge while her attention is somewhere else: a knack for successfully “making him chatter while she carried on secret conversations. Her talks were with herself” (274). She goes on to note that Mudge was enjoying himself, “not knowing –
or at any rate not at all showing that he knew – what far other images peopled her mind” (274).

While the telegraphist works to convince herself that she is done with Everard and his “kind,” it is evident that she is, at the least, not done with the kind of imaginative creating that got her into the uncomfortable situation with Everard in the first place.

The telegraphist falls even farther into her old habits once she returns from holiday and is tucked away in the safety of her office. Behind the bars and glass, the telegraphist once again returns to the sensational narrative she has written concerning herself and her clients, and she begins attempting to decode Everard’s increasingly strange behaviors, believing that he is “telegraphing” meaning to her. It is at this point that fiction begins to take the strongest hold over the telegraphist’s attempts at interpretation. When the telegraphist next sees Everard, she believes there is a particular connection between them. “When he saw that she saw him and their eyes met, he gave, on bowing to her, an exaggerated laugh in which she read a new consciousness. It was a confession of awkwardness; it seemed to tell her that of course he knew he ought better to have kept his head, ought to have been clever enough to wait, on some pretext, till he should have found her free” (278). The telegraphist, instead of learning from her previous encounter how little she truly understood Everard, takes that detente and uses it as an example of their strengthening connection, giving her even more conviction in the rightness of her readings.

At this point, the telegraphist becomes nearly melodramatic in her certainty of the reality of her imaginative tales. “It was as if they had met for all time — it exerted on their being in presence again an influence so prodigious. … Hadn’t she precisely established on the part of each a consciousness that could end only with death?” (278-79). She is here at the height of her authorship. The telegraphist imagines great scenarios where she goes to him in broad daylight and their relationship is concretized in an undefined way. She is preparing herself to leave the
cage and take real action when Everard appears again: “At that instant Captain Everard once more stood there, producing in her agitated spirit, by his real presence, the strangest, quickest revolution” (280). Galvan identifies this as “the telegrapher’s fantasy of a magical bond with her social betters,” a bond, Galvan suggests, that transcends “the material determinants of her lowly class standing” (“Class Ghosting” 298). When the spirit of her imagination is faced with Everard’s reality, however, the dreams wither. Emery-Peck writes, “Throughout the story, the telegraphist swings between highs of authorial empowerment and the lows of … feeling embittered by her impoverished and mechanical function” (295). Here the telegraphist faces one of those “swings,” dropping from the climax of her imaginative authorship into the low reality of her situation, affected simply by the real presence of Everard. With this “revolution,” the telegraphist begins to truly understand that class ascension is not possible for her. Instead, Everard “saves” the telegraphist by reinforcing reality, keeping her from drastic measures that could have ruined her life. Ultimately, the telegraphist finds that the cage is the safest place for her imagination: “to be in the cage had suddenly become her safety, and she was literally afraid of the alternate self who might be waiting outside” (292).

2.5 The Threat of Falling

While most of the protagonist’s visions of class transcendence deal with moving up, she does also draw on her knowledge gained from ha’penny novels to imagine what it would be like to continue to fall. Ball makes much of the sexuality of the the story and explores the ways in which the telegraphist imagines falling into prostitution and being “bought.” “[S]he simultaneously feels drawn down toward the secretive, illicit world of non-marital sexuality revealed to her by her work at the post-office, a world that evokes a very different narrative: that of the bad girl or fallen woman” (89). These thoughts, whether of a sexual nature or of
something more criminal like blackmail, are all generated by Everard: “She quite thrilled herself with thinking what, with such a lot of material, a bad girl would do. It would be a scene better than many in her ha’penny novels” (255). Additionally, most of these thoughts take place when she is in direct proximity to the object of her creativity and outside the safety of the cage.

During the rendezvous with Everard in the park, the telegraphist imagines having a lap full of gold: “the trouble she had taken could only, in these fleeting minutes — they would probably never come back — be all there like a little hoard of gold in her lap. Certainly he might look at it, handle it, take up the pieces” (265). Ball argues that the “possibility of engaging in ‘something else’ with Everard remains in the air throughout the scene, as does the possibility of blackmailing him” (89), coming to the conclusion that the telegraphist’s “little hoard of gold” “positions cash at the nexus between transgressive knowledge and transgressive sexuality” (90). Here, the telegraphist’s creativity, sparked by her reading of ha’penny novels, interacts with the knowledge she has acquired through her position at Cocker’s to give her a different kind of transgressive dream, one of leaning into becoming a “bad girl” or fallen woman.

Ultimately, the telegraphist reinforces the line between her own storytelling and the reality of her situation, and when she is again within the safety of the cage, her moral resolve returns. When Everard actually does try to buy her off, she sees it as a test of her goodness – one which she passes by not accepting the money. She imagines that the “redundant money – sovereigns not concerned with the little payments he was perpetually making” (283) carries a variety of meanings, none of which include blackmail or hush money. “He wanted to pay her because there was nothing to pay her for. He wanted to offer her things he knew she wouldn’t take. He wanted to show her how much he respected her by giving her the supreme chance to

22 See Ball and Savoy for additional discussion on money, sex, and transaction in In the Cage.
show him she was respectable” (283). Why, then, does the telegraphist on one hand fantasize about being bought off, and then not take the opportunity when it comes to her?

Firstly, the telegraphist never seems to have much of an interest in money. Even when she imagines saying to Everard outright, “buy me!” (257) she immediately clarifies to herself that she would not accept “anything so gross as money” (257). Ball asks the question then, “What is the purchasing medium if not money? What exactly does she want from Captain Everard? His attention? His love? His body?” (89) and concludes that, “[u]nsure of how to navigate or even name these desires, [the telegraphist] allows the matter to remain vague, reassured by the knowledge that she is not, in fact, a bad girl” (89). Ultimately, when reality and imagination meet outside the cage, the dissonance between the two is too great. Reality takes over, even in the telegraphist’s narrative, and she considers more “base” actions that are, while more scandalous and perhaps more like her passion novels, also more realistic in their own way.

As previously discussed, the telegraphist knows what it is to “fall,” even if she does not know what it is like to be “fallen.” In the telegraphist’s life, class decline continues to loom as a real possibility, and despite the excitement and mystery blackmail brings within a novel, it is both less appealing in real life and more expected. It is what Everard assumes. Outside of the cage, then, even her make-believe is sullied. Ball argues that this is due not to a loss of innocence “– a quality that critics of this text overemphasize – but rather to her refusal to look directly at what she nevertheless knows to exist” (90). When Everard tries to buy her silence, the telegraphist feels that she is above such things, despite having already entertained the idea of blackmail in the previous scene.

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23 Nixon writes that this interaction “marks the high point of [the telegraphist’s] naïveté as a reader” (192).
However, *In the Cage* is a novella that defies easy analysis or even easy summary. This visit from Everard, which literally shakes the telegraphist, seems to be a pivotal moment. It has all the drama of a climax, and its resolution leaves the telegraphist with the feeling “that she was saved” (280). Yet, it is not the end, nor even the beginning of the end. While the telegraphist does in this case, as she did in the previous encounter with Everard, seem to learn some lesson about the dangers of letting one’s imagination run too far, she also seemingly forgets the lesson just as easily. Even within this same visit of Everard to Cocker’s, the telegraphist starts in again on her imaginative interpreting.

Reality forcibly enters the cage and the telegrapher’s fantasy becomes too real when, in the novella’s penultimate scene, Everard arrives at Cocker’s in an agitated state, seeking the telegraphist’s help. Everard makes it clear there is some other trouble afoot, and though he does not explicitly what the problem is, it has to do with a previous telegram. Everard, in crisis, seeks a record or some knowledge of the telegram in order to find out if it was intercepted. Like a sensational ha’penny novel, Everard places the drama and the danger of his illicit affair at the telegraphist’s feet, inviting her to be the savior of the story. However, with the reality of the situation laid bare, the telegraphist finally realizes that she plays absolutely no role in Everard’s romantic interests. What’s more, the telegraphist sees past the passionate ha’penny drama of Everard and Bradeen and becomes aware of the realistic threats that a public scandal induces. With this, reality finally presses itself upon the cage, and the story physically reaches the telegraphist, even in her safe space.

She felt she scarce knew what — as if she might soon be pounced upon for some lurid connexion with a scandal. It was the queerest of all sensations, for she had heard, she had

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24 See Savoy.
read, of these things, and the wealth of her intimacy with them at Cocker’s might be supposed to have schooled and seasoned her. This particular one that she had really quite lived with was, after all, an old story; yet what it had been before was dim and distant beside the touch under which she now winced. (288)

Everard and Bradeen’s crisis disrupts the safety of the telegraphist’s cage, crossing the bars and inflicting the pain of their drama upon her. Ball draws attention to this passage, noting the “almost magical sense in which the sensational narrative actually does become, at long last, the telegraphist’s lived reality” (92).

At this point the situation becomes too “real” for the telegraphist, even though she is, in truth, still only imagining the consequences and there is little indicator that her concerns with being involved with a scandal will come to pass.25 The physicality of the situation causes the protagonist to revert even further into fiction, pretending to be someone else entirely – a telegraphist from the Paddington office. In the throes of his personal crisis, Everard fails to show the telegraphist the proper level of camaraderie, as she perceives it. “He really spoke to her as if she had been some strange young woman at Knightsbridge or Paddington” (287). The telegraphist enshrouds herself in this persona, managing “just the accent they had at Paddington when they stared like dead fish” (287). Ball identifies this as the telegraphist’s “curious yet often confusing experimentation with different voices and identities,” noting that she “also consistently writes and rewrites herself” (81). Here, when faced with the reality of Everard’s interest towards her, or lack thereof, the telegraphist retreats into an altogether new fiction, rewriting herself into a new, experimental persona.

25 Though, as Ball and Savoy point out, the 1889 Cleveland Street Scandal may be playing a part in the protagonist’s vision.
The final blow to the telegraphist is not that her narrative of scandal and high drama has come to life, it is her ultimate realization of the insignificance of her true role within it. Though in *In the Cage* she is the protagonist, in the passion narrative that plays out between Everard and Bradeen, the telegraphist is only a supporting character. “Then it was that, above all, she felt how much she had missed in the gaps and blanks and absent answers – how much she had had to dispense with: it was black darkness now, save for this little wild red flare” (287). This is the second reason she retreats into the character of the Paddington girl. She will play the role she has been handed, but she will no longer throw her whole being into it.

### 2.6 Conclusion

In the end we see that, although the telegraphist’s professional position and her experience coding and decoding messages offers to her imagination a world in which she is able to transcend the bars of her cage and return to her class of origin, the reality that eventually reveals itself to both the telegraphist and the reader shows that upward mobility is next to impossible and that the road to it is fraught with danger. Through this text, James invites his reader into the cage, illuminating not only the day-to-day workings and politics of a telegraph office but also exhibiting the complex web of potential personal and societal entanglements to which the female telegraphist is exposed. In his preface James writes that the origin for *In the Cage* “abides in one of the commonest and most taken-for-granted of London impressions” and that it was “an old story” to him by the time he brought the novel together (414). He goes on to say

The postal-telegraph office in general, and above all the small local office of one’s immediate neighborhood, scene of the transaction of so much of one’s daily business, haunt of one’s needs and one’s duties, of one’s labours and one’s patiences, almost of
one’s rewards and one’s disappointments, one’s joys and one’s sorrows, had ever had, to
my sense, so much of London to give out, so much of its huge perpetual story to tell, that
any momentary wait there seemed to take place in a strong social draught, the stiffest
possible breeze of human comedy. (414)

Here James lays out the enormity of the human experience that takes place within the telegraph
office. Inspired by his own visits, James seeks to convey this same liveliness in his novella,
establishing the telegraph office as a social nexus for an infinite variety of events. Not only is the
office a place where anything can happen, James shows that it is also a place where possibilities
_converge_. In a location like Cocker’s, operators, users, and even grocery shoppers come together
in a single location bringing their complicated lives and full range of emotional potential with
them.

Within this milieu, day in and day out, sits the telegraphist. Though separated from the
crowd, she is no less human, and she also brings her dreams, hopes, and fears into the location of
the telegraph office, where these emotions have the potential to interact in unimagined ways with
those of patrons and other persons. This unique mix serves to blur the line between reality and
fiction, particularly for the novella’s telegraphist. As the professional _within_ the cage, the
telegraphist is afforded a veneer of professionalism that protects her from the brunt of the
“human comedy.” Though there are other customers who occasionally pique her interest, none
pose a serious threat to the telegraphist’s relative creative safety behind the office’s bars until
Everard and Bradeen. Ultimately the potential of their affair proves too enticing, causing the
telegraphist to breach her cage and abandon her safe space. The draw of the couple’s

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26 James also exposes his own heavy use of telegraphic services. Considering the associated costs, James, perhaps
inadvertently but clearly, situates himself within the affluent class.
transgressive potential threatens to drown the telegraphist in its undertow, but she manages to reinforce her own reality in the nick of time and escape ruin.

That James positions the telegraphist’s experience within a larger social context of “so much of London” shows why an analysis of this text serves as a productive foundation for the rest of this dissertation project. Studying In the Cage not only serves to establish critical themes that will be readdressed throughout the following chapters, it also offers the opportunity for a close reading that will inform later discussions. We will continue to see that the ubiquity of telecommunication technologies ignited the creativity of a wide variety of writers, inspiring narratives that realistically feature the technology and its users as well as works that display figurative, metaphorical, and symbolic conceptions of the telegraph and telephone.
3 DANGEROUS CONNECTIONS: DECODING COMPLEX STANDARDS FOR WOMEN TELEGRAPHERS

Emma Hunter is widely credited as the first female telegraph operator, a superlative attributed to her by Western Union. However, Hunter was not actually the first: Sarah G. Bagley served as superintendent of a branch of the New York and Boston Magnetic Telegraph Company as early as 1846, while Hunter did not join the profession until 1851 (Jepsen 3). In fact modern research shows that a number of women served as operators prior to Hunter. In 1846, the year Bagley became a telegraphist, the telegraph industry was still in its infancy – a mere two years after Morse sent his first message to his colleague Alfred Vail via electromagnetic telegraph. Though Bagley is by all accounts the true first female telegraph operator, her appointment is “generally regarded as a footnote to her earlier work as a women’s rights advocate and founder of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.” (Jepsen 3). That the earliest woman operator would also be at the forefront of advocating for women’s rights does not spark surprise. Bagley clearly proved to be a progressive thinker and not one to bend to traditional gender expectations. She entered the field during a time when many considered the profession “entirely too dangerous for women” (Jepsen 133) largely because operators were often in charge of line maintenance and repairs in addition to the regular work of sending and receiving messages. Although professional telegraphy was heavily male dominated in its early years, Bagley’s appointment did not cause a stir. In fact, in a turn that is perhaps even more surprising than Bagley’s employment, the general public overlooked the early women of telegraphy almost entirely – so much so that Western

27 There are other accounts of Sarah Bagley, such as in Annteresa Lubrano’s The Telegraph: How Technology Innovation Caused Social Change that cite Bagley worked for Western Union. I believe this discrepancy can be accounted for in that Western Union gained more-or-less a monopoly over the telegraph industry by absorbing, over time, all of its competitors. So, while Bagley was probably hired by the New York and Boston Magnetic Telegraph Company, it is possible that she later worked for Western Union as part of the same position, though unfortunately no record of this exists.
Union, the largest employer of telegraphers, did not have record of a single female operator until five years later, though Jepsen gives evidence of at least three additional women in the US alone becoming operators before Emma Hunter’s appointment.\textsuperscript{28}

As more women entered the industry of telegraphy, these women’s roles — both socially and professionally — became more defined and restrictive. Women operators came to hold a precarious and somewhat unique position in late-nineteenth century society, both in England and America, due to the middle-class and public/private nature of their work. The common Victorian idea of separate spheres for the genders was just starting to wane by the last quarter of the century. Working women and ideologically progressive women (or “New Women”) both challenged the idea of separate spheres by appearing publicly. The concept of the spheres, born out of middle class thought (after all, working-class women had always labored alongside men), in turn heavily impacted emerging middle-class female professions — including telegraphy. While New Woman successfully advocated for the middle-class women’s right to work outside the domestic sphere, the concept of the spheres remained a social force, manifesting in the segregation of women workers from men — as we will see in the history — as well as the development of clubs and lounges for women workers and the societal expectation of temporariness or impermanence ascribed to this type of employment. Ultimately, female telegraph operators inhabited a complicated place in late-nineteenth century society, impacted by both their class status and their gender. Like Henry James’ telegraphist in \textit{In The Cage},

\textsuperscript{28} It is significant that Western Union, specifically, has no record of early female telegraphers, as they eventually came to dominate the commercial industry largely through the purchase of smaller companies. As a historical resource, the Western Union also became the locus of the records — including employment records — of this assortment of short-lived businesses. Although it is unclear if the three women that Jepsen identifies in particular worked for companies that were later absorbed by Western Union, that there are personal accounts of women being hired for the role but no formal employment records of women from the largest employer of telegraphists continues to be notable.
professional women telegraphists worked in public spaces while being barred from the rest of the world. This chapter builds on the discussion from the previous chapter, borrowing some of its themes and in particular its assessment of the telegraphist’s precarious class standing, to examine how these same notions impact the world outside of Cocker’s. Drawing on historical documents and texts from professional telegraphists, many of whom are women, we shall see that the telegraphic trials of class and gender are not limited to James’ cage.

The tenuous position women telegraphers held socially between the spheres touched almost every aspect of their lives, not just their public visibility. Women saw a sharp rise in employment in the late 1800’s, particularly in telegraphy and later as telephone operators. The changing status of the industry and the growth of its reputation as acceptable “women’s work” coincides with the growing social debate over the “woman question,” or what would come to be known as the “New Woman.” As Jill Galvan notes in *The Sympathetic Medium*, women in telegraphic and typing professions “became a more palatable version of the New Woman: the discourse around her, by emphasizing her low wages and status as an object of male desire ultimately reinforced her relativity to and reliance on men” (18). This chapter seeks to explore the interplay of these spheres and how the precariousness of the woman telegrapher’s existence manifests in texts of the era, particularly in their characterization of female telegraphists. I argue that by looking at the history of the professional woman telegraphist and studying the ways in which this figure is discussed, described, and personified in the literature, we can better understand the complicated space women telegraphists inhabited at the turn of the century and

29 Although the work became increasingly acceptable for women to perform, women consistently made up the minority of telecommunications workers. As Lubrano points out, even at the industry’s height in the 1890’s, women only made up 16% of the workforce in the telegraph and telephone sectors (137). This is due to many factors including the limited times of day women could work (often 8am to 8pm), while men worked evening and overnight shifts, and the segregation of women in the workplace that kept them from improving their skills and advancing in the profession.
see how the relative histories and literature helped to both illuminate and reinforce this social complexity.

Women telegraphists existed in borderlands – between classes, levels of education, and propriety – ultimately between acceptance and rejection. In fiction and in history, borderlands tend to be treacherous places. No Man’s Land, the rocky shore, the rabbit hole: these are places where the rules of man, and sometimes even the laws of physics, are unclear. Within late-nineteenth century society, women telegraphists existed in this liminal space. As women from a growing and shifting middle class working in an emerging profession, their status was largely undefined. Though members of a society with strict rules, the rules that did and did not apply to women telegraphists were often unclear, and women had to navigate these murky waters with little help and even less chance of rescue should they falter. In In the Cage, Everard sees the telegraphist quite differently than she sees herself. He pushes at the boundaries of propriety, unsure what space the telegraphist inhabits, and the telegraphist finds that it is up to her to determine what behavior is appropriate and to navigate herself out of dangerous waters. While other women contemporary to the female telegraphist endured some or all of the same liminal borderland experiences, the difficulties of these spaces often manifest in unique ways for women telegraphists.

History is itself a story that, while working towards objectivity, inherently excludes certain voices. Examining a piece of history through a literary lens serves a number of purposes: fiction can condense a variety of similar experiences into the form of a single character, and therefore, from an experienced author, we may see culture – in this case the culture of the female telegraphist – writ small. This chapter examines texts from a range of sources, from canonical

\[\text{30} \] James’ telegraphist shows us the potential for slippage at these borders.
and professional authors to telegraphers dabbling in fiction writing and public discourse. I begin with a brief historical overview, highlighting social backlash to the New Woman movement and exploring the historic development of women as operators in both the United States and England, before moving on to examine how women telegraphists’ liminality is represented in a number of fictional narratives. After an overview of the history of the woman telegrapher and an examination of published discourse on her position and behavior, we will turn to fiction to add texture and humanity to the historical description. Due to their wide reach, popular authors had the power to impact public opinion, and what they had to say on a matter affected the conversation and contemporary sentiment. By starting with Anthony Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl,” we can examine the woman telegraphist’s reputation from the point of view of a “traditional” text and an outsider’s perspective. Next, we will review a selection from W. J. Johnson’s anthology Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom to see what those writing from within the profession – both men and women – had to say about women telegraphists. These works, followed by Wired Love by Ella Cheever Thayer, allow us to see the ways in which fiction gives us the means to see inside the experiences of others. In these cases, female telegraphist authors may show readers more truth by removing the strict boundaries of reality and objectivity. The same is true for the other Lightning Flashes texts, which exaggerate gendered workplace concerns to a degree that makes these concerns easy to understand and interpret. These powers of fiction, that sit at the heart of literary analysis and the study of literature, are present in the works discussed in this chapter and will, I hope, add a context, complexity, and humanity to a dynamic and often overlooked slice of history.
3.1 Situating the Telegraph Girl

Sarah Grand’s 1894 essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” is generally credited with coining the term New Woman, though an idea of the type had been developing for some time. In her article, Grand complains of the “Bawling Brotherhood” of men who speak out against women’s advancement. She writes that, in contrast, “the new woman is a little above him, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (271).31 Although authors like Olive Schreiner, Henrik Ibsen, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Henry James and George Gissing, to name a few, were writing New Women characters into their works before and simultaneous to Grand’s publication, the appearance of “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” sparked a public debate and gave a name to the changing status of some women in late-nineteenth-century society.32

In response to Grand, many wrote critiques and satirical content addressing her ideas. The author Maria Louise Ramé, known better as Ouida, responded in an article in *The North American Review* titled “The New Woman,”

It can scarcely be disputed, I think, that in the English language there are conspicuous at the present moment two words which designate two unmitigated bores: the Workingman and the Woman. The Workingman and the Woman, the New Woman, be it remembered,

31 Although here Grand does not capitalize the term, the New Woman became such a common and ubiquitous label that it quickly gained capitalization, as it is commonly now written.
32 See *Story of an African Farm*, *Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler*, *Story of a Modern Woman*, *Daisy Miller* and *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Odd Women*. 
meet us at every page of literature written in the English tongue; and each is convinced that on its own especial W hangs the future of the world. (610)

Ouida goes on to criticize Grand’s article in detail, but this opening gives a strong sense of the tone of the rebuttal. Clearly, she is not pleased with the position Grand takes nor the collective consciousness growing around the New Woman. (Interestingly, she capitalizes the term New Woman and makes special note of the capital W.) Taking their own jab at Grand, *Punch* magazine published a “New Nursery Rhyme. For Child-men” also titled “The New Woman” in their May 26th edition in 1894. It goes as follows:

There is a New Woman, and what do you think?
She lives upon nothing but Fools and Ink!
But, though Fools and Ink form the whole of her diet,
This nagging New Woman can never be quiet! (252)

These critiques from Ouida and *Punch* display the tension of the first side of our social triangle: that of the line between New Women and genteel, private sphere women. These public sentiments show a clear preference for the later type. What’s more, these critiques and the social pushback to the changing, more public facing, values of women led to the development of a broad misunderstanding of the New Woman. Carolyn Christensen Nelson, in her introduction to *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Drama and Articles of the 1890’s*, writes, “A stereotyped image of the New Woman quickly took hold on the public imagination. She was educated at Girton College, Cambridge, rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public: in short, she rejected the traditional role for women and demanded emancipation” (ix). Nelson’s is a fairly generous description of the socially determined stereotype. The New Woman, for rejecting
domesticity, was often charged with “de-feminizing,” or dispelling any of her feminine attributes.

The reality of the New Woman is, unsurprisingly, more complicated than her critics chose to believe. Talia Shaffer describes the New Woman as one who “agitated for greater autonomy in everything from etiquette to employment,” (39). However, she makes a strong argument that the stereotype of the New Woman was much more pervasive than the women themselves, and that those that “walked without chaperones, carried their own latchkeys, bicycled” or even “smoked cigarettes, cut their hair, or wore divided skirts” were often of much more modest means than the publicly-defined New Woman and would have rarely identified themselves by the term (39). In *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*, a text credited with relaunching modern interest in New Woman studies, Ann Ardis defines New Women as women who chose “not to pursue the conventional bourgeois woman's career of marriage and motherhood “ (1), but later narrows the term to “real women whose violations of the social code were viewed as a serious threat to bourgeois culture's hegemony” (12). Ardis also argues that following Ouida’s publication, the “New Woman” as a source of social concern was pushed largely into the sphere of literary discourse, thus quarantining the New Woman from generating real societal impact. Although the New Woman was not as static a figure as her public image described, the stereotype remained a pervasive idea against which women who desired economic independence came into conflict.

Women telegraphists received many of the boons and freedoms of the New Woman movement without the social stigma usually attached. While maintaining their new independence, women telegraphists found, somewhat accidentally, a way to side-step the harshest of the critiques of New Women, in part because of the training their position required.
The new telegraphic industry created an incentive for women to be educated: working as an operator required at least a secondary education since workers needed to be able to read and write proficiently and have a good vocabulary (Jepsen 41-43). At a time when many families did not invest in the education of daughters, the growth of middle-class jobs for women, including as telegraph operators, encouraged women to seek high school diplomas and technical training. Because of this, women telegraphers often held a level of education between women of the working class (who had little to no education) and the stereotypically-college-educated New Woman. That telegraph operation often required a secondary education also helped to position the occupation as solidly middle-class, which lent to its respectability and made it a safe job for women to have while maintaining social propriety.33

While in terms of education, economic autonomy, and independent living, women in the telegraphic profession were balanced between the stereotype of the New Women and working women, they also inhabited a borderland between the public-facing working woman and the “proper housewife” or “angel of the house” who upheld traditional, Victorian ideals of womanhood and the domestic sphere. Women telegraphists, despite their New Woman-esque freedoms, were protected by general social approval. Having a good reputation was a currency women dared not undervalue even at the end of the nineteenth century, and to be able to both earn a wage and maintain respectability was certainly an incredible benefit. Martha Rayne in her 1884 text What Can a Woman Do?, which was designed to help young women find suitable employment, enumerates the possible occupations for women and touches not only on the finances but also the social standing of women telegraphists. She writes that “[f]or the women

33 Although this also meant that lower-class and under-educated women were barred from the profession.
themselves, the practice of telegraphy has certain simple and definite attractions. It does not soil their dresses; it does not keep them in a standing posture; it does not, they say, compromise them socially. A telegraph operator, they declare, has a social position not inferior to that of a teacher or governess” (139). Perhaps of most importance, this social positioning meant that women working in telegraphy could remain eligible prospects for marriage – they were still considered “suitable.” In contrast, other female professionals who interacted directly with the opposite sex as part of their work, were, therefore, potentially mixing with unsavory characters and considered less marriable.

Like some other women’s professions such as school teacher or nurse, the woman telegraphist’s public perception was one of temporariness. Because of this, telecommunication occupations afforded women a particular level of economic autonomy and created an avenue for women to live independently and retain “respectability” – at least for a time. Most people saw this kind of women’s work as a stepping stone for young women between early adulthood and marriage. Female telegraphists maintained respectability because they were expected to return to the domestic sphere after a short foray into the carefully controlled public atmosphere of the telegraph office. This perception influenced standard wages, among other elements, making the work generally unsuitable for lifetime independence. Employers set pay and hours with the expectation that women telegraphers did not need long-term financial stability. Women who did desire to live independently for more than a handful of years found that the depressed income left them financially strained – though it did usually keep them from outright destitution. Martha Rayne describes the situation in detail in What Can a Woman Do?. On the income of lady telegraphers, Rayne writes,
Her pay, we will say, is as yet only thirty-five dollars a month, and if she depends entirely upon her earnings for support, she is likely neither to save a cent nor to waste a cent. Her board and room will cost her probably at least six dollars a week, or, if she has a room-mate, possibly five dollars; her luncheons, her car fares, her washing, half as much more, without any extravagance on her part; her office dress, even if she make it herself, will take eight dollars out of her pocket-book; her bills for other clothes, for shoes, for hats—well it is easy enough for her to expend ten dollars every week in the year, and her salary is not nine dollars. (141)

Rayne goes on to discuss how, over time, a telegrapher’s pay may increase some, but that a woman in the position will never make over fifteen dollars a week. Rayne’s detailed financial accounting shows the near impossibility of a woman being able independently to maintain a middle class lifestyle whose trappings she would need to keep her position. Additionally, women regularly “accepted terms inferior to men because they need support only until the marriage state provides it” according to the Journal of the Telegraph (qtd. in Jepsen 72). As we shall see in Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl,” joining the profession was seen as a way for a woman to have more choice over her future husband, not necessarily as a way to decide whether or not to marry at all.34

In this way, maintaining respectability had its downfalls. Women telegraphists were not considered “serious” workers either in terms of long-term employment or in day-to-day behavior. The cyclical effect of the low pay and frequent turnover was that, even as the industry grew and as more positions for women became available in the field, the wages for women

34 Though the latter was possible as Jepsen shows in his sub-chapter on Family and Marriage (71-78).
telegraphers continued to drop, and there was little chance of upward mobility. Employers often segregated women from their male colleagues (particularly in major cities), in what was regularly known as the “Ladies Department,” following the thinking that the separate spheres should be maintained as much as possible – in part because women needed to be protected from the behaviors of men. This, of course, became a double-edged sword: While women telegraphists maintained their marriage eligibility through sequestration, the separation also rendered them ineligible for access to skill development and higher wages. Employers regularly assigned women operators to easier, less-frequented lines, and this division, as Anteresa Lubrano points out, “precluded them from being able to pick up the skill by filling in during the less busy times for the more skilled operators” (134). Lewis H. Smith, editor of the American publication the Telegrapher, waxes eloquent on this subject in the article “Lady Operators,” published in the February 27th edition, 1865. He writes,

> The great fault has been in simply teaching a young lady the rudiments of the business and then cooping her up in a room by herself or with others of her sex, away from all chance of gaining knowledge, or emulating those who are in the front rank. If men and women could change places, how think you the former would come out? If we [men] were hampered and excluded as women have been for centuries, where would be our boasted superiority? (n. pag.)

In this way, under the guise of gentility and respectability, companies put into place a design that inhibited women from improving their abilities or rank.

Among male operators, many felt that women in the profession did not take the work seriously. Because they did not regard women as breadwinners nor believe that “ladies” should have strengths outside the domestic sphere, such as a head for business, men telegraphists often
underestimated the contribution of their female counterparts and assumed a lack of seriousness for the work, whether true or not. J. W. Stover, a committee chairman for the National Telegraphic Union writes in the *Telegrapher* that “a general knowledge of business matters is not a womanly possession, it does not belong to the sex, and it is only found in a few who, by some freak of nature, possess a woman’s form, but the characteristics (to a great extent) of the masculine gender” (qtd. in Jepsen 93). This type of thinking pervaded the telegraphic profession. In contrast, when Smith, the publication’s editor, speaks out on behalf of women, he notes, “that we will have few sympathizers of the male sex, we expect” (“Lady Operators”). Smith knows that his position will not be a popular one, as it supports women’s participation in the public act of unionizing.

In this same vein, male colleagues and employers often criticized women for making more mistakes than men, including “jumping to conclusions” (Smith), using a stylistic mannerism called “clipping” that made the process of receiving messages difficult (Jepsen 24), and absenteeism. There is debate on the validity of these critiques, and most researchers contend that the problems did not occur as frequently as the complaints suggest, nor were the problems as gendered as the imbalance of male complaints implies. Instead, there is now mostly consensus that the preconceptions of women being unfit for the work heavily affected evaluations of their productivity. In this way, although the label of respectability and the attempts to domesticate served to protect women telegraphers’ reputations and social standing, these same classifications also made working conditions more difficult, as it led employers and male coworkers (not to mention the general public) to fail to treat these women with any seriousness. Women

35 This is directly related to the New Woman critique that they were divesting themselves of womanhood.
telegraphers found themselves in a borderland between the domestic sphere and the public/professional. They had an occupation and the potential for an income that did not ruin their reputation, but society’s expectation that these women would eventually return to domesticity greatly hindered their long-term stability or advancement.

3.2 Real Women Telegraphists

The history, then, of how these stereotypes develop and manifest is an important one. The argument at hand focuses primarily on the characterization of women telegraphists in the turn of the century’s literature. In the sense that art imitates life and vice-versa, the texts discussed here were influenced by – and likely influenced – the general public perception of women telegraph operators. Therefore, it behooves this study to establish a historical framework of the “lady telegraphist” before moving forward. This real-life context for women operators will inform the readings that follow. Additionally, if we are to study the resulting characterizations and stereotypes of the female telegraphist, it will help to know where it all begins. What follows, then, is a brief overview of the highs and lows of the story of women telegraphists in the United States and England, leading up to the end of the nineteenth century. Although there are many similarities between the public view of women telegraphists in the United States and England, their histories interestingly diverge and converge.

In the United States, “The entry of women into the profession in the first ten years or so after the invention of the telegraph attracted little public notice” (Jepsen 3). The American Civil War heavily influenced women’s growing numbers in the telegraphic profession as well as the dialogue surrounding their employment. Jepsen writes that telegraphy “began as a relatively gender-neutral profession. Unlike many of the occupations women entered for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century, telegraphy admitted women to its ranks before its gender roles had
solidified” (3). The lack of skilled and affordable labor in the new field helped to influence this gender neutrality.

The men leading the hiring charge filled positions with anyone who was able and willing to do the work – including their own sisters. Ezra Cornell, an associate of Morse, hired his sister Phoebe Wood as operator in the Albion, Michigan office in 1849 (Jepsen 4). And around 1850, Helen Plummer joined her brother, P.S. Plummer, on the job – she operated the telegraph, while her brother delivered the messages and maintained the wires (Jepsen 5). Jepsen lists other employers that hired and trained female acquaintances, distant family members, and even lodgers. “Thus,” Jepsen writes, “the earliest women operators went largely unnoticed at a time when it was a novelty to see persons of either sex operate the new and mysterious instruments” (7).

In the US, women’s numbers in telegraphy burgeoned in 1861 with the outbreak of the American Civil War, a shift that would later have a tremendous impact on women telegraphists’ public perception. “During the Civil War, women were welcomed into the telegraph industry, often at wages equivalent to those of male operators, because of the temporary shortage caused by the absence of men. As male telegraphers enlisted or were drafted into the Military Telegraph Corps during the Civil War, they were replaced by women in many offices” (Jepsen 79-80). There is, unfortunately, no census data for the number of women working specifically with telegraphy, but we do know that, in total, more than one hundred thousand new jobs were opened to women during the American Civil War. At first the growing female workforce generated little notice, but sentiment began to shift as men returned home from the war. Men began to see women in the workplace as a threat to their livelihoods and way of life. However, instead of firing women and filling their positions with returned soldiers, employers saw an opportunity to
save money: reducing operating costs by keeping women on at a lower rate of pay. One male telegraph operator writing only as “T.A.,” warns in the *Telegrapher*, “ladies will work for a much lower salary than gentlemen, and will, under those circumstances, get the preference, and will gradually replace them.” He goes on to say that male operators should protect their livelihoods by keeping women out of the unions and “also as much as possible off the lines” (qtd. in Jepsen 86). However, despite growing numbers of women in the workplace and women’s willingness and ability to work for lower pay, male concerns over job scarcity never came to fruition. “Women entering the craft in large numbers after 1870 did not displace male operators; women supplemented the male force by primarily occupying lower-skilled positions that offered correspondingly lower pay” (Jepsen 97).

Eventually however, employers’ plans to take advantage of female workers at a lower pay rate backfired. Although women were never able to negotiate equal wages, the pay disparity helped inspire women to organize and speak out. Across fields, trade unions began to admit women in order to maintain collective bargaining ability and due to concerns that women’s lower pay would affect their male members. This also led to the founding of the Working Women’s Union in New York City (Jepsen 81). In telegraphy in particular, women fought a hard battle for the right to join the National Telegraphic Union (NTU), playing out their concerns in the pages of the union’s paper the *Telegrapher*. Women telegraphers’ letters to the editor on the subject of unionizing published in the *Telegrapher* are surprising in their gentility and display the careful balancing act these women were mindful to maintain. Knowing that to be seen as agitators would only hurt their cause, these *Telegrapher* writers refer to themselves as “sisters,” engendering,

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36 As we have seen, excuses for this lower rate included reasons such as the perceived temporariness of women workers, their lack of skill (whether real, due to a deficit of access, or imaginary), and a general belief that women were not breadwinners.
they hope, a brotherly response. Susannah, the first to write to the Telegrapher on the subject, deprecates herself so as not to seem threatening or too modern. “You know that we – that is, your sister operators – are rapidly growing in numbers, and I am so simple that I cannot see why we should be excluded from the benefits of your association” (16). Although their admittance was voted down at the NTU’s Chicago convention in 1865 (Jepsen 91), as Thomas Jepsen points out, “by debating their opponents in print and insisting on their right to earn a living as telegraphers, women operators created their own legitimacy and visibility in the industry” (97).

The history of women telegraphers in England follows a different trajectory, though the end results are surprisingly similar. Despite differences such as a nationalized telegraph system and differing laws for women in the workplace, the results were the same: Women telegraphists faced similar issues of societal borderlands on either side of the Atlantic. While the American Civil War deeply impacted the historical course for women telegraphists in the US, in England women faced a different infrastructure and social context. Private telegraph companies began to spring up in the 1850s and 1860s; however, following an 1865 report by Frank Ives Scudamore, the Telegraph Act of 1869 was passed, nationalizing the telegraph industry and integrating it into the national postal service. By 1870, Jepsen shows, 31% of telegraph operators in England were women (59). As Lubrano notes, the feminization of the telegraphic profession was the result of evolution in the field, not planning. She writes that, in England, the integration of women into the field “was far more complete because the management of the Post Office (which controlled the telegraph industry in England) committed itself early on to a female signaling force in order to economize on personnel” (136-37).

Surprisingly, and in defiance of the popular “separate spheres” ideology, women in England were not segregated into separate departments in the workplace as they were in America.
(Jepsen 59). In 1871, the postmaster general noted that “it is a matter of experience that the male clerks are more willing to help the female clerks with their work than to help each other” (qtd. in Jepsen 28). Whether this sprang from men’s desire to interact with women or a lack of competitive feeling, ultimately women in England received more chances to train and to improve their skill than their American counterparts. Although these interactions likely helped women telegraphists develop their skills, particularly in ways that American women could not, the English workforce of women telegraphists was constrained by another problem: curfews. English law only allowed women telegraphists to work between the hours of 8:00AM and 8:00PM, nor could women telegraphers work as many hours as their male counterparts, hindering both their income and skill development, as well as the higher-paying night shifts (Jepsen 32).

Socially, the English expectation of women telegraphists’s temporariness reflects American sentiments. Jepsen shows that, in England, women worked in the field for an average of eight to nine years. Most women, after this stint, would leave the profession to be married, at an average age of 27 (in 1899). As in the US, the opportunity to work granted women a window of freedom into the public sphere. This allowed women telegraphists more circumspection in their choice of spouse and presented them with new opportunities to meet eligible bachelors – yet again, however, it did not free them from marriage entirely.

Most historians writing on the subject of women telegraphers focus on the ways women in the workforce differed from men, using the male worker as the control, and the woman worker as the variant. In contrast, Jill Galvan argues in *The Sympathetic Medium* that one should look at the situation of female telegraphers from a pro-woman perspective, as opposed to looking at

37 In situations where women telegraphists were not segregated from their male coworkers, the profession of telegraphist was still considered “safer” for women’s reputation than professions like shopgirl or food hall attendant that were subject to the full scope of the public sphere. Even James’ telegraphist maintains her propriety while interacting with customers due to the pretense of separation created by “the cage.”
women as “not men.” This is an interesting counterpoint that serves to complicate the most common historic narrative. Galvan argues against a study exclusively focused on how women telegraphers were cheaper labor, less skilled, and more often temporary. She writes, “there is much value in thinking about feminization not simply as a negative choice – as a matter of not choosing workers who would be too unwieldy or too expensive – but as a positive choice, a choice for workers believed capable of outperforming others in the particulars of the job. That is, it is logical to analyze feminization in terms of femininity” (6). On this point, Galvan notes, “for reasons having to do with ideal conditions of dialogue and knowledge exchange, people viewed women as particularly well suited for this vocation. By examining this gendering, we gain a revealing vantage point onto nineteenth-century ideas of femininity as well as modernizing concepts of communication and knowledge transfer” (2). This is a central tenet of Galvan’s argument, key to her hypothesis on the relationship between women telegraphists, typists, and spiritual mediums at the turn of the century.

Galvan maps out for her readers a clear definition of what she sees as the social expectations of female mediums (be it in telegraphy, typology, or spirituality) and how these traits were particularly suited to the late-nineteenth century woman. In this way, Galvan gives readers insight into how a feminized study of the field could be conducted, noting that “mediation gained particular prominence and complexity over the course of the nineteenth century: the proliferation of methods produced a networked culture that offered dramatic new communicative opportunities, as well as challenged ones to which the female sex seemed especially well poised to respond” (12) She goes on to assert that

Portraits of female media of all kinds commonly return to two allegedly feminine traits: sensitivity or sympathy, often imagined as the product of women’s delicate nervous
systems; and an easy reversion to automatism, or a state of unconsciousness. While the first posited the medium’s ability to reach out feelingly to others and thus to facilitate networks of communication, the second presumed that such self-extension would only be a matter of feeling: by subtracting her intellectually from the path of communication, automatism eased and protected others’ dialogue. (12)

To summarize this idea, Galvan writes, “In short, women were exemplary go-betweens because they potentially combined the right kind of presence with the right kind of absence” (12). The seeming paradox that Galvan gives between presence and absence is an important one to consider and has the potential to affect the ways in which we interpret literary examples of the female medium.

Historical evidence shows that, as Galvan argues, employers integrated women into the telegraph office to be a calming presence and to influence male behavior. “When Emma Hunter was put in charge of the West Chester, Pennsylvania, telegraph office in 1851, it was hoped that the presence of women on the line would elevate the moral tone of the discourse between operators” (Jepsen 101). Jepsen attributes this expectation to the Victorian separate spheres: “the moral superiority of women was part and parcel of the ‘two spheres’ ideology, and it was assumed that men would alter their behavior accordingly in the presence of women, both on the line and in the telegraph office” (101). In other words, the mere presence of women brought with it the domestic. Jepsen also mentions here the presence of discourse “on the line.” Telegraphers of both sexes often spent their free moments “chatting” with each other over the wires. This semi-unsupervised discourse led to all types of troublesome situations, as we shall see in the literature, not the least of which was coarseness and foul language. The popular thinking was that a female presence “on the line” would deter such talk, though this idea proved to be only
marginally successful and had its own unintended consequences.\textsuperscript{38} Employers also believed that the presence of women would have a positive and censoring effect on male \textit{customers} in the office and would improve their behavior as well.\textsuperscript{39}

Faint evidence shows that women were actually “exemplary” at presenting the certain kind of “absence” Galvan describes – one in which society expected mediating women to behave like automatons. Though there is an implication that women telegraphers were \textit{supposed} to behave this way, as an extension of larger societal expectations on women, less evidence exists that they actually did. The November 28th, 1864 issue of the \textit{Telegrapher} contains a lengthy critique of women operators, signed by an anonymous “Spark.” In it, he complains, “I have, also, been surprised and pained to observe, in a few of them [the women operators], an overbearing and uncourteous manner of transacting business over the wires, which is certainly not calculated to promote good feeling towards them among their co-laborers of the other sex” (“‘Susannah’ and her Sisters”). This insider’s critique, though ungenerous, likely stems from real experience and shows the disconnect between the expected behavior of women and the reality of it.\textsuperscript{40}

The history of women in telegraphy helps to show, in concrete ways, how telegraphists inhabited a liminal space with undefined borders situated somewhere between working women, New Women, and women of the private sphere. This offers contemporary readers a broad understanding of the tensions and experiences of nineteenth-century women telegraph operators, through which we can begin to understand the overall social position they inhabited, and the

\textsuperscript{38} Jepsen points out that by 1907 vulgarity and harassment were serious problems and central issues of the telegrapher’s strike that year (101).

\textsuperscript{39} If James’ Everard is any proof, this idea was equally erroneous.

\textsuperscript{40} How much of Spark’s statement we can believe is up for debate. As established, male telegraph operators likely criticized their female colleagues more than was accurate. Between the expectation for a calming saint and the Spark’s overbearing and uncourteous character description, real women telegraphists likely fell somewhere in the middle.
unique stereotypes and expectations they endured. While some other professional women experienced similar tensions depending on the vocation, the telegraphist also faced unique challenges generated by the specific practicalities of the work. While from a bird's-eye perspective, the social pressures placed on other middle-class women’s work looks similar and some women professionals inhabited this same borderland, not only are there slight differences between the general expectations, these tensions manifest in unique ways for the woman telegraphist – just as the shop girl, florist, or typist faced her own specific challenges.

3.3 The Telegraphic Life In Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl”

Turning, then, from the macro to the micro, we look to the literature to study the stories told about women telegraph operators and examine the ways in which these stories align with and complicate the historical narrative. Our first text is a short story by Anthony Trollope titled “The Telegraph Girl.”41 In this text, Trollope highlights many of the pitfalls women could face by attempting to participate in the public sphere, ultimately rewarding the “telegraph girl” who retains her domesticity despite her public life and profession.

As this work is not widely read, I offer a brief background and summary. Originally published in 1877 in Good Cheer, a Christmas edition of the monthly periodical Good Words, “The Telegraph Girl” was reprinted for a wider audience in Trollope’s collection Why Frau Froman Raised her Prices and Other Stories in 1882. The story centers on Lucy Graham who,
along with her roommate Sophy Wilson, lives in a modest room in a lodging-house in London; both women work at the telegraph office of the National Telegraph Department. Lucy and Sophy are distinctly oppositional in character and behavior. Lucy is reserved, circumspect, and cautious, while Sophy is frivolous. The two are likewise pitted against each other in appearance, as the narrator makes it clear that, to Lucy’s eye at least, Sophy is the more attractive of the two. The appearance of each expresses the young women’s characters: Lucy dresses exclusively in tones of brown and in practical and long-mended garments. Trollope writes, “her complexion was – brown. It was impossible to deny that her whole face was brown, as also was her hair, and generally her dress. There was a pervading brownness about her which left upon those who met her a lasting connection between Lucy Graham and that serviceable, long-enduring colour” (266). In contrast, Sophy has a “pink complexion” and “no inclination for that strong, serviceable brown binding which was so valuable in Lucy’s eyes” (270). She is instead “wedded to bright colors and soft materials” (270). Although Sophy may seem like the more feminine of the two telegraphists, with her interest in ribbons and bows, her emphasis on physical appearance proves distasteful to Trollope’s narrator, perhaps because an emphasis on appearance means an interest in one’s public appearance – in other words, a preoccupation with how one appears in the public sphere, a space women are not supposed to want to inhabit. Lucy, on the other hand, puts all of her energy into private-sphere endeavors like improved domestic arrangements and the care of others, worrying only for her own appearance as it affects her respectability.

Over the course of the story, both telegraphists fall in love with a new lodger: Mr. Abraham Hall. Sophy falls ill, however, and Lucy declines into near financial destitution trying to cover the full expense of the women’s shared room while also sending money to support
Sophy – which is nearly impossible to do on a telegraphist’s salary. Lucy does all she can to stay financially solvent, repairing and re-repairing her garments to remain presentable at work and spending so little on food that she nearly starves. Hall witnesses Lucy’s decline and tries to help, but Lucy’s stalwart propriety keeps her from accepting his money. Observing Lucy’s strength of character, Hall falls in love with her and ultimately asks for her hand in marriage.

From a Victorian societal and domestic standpoint, Lucy in many ways represents the “ideal.” She acts reserved and respectable, she follows all the social rules, and she clearly has a desire to care for others. When she decides to live independently, one of her greatest concerns is being lonely, which is part of what draws her to Sophy. In lieu of a husband, Lucy cares for her roommate, which Trollope uses to show Lucy’s strong capabilities as a mother. She is also a hard worker, without being competitive or looking for a raise. Even when Sophy’s “illness” throws Lucy into economic distress, she finds a way to make her income work harder, rather than ask for a raise or promotion. Likewise, Lucy never advocates for herself. These all seem to be “womanly” behaviors of which Trollope approves, and in exchange for this good behavior, despite being exceedingly “brown,” the plot rewards Lucy with the husband both women want.

In contrast, Sophy embodies many of society’s critiques of and concerns about women telegraphists. She takes too many liberties with her freedom: she goes out alone with men, she wastes her money on ribbons, and she misses work for undiagnosed illnesses that end up costing both the company and Lucy. She is frivolous and selfish. The contrast between the two roommates in many ways embodies the social tension between societal expectations for women and society’s perception of women. This “disturbed paradigm” (14), as Galvan puts it, echoes the critiques of Spark’s letter in the Telegrapher, who draws on opposing stereotypes to evaluate

42 Though never said outright, Trollope suggests that Sophy’s “illness” presents more an opportunity for a seaside retreat with partial pay than any real crisis.
the behavior of women telegraphists and assess them against the social expectation. The paradigm also exhibits the difference between the domesticity expected of women and the fear of what women could be if allowed access to the public sphere.

Though this story, like so many other Victorian works, centers around the marriage plot, the work story is distinct in that the central character’s position as telegraphist adds to the plot while also representing the complicated borderland women telegraphists had to navigate. As part of Lucy’s backstory, Trollope tells that a widower fifteen years Lucy’s senior offered to marry her, following the death of her brother and sole family member. Although a practical choice, Lucy rejects the offer citing that “she feared that she could not love him” (268). “She knew him to be a good man, with a comfortable house, an adequate income, and a kind heart. Had she gone to him she would not have been required then to live among … the telegraphs” (268). Instead, she chooses independence. “She was fond … of being a government servant, with a sure and fixed salary, – bound of course to her work at certain hours, but so bound only for certain hours. During a third of the day she was, as she proudly told herself, a servant of the Crown. During the other two-thirds she was lord, – or lady, – of herself” (265). Following this desire for independence, Lucy decides to retain her position at the telegraph office, hoping that she can achieve some financial independence. She asks herself, “Why should she not be independent, and respectable, and safe?” (265).

Although Lucy does achieve independence and respectability, it is the last of these in the list, safety, that proves to be the most difficult to achieve. Lucy is able for a time to live independently, though her work at the telegraph office seems unlikely to prove a long-term solution. In Thayer’s *Wired Love*, a character asks about the longevity of the profession for women, “Did you ever see an aged operator? I never did, and don’t know whether it’s because
electricity acts as a sort of antidote, or whether they grow wise as they grow old, and leave the
business” (46). Jepsen points out that, historically, telegraphy “was a young person’s game, and
women operators in particular tended to be young and single” (60). In 1880, the average age of
polled women operators in New York City was 21.8 years; however, Jepsen notes that some
career operators existed, such as Elizabeth Cogley, “who at the age of 55 in 1889 was one of the
most senior telegraph operators in the United States” (60). Although Lucy gains employment
with no clear intentions to marry, other than holding out for the “joy of real, downright, hearty
love” (268), that she can truly live out the rest of her life working in the telegraph office proves
not to be a certainty.

Because of the lower rate of pay for women and the assumption that they did not need to
work, Lucy and Sophy must be careful about their finances in order to carve out a humble yet
independent life. Although they are able to be self-sustaining, neither woman, despite Lucy’s
careful accounting, is able to save money. At the first hardship (Sophy’s removal to the seaside),
everything Lucy has worked for so diligently comes crumbling down, and both her health and
livelihood are put at risk: “Then the struggle became very severe with Lucy, – so severe that she
began to doubt whether she could long endure it” (293). Lucy first moves from the room she
shared with Sophy to a smaller “little garret” in the same house. She also denies herself “her
accustomed dinner at the office, contenting herself with bread and cheese, – or often simply with
bread, – which she could take in her pocket” (293). Lucy also goes to lengths to wash her own
clothes and do her own mending. Despite all this, she still finds herself in debt to the landlord.
As the seasons pass, Lucy’s problems compound. “Even brown dresses won’t wear for ever, let
them be ever so brown,” and “in spite of all efforts with her needle, she became sensible of a
deterioration in her outward appearance which was painful to her at the office” (306). Although
less is said about Lucy’s health, Trollope increasingly describes her as “weak” and “too weak,” and we see her regularly skipping a meal or eating only a “bit of bread” (314). Trollope implies that Lucy’s livelihood can be at risk due either to physical weakness or poor appearance. Conveniently for Lucy then, at her hour of greatest need, she discovers that “hearty love” she has been waiting for in Mr. Hall, and she saves herself from financial ruin through marriage, all without compromising her romantic ideals.

Lucy’s trials (the story’s deus ex machina ending notwithstanding) echo the real, lived experience of many women telegraphers. Although the telegraphic profession afforded young women enough independence to postpone marriage and be more particular in their choice of partner, the work did not provide enough stability to remain independent long term. Lucy balances carefully between the independent New Woman and the respected “Angel of the House”: Her financial independence allows her to be free at the outset of the narrative, but her propriety and mothering nature ultimately draw in her suitor. Through his characters, Trollope personifies societal views of late-nineteenth century professional women.

The story’s title, “Telegraph Girl,” is important narratively and historically. The text consistently refers to Lucy, who for all intents and purposes is a full-grown adult and creeping up on “old maid” status, as “the older girl” and Sophy “the younger girl.” At the story’s end, Hall proposes to Lucy saying, “My girl must not think herself a poor thing. May I not say, my girl?” (313). Galvan writes that “the discourse around these workers frames them in iconic terms that point up their identity as ‘girls’ or young women … Fictional accounts of typists and telegraphers often underscore a heroine’s femininity within the very title” (7). In contrast to Lucy’s own perception of her independence, which she sees as “most unfeminine” and “just as though she were a young man” (266), Trollope balances this with the reiteration, through the title
and repetition within the text, that Lucy and Sophy’s work is indeed feminine and, therefore, respectable. Galvan also points out that at the turn of the century, “‘girls’ – roughly speaking, females beyond school age but still unmarried – were considered to be within a liminal period in which paid work was generally socially acceptable” (7). Here Galvan shows that the term “girl” used for adult women relates to concepts of respectability. There is a draw-back, however. Infantilizing professional women and reducing them to “girls” lowers the expectation that they have mature and responsible faculties or that they will do their work well. In turn male colleagues can develop a heightened awareness for when female telegraphers make mistakes or act in any way frivolously. These critiques (the comments in the Telegrapher by Spark being a prime example) in turn make women’s success in the workplace even more difficult to achieve. The label of “girl” and the preconceptions that accompany it are self-fulfilling while both a compliment and critique.

3.4 What Will a Woman Do?

Although he is a highly respected and canonical author, Trollope’s view on women in the telegraphic profession is from an outsider’s perspective. To gain a greater understanding of social roles within the industry, we must look to literature written by telegraphists themselves. In 1877, American William J. Johnson published an anthology of writings concerned solely with the world of telegraphy titled Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit, and Wisdom. The second such publication, the first seems to have been lost to the annals of history. Editor and publisher of the biweekly paper The Operator, which published information of importance to telegraphers, Johnson collected stories,

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43 Trollope did spend decades of his life working for the Post Office, though he resigned in 1867, two years before the 1869 Telegraph Act that nationalized the telegraphic industry and placed it under the purview of the National Post Office.
poems, biographical essays and cartoons, bringing them together as an anthology: *Lightning Flashes* (Britt Peterson). The goal, Johnson writes in the preface, is to develop for telegraphy a “literature of its own” (3). One of the few to write on this collection, Johnson’s great-great-granddaughter notes that, while somewhat unpolished, “there’s something incredibly modern about these amateur stories and the way they handle technology, the influence of corporations, gender, and love in the time of hyperconnectivity” (Britt Peterson). The contributors, which include both men and women, are, as Johnson declares on the title page, “All the principal writers in the ranks of telegraphic literature, as well as several well-known outsiders.” Many of the tales anthologized include women characters who are both telegraph operators and objects of romantic interest. While Martha Rayne asks *What Can a Woman Do?*, these sample texts will show that a more common question was “what will a woman do?” given access to the public sphere and telegraphic tools.

A tale titled “Kate; a Electromagnetic Romance” seems to be the highlight of the anthology, and is crucial to this study as it provides an insider’s view of the professional working of telegraphy as well as characterizations and expectations of female operators. The story’s creator, Charles Barnard, was a professional journalist and author of books on a variety of subjects including electricity. “Kate” is the only text in the collection to have been published previously by a publication other than Johnson’s own (in this case, *Scribner’s Monthly*) and is the only submission with its own illustrations. In Barnard’s story a young woman named Kate works as a telegraph operator in a train station managed by her father. Kate is in love with a train engineer named John whom she sees briefly each day as his locomotive stops at the depot. Although this is clearly intended by the author to be a “feel-good” story where Kate, the

44 Although this collection has not experienced continued popularity, it did receive a second publication in 1882.
telegraphic heroine, saves the day and wins that ultimate achievement for women (marriage), and though the story is titled eponymously for most of the story, Kate is treated as little more than an object. (A careful reader sees that Kate is an object of use: both as an operator and in her future as a wife.) The story begins with the line “She was a beauty” (53). Yet this is not a description, as we might imagine, of Kate, but of the No. 59, the ultra modern, brand new train for which John is the engineer. Subtly, Kate is pitted against the train throughout the story, with a coinciding illustration reinforcing this parallel – and making it a literal parallel in which Kate is in one half of the frame and the No. 59 is in the other (Fig. 1). The tale closes with John and Kate saying one last goodbye to the No. 59, as they go off to their new life together.

This comparison between Kate and the No. 59, who is repeatedly referred to as “she” throughout the story, echoes Galvan’s argument on the necessity of automatism in telegraphic work and the particular suitability of women for that type of mechanical “absence.” Although it seems that Barnard’s purpose is to pit the two “girls” against each other, by setting up this dichotomy, he compares them in a way that is very telling. To drive home this notion, the narrative recounts how Kate makes mistakes when she

Fig. 1 “A Handkerchief is Quickly Flirted in the Air.” “Kate: An Electro-Magnetic Romance,” by Charles Barnard, Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom, edited by W. J. Johnson, 1882.
worries; showing that she must turn off her mind and her emotions to be an efficient telegraphist. Readers see that if she is to succeed at her work, she must become a machine.

As part of her budding romance, Kate attempts to utilize telegraphy to communicate secretly with John. After a series of failed attempts at subterfuge, Kate’s female colleague and friend in a nearby office helps her devise a new signaling scheme involving the use of old telegraph lines, and Kate and John soon find themselves in the forest, trying to implement the plan. Here Barnard provides an informative insider’s view of the infrastructure and inner workings of contemporary telegraphy, with an accompanying illustration (Fig. 2). John and Kate discover an abandoned line from a defunct company, and after a very detailed description on Barnard’s part, rig together a signaling device that will send a secret alert to Kate when John nears the station.

Due to their innovative scheme, only a few weeks later, in a startling set of coincidences, Kate saves the lives of the Railroad company President, Board members and all their families when a scheduling mistake sends John’s train through the station at the exact same time the President’s private car is stopped on the tracks. The secret telegraphic bell alerts Kate to the

Fig. 2 “Kate Unrolled the Wire as He Took It Up.” “Kate: An Electro-Magnetic Romance,” by Charles Barnard, Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit & Wisdom, edited by W. J. Johnson, 1882.
oncoming disaster, and she rushes into the snow to stop John’s train before it reaches the station. As a reward for saving everyone’s lives, the president of the railroad gives John a promotion and Kate receives hugs and kisses from everyone, including the company president: “the President actually kissed her for the Company. A real Corporation kiss, loud and hearty” (61). Kate also receives the mandate that she should resign from her position, the subtext relaying that she should marry John.

In the story, Kate’s office is in a public location, bustling at certain times with all kinds of visitors and trade, but Kate is by and large shut off from all of this in her small office and under the watchful eye of her father. In this way, the office serves as a quasi-extension of the home and private sphere, a domestic space that she only occasionally escapes when the platform is busy enough to conceal her movement. We see that, for most of her day, Kate resides in a borderland space – one that is neither strictly public nor private. The telegraph, both the authorized implement of Kate’s work and the clandestine bell, invade her pseudo-domestic sphere and provide a line through which Kate can access the public sphere. Likewise, in an attempt to prolong their moments together, Kate teaches John to spell her name in Morse code, which he repeats on the train whistle as he pulls into the station to give her advanced notice of his arrival. He does the same on his evening return trips, and she hears the whistle across the valley as she goes to sleep. Kate tells her friend, over “the wire” of course, “when he passes in the night he sounds my name all through the valley, and I can hear it for miles” (57). An unconventional use for Morse Code, it paints a striking picture and shows how, through this “sounding,” the outside world enters Kate’s room at night.

Johnson’s collection contains a number of examples where the knowledge of encoding that women telegraphists learn in the public workplace helps them to enact romantic subterfuge,
thus denying their expected domestic role. While seemingly appreciated within Barnard’s text – Kate’s lesson grants John new access after all – this trick is also an example of the fears men had about women entering the public workplace: that they would subvert societal standards and generally get up to “no good.” Although this tale may serve as a warning of what women can accomplish when given access, even seemingly supervised access, in the case of this narrative in particular, that connection to the outside world becomes quite literally a lifeline when the information it transfers serves to save the lives of dozens of people.

Another element of the story, an allusion, is important to note as it places Kate once again in a liminal borderland. Near the end of the text, Barnard seems to force in a line that at first glance makes little sense in the context of the work but with a little tenacity may prove illuminating. Kate is awaiting John’s signal after they set up their new circuit, and she fears that it is not working. Barnard writes, “‘He cometh not’ she said” (959). This is a clear allusion to Tennyson’s “Mariana,” but what is the reader to make of it? Are we supposed to think that Kate is “a weary a weary” (11, 23, 35, 47, 59, 71, 83) and wishing, “would that I were dead” (12, 24, 36, 48, 60, 72)? Like Mariana Kate is isolated, and her life revolves around John’s brief appearances much like Mariana waits for a man to appear. Also Kate’s limited opportunities and small world, along with the repetitive nature of her tasks, align her with Mariana – who becomes automatic even in her grief. Despite this, Kate’s overall characterization does not convey the same melancholy or moroseness as Mariana. Perhaps Kate’s telegraphic connection to the wider world makes the difference.
When considering Tennyson’s fated women, Kate is also significantly reminiscent of the Lady of Shalott. Both are isolated and see the world through a window.\(^{45}\) For Kate, the information that comes through her window by way of customers’ messages gives her a distorted view of the world, much as the Lady’s view is a flipped mirror image. When Kate leaves her “four gray walls” (Tennyson 15) to warn John, she nearly dies and everyone wonders at her as she lays on the ground:

Knight and burgher, lord and dame,

To the planked wharfage came:

Below the stern they read her name,

*The Lady of Shalott.* (168-71)

Finally, Kate only “truly lives” once she leaves her telegrapher’s cage. Only then does she get to quit her job and be married. The allusion helps to reinforce the point that Kate, as a telegraphist, is on the verge between public and private. The Lady of Shalott can only stay alive if she remains cloistered in her tower, but if she stays, she can never truly *live.* For the Lady to *live,* or to experience life, is also to die. Kate, while she remains in the telegraph office, can only watch other people pass through, seemingly living their lives to the fullest –

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,

An abbot on an ambling pad,

Sometimes a curly shepherd lad,

Or long-hair’d page in crimson clad,

Goes by to tower’d Camelot: (55-59)

\(^{45}\) As does Mariana, if we are to believe Millais’ depiction.
Kate is close enough to the public sphere that she can see its comings and goings, but she has no real access to it herself, like the Lady of Shallot, “No time hath she to sport and play:/ A charmed web she weaves alway. / A curse is on her” (37-39). Ultimately, Kate must leave the office, giving up her livelihood, and take a chance on the public sphere. Her foray is short-lived and ends ultimately in marriage – a state that Barnard insinuates is both a death, as it is a loss of self and of public life, but also “true” living. This allusion helps readers understand Barnard’s perspective on Kate’s status as a telegraphist: she balances between the public and the private, the appropriate and the inappropriate, ultimately between life and death.

Barnard’s is not the only story in Lightning Flashes that deals with such themes; in total eight stories or poems in the collection (out of forty-eight) center on women telegraphers. These stories all have two elements in common: women serve as objects to men’s desires, and the stories all involve trickery on the part of the women. G.W Russell (not the Irish poet) writes the poem “Out of Adjustment” in which a male telegraph operator stopping at a train depot sees a woman operator crying, and thinking himself “a knight of the telegraph key” (62), consoles her and fixes her current. In exchange, she gives him a kiss. The girl’s fiancé arrives as the two are in this “embrace” and threatens the narrator. The telegraphist tells her betrothed, however, that the man is her cousin. The poem ends:

As we parted that day she whisperingly said,

“You adjusted my relay, assuaging my tears,

And I in return have reciprocated,

For I soon ‘adjusted’ your troubles and fears.

46 Notably, webs are also a popular metaphor for telecommunication wires.
47 Although this kiss seems unlikely, many of the male-generated stories in this collection include dalliances that, outside of fiction, would have been deemed improper.
Your work was performed by the rules of the line

I copied from you with the best of success,

My work, too, was done by the rules of the lyin’,

And saved you and me from great trouble I guess.” (Emphasis original, 63)

The homophone between “line” and “lyin’” and the emphasis on the two words clearly express the writer’s anxiety that access to the first will promote the latter. The narrator is disturbed by how quickly and effectively the girl lies. He puts emphasis on this concern, describing that she “fearfully” lied (63). Not only does the woman lie quite naturally, she does so to her fiancé – though the narrator is slower to criticize this action (possibly because he is the one reaping the benefits). Here the woman embodies male fear of what happens when the separate spheres are dissolved and women are granted freedom and unchaperoned access to men: that women will lie and, more importantly, in doing so they will trick and cuckold men, as the woman does here.

While the author presents this as a cheery poem – the speaker saves the day, gets a kiss, and is not physically assaulted – his fear of women seeps through the lines and tinges the otherwise upbeat tale, making it unnerving.

Another story in the collection, “Tis Better to Have Loved and Lost,” reveals similar concerns. The story is very short (only a third of a page long) and is printed anonymously. In this story, the male narrator meets a charming young woman who shows an interest in his profession. After he shows her the ropes, or “wires”, and she explores how the system works, she leaves. Only later does he learn the woman herself was a telegraph operator. The narrator, being thus fooled, is so upset that he makes an egregious error on a message. The story ends with the

48 That Tennyson seems quite popular among these authorial telegraphists suggests an interesting avenue for study.
Here, again, the author expresses fear over women’s ability to deceive unsuspecting men. Although this writer is an amateur, as are most of the submissions in *Lightning Flashes*, and his story lacks narrative basics such as motivation and characters beyond that of a strawman (or straw-woman in this case), this submission still offers an invaluable look into the world and mind of telegraph operators. In the text, modern readers can see in the closing line the disdain the narrator holds for such duplicitous women. In fact, the lack of other story-like qualities suggest that the driving purpose of this narrative is to express the author’s position on women in the profession.

These two examples center on a single problem: that women lie, and by doing so, they make fools of men. Sarah Grand writes on the subject of man’s fear of the duplicitous woman, shedding light on the root concern we see expressed in the previous texts: “Man acknowledges that the business of life carried on according to his methods corrodes, and the state of corrosion is a state of decay; and yet he is fatuous enough to imagine that our ambition must be to lie like him for our own benefit in every public capacity” (274). Grand argues here that men believe women want to emulate male behaviors. And men, knowing full well how lowly those behaviors are, try to keep women from the public sphere in order to hinder them from low-moral behavior such as lying. From Grand’s perspective, these writers are projecting their own fears about women onto their female characters. Grand’s concept is clearly present in the previous two texts: men imagine that women will lie – and in the same ways that men often do – in order to push their own advantages.

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49 Whether the speaker makes this statement ironically or in earnest is unclear. The entire text carries an exaggerated tone that may suggest satire, the writer is also likely an amateur, as are the majority of contributors to the collection, and the tone is not really all that different from other entries.
In addition to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century concerns the previous two texts express over women’s public access, duplicitousness, and what happens when these are combined, the particular dissimulation of impersonation (particularly between men and women) is another notable fear from women with access to telegraphy. Here we see the old plotline of mistaken identities takes on new forms in the nineteenth-century technological era. In “Wives for Two; or, Joe’s Little Joke” the narrator and his colleague Joe both fall in love with the same woman “down the wire,” while Joe loses interest, the narrator continues his relationship and the couple decide to marry. At the wedding, Joe surprises the narrator by marrying the wife’s coworker, until it is revealed that the narrator has married the coworker and Joe has married the woman they both loved. After the wedding Joe explains that, knowing they were both enamored with the same woman, he arranged for the coworker to pose as the object of their affection, but the relationships progressed so far that none of the knowing parties were willing to come clean, so everyone kept up the identity-switch ruse up until the moment the marriage licenses were signed. The narrator takes it in good spirits when Joe reveals the plot, concluding that “it was the girl that I loved, and not the name” (44), after all.

As with most of the works in this collection, the tone is light. The narrator opens the tale by calling that time “the halcyon days” (41) and wishing he could return to them. Yet this story carries a troubling undercurrent and serves as a warning. It echoes Grand’s comments on the corroding methods of men’s public lives and the general assumption that women, if allowed, will follow in their stead. It works to alert readers of what happens when women take too many liberties and become too free with men: they can be led astray by the likes of Joe, who

50 The tag for Britt Peterson’s “The Golden Age of Telegraph Literature” compares these identity swaps to the modern concern of “catfishing,” highlighting that “The 19th-century genre showcased technology anxieties and Catfish-esque storylines.”

51 The women are named in the text; the original woman is Dolly and the coworker is Mabel.
orchestrates the entire affair and uses the women to dupe (and nearly cuckold) the narrator. The author makes a point of saying that the women “were both orphans and without relations in their town” (44), suggesting they had no one either to chaperone their behavior or protect them from mischief or mischief-makers. Although this story is slightly more egalitarian in its critique of telegraphy’s vices than the previous two – Joe is found mostly at fault – it is at its core a cautionary tale warning society of the kinds of trouble women can be led into by men if allowed, especially unchaperoned, in public spaces. Ultimately, this sample of texts presents an interesting take on the concerns over women in public: where most criticisms are general worries over women behaving poorly – they will stay out too late, be bad at their jobs, spend too much money, for example – these stories show a direct attack on men. These authors imply that, if allowed to inhabit the public sphere freely, women will not only become un-womanly, they may try to usurp the power of men altogether.

3.5 Women Telegraphers in Their Own Words

Although a number of the texts in Johnson’s collection echo the warning sentiments of “Kate,” “Out of Adjustments,” “Tis Better to Have Loved and Lost,” and “Wives for Two,” two of the contributions upend these separate sphere assumptions in subtle ways. The table of contents for Lightning Flashes lists the names of many of its contributors. While some authors are listed by their first and last name, most contributors are identified by two initials and a

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52 Though Mabel is also known as a prankster by her colleagues, the text suggests that Joe was the instigator of this particular event. That Mabel went along with it so readily reinforces the dilatory effect society perceived that men can have on women if allowed to interact freely – he encourages her worst impulses.

53 The narrator also describes the setting in which he first communicated with the both the women, offering an interesting insider’s peek into the occupation: “business slacked up at about six, and then, till ‘GN.’ at eight, the wire was given up to what you young chaps now term ‘buzzing;’ the word would have been very applicable then, moreover, as it was more like a hive of bees than anything else, and the amount of good-natured fun and banter that passed between us, not to mention more serious and even ‘spoony’ talk … was a caution to outsiders!” (41).

54 A projection that is not alien to women of today.
surname. A cursory examination of the list would lead a reader to think that all the contributors are men. There are no overtly female first names, and the tradition of going by initials is generally a male one. But hiding within these is L.A. Churchill, believed to be Leda A. Churchill, a Boston suffragette, author and woman telegrapher. Like her name, Churchill’s two entries seem to fit in with the rest – both are about mistaken identities – but they also serve to subvert the tropes present in the rest of the anthology. In “A Slight Mistake,” a young man named Paul sees a pretty girl at a telegraph office and mistakes her for the operator. Returning to his office, he opens a line of communication with Flossie, the operator of that town, and, over time, professes his love. When he goes to meet her face to face, however, he discovers that he has actually been wooing a “a woman of about fifty, with a decidedly stout figure and a profusion of gray hair, the latter frizzled and puffed in every imaginable manner” (74). Paul is horrified by his mistake, especially as Flossie reprimands him, reminding him that she is the one he has been talking to the whole time.

Though this story follows the same pattern as the previous stories in that it seems to be a story about a woman misleading a man (at least Paul certainly thinks it is), Churchill makes it clear that the woman who serves as the object of affection in this text had no intentions to deceive. This story puts into stark relief how women were often viewed as objects within nineteenth-century society. Upon discovery of Flossie’s identity, Paul immediately dispels any sentiment for the women, even though she says that he has “called at least a dozen times a day for nearly two months, and written to her every day for more than four weeks” (74). Despite their long conversations, in reality, Paul exhibits his true interest – that is, in the woman’s appearance.

55 Although Lightning Flashes is an American collection and therefore more aptly reflects American society, the same social expectations were equally true in late-nineteenth-century England, if not even more restrictive, and it is easy to imagine that these criticism would be similarly transatlantic.
He writes the operator off immediately when he discovers she is not the pretty girl he had his eye on, and he dismisses the woman’s remonstrances, outright ignoring the operator’s feelings. Paul’s vanity is laid bare, and he is so ashamed of what passes that he not only moves cities but begins work under a new name.

On one level, the ways this story changes from the original trope are subtle. An ungenerous reader, or one approaching the text with preconceptions, could read it as one more in line with the rest of the collection; not only does it follow a similar case of mistaken identity, some readers may, like Paul, blame the woman for Paul’s mistake. Churchill treads cautiously, sometimes to the point that she risks being misread, but a careful reader can see the nuanced differences and the changes she makes in the perception and portrayal of the gender dynamic. Churchill, like the other contributors to Lightning Flashes, is a professional telegrapher, and being a part of the profession, she understands the social complexity and nuances of her audience of professional peers. Paul expects the stereotype of the pretty (and eligible) telegraph “girl” and is disturbed to find a stout middle-aged woman in her place. Though some of Churchill’s readers may see Paul as the victim, the author ultimately subverts the gendered tropes of the collection’s other installments. This story exhibits how the anonymity of the telegraph and the publicness of the profession put women at risk for being subject to the kind of objectification and misdirection perpetuated by Churchill’s Paul and the other writers in the anthology.56

Churchill has two contributions in the Lightning Flashes anthology; the other just as subtly subversive as the first. “Playing with Fire” tells the story of Rena Chelsey who decides to

56 One may argue that, due to the subtlety of the differences between Churchill’s story and the others reviewed here, knowledge of the author’s gender leads to this interpretation of contrasting intentions, rather than evidence within the text itself. However, the most distinct difference between this and the other examples is the ending – it is not a happy one. Where John and Mabel marry happily in the end, and the identity switch is written off as a funny tale, here it ruins Paul’s life. That this ends as a tragedy rather than a comedy invites the reader to examine the text for intentions that may run counter to the mainstream.
play a trick on a girl in another office down the line who goes by the call name “Bn.” Rena’s plan is to pretend to be a man, since she has heard that Bn “is fond of any attention from the masculines” (69). However, Rena actually finds Bn quite charming, and their relationship blossoms. One day, Rena and Bn decide to meet, and Rena knows that she will finally have to admit to Bn, whom she has grown to admire, that it was all a prank. However, when her telegraphic companion arrives, it is a handsome young man named Herbert. He admits that when Rena’s persona “Isaac” first started sending flirtations, the girl who was the original object of Rena’s trick did work there, but she had left and Herbert had taken her place; soon after Herbert began receiving the messages, and thought that he would have a little fun and pretend to be Bn. He had come to the station that day to confess to the lie, which he was loath to do because he had grown to admire “Isaac” quite a lot.

This story turns the deceitful woman trope, and its inherent gendering, on its head. Here, because of the doubling, roles reset to “heteronormativity,” since the characters as it happens are both trying to trick the other. For a modern audience the story had clear queer undertones that are tempting to unpack and certainly make this story even more intriguing. However, the gender experimentation within the story seems to play a minimal role as long as the ending nullifies it. In fact, neither character seems openly concerned nor displays any qualms over the growing affection developing for the other, whom each believes is of the same sex. The two characters actually grow so fond of each other that when they reveal their respective identities, Herbert proposes to Rena on the spot, reinforcing the idea that both operators are attracted to their counterparts before their true genders are revealed.

This story, then, turns the fear of being tricked on its head. Each character is both trickster and victim, and the fears of telegraphy become gender-neutral. In part, the fear of
telegraphy’s anonymity is the fear that the person on the other side of the flirtation will be other than what they seem: older, unattractive, or the wrong gender. In this case, the two characters think the person they are tricking is socially unsuitable for them, but that threat in neutralized as they discover that they have been developing a heterosexual relationship the whole time.

Equal to, or perhaps greater than, the fear of being attracted to the “wrong” person, the fear of trickery via telegraph is deeply rooted in issues of power. When parties are anonymous, the power dynamic between men and women is obscured. The fear suggested in other *Lightning Flashes* works is of a shifting power dynamic where men are duped by women, thus affording women the upper hand in the relationship. One solution to this problem, then, is to be proactive: Do the tricking before one can be tricked (like Joe in “Wives for Two”). In “Playing with Fire,” both characters believe that they are the only ones practicing identity fraud and therefore have the power in the relationship by being the only one who seemingly has all the information. However, even when the two characters believe that their duplicity gives them the upperhand, Churchill shows that their power can be undermined and that this kind of trickery is not a useful way of obtaining or maintaining power. In this case, at least the two characters are good sports about the double-duping and it brings them to the conclusion that they are suited for each other.

In another step towards women’s progress, when Herbert proposes, Rena turns him down. Despite confessing that she feels equally for him, she says that she cannot marry because she has a greater cause. Though readers are not told what that cause is, we are told that she succeeds in it. The mere fact that a woman makes anything a priority over marriage is counter to contemporary social expectations, especially when read in the context of the rest of this collection. It subverts the tropes of all the other stories. Churchill’s texts show that despite
having access to the public sphere, and having accessibility that allows for both tricking and being tricked, the woman telegraphist may still retain her priorities and morals.

Johnson’s collection, though an invaluable and unique source for insight into the profession of telegraphy, is not the only place these tropes occur or are subverted. Ella Cheever Thayer’s novella *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots & Dashes* deals with many of the same themes. Thayer was a telegraph operator in the Boston Brunswick Hotel and, like Leda Churchill, a suffragette. Thayer’s knowledge of the life of the woman telegraphist and her progressive ideas are both very present in the work. The novella centers around Nattie, a rural young woman living in a room of the Hotel Norman, leased from the overbearing Mrs. Kling. Nattie lives alongside an interesting cast of characters, the most prominent of whom is Cynthia Arch, an aspiring opera singer.

The two worlds of Mrs. Kling and Cynthia Archer pull Nattie in different directions, a representation of the various and sometimes contradictory public and private sphere expectations that impacted women telegraphists. Cynthia, as a performer, leads a very public life – she is literally on display. Accordingly, Mrs. Kling strongly disapproves of this life. Kling makes this clear when she says that one “cannot deny that no young woman of a modest and retiring disposition would seek to place herself in a public position” (65). Kling dislikes Nattie's growing friendship with Cynthia; she believes that Nattie should stay home and pursue more “appropriate” pursuits, such as finding a husband. In this fictional representation of the liminal borderland women telegraphers occupied between traditional ideals and the New Woman trope, Nattie, the protagonist, finds herself navigating a treacherous space. She has to keep Mrs. Kling happy or risk losing her housing (one of the very real prospects of independent women), while also wishing to express herself as an autonomous individual.
Although Nattie is “on the fence” about her neighbors, Thayer is less ambivalent about the characters. The author clearly intends for the reader to dislike Mrs. Kling. The name “Kling”, of course, is no mistake. Even Celeste, Mrs. Kling’s only ally, turns on her when she has the chance: “I must say, now that you are speaking of her, that she does Kling in a way that is not pleasant sometimes” (emphasis original 217). Late in the novel, Cynthia is trying to come up with a crisis that will bring Nattie and her love interest Clem together. Cynthia considers starting a fire or pushing Nattie into a lake. Ultimately, Cynthia finds she does not have to do either because Mrs. Kling’s disapproval of Nattie reaches such a fever pitch that she threatens to evict her. Thayer offers a comparison in which Nattie considers that facing Kling seems only slightly preferable to burning to death or drowning.

Nattie positions herself, in terms of personality and temperament, between Kling and Cyn.57 At the beginning of the novella, Nattie feels herself much aligned with Kling. When one of the other residents makes fun of Kling, Nattie stands up for the “old maids,” thinking she may very likely be one of them. Over the course of events, however, Nattie comes into her own. Finding love partially initiates this change (it is a “Romance of Dots and Dashes” after all). As Nattie moves from future old maid to future wife, she finds happiness and financial freedom that allows her to pursue her own desires.

Another large part of Nattie’s self discovery, however, is Cynthia. Cyn is self-sufficient, moral without being weighted by moralistic codes, and driven by her art. Cyn encourages Nattie to pursue her dream of being a writer, thus drawing her away from both Kling and the

57 It seems only fair to address the homonyms “Cyn” and “sin,” if we are to make something of “Kling” and “cling.” I believe that the reference to sin reflects the broader social critique (a la Mrs. Kling) of Cynthia’s profession and progressive thinking. From all other characterizations of Cynthia, it is clear that this criticism does not grow from the author’s judgment.
telegraphic world with its ambiguous borderlands, and into the world of the New Woman. 58

When Nattie asserts herself and realizes that she wants to be called “Natalie,” not the telegraphic “N” or the infantilizing “Nattie,” Cyn is the first to adopt the change. Cheever’s characterizations, however, clearly make Cyn’s New Woman more appealing than Kling’s domestic one. Ultimately though, Nattie chooses a third path – she opts to pursue her writing (in other words, she chooses career and the public life) as well as a marriage (the traditional choice).

3.6 Conclusion

As a whole, this chapter has sought to outline and display the complicated social positioning of women telegraph operators. Situated between spheres and classes in a complex borderland where freedoms and expectations could shift or reshape at any time, female telegraphers found both protection and unique trials. Although the history of telegraphic growth differs between England and the United States, women telegraphers clearly experienced similar results. By reading texts from a variety of sources and levels of professionality, we can better understand the pervasiveness of the stereotypes under which women operators worked. Trollope’s “Telegraph Girl” provides a realistic outsider’s perspective on the characterization of the telegraph women, while the selections from Johnson’s Lightning Flashes gives an insider’s view and displays some of the gendered fears developing around women in the telegraphic workplace. A study of Leda Churchill’s contributions shows how women were clearly aware of those stereotypes and how subtlety worked to undermine them. Thayer’s text, one of the clearest examples of the female experience as a telegraph operator, echoes the struggles of Nattie’s professional life and her personal one, clearly displaying the difficulties of balancing traditional

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58 The life of the New Woman is, of course, not without its trials. However, by choosing this identity, Nattie could escape some of the ambiguity of the telegraphic life, where her life relies on correctly navigation expectations of propriety.
and emerging views of the role of women within the spheres. Each of these texts helps lay into place a crucially important understanding of the liminal borderland women telegraphists occupied during this transitional time for women across classes.
4 THE BUSINESS OF COMMUNICATING: TELEGRAPH USE AS CHARACTER TROPE & SOCIAL COMMENTARY

This chapter examines telecommunication’s role in character stereotypes of businessmen at the turn of the twentieth century. While the previous two chapters review topics of the telegraphic profession and the ways in which telecommunications influenced the lives of telegraph professionals, this chapter looks to its users to see how the telegraph as a service works within the texts. The following chapters will then examine the impact of telecommunications as a concept. Additionally, while the previous chapter surveys the role of women in the history of telegraphy, this chapter covers iterations of businessmen and how the telegraph reinforces some male stereotypes. The ubiquity of this character type in texts from 1880 to 1913 solidifies its place in this dissertation’s overall project.

The character rosters of late-nineteenth-century texts have no shortage of speculative businessmen seeking to swindle the upper and lower classes alike. Images of speed regularly convey this characterization: fast cars, quick wit, and technologically advanced communication modes. In contrast to the genteel class who often embrace a slower life, these men are active, always on the move, and always after a new investment opportunity. However, their work is not the (often falsely idealized) manual labor of the working poor. The novels very rarely deify these characters in the same ways as they often do agrarian workers and the urban working poor. Due to the economic and social disruptions affiliated with the rising business class, many texts cast the character of the businessman as the villain: one who cons nobles and landed gentry out of

59 Many of these characters, such as Trollope’s Melmotte and William Dean Howells’ Dryfoos strive for social clout as well as wealth. They fall into a subcategory of nineteenth century businessman that I call the “gentleman impostor.” They attempt to buy (or blackmail) their way into the upper echelons of society, to mixed success. Though in some ways kept at arm’s length, these men are able to attain invitations to important social gatherings and often arrange advantageous marriages for their children – solidifying their stations by marrying into titles. For a fuller analysis of this transaction, see Wagner.
their fortunes.\textsuperscript{60} In \textit{The American} Henry James lays out the situation simply: “We really cannot reconcile ourselves to a commercial person. We fancied in an evil hour that we could; it was a great misfortune” (318). In both British and American texts, authors regularly associate business-minded characters with American capitalism in particular: the characters are sometimes American, but they may also have American business associates or interests, or their way of life may present an invasion of American-ness or otherness. Tamara Wagner explains:

The representation of American “commercial persons” became a catalyst for cultural anxieties about changing social hierarchies at home in Victorian Britain and in the projected home spaces of a lost colony presented in the process of turning itself into a commercial rival. At the same time, British perceptions of American men of business come to inflect not only the different manifestations of anti-Americanism current at the time, but also divergent ways of representing the new self-made man’s aggressive self-promotion. (196)

New technologies serve as the link between the businessman and his efficiency, allowing him to travel, build connections, and communicate more quickly than ever before. This adaptability to the “new” is a hallmark of the speculative businessman. In E. M. Forster’s \textit{Howards End}, Margaret Schlegel reflects that the capitalist Wilcox family “knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they had grit as well as grittiness” (107-08).\textsuperscript{61} We see that the Wilcoxes, like their business-oriented counterparts in other contemporary narratives,

\textsuperscript{60} Throughout this chapter I will refer to “men of the business class,” and “businessmen.” Although in modern times a gender neutral term would be preferred, because of course women also work in the world of business, that is not the topic of this chapter. Though this period of literature does contain examples of women in business, what I seek to articulate here applies specifically to the \textit{ways men} were viewed as part of the social structure.

\textsuperscript{61} Despite the novel’s repetition of the phrase “hands on all the ropes,” little scholarship has addressed its meaning or source. In addition to a probable reference to other sailing, one should consider the iterations of “hands on all ropes,” used by various characters in this novel and seemingly nowhere else, in relation to Forster’s exhortation to “only connect.”
have the necessary network for success. One can imagine that if Margaret had said that their
hands were on all the “wires” instead of “ropes,” the metaphor would not be far altered.
Communication technology facilitates these connections; and in this way, telecommunications
plays an important role in the rise of the business class. As a reflection of this, late nineteenth
and early twentieth century authors used these same technologies within their texts, first to sculpt
their business-oriented characters, and then to communicate concerns and opinions over the
evolving state of business in England and the US. Wagner observes that authors use the character
type for a variety of end-means: “it is a narrative device that is evoked and reworked consciously
as such in order to address a number of very different literary and cultural as well as social or
more specifically financial issues” (215). Telecommunications plays a key role, with authors
relying on known stereotypes to disrupt or complicate reader expectations.

A cursory study of nineteenth-century works shows that the rise of the business class in
England and America – and its particular relationship to speculation – is a common concern. The
century’s literature is full of hardscrabble entrepreneurs, and many authors display a keen fear of
the economic transition from landed gentry to the upwardly mobile middle class.62 On Howells’
works and his concern over shifting American markets, Henry Wonhman notes that the
“unprecedented need for investment capital during the second half of the nineteenth century”
awoke cultural fears to which authors responded: “Like many commentators of the period,
Howells anxiously promoted a traditional view of honest industry against the emerging
phenomenon of speculative finance” (476). Howells is certainly not the only one to feel this way,
nor does concern limit itself to the United States. Englishman Anthony Trollope writes in his
autobiography, “a certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and

62 Some characters, like John Thorton in Gaskell’s North and South or Eliot’s Caleb Garth in Middlemarch, are
portrayed as simply trying to make their way in the world.
climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable” (219). That “dishonesty” is particularly an economic one, largely stock market speculation, and Trollope’s writing on the topic, Denise Lovett claims, is “both a eulogy for traditional English society and an attack on rapacious capitalist values” (691). Trollope’s observations are a seminal example of the growing social unease surrounding the “climbing” class of men and their new unscrupulous business practices.

This chapter will examine texts by four British and American novelists at the turn of the century: Howards End by E. M. Forster, The Rise of Silas Lapham and A Hazard of New Fortunes by William Dean Howells, The Octopus by Frank Norris, and the Way We Live Now by Anthony Trollope. These texts span the Atlantic, as did much of the business at the end of the century. This combined survey of texts displays iterations of the businessman stereotype, the various means by which authors extended, complicated, or subverted the type, and the integral role of advanced telecommunications to both parts. By approaching the texts in this order, we can see how authors develop these characters in realistic ways, rework reader expectations, and play on the stereotypes. Howards End provides a useful metaphorical framework and productive control sample, the American texts show a conscious reworking of the narrative trope, and Trollope closes out the discussion by bringing the negative influences of American business practices back across the Atlantic, exploring their influence on the British gentry.

In each of these novels, telecommunications play a central role in the way characters conduct business. For a twenty-first century reader, this shows the ways in which the telegraph and telephone were utilized in professional settings and helps readers begin to understand the role telecommunications played in the rise of the business class and the expansion of speculative
business practices. More than this, however, telecommunications play a key role for characterization in the novels, both to establish stereotypes and disrupt them. Access to the telegraph in particular was widely available to the public; however, because of the associated costs, not everyone could afford to use the technology. Therefore, telecommunications become useful markers for certain character types. *How* characters utilize these technologies as well as *when* and *why* help add to the readers’ understanding of individual characters and point to broader socio-historic and economic trends and changes that the authors were observing in their world and of which these characters are representative. I argue that for the class of businessmen reviewed here, telegraphy communicates two key character elements to the reader: a sense of business acumen and an ability to conduct business with speed and precision.63 Not only do these authors use telegraphic characterizations to communicate social critiques of the turn-of-the-century businessman through the use of telegraphy, but also the ways in which various characters use telecommunications in the novels impact these character definitions.

### 4.1 Telegrams, Anger, and the Outer Life

The trope of the energetic, adaptable, and successful businessman takes on many forms in late-nineteenth-century works, from nuanced individuals to caricatured stereotypes. And while changing economic and social structures seems to be inherent in the character, the implications of this are open to diverging interpretations. Henry Wilcox, the patriarch of the Wilcox family, though brash, is an example of a more upstanding type of man of business.64 Forster sets the lifestyle of the Wilcoxes – what he calls the “outer life” – in contrast to the Schlegel’s

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63 I believe that the authors discussed here, knowing their readers’ understanding of the world, used telecommunications as a shorthand, a type of character profile writ small, to “telegraph” information about a character’s personality and social standing without stating it overtly.

64 Henry Wilcox is certainly not perfect - his profligacy ruins a woman and he easily dismisses any female intellectual work, but he is no worse than many “genteel” protagonists of the era.
valorization of the “inner life.” These struggles between families and social ideals, Leslie White points out, “reflect larger (and ongoing) cultural tensions, in particular between the aesthetic and the practical” (44). Forster’s conflicts between the inner and outer lives, “the aesthetic and the practical” (44) are, at heart, class conflict. The ways in which these two types of living appeal to and deter characters in the novel set the stage for Henry Wilcox’s complicated position as a member of the business class and speak to the reader about the tenuous social position of the London businessman.

This delineation is made clear when Margaret affirms that their house was “irrevocably feminine, even in father’s time” (45) in contrast to the Wilcox’s home that “sounded irrevocably masculine” (45). Even though there were men in the Schlegel home and women in the Wilcox home, Margaret sees the overarching ethos of the two families as either feminine or masculine.

Philip Gardner’s collection of contemporary reviews offers insight on Forster’s popularity and Howards End’s reception, with glowing appraisals such as, “There is no doubt about it whatever. Mr. E. M. Forster is one of the great novelists” – a position which Howards End seems to have solidified (qtd. in Gardner 130-31). Despite this, Alistair Duckworth points out, “Academic criticism of Howards End is not much in evidence in the two or three decades following the publication of the novel” (299). Virginia Woolf notably wrote “The Novels of E. M. Forster” for the Atlantic Monthly in 1927; and while Rose Macaulay’s 1938 The Writings of E. M. Forster is the first full-length text on his work, scholars regularly credit Lionell Trilling’s 1943 E. M. Forster with bringing Forster’s works to the U.S. and solidifying his reputation. Duckworth writes that academic criticism of Forster increased from 1960 onward (301) and goes on to note that studies of the 1970s and 1980s “remained largely unaffected by the seismic shifts that occurred in academic criticism as a result of the application of Marxist, feminist, and deconstructive theories to literature. Much Forster criticism in this period retains the traditional critical objectives of close reading and the recovery of informing biographical and historical contexts” (303). Instead, criticisms address Forster’s interest in liberalism and liberal humanism in Howards End. While the posthumous publication of Maurice and Forster’s other manuscripts shed new light on the author’s sexuality and caused some “controversy in the press and in some critical circles,” Duckworth argues that “Forster scholars tended to assimilate the new material into received assessments of Forster’s achievements” (303). Scholarship on Howards End has started to wane, and Duckworth notes in 1997, “The Modern Language Association’s annual bibliography, that stock market of literary reputation, shows that academic interest has fallen in recent years” (308). While critical analysis of Howards End has slackened since the 1960s to 1980s, new publications continue to arise yearly, with emphasis on topics of aesthetics, connection, and economics.

For works on topics of aesthetics, see Gemma Moss’ “Music in E. M. Forster’s A Room with a View and Howards End: The Conflicting Presentation of Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics,” Richard Rankin Russell’s “The Life of Things in the Place of Howards End,” and David Deutsch’s “Reconnecting Music to Howards End: Forster’s Aesthetics of Inclusion.” Criticism on economic subjects include Regina Martin’s “Finance Capitalism and the Creeping London of Howards End and Tono-Bungay,” Ed Wiltse’s “Teaching Howards End to the Basts: Class Markers in the Classroom and in the Bourgeois Novel,” and Sam Waterman’s “Schlegel Capitalism: E. M. Forster and the Cultural Form of Modernist Adventure,” and Kim Shirkhani’s “The Economy of Recognition in Howards End.” On issues of connection, see Greg Chase’s “Who’s ‘we’?: Claims to Community in Howards End,” Mark Hopwood’s “Only Connect: Moral Judgment, Embodiment, and Hypocrisy in Howards End,” and Leslie White’s “Vital Disconnection in Howards End.” As these are all key subjects in Forster’s novel, the academic works listed here often address a combination of topics, where aesthetics and materiality, economics, and social connection overlap.
In Forster’s novel, the Schlegel sisters Helen and Margaret, though not particularly wealthy, are members of society. The differing priorities of the Schlegel and Wilcox families display this overarching conflict. Their late mother “had money” (29), and her children, Margaret, Helen, and the youngest and only son Tibby, reside at Wickham Place, the London family home, while living off the interest of their inheritance. Orphaned, the three live an artistic, independent lifestyle (with the exclusion of the meddlesome Aunt Munt). The Schlegels’ academic father raised his children to appreciate the humanities, arts and philosophy above all else. In fact, Germany’s growing obsession with capitalism drove Shlegel out of his home country: “It was his hope that the clouds of materialism obscuring the Fatherland would part in time, and the mild intellectual light reemerge” (30). In the meantime, however, he “naturalized himself in England” (29), and died five years after his wife Emily, never seeing those hopes come to fruition. The Wilcox family’s entrance, then, into the Schlegels’ carefully crafted, cerebral life creates fissures in the sisters’ worldviews, as the “outer life” proves itself both alluring and disquieting.

The Wilcox family, with Henry at its helm, exhibits the outward, practical life that serves as a challenge to the Schlegels’ aesthetic classism. The Schlegels consider themselves humanists, and, on the surface, do not define people by class. Though this philosophy leads to the sisters’ relationship with Leonard Bast, through Bast readers also see that the sisters are not as free of class bias as they want to believe. The Wilcoxes, on the other hand, display clear class consciousness. Henry sees himself and his family as distinct from the working class, and his classical liberalism leaves him with little sympathy for the lower classes. Though not members of “society” like the Schlegels and less trained in the fine arts, the Wilcoxes (the men in
particular) consider themselves to be as good as (or better than) anyone else. When the Wilcoxes take a home on the same square as Wickham Place, Munt declares they are doing it “no doubt, in the hope of getting into London society” (58). On the contrary – Henry Wilcox makes clear he is not a genteel sort and in fact has no interest in modifying himself or his life to fit in with their society. He tells Helen that “one sound man of business did more good to the world than a dozen of your social reformers” (24). Though Wilcox displays a keen awareness of the various social classes, he also makes it clear that he considers himself and his family better than each, and in this way is an ideal representative of the emerging business class: those with wealth comparable to the gentility and, though lacking titles or family history, an accompanying sense of moral superiority.

Unlike the Schlegel patriarch who literally flees capitalism, Wilcox celebrates capitalistic values and views them as superior to the Shlegels’ humanist ideals. In turn, Wilcox also views himself as a superior individual. It is clear throughout the novel that Wilcox has no interest in playing the kinds of games required to get him into society. Though Munt has clear disdain for Henry Wilcox, what truly disturbs her is his disdain for her and her kind. He refuses to make her comfortable by conforming to the social-climber narrative she writes for him; thus, she turns against him, as does Helen. Helen views Wilcox as a villain. She blames him for the downfall of the characters Leonard Bast and Jacky, and her hatred for Wilcox drives a wedge between Helen and Margeret.

On more than one occasion the sisters use the phrase “telegrams and anger” to describe the kind of outer life led by the Wilcoxes. The first iteration of the phrase is mostly literal;

67 The matriarch of the family, Ruth, dies early in the novel (leading to a pivotal piece of the plot), and the daughter Evie is largely absent.
68 Wilcox here refers to those of the upper classes who, having no other way to fill their time, seek to “help” the poorer classes, often by trying to “elevate” their lives with art, lectures, and/or religion.
following romantic confusion between Helen and Paul, Margaret says to Helen, “To think that because you and a young man meet for a moment, there must be all these telegrams and anger” (28). In this case, parties actually sent and missed telegrams, leading to anger and confusion. This idea quickly becomes a metaphor, however, for the lifestyle and personalities of the Wilcoxes. In the next line Margaret says, “I’ve often thought about it, Helen. It’s one of the most interesting things in the world. The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched - a life in which telegrams and anger count” (28). Here Margaret sees telegrams and anger as the dividing line between the inner and outer life and the phrasing suggesting that, to Margaret, these two elements embody the modernism of the Wilcox family. She goes on to say, “This outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one - there’s grit in it. It does breed character” (28). Both sisters initially find the Wilcox family appealing, but Helen’s falling out with Paul puts her on a path of resentment against the family and their way of life. She views the practical, business-oriented life of the Wilcoxes as void of true meaning. Helen begins to fear the allure that this life has over her sister Margaret, creating tension between the sisters and their worldviews. Criticizing the Wilcoxes, Helen says of Paul, “I shall never forget him. He had nothing to fall back upon” (28).

While Margaret introduces the idea of “telegrams and anger,” Helen takes up the phrase as a refrain and uses it to characterize the Wilcox men and their lifestyle. What is wrong with telegrams and anger is wrong with the Wilcoxes. What, then, does this phrase mean to Helen? A second refrain often used by Helen to describe the Wilcox family may offer a clue. On multiple occasions when Helen describes the outer life, she calls it nothing but “panic and emptiness.” Of her encounter with Paul, Helen reflects later, “When I saw all the others so placid, and Paul mad with terror in case I said the wrong thing, I felt for a moment that the whole Wilcox family was a
fraud, just a wall of newspapers and motor-cars and golf-clubs, and that if it fell I should find nothing behind it but panic and emptiness” (26). Comparing the phrases “panic and emptiness” and “telegrams and anger” gives insight into how telegrams fit into Helen’s view of the Wilcox’s world. Though to a modern reader the telegram may seem out of place in this lineup alongside anger, panic, and emptiness, its context makes clear that Helen views telegrams in a poor light. Through word association, modern readers can better understand the telegram’s presence in the novel: namely how it represents and engenders a lack of connection and a directness that dispenses with social graces or expressions of empathy.70

The constraints of the telegraph have a practical source. Because telegrams were charged by the letter, users often tried to be as succinct as possible. To be verbose in a telegram was wasteful. Due to this, the wording of telegrams took on its own sort of language. Even after being translated into and out of Morse code, telegrams often required a second layer of translation by the reader to parse out meaning and intent. The language of the telegram was often devoid of articles, sign ons and sign offs, and generally any of the niceties used in letters and face to face communication. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the word “telegramese” as “the concise and elliptical style typical of the wording of a telegram” and “telegrammatic” as

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69 This is a crucial moment in Helen’s assessment of the Wilcox’s over the course of the novel. The artifacts of their life that she chooses to highlight here are very telling - they’re all associated with men, and business and newspapers and cars can also be associated with speed. This simple description, simple list of items, does so much to describe Helen’s perception of the Wilcox’s way of life.

70 One might imagine that telecommunications would create connections instead of dispensing them, and in some ways of viewing the technology, this is true. For Helen, however, the only true form of communication is personal and unmediated. Helen believes that “personal relations are the real life” (28). *Howards End* opens with the memorable line, “One may as well begin with Helen’s letters to her sister.” Though Helen prefers face-to-face communication, letter writing falls under the umbrella of personal connection: Neither word count nor third-party mediation are major concerns, and handwriting is individual and expresses character (as opposed to typing). The telegram on the other hand, with its impersonal and constrained messages, disrupts rather than engenders the types of connections Helen holds in the highest regard. What Helen desires is true human connection, not a connection through wires. Though the ability to interact over great distances is the benefit of telegraphy, it lacks a range of expression.
“characteristic of a telegram, esp. concise, condensed.” Both “telegrammatic” and “telegramese” emphasize the direct and staccato nature of communicating via telegram.

In contrast to the Schlegel sisters (whom Bast describes as “discoursing at ease on every subject” [41]), Henry Wilcox takes on a succinct style in all his communicating. Entrenched as he is in the practice of telegrammatic discourse, even Wilcox’s casual speech takes on a succinct, nearly cryptic, style. Wilcox is direct, short on niceties, and highly unlikely to wax eloquent. In all moments, he employs the language of the world of business. Margaret makes note of this when Henry proposes to her. She notes that he never acknowledges his love for her outright. She thinks, “the effort would have jarred him, and never, if she could avoid it, should he lose those defenses that he had chosen to raise against the world. He must never be bothered with emotional talk, or with a display of sympathy” (142).

Through the two sisters, Forster offers complex observations on the turn-of-the-century businessman. Not only can he be a well-rounded character in his own right, the man of business may engender a range of responses from those around him. Though Margaret believes there is a well of feeling behind Wilcox’s defenses, Helen translates his terseness as anger and emptiness. She does not believe that Wilcox has hidden passions, instead reading his lack of sympathy as emotional bankruptcy that bars him from connecting with those around him. This is why Helen believes that when the trappings of the Wilcox’s wealth are cut away, what will be left is panic and emptiness. Helen sees only an unsympathetic void beneath Henry’s abrupt exterior. The social trappings of business, heavily influenced by the telegraph, lead Helen to this conclusion and cause her to turn against Henry Wilcox.

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71 Because “telegraphic” has taken on a broader meaning of unspoken language, I employ the phrase “telegrammatic” to reference specifically the type of language used in wired and wireless telegrams.

72 A view of the businessman that we shall see is common in the collected texts.
Margaret recognizes these same personality traits in Henry (common to businessman types), and she agrees with her sister’s evaluation of his interpersonal characteristics. When trying to justify her betrothal, Margaret tells her sister, “The real point is that there is the widest gulf between my love-making and yours. Yours – was romance; mine will be prose … I know all of Mr. Wilcox’s faults.” Margaret then enumerates them: “He’s afraid of emotion. He cares too much about success, too little about the past. His sympathy lacks poetry, and so isn’t sympathy at all” (182). Each of these faults relate back to Henry’s business-class ethos and to his telegrammatic style of thought and speech. Like the telegraph, Margaret and Henry’s relationship is built on directness and the communication of necessities – not niceties.

More even than simply accepting Henry’s exteriority, Margaret is in fact drawn to these characteristics, finding his straightforwardness appealing after a lifetime of living “inwardly.” Across texts, while authors often shape the businessman (stereo)type as abrasive if not altogether repellant, characters within the texts are also drawn to the men, sometimes simply through their wealth, but also through the same personality traits that others disparage. Margaret reflects upon Wilcox that, “she liked being with him. He was not a rebuke but a stimulus, and banished morbidity. Some twenty years her senior, he preserved a gift that she supposed herself to have already lost – not youth’s creative power, but its self-confidence and optimism” (169). Of the family as a whole, Margaret thinks, “They led a life that she could not attain to - the outer life of ‘telegrams and anger’” (108). Though this does not seem a positive attribute, the narrator goes on to say, “To Margaret, this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby affected to do. It fostered such virtues as neatness, decision, and obedience … They form character too; Margaret could not doubt it: they keep the soul from becoming sloppy. How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world?” (108). This final question
then moves to the truth of the matter. While appreciating the Wilcox’s virtues, Margaret does not strive after them herself. Instead, she sees her own virtues as sympathetic, and believes that her interiority can complement and balance the Wilcox personalities.73 To her, it does in fact, take “all sorts.” Margaret tells her sister, “Don’t brood too much ... on the superiority of the unseen to the seen. It’s true, but to brood on it is mediaeval. Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them” (108). This is what Margaret seeks to do in her own life, particularly by agreeing to marry Henry Wilcox.74

The proposal scene— and the exchange leading to it in which Wilcox “telegraphs” information to Margaret both literally and metaphorically—expresses Margaret’s desire to complement Wilcox’s personality and to de-code from Henry’s directness a deeper well of meaning. Moreover, that he continues to use telegrammatic language even in the most romantic of scenes reinforces the breadth and depth of his culture-of-business mindset. When sisters find themselves in need of a new home, Henry Wilcox offers to show Margaret a townhouse he owns with the possibility of the Schlegels renting it from him. He sends her a “letter,” later clarified to be a telegram (169), inviting Margaret to see the house. “It was a businesslike letter, and stated frankly what he would do for them and what he would not do. Also the rent. If they approved, Margaret was to come up at once … and to go over the house with him. If they disapproved, a wire would oblige” (164). Margaret, filling in the blanks of Wilcox’s manner, intuits that he means to propose to her: “The letter perturbed, because she was not sure what it meant … might this be a manoeuvre to get her to London, and result in an offer of marriage?” (164). In fact, it

73 She also recognizes that it takes men like Wilcox to make the capital from which her six hundred pounds a year comes (63).
74 The end of the novel may seem to suggest that this was a failed endeavor.
was. Though Margaret tries to talk herself out of believing it, she finds that she can actually translate Henry’s form of communication.

Once at the house, Wilcox admits that he had other motives in inviting Margaret. The exchange is stilted and awkward, yet they part with each understanding the other. The conversation goes as follows:

“Miss Schlegel” – his voice was firm – “I have had you up on false pretences. I want to speak about a much more serious manner than a house.”

Margaret almost answered: “I know –”

“Could you be induced to share my – is it probable –”

“Oh Mr. Wilcox!” she interrupted, holding the piano and averting her eyes. “I see, I see. I will write to you afterwards if I may.”

He began to stammer. “Miss Schlegel - Margaret - you don’t understand.”

“Oh yes! Indeed, yes!” said Margaret.

“I am asking you to be my wife.”

So deep already was her sympathy that when he said, “I am asking you to be my wife,” she made herself give a little start. She must show surprise if he expected it. (171-72)

As marriage proposals go, this one is noticeably devoid of emotion. Instead of fully expressing himself, Henry telegraphs his intentions to Margaret through coded language. In turn, Margaret translates that into her own type of discourse that adds a layer of sympathy and intuition, understanding what she sees as the truth behind the spoken word, then recodes her own meaning so that it can be interpreted by the straight-talking Wilcox. Forster prepares readers for this stilted telegraphing of meaning by preceding it with an actual telegraphic exchange, where Margaret similarly intuits Wilcox’s meaning from his message. These two scenes are
intentionally arranged as echoes of each other. One can see that the telegram is intrinsically connected to how Henry Wilcox relates to and interacts with the larger world.

Ultimately, through the two sisters, Forster presents two alternative understandings of the rising business class. In the first half of the novel, the sisters’ differing opinions of Henry Wilcox divide them, displaying to modern readers the crisis of progress happening in the real world contemporary to the novel. In some ways, the opposing “readings” the two Schlegel sisters practice upon Wilcox may seem to cancel each other out. By providing contrasting views, Forster perhaps leaves it up to the reader to pass judgment on Henry Wilcox, and, by proxy, the kind of man of business he represents. To complicate matters further, however, Wilcox suffers a series of downfalls in the second half of the novel that lead even Margaret to question her original view of her spouse’s character. At one point she speaks of his “inner darkness” (347) and again of him being “rotten at the core” (348). Helen desires to maintain the life she has always known, a life where inherited wealth and intellectual pursuits remain supreme, though the energy of the Wilcoxes and their new kind of wealth, as well as how it might interact with the life she has known, draws Margaret in. By the end of the novel, however, Forster seems to have sided with the former of the two perspectives, bringing the sisters together over the downfall of Leonard Bast and then Henry Wilcox.75

Though the phrase “telegrams and anger” means less to a modern reader, for Forster’s contemporaries, it served as a shorthand to communicate much about Wilcox’s character: he serves as a mirror of men in their real world. This social cue inherent in the phrase “telegrams and anger” helps audiences now to understand more about the reality of late Victorians and the

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75 Although Helen’s clear denunciation of the “outward life” is complicated by the events of the novel, readers can see, even if Helen cannot, that her comfort and way of life is based on the oppression of capitalism, whether or not she chooses to recognize the fact.
class conflicts they experienced. While the sisters are happy to help Bast in his upward mobility because they see him as someone upon whom they can enact charity, Henry Wilcox is viewed as a dangerous intrusion into the social structure. Though in the novel the sisters ultimately resolve their conflict, contemporary readers can use the struggle between Helen and Margaret to learn, among other things, about the greater social conflict between old ways and new, a theme situated at the center of the text.

When Margaret reflects on her break with Wilcox, she believes that her words are “spoken not only to her husband, but to thousands of men like him – a protest against the inner darkness in high places that comes with a commercial age” (347). Margaret explicitly connects Wilcox’s (im)morality with his capitalism and imperialism. Notably, Wilcox’s financial success is due in large part to the rubber market, part of a horrendous exploitation of Congolese people and resources that Conrad called “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of the human conscience” (17), and which Adam Hochschild describes as “the first major international atrocity scandal in the age of the telegraph” (4). In this light, Margaret sees at last why her father fled Germany when he saw the same capitalism growing in his homeland.

Ultimately, Henry Wilcox’s inability to connect in “authentic” ways closes the door on his social mobility. Just as the Schlegels are upper class and the Wilcoxes are business class, an inward life is likewise seen as an upper-class lifestyle (in other words something to be sought and achieved), while the outward life is lower in class (though not “low class”). One must have financial security to spend one’s time on inward contemplation and advancement, after all. Margaret envisions a way for the inward and outer lives to work symbiotically: She recognizes that her way of life is supported by business, but she also thinks that she can elevate Henry intellectually. However, Henry’s inability to connect – to communicate on a humanist level and empathize with
those around him – holds him back from building an inner life. What’s more, he does not view
the inward life as something necessary, and this also keeps him from advancing, both
emotionally and in class. After all, he cannot be a gentleman if he cannot be gentle.
Ultimately, this conflict between types of families, priorities, and lives also serves as an example
of a more general tension between the upper and middle classes.

4.2 Lapham & Dryfoos’ Failure to Communicate

Though Wilcox is in no way the hero of Howards End, Forster’s approach to the
caracter type of the rising businessman is fairly positive compared to texts by his
contemporaries. What’s more, many perceived the business class’s newest iteration as uniquely
American in origin, and business-oriented characters make a regular appearance in texts set in
urban areas of the United States. William Dean Howells’ The Rise of Silas Lapham and A
Hazard of New Fortunes, for example, both include the character type of the upwardly mobile
businessman. In both instances, the men try to break into the social circles of their respective
cities, Silas Lapham in Boston and Mr. Dryfoos in New York. Although the U.S. was much
younger and lacked a landed gentry, American businessmen encountered many of the same
social barriers as those in England. By the end of the nineteenth century, those considered
“nouveau-riche” found it increasingly difficult to work their way into the upper circles of the
established families we now refer to as “American royalty.” Although the families of America’s
upper-class originally gained their wealth through entrepreneurism, those who inherited said
fortunes often disdained the trappings of business – and businessmen. This is the situation in
which Silas Lapham and Mr. Dryfoos find themselves in Howells’ novels. In The Rise of Silas

76 In contrast, Leonard Bast desires this inward life, but his material reality keeps him from attaining it. Comparing
himself with Margaret he thinks, “With an hour at lunch and a few shattered hours in the evening, how was it
possible to catch up with leisured women who had been reading steadily from childhood?” (41).
Lapham, the eponymous character finds surprising success in the paint market, while A Hazard of New Fortune’s Dryfoos discovers wealth when Standard Oil Company buys his Pennsylvania farm.

Despite a lack of contemporary scholarship, Silas Lapham’s rise and fall still have much to offer modern readers. Here, the chapter’s working metaphor of “telegrams and anger” can assist our reading and understanding the characters of both Lapham and Dryfoos. Critical scholarship on Howells is vast; however, with forty-three novels and short stories collections, attention to the author is split many different ways, with The Rise of Silas Lapham and A Hazard of New Fortunes receiving only a small fraction. Howells’ popularity came early: James Woodress writes that “Howells in his own day was generally regarded as the leading American man of letters” (272) and he sees our two present texts as some of Howells’ best work, works that “exemplify his principles and achieve remarkable verisimilitude in their depiction of character and setting” (273). Upon publication, The Rise of Silas Lapham was an immediate, popular success. The novel was serialized in The Century, with an estimated one million people reading each installment (Woodress 286). Despite its popularity, critical reception of the novel was less than enthusiastic: “The reviewers of The Rise of Silas Lapham were not very happy with the novel, and it has remained for later readers and critics to give it a high place in American letters,” writes Woodress (287). While at the time of publication “the general tenor of the criticism was directed against Howells’s uncompromising realism” (Woodress 287), later readers began to take note of the moralistic importance of the novel, which in turn increased its scholarly popularity. Patrick Dooley writes that “the moral point of Silas Lapham was frequently missed by its early readers. If they liked the book, they saw it as a love story with a happy ending; if they didn't, they saw it as decadent realism. The moral dilemma involved in the
bankruptcy plot escaped them” (92). He goes on to posit that early readers “not yet accustomed to connecting business and ethics, saw the bankruptcy plot as a financial not a moral matter” (92). Dooley credits the moralist James Fairchild for the shift, that following his lead “business ethics gradually gained popular awareness and support. So too, the moral drama of Silas Lapham came to be widely appreciated. Eventually it was regarded as the main message of the novel” (92). Although The Rise of Silas Lapham, and Howells’ writing in general, has vacillated in popularity over the years, the novel has never completely left the public eye. 77 Scholarship of the last decade often offers new evaluations of Howells’ realism, continues to unpack the morality of the novel, and examines elements of society and class. 78

Although Howells’ texts, as well as the remaining texts covered in this chapter, are less overt about their characters’ relationships with telecommunications, by using the framework established from Howards End, we as modern readers can see the connections between these men of business and the new telecommunication technologies that would have required no explanation for the texts’ contemporary audiences. Moreover, if we examine these texts and how they relate to one another, an understanding of the larger socio-economic considerations of the time will take shape. Citing Howells’ realism, Woodress writes, “From reading Howells, one

77 Don Cook writes, “Even in the 1920s and 1930s, when Howells reputation was in near-eclipse, The Rise of Silas Lapham continued to be read and assigned in American literature courses. But during the 1940s scholars began to revise their image of Howells” (429). He goes on to write that by the 1950s, “a serious reevaluation of Howells was underway” and that since the 1960s a number of book-length critical studies of Howells’ work have been published. Everett Carter’s work in Howells and the Age of Realism (1950), Edwin Cady’s work on the novel in his 1956 The Road to Realism, and George N. Bennett’s William Dean Howells: The Development of a Novelist (1959) are some of the most historically impactful writings for scholarship on The Rise of Silas Lapham. Today, The Rise of Silas Lapham has lost some of its popularity. At the time of this writing in 2022, the MLA International Bibliography shows nothing has been published on the novel since 2017.

gets a real sense of what people thought, felt, and did in the late nineteenth century, for his effects are achieved by a careful attention to ample, accurate detail and reasonable motivation” (273). In this way, Howells’ detailed prose can assist modern readers in better understanding not only how the businessman character functions within the text but also how the character type interacts with contemporary readers’ knowledge of the real world.

Two examples of telegraphy in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* help to clarify the relationship between business and technology at the turn of the twentieth century. The first of these comes when Lapham’s family discusses his unwillingness to take time off. They decide to telegraph his office, saying that Lapham is sick. In the second example, Lapham discusses a new business deal with two brothers from New York who utilize the telegraph to expedite a deal they are planning – a deal that will eventually lead to Lapham’s ruin. By examining these two scenes, we can see how Howells uses the telegraph as an important part of Lapham’s character creation and then subverts readers’ expectation of the successful businessman through Lapham’s decline. Furthermore, by understanding the nuances of the ways telecommunications are used in these scenes, we can see a foreshadowing of Lapham’s fall. Although the title of the novel is *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, when the reader is first introduced to the main character, Lapham has already achieved great financial success and is trying to leverage that into social success. Though in terms of income and social standing the novel chronicles Lapham’s fall, scholars generally accept that Lapham’s “rise” is one of ethics. Howells himself writes in *Literary Friends and Acquaintances* that he intended the rise to be “a moral one” (141). Modern critics agree.

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79 While Woodress attributes this to Howells’ realism, many scholars regard Howells as a naturalist, a genre of realism that focuses on these particular qualities.
80 Dooley opens his article by saying, “It is most obvious to twentieth-century readers of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* that William Dean Howells intends to provide moral education” (79).
Lapham serves as a useful contrast to Forster’s Henry Wilcox. Where Wilcox is self-assured in business and scorns the London social circles (believing himself to be just as good or better than the gentry), readers find Lapham on the social hunt. An 1885 New York Times review of the novel writes that Lapham “in his ostentation and secret fear of defect from a lack of early advantages, gathers up in himself the traits of many self-made men of our cities and towns” (5). Lapham’s class consciousness is pervasive in the novel and exemplifies the struggle between classes, particularly of the upwardly mobile. He is not at all confident about how to accomplish this and fusses over the expectations of the elite. When invited to a dinner, an event Woodress calls “one of the greatest scenes in nineteenth-century American literature” (287), Lapham languishes in indecision concerning his dress. Howells writes that, “on [Lapham’s] way home the next day, in a sudden panic, he cast anchor before his tailor’s door and got measured for a dress-coat. After that he began to be afflicted about his waist-coat, concerning which he had hitherto been airily indifferent … It ended in their buying a book of etiquette, which settled the question adversely to a white waistcoat” (182). The family goes on to learn from the “etiquette man” of their book such useful information as to not eat with their knives and never pick their teeth with their forks (182). Howells makes it clear that Lapham is intensely concerned with social climbing and the rules Lapham believes are necessary to follow to achieve success. To ask advice of someone already within this circle would reveal that he does not already belong – an act he is

81 History shows an incredible increase in the publication of etiquette books at this time. Like Lapham, many upwardly mobile members of the middle class sought acceptance in higher social groups, turning to books of etiquette for lessons on how to gain entry, with mixed success.
unwilling to commit. Moreover, this lack of self-assuredness is, at least in part, responsible for Lapham’s financial decline. Certainly, he does encounter a series of unfortunate accidents (his new townhouse burns down; the sale of paint unexpectedly drops), but if he had not been striving for social recognition or had practiced better business acumen by diversifying his business and investments, Howells intimates that Lapham may have been able to avoid these steps down the ladder of ruin.

The author’s critique of Lapham’s actions (or inactions) echoes in two of the text’s instances of telecommunications. Early in the novel, Lapham’s wife and children complain about how little time he takes away from work. Mrs. Lapham says to her children, “The man slaves harder every year ... I don't know what to do with the man any more!” (149). She goes on to complain that it “seems as if the more money he got, the more he wanted to get” (149). At the end of the discussion, however, Mrs. Lapham comes to a conclusion: “I know one thing ... He shall not go back to the office today” (149). Mrs. Lapham organizes a plot and employs her daughters to send a telegram to ensure that no one from the office will disturb his chance at leisure. She tells them, “You can just drive over to the hotel as soon as you're through, girls, and telegraph that he's not well, and won't be at the office till to-morrow. I'm not going to have them send anybody down here to bother him” (150). We have only this discussion concerning the telegram to work with; however, this is enough to learn something important about Lapham and the way he runs his business. Here the reader learns that Lapham’s office has ready access to a telegraph or perhaps a line and dedicated machine for the business, showing that the workings of the office would warrant such an expense. Also, Lapham is consistently working. This, paired

82 This is also an interesting difference between British and American telegraphy. In America, the system was privatized and was more commonly used by private businesses than the general public. In England, however, the telegraph lines were a public institution run by the Post Office, which made it less likely that one would find a telegraph anywhere but public spaces.
with his wife’s complaint that he constantly pursues a greater payoff suggests that the office is a high-energy and work-focused environment.

While his office set up suggests that Lapham is adept at utilizing telecommunications, in this instance Lapham’s family co-ops the tools of his business and turns them against him. Although his family knows that he does not want to take any days off – his wife tells the children, “It used to be so that he'd take a little time off now and then; but I declare, he hardly ever seems to breathe now away from his office” (149) – the family overrides the patriarch’s desires. By making a decision for Lapham, one that is expressly counter to his wishes and that undermines his professional work, the family nullifies Lapham's authority – and they use his own tools to enact this subterfuge. This act signals Lapham’s weakness, for he can control neither his family nor his business. It also foreshadows Lapham’s decline to come by showing that he has less of a mind for business than his initial success suggests. Though he has access to the modern tools of business, Lapham lacks the skill needed to use them to his advantage. In contrast to Henry Wilcox, for whom Forster uses the telegram to display control and strength, Howells subverts that expectation, playing on the reader’s knowledge of businessmen and using the telegraph to show instead Lapham’s weakness and a lack of power.

A second telegraphic instance occurs when Lapham meets with the two New York brothers finalizing the deal that will ultimately lead to Lapham’s downfall. The brothers utilize the telegraph to expedite their business dealings, giving readers a prototype for the successful businessman. Howells writes, “The two brothers with whom Lapham talked named their figure, subject to the approval of another brother at Kanawha Falls, to whom they would write, and who would telegraph his answer, so that Lapham could have it inside of three days” (318). With this description, Howells shows readers the movements of successful men of business. They know
how to raise funds and make deals. Their emphasis is on making fast money. The way they utilize the telegraph in this scene speaks to the tempo at which the New Yorkers organize transactions with efficiency. Here, Howells uses telecommunications as an indicator of character: these men mean business. Again, however, Lapham is subverted, and Howells highlights the protagonist’s weakness in contrast to these brothers:

Lapham started back on the eleven o’clock train with an elation that gradually left him as he drew near Boston, where the difficulties of raising this sum were to be overcome … when he emerged, old, sore, and sleep-broken, from the sleeping-car in the Albany depot at Boston, he wished with a pathetic self-pity that they knew how a man felt at his age. A year ago, six months ago, he would have laughed at the notion that it would be hard to raise the money … and he could not think of any securities on which he could borrow, except his house in Nankeen Square, or the mine and works at Lapham. He set his teeth in helpless rage when he thought of that property out on the G. L. & P., that ought to be worth so much, and was worth so little if the Road chose to say so. (319)

At this point in the novel, Lapham’s fortunes are already on the decline. He bemoans losing his townhouse and his slow paint sales: “he thought ruefully of that immense stock of paint on hand, which was now a drug [sic] in the market, of his losses by Rogers and by the failures of other men, of the fire that had licked up so many thousands in a few hours” (319). Unlike the brothers from New York City, Lapham’s finances are no longer in a place where he has ready money for this investment. Nor, as we can see, does he know where to get it. He realizes that he will have to risk the last of his property for this venture. All of this makes him feel old and worn, again setting him in contrast to the younger brothers. It is clear that this is less about age than about his recent hardships that are wearing him down: Lapham says that he would have had a different
disposition six months earlier. Howells intentionally sets up the contrast between Lapham and the brothers to show, in sharp relief, Lapham’s weaknesses and failure as a businessman. Additionally, in contrast to the businessman archetype, Lapham does not know who to call on to help make this deal go through. Ultimately, the telegraph reinforces the contrast between Lapham and the two brothers. The brothers’ skill in utilizing the telegraph points to an adaptability that Lapham lacks. In this case, telecommunications represents not only increased speed for conducting business (the brothers are able to exchange messages back and forth in only a few days) but also a youthfulness that allows for flexibility and adapting to new technologies. Lapham, on the other hand, does not have the reflexes to successfully adapt to his new circumstances – nor the telegraphic control to improve his lot.

The Rise of Silas Lapham is not the only one of Howells’ novels to examine the upwardly mobile or newly rich. In A Hazard of New Fortunes, Howells introduces readers to the Dryfoos family, transplants to New York City whose new fortunes in oil set them on the path to social recognition. Readers see how Dryfoos is characterized as a businessman but also as a person of the business class, which places him at odds with the socialites he hopes to join. Woodress notes that “A Hazard of New Fortunes (1889) is Howells’s longest novel and his largest canvas” and goes on to affirm, “For many Howells critics this is his most important work” (289).83

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83 Early scholastic work on the novel often addressed the novel’s style as well as Howells’ realism, and over time, writings by Edwin Cady, Amy Kaplan, and John Crowley have had a tremendous impact on the way we now view the novel. Like The Rise of Silas Lapham, less is currently published on A Hazard of New Fortunes, despite its popularity with scholars and its acceptance as one of Howells best works. In the past two decades, scholarly work on the novel has covered a variety of topics, falling into two broad categories: style and social identity. For contemporary work on Howells’ realism and formalism, see Donald Pizer’s “W. D. Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes: A Mostly Formalist Reading,” Michelle Kohler’s “Some Glittering Nondescript Vertebrate: The Provocative Style of Realism in Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes,” and Joseph Darda’s “The Sacrificial Enterprise: Negotiating Mutilation in W. D. Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes.” On issues of identity, see Jonathan Bauch’s “Public German, Private Jew: The Secret Identity of Berthold Lindau in Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes” and Patricia Schulster’s “The Unanswerable Woman Question in William Dean Howells’ A Hazard of New Fortunes.”
Dryfoos is much like Wilcox — brash, direct, self-assured, and full of “telegrams and anger.” He arrives in New York fully expecting to be welcomed into society with open arms but soon discovers that entrance is much more difficult than anticipated. Howells sets Dryfoos’ business-mindedness in contrast to Dryfoos’ son Conrad. While Conrad wants to become an Episcopal priest, Dryfoos plans for his son to enter the family business of, well, business. After having achieved a small fortune from the sale of his oil-rich farm, Dryfoos learns the art of moving money: speculating and investing. He has no particular market other than what will grow his wealth. Wohnam notes that in Howells’ works, the “vocabulary of retail – goods, labor, production, and consumption – might go some way toward capturing the poetry of Gilded Age economic life, but the transactions that spoke chiefly to Howells and to the imagination of the era involved large-scale movements of invisible wealth, not the transfer of material things from hand to hand” (476). To get his son into the work, Dryfoos develops the paper *Every Other Week*, for which Dryfoos hires the central character Basil March, in order to convince Conrad to take an interest in the world of capitalism.

Dryfoos in many ways fits the stereotype of the vilified businessman. He is a social climber but lacks all social graces, he’s openly self-confident, believes that his position is always the correct one, and he exploits the working class, which is clear as he fights to abolish labor unions. Howells is not as readily forgiving of these traits as Forster and does not provide a perspective like Margaret Schlegel’s to balance out the social critique of the character. Howells instead develops a clear indictment of Mr. Dryfoos: His son Conrad is ultimately killed while

84 The delineation between Dryfoos and Conrad is reminiscent of the Wilcoxes vs. Schlegels. Dryfoos certainly lives what Helen Schlegel would describe as an “outward life,” while Conrad’s desires reflect a particular inwardness.
85 In many ways, Dryfoos is similar to Trollope’s Augustus Melmotte, later discussed. The major difference between the two, however, and what makes Melmotte a “greater” threat to social stability, is that he seeks to exploit the upper classes instead of the lower.
assisting the injured participants of labor riots, caused in part by Dryfoos’ machinations to dispel unions. Howells’ portrayal of Dryfoos and the chaos and loss Howells unleashes upon this character is a clear indictment of the ruinous greed the author saw as the driving factor of America’s “Gilded Age.” The greed on display in Howells’ text is the kind that leads businessmen into uncertain speculations, often dragging their families and business partners down with them when the investments fail. Conrad’s death is a clear show of the retribution that accompanies exploitation. Dryfoos loses his only son, something that all the wealth and social clout cannot replace. Wonham writes that “William Dean Howells was ‘philosophically opposed to high finance,’ especially as embodied in the volatility of Wall Street,” and while Dryfoos, in particular, displays “enough egoism and greed to support such a judgment,” “the well-meaning Lapham’s unfortunate career has always been considered Howells’s most eloquent indictment of stock speculation” (473). Though there are no clear examples of Dryfoos using telecommunications in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he not only helps fill out the character portrait of the “man of business” discussed here, he also embodies many of the critiques the elite had of these “upstarts.” We also see that Dryfoos suffers a similar disconnect between communication and personal connection that afflicts Wilcox and that his language of business fails to serve him at critical moments, particularly in relation to his son.

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Mrs. Isabel March, the wife of the novel’s protagonist, is the only person who clearly sees the benefits of the telegraph, insisting that her husband use it for all his business transactions. Mrs. March serves as a synecdoche of her society, representing the outsider’s perspective on the world of business. In both of the novel’s telegraphic scenes,

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86 At a dinner party, Dryfoos tells how he busted a union at his own worksite by playing nice until he had the ability to replace his entire workforce in a single blow. Following the incident, Dryfoos developed business agreements that required all workers to be non-union, thus helping to develop an industry standard that would weaken unions across the board.
Isabel March fears that the “real” businessmen will change their minds if Basil March fails to act quickly enough. This is important to note as it speaks to how Isabel March thinks business is done. When Basil March is offered the position of editor for *Every Other Week*, his wife insists that he telegram immediately to accept the offer before it can be rescinded (25). Later, when Dryfoos decides to sell the magazine and offers it to Mr. March and his colleague Fulkerson for pennies on the dollar, Isabel again insists that they wire Dryfoos directly before he can change his mind (683).

In a key way, Isabel March represents the author, and other authors discussed in the chapter. These writers are no more on the “inside” of the business world than Isabel March, and ultimately the characters they create inherently represent not the true businessman (even if Howells considered himself and is widely recognized as a Realist) but what the authors, as part of a larger society, *perceived* as “the businessman.” Therefore, the way Mrs. March chooses to interact with this world speaks volumes, not only about her perceptions of Mr. Dryfoos and his colleagues in the novel, but also about the nineteenth-century perception of the business class at large. Advanced communication technologies were considered an intrinsic part of the business network, thus also a part of the infrastructure of American greed and the role “business” played within it.

4.3 **American Railroads & Telegraphs**

In the American novel *The Octopus* by Frank Norris, readers see commercial greed spread across the nation, with urban centers as their hub, by way of capitalist sprawl. In the first installment of his “Epic of the Wheat,” Norris uses the image of the octopus to illustrate the growing power, or what he calls “force,” of the railroad within one entity, one body, that even as
it spreads, each of its tentacles is still connected to the whole.\footnote{As Richard Davison points out, “Frequently, like the proverbial blind men in their encounter with the elephant, the critics have been seized by a single tentacle of \textit{The Octopus} and have strangely managed to elude its other wriggling appendages, not to mention that massive head!” By addressing the Octopus’ powers of connectivity, we will here strive to see the entity as a complete being and not mistake one tentacle for the whole.} The majority of the novel positions the railroad company, specifically the P. and S. W., as oppressive, though with the encroachment of the railroad came also connectivity, ways to ship goods, to travel and to communicate more quickly than ever before. In contrast to the other texts discussed here, \textit{The Octopus} pays little attention to the societal element of the business class. There is certainly a difference between the self-assured president of the railroad company, Shelgrim, and his lackeys like S. Behrman; but Norris’ overall focus is on the rise (and fall) of the ranchers, specifically Magnus Derrick, not the societal climbings of the urban businessman. Though differing in many ways to the other novels in this chapter, in the context of the present argument, Norris’ \textit{The Octopus} helps to lay another piece into place: That the businessman’s access to telecommunications is a source of power, and that connection assists the growth of industry and capitalism while helping to subjugate the working class. That the ranchers use telephone lines to communicate across the property and install a ticker machine in order to maximize their financial success helps to characterize them as upwardly mobile and possessing smart business skills. However, Norris contrasts this with the railroad men who have ultimate control over the communication technologies, and the willingness to use that technology to manipulate or exert control over others. Ultimately, readers see how small and futile the connections of the ranchers are in the face of the “leviathan, with tentacles of steel” (51) that is the Railroad.\footnote{Norris makes a point of sharing that the railroad is an entity of its own, that if you cut off its head, another will grow back, which makes it difficult to assess the businessmen archetype; however, S. Behrman and Shelgrim are also clear individual characters.}
Norris’ work has often confounded critics and historians, leading to a wealth and variety of interpretations. Joseph McElrath writes that Norris’ work is important “because of what he indicates to the cultural historian: his works mirror changes occurring in his milieu during a remarkable period of intellectual and artistic transition at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth” (379-80). This transitional quality is reflected in every facet of Norris’ writing, according to McElrath: “The blending of the modern and the Victorian in [Norris’] works once caused some confusion among literary historians: Norris’s fiction was identified as a puzzling mixture of pessimism and optimism, realism and romanticism, progressive philosophy and regressive thought,” concluding that “his intention was clearly that of a synthesizer attempting to wed the traditional and the modern” (380). Norris’ intention in The Octopus particularly frustrated interpreters. Inspired by his experiences in the American West and the 1880 Mussell Slough tragedy, Norris sought to compose “a trilogy representatively picturing the complexities of modern economic life” (McElrath 389). As McElrath points out, while Norris “attempts an enlightening response,” “which is his response, however, has been a matter of heated debate for decades” (389), and scholars continue to debate which voice in the novel, if any, represents the author’s perspective.

89 Though Norris’ career was shortened by his early death, his extant works received much acclaim at the time of their publication and continue to be popular today. Upon the occasion of Norris death, William Dean Howells wrote that Norris’ works “imparted the assurance of an American fiction so largely commensurate with American circumstance as to liberate it from the casual and occasional, in which it seemed lastingly trammelled” (49). Despite his popularity, Norris’ writings did not go without their share of criticism. In Richard Allan Davidson’s analysis of an early review of The Octopus by Wallace Rice, Davidson writes that “Rice’s remarks are of particular interest because they raise criticisms that have been echoed from the earliest of Norris’ critics to many of the most recent ones” (147), particularly, that critics applauded “any attempt at poetic justice in fiction, however alien such justice may be to actual life,” condemned “Shelgrim’s rationalizations for the railroad” complaining specifically that these reasons seem to win over Presley, and that the Vanamee and Angele episode “has no possible relevance to the novel” (Rice qtd. in Davison 148). Davison also points out that Rice is “the first of many critics who mistakenly view the poet as Norris’ mouthpiece” (147).

90 For a complete overview of critical works on Norris from the early twentieth century, see Frank Norris: A Bibliography, compiled by Kenneth Lohf and Eugene Sheehy.
In *The Octopus*, Norris offers two iterations of the business type: the up-and-coming ranchers and the established Railroad men, and both attempt to use telecommunications to their own advantage. In the prefatory maps of *The Octopus*, Norris visually delineates spheres of influence through the demarcation of property and telephone lines. These maps display the power Magnus Derrick, a central character and aspiring businessman, has over his own small corner of the world, but also how that influence pales in comparison to the power of the railroad.

Magnus Derrick aspires to become a gentleman farmer, but despite his upward mobility, the subsequent clashes with the P. and S.W. Railroad leave him emotionally ruined and financially destitute. The contrast between Derrick’s use of telecommunication and that of the emissaries of the P. and S.W. exemplifies the contrasts in power.

Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte addresses the preface map this cartography and points to the prefatory map of the novel as a visual representation of the movement of force and the relationship between technology and force. “[T]his preliminary map,” she writes, “is more than a technique of Norris’ realism – it announces the centrality of cartography and space itself to the questions of economic and political force that Norris explores in the novel” (202). She goes on to write,

Norris’ introductory map goes beyond orienting the reader to emphasize the economic and technological forces that define this space. While Norris includes some topographical and natural features on the map (trees, creeks, springs, high ground/low ground), far greater emphasis is given to roads (county road, upper road, lower road), rail routes and
telephone lines – the lines of communication and transportation through which economic force flows. (203) 91

In the San Joaquin Valley, the ranchers install telephone lines that allow them to communicate primarily across divisions of their own ranch. In contrast to the telegraph wires, which connected over long distances and were controlled by companies, these telephone lines are localized and private. In the preface map, the most notable of these are the telephone lines that traverse Magnus Derrick’s ranch, Los Muertos, by far the largest property. The telephone lines run between the various division houses, allowing Magnus and his son Harran to maintain control over the vast area through rapid communication. Magnus Derrick is at the technological center of it all. Importantly, as Brett Zalkan notes, the maps demonstrate Derrick’s use of technology to dominate the natural world: “Superimposed upon an earlier era’s pristine wilderness and terra incognita, the lines remind the viewer that landscape is an artifact of culture, a product of human vision” (27). Thus each of the lines suggest a type of control “mapped” onto the landscape by humanity, more specifically business interests.

This, then, is the telegraphic and telephonic stage on which the drama of the novel is played out. While farmers at heart, the ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley, with Magnus Derrick at their head, try to grow their business through the use of telecommunications. Derrick and his sons even install a ticker at the ranch house to keep track of stocks. To be sure, the technological updates Derrick makes to his ranch are appropriate for someone growing their business; however, the steps he takes are ultimately of little to no consequence when his success becomes antithetical to the P. and S.W.’s interests. Howells writes that Derrick, “the high, pure leader of

91 We can also safely assume that telegraph wires exist along the same map lines as the railroads.
the rebellion against the railway,” falls into “ruin, moral and mental, through the use of the enemy’s bad means for his good cause” (775). These “bad means” include Derrick’s telephone lines and telegraph-based stock ticker, through which he seeks to exert force over the natural landscape. However, though Derrick has the right tools, his high moral standards keep him from using them in the ways necessary for his success.\footnote{He does try to cheat the system once, but he fails and ruins his reputation in the process.} In contrast, the railroad has both the tools and the business ethics (those that champion profit, efficiency and practicality and exhibit fewer qualms for subterfuge, lying, and bribery) to use the tools effectively.

With their connections to the telegraph industry, the Railroad men in The Octopus are the true men of “telegrams and anger.” Through their extensive connections, they are able to control the land and wrest power from the ranchers. In its relationship with the railroad company, telegraph companies like Western Union actively participated in the exertion of force. Lewis Coe recounts the telegraph’s role in completing the transcontinental railway in 1869. To celebrate “the last spike in the last rail that united New York and San Francisco with a band of iron” (qtd. in Coe 133), telegraph wires were connected to the rail spike, and when driven in, transmitted a signal to telegraph offices nationwide (133-34). Coe also describes the railroad’s use of telegraph wires, and later telephone wires, to dispatch trains through the time of World War II (135). He writes, “The Morse telegraph and the railroads coexisted for several years before anyone thought of combining them for more efficient operation. The telegraph wires usually ran parallel to the railroad tracks” (134). In this way, the train arrived at its destination on time instead of waiting an indeterminate length for oppositely-bound trains to pass, and the practice of telegraphic train dispatching was born. An illustration titled “Justice in the Web” by F. Opper and published in an
1885 edition of the periodical *Puck* displays in a striking way, the integral nature of the railroad and telegraph companies (Fig. 3). In the image, the American Railroad magnate and notorious speculator Jay Gould, in the shape of a spider, hovers over a courthouse, balanced on a web of telegraph wires. One of the telegraph poles is inscribed with the words “Gould’s Western Union Telegraph Co.” referencing Gould’s purchase of controlling shares of Western Union. This illustration and its associated history clearly demonstrates the deep relationship between the railroad, the telegraph, and Wall Street that sets the stage for the events of *The Octopus*.93

93 In *The Train and the Telegraph: A Revisionist History* (2019), Schwantes takes an in-depth look at the history of integral relationship between the two entities.
Within the novel, the most striking example of the control the Railroad men have over communication occurs after the “pivotal event” of the novel, in which a shoot-out between the ranchers and agents of the railroad (modeled on the Mussel Slough Tragedy of 1880) kills two of
the ranchers. In the novel, Norris writes that on the day following the massacre “the most important piece of news that morning was the report of the action of the Railroad upon hearing of the battle” (541). He goes on to describe what happened:

Instantly Bonneville had been isolated. Not a single local train was running, not one of the through trains made any halt at the station. The mails were not moved. Further than this, by some arrangement difficult to understand, the telegraph operators at Bonneville and Guadalajara, acting under orders, refused to receive any telegrams except those emanating from railway officials. (541)

The behind-scene machinations of the Railroad men show their clear relationship to the telegraph offices through this shut-down, an event that has ramifications for both society and the individual. Most troubling is the large scope of power that the Railroad men wield through this isolation and the Rail company’s exemption from the communication blockade. As Presley notes, “The story of the fight, the story creating the first impression, was to be told to San Francisco and the outside world by S. Behrman, Ruggles, and the local P. and S. W. agents” (541). Because of the vastness of the American West, the removal of telecommunications creates almost complete isolation of the town and surrounding areas.

Ultimately, The Octopus sits at a crossroads of telecommunication developments, specifically in its Westward expansion and growing power struggles. Though Derrick and his

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94 Norris uses this term in “The Mechanics of Fiction.” He writes, “All good novels have one. It is the peg upon which the fabric of the thing hangs” (59). The massacre at Hooven’s is clearly the pivotal event of The Octopus.  
95 Notably, in this case we see that the men that control the modes of communication also control the message. Though telecommunications seems to offer a world that is intrinsically connected, the forces controlling the modes of exchange define the stories that are transmitted. In this example, the social implications of this power structure become clear. S. Behrman and his cohorts, as mouthpieces of the Railroad, represent the sole voices to report the events of the previous day to the wider world. Thus the Railroad exerts its force via technological modes, including the telegraph company, in order to define the events and bend the power of public sentiment to their side. For more on the isolating power of telecommunications, see Chapter Six.
colleagues strive for economic upward mobility, Norris shows here that they lack the connections to make it happen. S. Behrman, as representative of the railroad both literally and figuratively, has the know-how to control the situation and keep the ranchers in their place. Through the contrast between Derrick and the Railway men, readers see both how Norris develops the characters as businessmen through their use of various business-minded maneuvers including utilizing telecommunications, and how Norris uses these same tools to show the futility of Derrick’s actions in the face of the beastly and powerful “octopus.”

4.4 An Evolving World in *The Way We Live Now*

The greed of the American Gilded Age that grows rampant in *The Octopus* did not stay on the continent but instead made its way across the Atlantic to England and the nation’s financial hub: London. This American influence sets the stage for Trollope’s novel *The Way We Live Now* in which Augustus Melmotte uses American financial success to tempt high-society Londonites and beguile English landowners. Although Trollope’s Melmotte is an outsider of unknown origins and his associates, particularly Mr. Fisker, are American, Tamara Wagner argues that Trollope’s intention is to use these characters to turn the mirror back onto Victorian society. Wagner shows that Victorian authors like Trollope employed outsider businessmen “either to diffuse or to focus an exposure of money-mindedness within Victorian society itself” (198) and that “The projection of anxieties about financial and familial, commercial and domestic, fraud onto the American speculator hence swiftly became an overused cliche. At the same time, however, an ongoing reworking also engendered some of the most critical engagements with the national stereotyping at large” (198). As Wagner points out, Trollope uses

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96 For a survey of Trollope’s critical and academic reception, see Chapter Four.
the trappings of business (including, I argue, telecommunications) to develop his caricature then subverts or “reworks” the stereotype to new ends.

Annette Van takes Wagner’s argument one step further, agreeing that Trollope’s real indictment is not of the speculative businessman but the wasteful Englishman, particularly Sir Felix Carbury and Miles Grendall. She writes,

The novel may represent Fisker’s financial speculations as suspect and too risky for proper English gentlemen to invest in, but Felix and Miles’ gambling is obviously beyond the pale. That the Englishman should know better is supported by the novel’s ending in which the two young Englishman have been banished from polite society. In comparison, Fisker returns to his native land with a clever, rich fiancee, and with every indication of future financial success. (90)

Van’s description of the novel’s events is accurate, though perhaps a bit reductive. The analysis that Fisker and his ilk get out unscathed denies Trollope’s negative characterizations and narrative indictments of these characters. However, that the Englishmen suffer the worst fates cannot be denied, and Van’s analysis underscores Wagner’s assertions that the American businessman is a tool, used by Trollope to condemn English interest in speculation, not in the Americans themselves necessarily.

Whether or not scholars can agree on the role Melmotte plays allegorically, within the text Melmotte, as a con-artist, embodies the elitists’ fear that they will be swindled by the upwardly mobile and that their place at the top can be usurped. Although *The Octopus* is the latest published text discussed here and *The Way We Live Now* is the earliest, both observe the same basic time period. Trollope’s return to London in 1873 inspired him to write *The Way We Live Now*, and significantly, much of the underhanded business dealings in *The Way We Live*
Now originate in the United States and relate to the railroad. Understanding the business world of *The Octopus* lays a framework for interpreting that which Melmotte attempts to obscure from his investors in *The Way We Live Now*. Wagner writes that by the 1870s, “expansionism and American enterprises had become intricately yoked together in the popular imagination” (196). The fears around American business ethics were not of actions an ocean away, but instead they were tied to an expansive commercialism that found its way even into the homes of the London elite. Wagner goes on to speak of Trollope’s works in particular, “Speculating Americans and a speculation of American business and businessmen recur through Trollope’s novels, denoting specifically the country’s offstage representation as insightful commentary on the shifting anxieties about commerce at home and abroad” (205). Of the businessmen discussed in this chapter, Trollope’s Melmotte is the most villainous and most extreme. This is no accident. Wagner says that “Melmotte has remained Trollope’s most notorious fictional speculator” (207), and Trollope himself says that envisioned Melmotte as “the speculator who robs everybody” (219).97

In *An Autobiography* Trollope writes that *The Way We Live Now* was “instigated by what I conceived to be the commercial profligacy of the age” (218). Trollope, upon his return to London following a visit to his son in Australia, was appalled by the financial scandals he saw occurring (in particular the Crisis of 1873) and wrote the novel in response to what he observed happening around him. A satire, the novel’s contents stem from the author’s own reality and what he saw as society’s ills. Although Trollope looks back on his writing of *The Way We Live Now* with some critique in his autobiography – “The book has the fault which is to be attributed to almost all satires, whether in prose or verse. The accusations are exaggerated” (219) – he goes

97 Though in his autobiography Trollope contends that Melmotte is “well maintained” compared to other satirical aspects of the novel (219).
on to say “In other respects The Way We Live Now was, as a satire, powerful and good” (219). Trollope believes that the accusations he lays out in his novel “make effect rather than represent truth” (219); however, much can be learned from the image Trollope paints of late-nineteenth-century London.

Much like Dryfoos and Silas Lapham in Howells’ texts, Trollope’s Melmotte uses his growing capital to buy his way into the London elite’s inner social circles. Unlike Dryfoos and Lapham however, Melmotte comes with a larger agenda than purchasing social clout. Once in, Melmotte offers a shining opportunity to men whose once-great standing is beginning to diminish. While presenting himself as one more “upstart” and making clear his intentions of buying his way into society, Melmotte’s true reason for rising in status is to get to the men with the money. Melmotte is surprisingly upfront about his social climbing, clearly purchasing access, yet keeps hidden his larger agenda. The men he targets have titles and a history of family wealth but are not practiced in the world of business. They have, up to this point, lived off the income of their interests and lands. However, as the social landscape of England begins to change, this circle finds their incomes running short of demand and realizes they need to diversify and invest their wealth. They put their faith in Melmotte, believing his business acumen and new-found prosperity will steer them all towards gain.

Melmotte purchases access and social recognition while knowing that he is not a true member of the inner circle. The social elite’s concern over the “false gentleman” is a strong and pervasive one. With a burgeoning population trying to work their way into the top levels of society, those already at the top fought to protect their place by strengthening the requirements for entrance: they are highly aware of the social rules and fashions. This is why, in The Rise of Silas Lapham, Lapham’s choice of waistcoats is such an important one. He believes that it can be
the difference between social success and ruin. Melmotte understands, however, that it is those that try to play the game that are often seen as impostors. He, on the other hand, is overtly bad at “the game,” but is a good businessman. While the men that buy into Melmotte’s schemes and rely on his charity watch for the false gentleman sneaking through the back door, they unintentionally invite the real threat in through the front.

Over its course, the novel makes clear that Melmotte is a man of both telegrams and anger. His boorish behavior reinforces that he is not, by nature, part of London’s elite class. His ability to use telecommunications to his advantage, however, does show that he is a man of business. Despite Melmotte being generally unpleasant, his business acumen – which is communicated to both the reader and other characters in part through his use of technology – grants him “access” to the highest levels of society. Melmotte’s use of telecommunications goes hand in hand with his exorbitant spending: Both display his ability to make money.

Early in the novel, Melmotte hosts a ball that is lavish in its expense and wide ranging in its attendance. Guests of the ball include the Duchess of Stevenage, Lord Grendall, and even a Prince. Trollope writes, “No doubt the persuasion with the Duchess had been very strong. Her brother, Lord Alfred Grendall, was known to be in great difficulties, which, – so people said, – had been considerably modified by opportune pecuniary circumstances” (44). Similarly, “it became to be known … that a prince of the blood royal was to be there. How this had been achieved nobody quite understood; but there were rumours that a certain lady’s jewels had been rescued from the pawnbroker’s” (44). By purchasing the attention of the highest members of the circle, Melmotte’s success is certain. Melmotte spares no expense for the access, “an amount which would make this affair quite new in the annals of ball-giving” (43). Because Melmotte is so obvious in the way he goes about purchasing favor, the men he manipulates believe there is no
ulterior motive. They are so sure that their social standing is a desirable one, they see nothing suspicious in the copious amounts of money Melmotte spends to be accepted.

Melmotte’s unabashed self-assurance causes him to stand out from the Laphams of the world. He does not amend his brash and improper nature, much to the chagrin of those with whom he socialized. Melmotte pays his way, and the social elite accept him because they need him, not because they like him. For example, the Duchess of Stevenage, though willing to attend the ball, is the same that tells her son, “Of course they are vulgar, ... so much so as to be no longer distasteful because of the absurdity of the thing” (51). When the Prince arrives at the ball, Trollope tells readers, “Considerable skill was shown in keeping the presence of his royal guest a secret from the host himself till the Prince was gone” (59). Though the Prince agrees to attend, he is shielded from interacting with Melmotte directly because it is so widely accepted that the host is not a true part of the inner circle and is too “vulgar” to ever be so. What’s more, “Melmotte was not a fool and understood it all; – understood not only that it had been thought that he should not speak to the Prince, but also that it might be better that it should be so. He could not have everything at once” (61). Melmotte understands his position in society better than any of his “peers” expect. While his guests think that they have outwitted Melmotte, the host is playing a longer game and understands the moves his guests make.

In addition to being disliked personally, Melmotte has a negative reputation that spans Europe; however, Melmotte is adept at using telecommunications and knowing whom to contact and when – one more reason that the elite entrust their money to him. The genteel men Melmotte swindles disbelieve the rumors, arguing that if Melmotte truly swindled everyone he encountered, how would he have anyone left to work with? Melmotte’s targets disregard the rumors and suggestions of his unscrupulous reputation because they see Melmotte’s variety of
connections and therefore cannot believe that he could be as bad as what is said about him.
Trollope writes that Melmotte was “regarded in Paris as the most gigantic swindler that had ever lived; that he had made the City too hot to hold him; that he had endeavored to establish himself in Vienna, but had been warned away by the police; and that he had at length found that British freedom would alone allow him to enjoy, without persecution, the fruits of her industry” (46).
This reputation of Melmotte’s is no secret, either. He is described as having a countenance “on the whole unpleasant, and, I may say, untrustworthy” (48). The Duchess says of him, “I dare say he hasn’t been very honest. When men make so much money, I don’t know how they can have been honest” (51) and the Marchioness of Auld Reekie comments, “by all accounts [the money] was badly come by” (50). Despite all of this, the men he targets entrust their money to him. In addition to believing that Melmotte’s end goal is to buy his way into society and that they have fulfilled their part of the transaction by allowing him entrance, they believe that he is too dull to understand the nuances of etiquette and thus too dull to swindle men of such high stature.
Another fact of the matter is that these elites need him. Their status is waning, their coffers are emptying, and they have to take the chance.

Melmotte’s various uses of telecommunications signal to the other men the quality of his mind for business as well as his connections. While Melmotte’s gross behavior can be seen as the “anger” of businessmen, his use of telegrams appeals to his investors. Trollope uses Melmotte’s comfort with the technology to communicate what kind of businessman Melmotte is – one who has the business acumen to use telecommunications wisely. Melmotte takes advantage of his cultivated reputation as a smart and successful businessman in order to steal from the men he invites to be on the board of his “Great South Central and Pacific Mexican Railway.”
Telecommunications plays an important role in this because it is an intrinsic part of the persona
Melmotte shapes in order to beguile his investors. They, like Trollope’s readers, understand the cue that adept telecommunication use gives. The men Melмотte brings into his financial scheme see his familiarity with telecommunications and read that as a sign that Melмотte is a man with connections and with the business savvy to make fast money.

Melmotte’s show of telegraphic speed and control in his business practices establishes him as a capable capitalist. The scheme of the Great South Central and Pacific Mexican Railway comes together when a businessman named Mr. Fisker arrives from America. He gets Melмотte to agree to his plan of railroad speculation and to run the British office. Although Fisker and his associates have yet to build the railroad (and it is not at all clear that it will ever actually exist), Fisker and Melмотte work together to divide the company into shares and then create enough interest in the potential railroad that those shares can then be sold at a profit. Once Melмотte signs onto the idea, the wheels begin to spin quickly. Paul Montague, who is skeptical of the scheme but is dragged along by Fisker, observes the progress Melмотte makes, especially by use of the telegraph: “Mr Melмотte was indeed so great a reality, such a fact in the commercial world of London, that it was no longer possible for such a one as Montague to refuse to believe in the scheme. Melмотte had the telegraph at his command, and had been able to make as close inquiries as though San Francisco and Salt Lake City had been suburbs of London” (127). Melмотte uses this telegraphic connection, and the expediency of it, as a show of strength. Because of the speed at which Melмотte develops Fisker’s plan, Montague finds

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98 Wagner calls Fisker “Melmotte’s indisputably American double” (207).

99 See Chapter Five for a discussion on the telegraph’s seeming ability to annihilate space.
himself incapable of standing against “the tower” (127). Soon the train is moving too quickly to stop its progress.

Trollope characterizes Montague in contrast to Melmotte. Although Montague has access to the telegraph, he doesn't have the connections to use it effectively. At one point, continuing in his doubt, Montague does try to pull the brakes on the operation, but Melmotte undermines him. This inability communicates Montague’s lack of business-savvy. Montague tries to force Melmotte to fully discuss the finances and true progress of the company, but Melmotte declines. He tells Montague, “The telegraph wires are open to you, sir. But, my Lords and Gentlemen, I am able to inform you that in affairs of this nature great discretion is necessary” (517). This is a clever move in a number of ways. By telling Montague that he may use the telegraph, Melmotte suggests that Montague needs permission and that Melmotte has the control to give or deny it. Moreover, Melmotte feels confident meeting Montague on this point because he knows that Montague does not have the connections to adequately investigate the standing of the company in the United States. Melmotte says, “No doubt you are in correspondence with Mr. Fisker. Ask him” (517). No doubt Melmotte is in correspondence with Mr. Fisker also. Fisker is Melmotte’s American counterpart, and it is clear that Montague will get no straighter answers from Fisker than he did from Melmotte. And so Melmotte tells Montague that the telegraph wires are “open” to him because Melmotte knows that Montague is not business-savvy enough to use the technology in a way that will benefit him.

In another instance, Melmotte uses the telegraph to take control of a situation again when his daughter attempts to elope with Sir Felix Carbury. Melmotte’s expediency and precision in his use of telecommunications to exert his own will over his daughter displays his telegraphic adeptness. We also see that he has connections: he is able to find, at a moment’s notice, men to
catch Marie and return her to London. Marie and Felix plan to meet in Liverpool, and from there, take a steamer to New York. However, when Marie Melmotte arrives at the train station in Liverpool, two men in the service of her father detain her. The reader and Marie come to understand that Melmotte has discovered his daughter’s absconding (and more importantly the check she cashed in his name), and telegraphed ahead for Marie to be stopped at the station. Although the men threaten to arrest her for the theft of the check if she will not come quietly, they are clearly not regular police officers, as Trollope sets them in contrast to the “policeman, who did not at present connect himself with the affair” (707). These are Melmotte’s men, dispatched from within Liverpool to see Marie safely returned. Though Marie tries to talk her way out of the situation, pretending to be a Mademoiselle Racine, the jig is up.

Trollope explains the role the telegraph played in Marie Melmotte’s unhappiness, which extends into a critique of its use as a whole:

There was certainly no help to be found anywhere. It may well be doubted whether upon the whole the telegraph has not added more to the annoyances than to the comforts of life, and whether the gentlemen who spent all the public money without authority ought not to have been punished with special severity in that they had injured humanity, rather than pardoned because of the good it had produced. Who is benefited by telegrams? The newspapers are robbed of all their old interest, and the very soul of intrigue is destroyed. Poor Marie, when she heard her fate, would certainly have gladly hanged Mr. Scudamore. (708-09)

This short diatribe may be one example of the type of “fault” of the novel Trollope would later critique in his autobiography. He writes, “The spirit which produces the satire is honest enough, but the very desire which moves the satirist to do his work energetically makes him dishonest”
(219). Though I do not think that this example is dishonest, it does seem much more the opinion of the author instead of the character. I doubt that Marie was considering the downfall of the “soul of intrigue” as caused by telegraphs or of the hanging of Frank Ives Scudamore, the man who organized the nationalization of the telegraph in England and ran the system through the 1870’s, while being strong-armed back to London. Perhaps we should be reading “Poor Trollope,” instead of “Poor Marie.” In any case, besides the many other wrongs Trollope sees the telegraph spreading, it does do wrong to Marie Melmotte in that it concludes her elopement before it has even truly begun.100

Although this scene may seem like a personal use of the telegraph, not a business one, Melmotte stopping Marie from eloping with Carbury is a financial decision rather than an affair of the heart or a question of propriety. Melmotte’s mastery over the tools of business, including the telegraph, help him to maintain control over his daughter as well, forcing her into an arrangement that, to Melmotte, is simply one more business transaction. Although the men who pick her up continue to insist that the question of the stolen check for two hundred and fifty pounds requires her return, Marie knows better. She tells them that the amount of money “is nothing in our house. It isn’t about the money. It’s because papa wants me to marry another man” (984).101 Her destiny, as the author explains, is “as in royal espousals’ interests of State

100 Though readers know that Sir Felix Carbury had decided against getting on the ship to America.
101 The other man in question is Lord Nidderdale, set to inherit a castle and the title of Marquis, while Sir Felix has no additional title or inheritance waiting for him. In fact, before the novel opens Marie is to be engaged to Nidderdale, but the terms of the arrangement cannot be agreed upon, and so the marriage is called off. “The young lord Nidderdale, the eldest son of the Marquis of Auld Reekie, had offered to take the girl and make her Marchioness in the process of time for half a million down. Melmotte had not objected to the sum, – so it was said, – but had proposed to tie it up. Nidderdale had desired to have it free in his own grasp and, would not move on any other terms” (65). When Melmotte asks Lord Nidderdale’s lawyer if he would trust such a large amount of money to the young man, the lawyer replies, “You are willing to trust your only child to him” (65). Melmotte does not take this rebuke well, responding by telling the lawyer that “his answer had nothing in it, and marched out of the room” (66). The narrator has his own two cents to add to the event, writing, “I doubt whether Lord Nidderdale had ever said a word of love to Marie Melmotte, -- or whether the poor girl had expected it. Her destiny had no doubt been explained to her” (66).
regulate their expedience with an acknowledged absence, with even a proclaimed impossibility, of personal predilections, so in this case was money allowed to have the same weight” (65). Marie learns to care about her future over the course of the novel, and decides that she does want to choose her own husband, but she cannot change her power to make it so, particularly in the face of her father’s connectivity and financial skill.

In each of the texts covered in this chapter, authors rely on stereotypes to easily convey basic information about their characters, in particular utilizing an adeptness with emerging telecommunications (or lack thereof) to characterize the American-type of speculative businessman – the man of “telegram and anger.” Wagner brings these various narrative threads into a single assessment, writing, “American speculations, fictional and financial, in Victorian novels, are centrally invested in a shattering, or at the very least, a redistribution or redirection of expected plotlines. This is precisely what makes their employment of anti-American typecasting so fascinating and so much more than a simple reiteration of a cluster of clichés or literary stereotypes” (215). In Trollope’s work, we see how this shattering occurs, where Melmotte and Fisker’s speculations and money-mindedness disrupt every facet of the genteel life, from business to marriage to a game of cards between friends. In fact, as this chapter has shown, each author in his own way reworks the clichés of telecommunication to offer unexpected plots and sharp social observations.
In Jules Verne’s *Around the World in 80 Days*, Phileas Fogg sits at his club discussing a recent bank robbery with his companions, each imagining where the thief may hide. One member of the party argues that the thief will have plenty of places to go, “after all, the earth is a pretty huge place” (13).

Fogg replies, “It used to be” (13).

While Fogg knows that the physical size and mass of the earth has not changed, his assertion that the world is smaller is not simply an exaggeration – if one considers not the measurements of the globe but human perception of it. Fogg goes on to declare, “The world is smaller, because we can now travel around it ten times faster than a hundred years ago” (13). His assertion gets to the heart of the issue: that one’s understanding of distance (and by relation space and locality) may be relative to one’s ability to traverse said distance. Fogg's figurative language here leaves the reader wondering how much of his statement is metaphor and how much a reflection of Fogg's subjective experience of time and space in a new technological age. To Fogg, the world is “smaller” because with the introduction of new technologies, it has become easier than ever to traverse it.

Ideas on relativity were cropping up across fields of study at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Einstein published his theories on relativity in 1905 and 1916, but his development of these theories did not occur in a vacuum. By the late nineteenth century, scholars had well developed non-Euclidean geometry, and new observations on Cartesian geometry were underway. Ernst Mach and Henri Poincaré both published on concepts of space that relied on human experience, not geometry, and Karl Pearson expresses precisely
this idea of subjective measurements when he writes, in his 1911 *The Grammar of Science*, “We do not therefore gain by terming space and time external and internal modes of perception. Both modes of perception are so habitual and yet so difficult of analysis, so commonplace and yet so mysterious, that, although we recognise a distinction between the two, we are often hardly certain whether we are distinguishing things by time or by space” (210-211). Pearson shows that time and space are so intrinsically linked in human perception that it can be difficult for an individual to tell the difference between them. Moreover, relativity was not only taking hold in mathematics and the hard sciences. Art, religion, philosophy, psychology, and sociology all underwent shifts towards relativism at the turn of the century.  

This wave of relativism did not, of course, exclude literature. Under specific concepts like Nietzschean “perspectivism” and other forms of conceptual relativism, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Ford, and others experimented with new forms and narrative styles and included concepts of relativity, subjectivity, simultaneity, and perspectivism in their texts. Proust particularly addresses the role new technology and inventions such as the telephone and railroad played in this newfound subjectivity in his work *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In “In a Budding Grove,” Proust describes how traveling by train is closer to imagination than reality in that it bears the rider “from the place in which we were living right to the very heart of a place we longed to see, in a single sweep which seemed miraculous to us not so much because it covered a certain distance as because it united two distinct individualities of the world” (693). Here, Proust sees railway travel as a removal of distance, due both to its speed and its separation from the

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102 For examples of relativism in art see Cubism, including works by Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. For an example of relativism in Sociology see Émile Durheim’s *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), in Psychology see Karl Jaspers’ *General Psychopathology* (1913), and in Philosophy & Religion see Henri Bergson’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) and the works of Friedrich Nietzsche particularly *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. 

experience of covering distance. He contrasts it to driving, which he calls more “real” because in a car one would be “following more closely, in a more intimate contiguity, the various gradations by which the surface of the earth is diversified” (693).

Later, in “The Guermantes Way,” Proust again describes the experience of distance annihilation, this time due to the telephone. He describes the “sacred forces” and “admirable sorcery” that is enough to “bring before us, invisible but present, the person to whom we have been wishing to speak, and who … finds himself suddenly transported hundreds of miles” (176-77). However, the contrast between the closeness of the voice and the distance of the person engenders a crisis in the narrator: “How often have I been unable to listen without anguish, as though, confronted by the impossibility of seeing, except after long hours of journeying, her whose voice has been so close to my ear … and at what distance we may be from the people we love at the moment when it seems that we have only to stretch out our hand to seize and hold them” (178). The speaker struggles to contend with the contrast between the nearness of the person’s voice and the distance of their physical form. In this case, distance is both destroyed and reinforced, offering a paradox to the speaker. This crisis of relativity – of the division between what one experiences as real and what is purported to be objectively or scientifically real – is a critical element of this chapter’s argument. For late nineteenth century thinkers and writers, these changes in technology introduced a range of present and tangible concerns over human experience, subjectivity, and objectivity that shaped their writing and philosophy.

For modern audiences, the division between the “real” and the individual experience is commonplace. Rarely does a telephone call create in us a discordance of time and place that leads to reflections on death and eternal separations (as it does Proust). Having the world “at hand,” “within reach,” and “at your fingertips,” is so regular today that these clichés have lost
their connection to the metaphors that spawned them. Because “the world” – or at least the World Wide Web – is accessible through one’s computer or phone, to many these phrases even seem literal. The world is at your fingertips. It is a small world, after all. Because modern readers can easily accept Fogg’s statement that the world is smaller, the observation may even seem banal. However, we must acknowledge that at the time of writing, this was a new idea. It is important that we note, therefore, how extraordinary the concept of a shrinking world would have been to nineteenth century individuals. To have the world “at hand,” was not commonplace, or even novel, it was astounding and unprecedented. The previously inconceivable feats of instantaneous communication at a distance caused in some users crises of place and person, in which users experienced confusion and/or interruption in their understanding of location, distance, and even embodiment. What’s more, because these were new experiences, there was not a common vocabulary to describe or explain them. Nineteenth century writers employ metaphors of closeness to describe distance-transgressing technology not necessarily out of artistry but also simply because there was no other language for it. To say that the world is smaller or that a person has been transported hundreds of miles indicates an author that is grappling with new ideas and new ways of experiencing and interpreting the world.

Ultimately, emerging technologies including telecommunications altered the way individuals conceived of distance, space, and place at the turn of the century. The previous chapters of this dissertation have sought to address the ways in which authors utilized telecommunications within texts as indications of particular character types and tropes, particularly in realist texts in which the contents of the works seek to represent the contemporary world. By examining these works, readers can come to better understand the texts themselves and the contexts in which they were written. In this chapter, we turn from characterization to
language, examining how authors discuss telecommunications and to what ends. I seek to show the ubiquity of changing conceptions of time and space by examining documents across types and genres written by British and American authors. Through close readings, aided by historical and theoretical context, I argue that the telephone and wireless telegraph’s introduction as well as the growing power and institutionalization of the wired telegraph are clear influences on turn-of-the-century conceptions of individuals and the distance between us.

5.1 Contracting Distance

In his 1902 work *Anticipations: of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*, a young H. G. Wells unpacks the effects of scientific and technological/mechanical advancement on everyday life and attempts to deduce how these fields will continue to evolve and cause increasing changes in the ways humans go about their day-to-day lives. Following the publication of his most popular science fiction works, or what Harris-Fain calls “scientific romances” (243), Wells’ *Anticipations* marks the author’s shifting interests in non-fiction as another way to unpack his social and political ideas (249). Although the book was a financial success, it has not inspired much scholarship. In the text, Wells makes many useful observations on his present time and some surprisingly prescient deductions about the future. In fact, in his introduction to the 1914 edition, Wells himself comments on his successful predictions: “On the whole, and that is the astonishing thing, the book stands; there are places when you might very well think the writer was writing about the present instead of lunging boldly into what was then the future” (xiii). He also includes a charming compliment to his younger self. “It is a better book than I have been in the habit of thinking it was, and whatever

103 Although Wells makes some references to Asia and Africa, this study is largely euro-centric and often views cities, like Wells’ own London, to be the center of human interest.
the value of both of them to the world at large may be, the H. G. Wells of thirty-three has little to be ashamed of in presenting his book to the criticisms of the H. G. Wells of forty-eight” (xiii). Even into the twenty-first century, readers can continue to see the accuracy with which Wells predicts societal changes predicated on advancements in science and technology. While there is an echo here of some of his fiction writing, *Anticipations* uses a grounded and well-documented assessment of Wells’ present to anticipate what the future will hold. Although our modern-day resources are sure to look quite different from what Wells imagined, our metros and subways, the myriad means of electronic communication, even Amazon and Instacart are not far off from Wells’ forecasts in *Anticipations*.

In this text, Wells scaffolds his argument, with each chapter building on information from the one previous, and at the start of it all is transportation. Much like Phileas Fogg, Wells sees the advancements in “locomotion” as a turning point in history, one that is certain to affect how humans not only live in the world but also how they perceive and interact with it. I will focus here on the second chapter of *Anticipations*, titled “The Probable Diffusion of Great Cities.” After setting the stage in his first chapter, Wells here begins in earnest on his central goal: to anticipate the future.

Wells opens the chapter with a proposition upon which the rest of his argument hangs, that “the general distribution of population in a country must always be directly dependent on transport facilities” (21, emphasis original). He goes on to argue that the size of a metropolitan

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104 For an insightful overview of Wells’ method and an analysis of his accuracy, see Paul Crabtree’s “Discovering the Future.” Little scholarly analysis of this text exists, though Dryden’s “The Inheritors, H. G. Wells, and Science Fiction” offers an interesting discussion on Wells’ purpose for writing the book and its influence on Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford’s co-authored story *The Inheritors*.

105 Lindy Dryden analyzes Wells’ friendship with Conrad and Ford and his impact on *The Inheritors*, which Dryden argues was written in opposition to the utopian ideas Wells espouses in *Anticipations*. In it, she quotes Wells’ account of Conrad’s reception of the text: “He doesn’t like it in a friendly & respectful way” (qtd. In Dryden 103).
area is dependent on the inhabitants’ ability to traverse it in a timely manner: this he calls the
city’s “sphere of influence” (24). The size of this sphere is determined, de facto, by how far one
is able to travel in one hour. Wells provides an explanation for this particular measurement: “The
day of twenty-four hours is an inexorable human condition, and up to the present time all
intercourse and business has been broken into spells of definite duration by intervening
nights…The possibility, therefore, of going and coming and doing that day’s work has hitherto
fixed the extreme limits to which a city could grow” (25). He goes on to assert that, “So far as we
can judge without a close and un congenial scrutiny of statistics, that daily journey, that has
governed and still to a very considerable extent governs the growth of cities, has had, and
probably always will have, a maximum of two hours, one hour each way from sleeping-place to
council chamber, counter, work-room, or office stool” (25). By Wells’ estimation, because a day
has fixed limits, so too must the size of a city in order to accommodate its inhabitants and make
it possible for individuals to attend to their daily needs. Because this is a practical need, Wells
does not address this definition of city size as a municipal definition, rather the logical
conclusion of the needs of residents.

Building on the idea of the one-hour diameter, Wells unpacks how advancing modes of
transportation thus influence the size of a city and its population density. For example, he argues,
a pedestrian city will be, at its maximum, four miles wide. If horses and carriages, hackneys and
omnibuses are included in the equation, that diameter grows to six or eight miles. Then of
course, there is also the issue of economic accessibility – those who can afford such amenities
can move farther afield, while those still reliant on their feet alone are forced to remain in the
original four miles. Then, into this already complex transportation structure, comes the
locomotive train.
Ultimately, there are two types of city growth— that of population and that of physical diameter. Wells shows that these two factors do not increase and decrease in tandem as one might expect. Instead, an increase in population is as likely or more likely to lead to population density than the diametric growth of a city. One such example of this, Wells shows, is the congestion of London in the nineteenth century, which he attributes to the introduction of the railway and steamship. Calling them “purely centripetal forces,” Wells writes, “They worked simply to increase the general volume of trade, to increase, that is, the pressure of population upon the urban centers” (26), and the force of the new transportations led to “a gigantic rush of population into the magic radius of— for most people— four miles, to suffer there physical and moral disaster less acute, but, finally far more appalling to the imagination than any famine or pestilence that ever swept the world” (26). In this way, Wells deduces that the devastating overcrowding of London in the “middle and later thirds” (26) of the nineteenth century was due to an imbalance between the means of transportation between cities and from rural areas to metropolitan ones and the means of traversing a city once within its limits. With the rail and steamship, it became easier than ever before for travelers to arrive in London (and other large cities across Europe), but traveling through the city was still largely pedestrian and thus mostly dependent upon a small sphere of influence, which led to overcrowding.

Wells looks to the introduction of suburban railways at the turn of the century as the first step towards the alleviation of urban congestion. With these, one could travel up to ten or twelve miles within an hour, greatly expanding the possible diameter of a city. At the time of publication, however, these railways only traveled to a handful of locations, creating radii of growth, but not expanding the borders of London consistently. Wells writes,
The star-shaped contour of the modern great city, thrusting out arms along every available railway line, knotted arms of which every knot marks a station, testify sufficiently to the relief of pressure thus afforded. Great Towns before this century presented rounded contours and grew as a puff-ball swells; the modern Great City looks like something that has burst an intolerable envelope and splashed. But,...these suburban railways are the mere first rough expedient of far more convenient and rapid developments (27).

Wells describes here the impact railways have made upon the shape of cities. Instead of growing in a fairly symmetrical circle, the few inner-city railways cause “the modern great city” to expand along these lines, with longer arms where quick transportation is available, and inversions where foot-traffic limits the city’s size. Wells argues that, following the existing pattern, more rail transportation would allow for more municipal growth. As we shall see, this situation is, then, the basis upon which Wells envisions a bright, new future – one with plenty of elbow room.

As we have learned by now, where there are railroads, there are telecommunication wires. This is as true in Wells’ vision of the future as it is in his present time. Peering into the future, Wells envisions a world that is connected not only by rails and steam-engine ships but also through a variety of telecommunications. While he asserts that the growth and diffusion of cities “is all a question of transit” (34) and that, “Limitation on transit contracts the city, facilitation expands and disperses it” (34), Wells does not necessarily see transit as the only facility that can help a city spread. In fact, he writes, “The telephone will almost certainly prove a very potent auxiliary indeed to the forces making for diffusion” (34). Instead of being
contradictory, Wells seems to see telecommunications as an important supplement to speedier transportation and a facilitator for city growth.

As Wells shows, at the time of writing, the telephone was already starting to grow in popularity, especially among businesses and the elite. Though there were some obstacles to the telephone’s ubiquity – including a “scandalously stupid business conflict between telephone company and and post-office” (34) causing delays and complications, it being “needlessly expensive” (34), and the “unmitigated public nuisance” of “non-dismissable Civil servants” (34) running the post office – Wells is sure that all of these problems will be overcome in time, after which the telephone will become commonplace. Wells writes that “the whole of Great Britain south of the Highlands seems destined to become such an urban region, laced all together not only by railway and telegraph, but by novel roads … and by a dense network of telephones, parcels-delivery tubes, and the like nervous and arterial connections” (35). Although we have not yet made it to parcel-delivery tubes, Wells’ overall anticipation of a densely connected society rings true.

The prefix “tele-” means “to or at a distance.” Wells is looking at a London that is densely populated, where millions of people are crammed into unsafe and unsanitary tenement housing. What he envisions, then, is a London that offers all the amenities of living within a four-mile radius with none of the crowding – in other words, he envisions the city at a distance. In this future version, people are not isolated; instead, they are as connected as ever, if not more so. Through advanced technology and engineering, all levels of society would be able to live apart while being “together.” As Wells puts it, the “freedom to live at some little distance from their work will be increased” (35). Ultimately, physical closeness will be replaced by technological closeness.
Wells gives a number of specific examples of what daily life may look like when these tele-connections are optimized. The businessman, according to Wells, will be able to “sit at home in his library and bargain, discuss, promise, hint, threaten, tell such lies as he dare not write, and, in fact, do everything that once demanded a personal encounter” (35). Readers can see developing here the idea of the personal and intimate happening at a distance. Wells also describes the benefits of connectivity for the “mistress of the house”: she “has all her local tradesmen, all the great London shops, the circulating library, the theatre box-office, the post-office, and cab-rank, the nurses’ institute and the doctor, within reach of her hand” (34, emphasis added). This last phrase, though on one level simple figurative language, gets to the heart of the matter. In both these examples, though more explicitly in the second, Wells utilizes a language of closeness to describe interactions at a distance.

This description of a city’s many amenities being “within arm’s reach” shows the necessity of relying on metaphor for new technological experiences for which there is not more specific language. This metaphor, though representing both the shortcomings and flexibility of language, expresses not just a lack of useful words but constraints on the individual mind to conceptualize these new technologies. The phrase “within reach” expresses the physicality of telecommunications but also the way individuals come to consider the distance between themselves and the amenities of the city. The world is smaller – not by measurement but in the minds of people, particularly those with access to advancing technologies. The city’s sphere of influence is able to expand to thirty miles or more (27) because, through advanced technology, it still feels like the original 4-mile radius.

106 Wells seems to be drawing from the same stereotypes as covered in the previous chapter.
Ultimately, Wells argues, this new way of experiencing proximity will allow cities to grow exponentially – far beyond the radius sizes required by physical travel. Thus, the “diffusion of great cities” will be complete, and people everywhere will have equal access to metropolitan amenities. “Everywhere, indeed, over the land of the globe between the frozen circles, the railway and the new roads will spread, the network of communication-wires and safe and convenient ways” (37). Here we see that Wells does not anticipate physical isolation, with nearness completely traded in for technological accessibility. Instead, he sees advanced transportation working in tandem with telecommunications, to the extent that urbanity and rurality will be defined better by soil types than by resources or accessibility (37). This does not, however, mean that all places on the globe will become dense, urban areas. With diffusions comes some leveling of difference, “the country will take to itself many of the qualities of the city,” while cities will adopt the characteristics of the country, including “greenness” and fresh air” (37). “There will be horticulture and agriculture going on within the ‘urban regions’ and ‘urbanity’ without them” (37).

Readers should remember that Wells’ discussion of diffusion is predicated on the one-hour city radius. Despite his descriptions of urbanism taking over the globe, this massive growth of urban centers is only possible if residents can reach necessary resources within a set amount of time. Therefore, while there can be increased measurable distance between people, the perception of that distance and its utility to the individual, still has to stay within the hour range. When Wells writes, “The world grows smaller and smaller, the telegraph and telephone go everywhere” (Anticipations 199), this may seem metaphorical to modern readers, but it also represents the concept that distance is measured by travel time, and thus to the late-nineteenth-century person, the world literally felt like it was shrinking. Wells seeks to address these topics
objectively, presenting what is arguably a scientific perspective. However, through his language usage and necessary use of metaphor, we can see that the contracting of distance brought about by new technologies offered both new possibilities and new complications.

These concerns often play out across media and genres, from spiritual narratives and ghost stories to magazine and newspaper articles. This, then, is the context into which Arthur Mee’s article “The Pleasure Telephone” is published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1898. In it, Mee envisions a world where the “pleasure telephone” can be found in every house. This phone works in only one direction, allowing individuals to pick up an earpiece and listen in to concerts, speeches, sermons, news updates and more. The article is accompanied by detailed illustrations of people listening to these events in a variety of settings, from living rooms to doctor’s offices. Although Mee opens the article with an excerpt from Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, in which two characters listen to music that is being “telephoned” into the room, the “pleasure telephone” that makes up the body of Mee’s text is based on an existing system, the Telefon Hírmondó of Budapest. “The Telefon Hírmondó (Telephone Herald) was conceived by a colleague of Edison’s, Theodor Puskás” (Ehardt 105), and what came to be known internationally as the “talking newspaper” began in 1878 delivering “a regular program of commercial news, musical entertainment, and weather forecasts to its customers” (Ehardt 105). Using the Telefon Hírmondó as his foundation, Mee envisions a similar and even more successful system of telephonic entertainment in London.

Mee’s predictions prove to be less fruitful than or accurate as Wells’ – the most obvious wrench in his forecast is the introduction of the radio and the decline of the importance of the telephone for “broadcasting.” Notably, Mee also imagines how the technology might extend to

107 Mee was a well-regarded English journalist, writer, and educator. For more on Mee, see *Child of Wonder: An Intimate Biography of Arthur Mee* by Sir John Hammerton.
the visual, and while we now have radio and television instead of the specific wires and ear
pieces Mee discusses, much of what he envisions does come to pass, if in a different form. A
curious oversight in Mee’s article is that, at the time of publication, there were numerous other
examples of this form of “entertainment telephone” across Europe, and even already in place in
London. In addition to Paris’ “Théâtrophone” and Vienna’s “Wiener Privat-Telegraphen-
Gesellschaft,” London itself had the “Electrophone,” a private music and entertainment service
established in 1894. Although the Telefon Hírmondó was the most established – and proved to
be the most resilient – of these services, and therefore a reasonable choice to serve as Mee’s
primary example of the “pleasure telephone,” it is curious that he fails to mention the existence
of the other services, particularly that in his own city of London, the subject of his article.
Budapest’s Telefon Hírmonó continued until the 1930s, though the idea soon fell by the wayside
in the rest of the world (Ehardt 106). While the “pleasure telephone” proved to be ephemeral,
and Mee’s predictions along with it, as Ehardt shows, this invention set the stage for later
telecommunication technologies. Additionally, the ways in which Mee contends with these
technological possibilities and the terminology he uses to describe them serve as an important
artifact that reflects his contemporary society.

Of particular interest to the present discussion is the myriad ways Mee utilizes the
language of closeness and the destruction of distance to communicate the potential of the
“pleasure telephone” and the experience of its users once London is adequately connected. Even
if its predictions prove erroneous, what this work accomplishes is to clearly present the effects of
telephonic connection on individuals, conceptions of space and time, and on language itself.
Mee’s work is a treasure trove of linguistic examples of contracting space caused by
telecommunications, in this case a relative of the telephone. In fact, he says directly that
“Distance will lose its enchantment by being abolished altogether” (5). The statement proves to be a bit of a paradox: if the pleasure telephone actually “abolished” distance, then distance would lose much more than its ability to enchant. The contradiction suggests that we should read the statement as at least partly metaphorical. The instantaneousness of telecommunications causes the experience that distance does and does not exist – or that it exists but is of no consequence to the user. Therefore, distance loses its allure because it no longer matters to the individual. In other words, distance goes from being concrete to conditional. In a similar line of thinking but looking to the future, Mee asks “who dares to say that in twenty years the electric miracle will not bring all the corners of the earth to our own fireside?” (5). Again, we see space annihilated by the telephone, even if the description is more figurative this time. Mee’s vision of all corners of the earth at one fireside is, of course, metaphorical. He employs language of distance – corners of the earth – and nearness – the home’s fireside – to illustrate the opportunities the telephone offers. However, this description is not pure imagination. Metaphors are inherently representational, and in this case, the image of the world at one’s hearth presents to the reader the uncanny, subjective experience of using the pleasure telephone.

Mee enumerates the ways in which the pleasure telephone, with its ability to condense distance, will be the great connector by “carrying business and pleasure into the homes of thousands, and making next-door neighbors, as it were, of strangers who have never met” (2), and he describes how the technology will create a world in which “The humblest cottage will be in immediate contact with the city” (2), bringing “the pleasure of society to the doors of the artisan’s cottage” (2). These pleasures include the news, which “not only comes with extraordinary promptness, but it is brought to one’s own fireside, without the trouble of running into the street for the paper” (3), and the theater – he envisions how “At night the subscriber is
taken round the theatres, each being visited in turn” (3), concluding that “Patti and Paderewski may yet entertain us in our own drawing-rooms, and the luxuries of princes may be at the command of us all” (5). Mee’s article includes a number of accompanying illustration that show the various purposes for which the pleasure telephone can be used, including two that coincide with Mee’s assertions on the technology’s use for entertainment (Fig. 4).

Mee’s predictions on the potential of the pleasure telephone echo Wells’ comments on telecommunication in *Anticipations*, even employing similar metaphors to describe the product of these technologies – particularly blending urban and rural spaces and utilizing images of the home and hearth. These examples exhibit both the fact that telecommunications presented a need

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108 Mee is referencing the Italian opera singer Adelina Patti and Polish pianist Ignace Jan Paderewski. The later part of this statement seems particularly important to Mee and invites thought on the democratizing ability of telecommunications that would surely prove to be a fruitful source for future study. Mee foresees that the telephone will will make millions merry who have never been merry before, and will democratize, if we may so write, many of the social luxuries of the rich.” (2)
to rethink conceptions of distance and how writers turned to figurative language to illustrate this change and its division of the objective and subject experience.

5.2 The Expansion of Control

While Mee and Wells both see the annihilation of space via telecommunications as a democratizing power, other contemporary writers were observing how bringing the world to our doorstep could prove dangerous and reinforce or strengthen existing power hierarchies. In Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, the eponymous creature represents the power, or what he calls “force,” of American railroad companies and the expansion of that influence as it spreads across the country through new technology.\(^{109}\) While the development of the railroad and its corresponding telegraph lines helped to connect a growing nation, these advancements also granted powerful forces access to the American frontier. In *The Octopus*, we see how technology condenses space while expanding power. In addition to the questions of subjectivity and relativity present in Wells’ and Mee’s texts, in Norris’ work we also see how connectivity offers power structures increased access to the individual, thus also altering perceptions of individuality and autonomy.

In *Anticipations* Wells writes, “We are in the beginning of a new time, with such forces of organisation and unification at work in mechanical traction, in the telephone and telegraph, in a whole wonderland of novel, space-destroying appliances … as the world has never felt before” (127). What Wells calls “space destroying appliances” includes new communicative technologies like telegrams and telephones that are aligned with the railroads, sometimes literally, but also in the ways in which they extend force and the modern crisis. With the train’s ability to move between places at double or triple the speed of what had heretofore been possible, railway passengers’ perceptions of space often became altered and confused. In *The

\(^{109}\) For a review of Norris’ critical reception and context, see Chapter 3.
Railway Journey, author Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes, “What was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology. Organically embedded in nature as it was, that technology, in its mimetic relationship to the space traversed, permitted the traveler to perceive space as a living entity” (36). This mimesis no longer held true after the development of the train. Instead, mechanization influences how individuals both define space and travel through it. This is reflected by Norris in many of his mechanical descriptions of “the Octopus” including “the terror of steel and steam,” “the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil,” and “the iron-hearted Power” (51).

The crisis of the new invention and the ability it brought with it breaks down the boundaries between mechanization and nature, and for Norris, creates the hybrid monster of “the Octopus”. New mechanically and technologically driven abilities to travel, communicate, and connect to other people and places more quickly than the natural world created a crisis in the ways in which nineteenth-century individuals interpreted time and space. Through a detailed exploration of the way communication, especially that over long distances, is handled in Norris’ novel, we can see how these small issues are a synecdoche of the overarching themes of The Octopus, specifically the ways in which connectivity allows the instantaneous movement and growth of force.

Shifting away from an understanding of space and time rooted in physical nature, in which distance was conceived as how far a human or animal body could travel in literal space in a certain amount of time, people radically re-conceived what time and space meant because of new technologies of communication and movement. Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte addresses the influences of economic and political force across physical space in Norris’ text by addressing the lines of communication marked on the prefatory maps. In contrast to traditional naturalism

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110 To date, scholarship has paid little attention to the use of telecommunications in Norris’ novel. However, by situating the study amid the larger discourse of critical work on The Octopus, one can see how it interconnects with
that focuses on urban centers, Berte shows that the naturalist geography at work in Norris’ novel explores a variety of spaces from the local to the international, moreover mapping the technological means by which force moves in and between these spaces. The first of the maps shows telegraph lines, and the subsequent maps show railway lines that we can safely assume (and we can know from the content of the novel) had telegraph lines running parallel. Lines of telecommunication are critically important to the novel, even in the “mapping of power” in the frontispiece material. Furthermore, the area covered in each map grows in size, from a single ranch to the state of California. Berte concludes that the novel’s interlocking spaces of power, from the local to the international, express Norris’ concept that modern citizenship is inherently globalized. Although the order in which the maps are presented suggests a “zooming out,” one can also observe how national and global forces affect the individual through the demarcated lines of telecommunications.

The reorientation of time and space is distinctly described in *The Octopus* with the account of the ticker at Los Muertos – what Norris describes as “the most significant object in the office” (54). The device uses telegraph lines to transmit stock price information from Wall Street to Derrick’s rural farm. Norris goes on to illustrate that

The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. . . .During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up

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many facets of the current dialogue. For example, Berte provides a detailed reading of the three maps-in-prose in the novel, highlighting how each is described as “accurately plotted,” though contradictory in their views of ownership/power. Berte shows how the scope of the novel itself expands outward, as does the vision and interest of certain characters such as Magnus Derrick and Presley. In this way, she examines the movement of force through the mapping of the railroads. Through exploring the relationship, both spatially and politically, between the railroad and telegraph companies, Berte’s observations on the movement of force become intrinsic to the discussion at hand.
nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel.
At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant. (54)

Here, the power of the telegraph and its ability to connect almost instantaneously to other cities and nations not only condenses the distance between spaces but puts the notion of the individual into perspective, bringing it into question. In this way, the individuality – and ultimately autonomy – of the ranchers is challenged by their telecommunicative connections to other places on the globe. Moreover, they can also “feel” events taking place thousands of miles away, an example of distance annihilation and its metaphorical descriptions. Berte sees this excerpt from Norris as representing his characters “within a geographical network of force that determines their fate” (212) and that “a scale-based geography of force can circumscribe the individual, suggesting powerlessness and challenging self-determination” (213). Though Berte believes that this powerlessness is ultimately negated through Presley’s invocation of “the People,” the economic force exerted by companies like the Railroad is inescapable throughout Norris’ novel.

The telegraph, by way of telegraph companies, not only serves as a channel for these forces in the novel, but it also allows for the exertion of force through its relationship with railroad companies, condensing distance in a way that allows for central forces to affect distant regions. The Railroad shows its strength and control over telegraphic forces by overseeing interactions. Coe provides an interesting excerpt from a telegrapher’s manual titled Practical Hints for Railway Telegraphers that addresses this issue. It suggests, “Do not lose your temper and take it out on some operator along the line. Do not comment on the company’s way of doing business. The dispatcher hears all that goes over the wires, and he is in a position to retard your
promotion or help you along toward promotion” (138). This explicitly shows the relationship between telegraphers and the railroad, to the point that advancement in the workplace depended on one’s behavior over the lines. This lack of privacy is also demonstrated in The Octopus in Osterman’s covert telegram concerning the League’s plans to bribe officials. He writes, “Flotation of company in the district assured. Have secured services of desirable party. Am now in position to sell you your share stock, as per original plan” (163). Osterman’s message is encoded in part simply because of the illegality of its content; however, one also wonders if the sender was not particularly worried about members of the Railroad intercepting it. The Railroad’s entrenched relationship with the telegraph company provides it with the power to control the technological lines of communication.

The close ties between railroad and telegraph began in 1851, when a superintendent of the Erie Railroad named Charles Minot used the telegraph lines to check at stations ahead on the track for oncoming traffic. In this way, the train arrived at its destination on time instead of waiting an indeterminate length for oppositely-bound trains to pass, and the practice of telegraphic train dispatching was born. This exercise is used in The Octopus to disrupt Dyke’s escape after high-jacking an engine. After months of being chased by posses of men, Dyke is cornered in Guadalajara and steals a train engine in a last attempt at escape. However, the sheriff utilizes telegraphic dispatching to head him off. Norris writes,

But the sheriff was already out of the saddle and into the telegraph office.

“There’s a derailing switch between here and Pixley, isn’t there?” he cried.

“Yes.”

“Wire ahead to open it. We’ll derail him there.” (476)
Taking advantage of the relationship between the railroad and telegraph offices, the sheriff is able to exert force over Dyke by wiring ahead and derailing the train. Though Dyke catches this trick in time and avoids running off the rails, he is ultimately left stranded by this maneuver.

The power manifest in controlling telegraphic communications is evident both in terms of utilizing telecommunication to exert direct influence and in the ability to shut down the connections altogether. If the telegraph has the capacity to eliminate distance and time between spaces, then the removal of this technology has the ability to create almost complete isolation. Though telecommunications seemingly create a world that is intrinsically connected, objectively distance between places still exists, and ultimately the forces controlling the modes of exchange determine the individual’s fate. As discussed in Chapter Four, after the shootout at Derrick’s ranch, the railway disconnects the town of Bonneville from the outside world by taking control of the telegraph lines and uses the telegraph to exert power over the residents of the San Joaquin Valley. This disconnection from the outside world affects residents like Hilma, Annixter’s widow, on a personal level. In addition to being removed from her home, losing her husband and subsequently miscarrying her child, Hilma is also left without the comfort of family due to the shutdown of communication lines. With her family living in San Francisco, Hilma is unable to get word to them for help. The physician that sees her complains, “She ought to have her mother with her … She does nothing but call for her or beg to be allowed to see her. I have tried to get a wire through to Mrs. Tree, but the company will not take it, and even if I could get word to her, how could she get down here? There are no trains” (541). Here, the Railroad exerts its power over the lives of individuals through its control of all forms of telecommunication in the area. Perhaps more troubling, however, is the larger scope of power that the Railroad wields through its ability to pick and choose whom it isolates.
“The Octopus” is able to spread its force to far-flung communities because distance has been annihilated through trains and telecommunications. The concept of the American frontier is deeply rooted in freedom and autonomy. While railroad expansion first seemed to offer that dream to more people, connecting the American West to the rest of the world through railways and telecommunications ultimately brought about the end of the idealized American frontier. In *The Octopus* we see that what starts as helpful technology – the train allows for the movement of the wheat to the city-centers, and the telegraph allows for information, particularly stock market information, to be sent out from the cities to the wheat producers – ends in a deadly exertion of force that destroys individuals. The central characters of the novel ultimately trade in their frontier freedoms for ease of use – notably with the intent to grow their own power through these modes of connectivity – but in reality, these changes allow the railroad company to exert itself over even larger areas.

The “Wild West” was not the only part of the world in which telecommunication made distance an obsolete concern and allowed for increased influences from centralized power structures. In Ireland, British imperial power grew stronger as the space between states was “annihilated” through advancements in technology. The telegraph served as such an integral part of the English’s power in Ireland that it influenced the members of the Easter Rising to choose the General Post Office (GPO) as the location of their siege. The GPO was the conduit of English power in Ireland via communication, and they chose to usurp that power by broadcasting their own message. The rebels worked to re-establish the distance between England and Ireland that was overcome by telecommunications, particularly by disconnecting the quartered English army from receiving directions or assistance from central control or for relaying information.
Many consider the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin as a turning point for Irish history and politics. In “Easter 1916,” written after the Rising, Yeats refrains that all is “changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born” (446). If one knows a single fact about the event, it likely pertains to the siege of the GPO. Although locations of conflict and activity in the Easter Rising ranged across the city, the GPO is the focal point of most modern historical narratives concerning the rebellion. Yet, the rebellion leaders’ choice of locations continues to be a point of discussion. Why the GPO? Truly, it was a government building and therefore a physical representation of British rule, but it was not the main location of that rule. To these ends, Dublin Castle would have been a more obvious choice. Neither was the GPO an apt military choice by being easily fortifiable. The many windows and multiple entrances made it difficult to cover all potential entry points, while the gunmen on the roof were susceptible to fire from neighboring buildings. In *Inventing Ireland* Declan Kiberd writes that “Doubtless, as a volunteer, [Michael Collins] was unimpressed by the choice of the Post Office as a military centre, since it left soldiers like himself exposed on all sides” (207). What’s more, historical accounts suggest that the leaders of the uprising knew the hazards of their choice but were not ultimately concerned with military success. Desmond Fitzgerald notes this fatalism when recounting his experience inside the GPO. He describes a conversation between himself, Joseph Mary Plunkett and Patrick Pearse in which he recalls, “I was firmly convinced that it was only a matter of hours until we should all three be dead, and I was also sure that they both shared that conviction with me.” He goes on to say, “Both [Pearse] and Plunkett spoke of how much bigger an event it would have been had the original plans gone forward unchecked. But they did not suggest that even in that case we might have expected a military victory. The very fact that the conversation returned so
steadily to what might have been was an admission that there was no doubt now about what was
going to be.”

What then, was the goal of the Rising if not success? Historians generally believe that
the purpose of the Easter Rising of 1916 was symbolic: the goal, rather than victory, was to
“telegraph” meaning, primarily to the populace of Ireland. Both telecommunication technologies
and poetry played important roles in the relaying of this message and the “coding” of the
information for the targeted audience. Where *The Octopus* illustrates individuals living under
false assumptions of self-determination and autonomy that are blind to the technological reach of
encroaching forces larger than themselves, the rebels of the Easter Rising were all too aware of
the ways telecommunications could be used by far-off entities to exert control. By disrupting the
English army’s modes of communication, the rebels reinstated the “natural” distance between
places – distance that was subjectively and objectively similar. Additionally, in *The Octopus* the
railroad representatives understand the importance of narrative control – it is one of the reasons
they shut down communications after the ranch shoot-out. Similarly, the rebels of the Easter
Rising found telecommunications to be an important component for messaging, ensuring that the
general public received the “right” information.

To understand the critical importance of the GPO to the uprising, I believe an important
key is in the Easter Rising’s popular nickname, “The Poets’ Rebellion.” Many of the leaders of
the rebellion and signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic were men of letters: poets,
playwrights, and academics. Of the seven members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)
Military Council, only James Connolly had any formal military training (Bury). This does not
mean, however, that their actions were foolhardy or enacted without proper planning. Siding
with the many historians that believe military success was not the leadership’s ultimate goal, I
argue that the leaders of the Easter Rising were committed instead to message and to the communication of an idea. One of the key events of the week was Pearse’s reading of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in front of the GPO. This document and its message were at the center of the revolution. Additionally, though the GPO was not a promising choice for headquarters from a military standpoint, the decision makes more sense if one believes the focus was instead on communicating an idea. In her book *Dublin 1916: The Siege of the GPO*, Claire Wills notes that the Irish Rising stormed “a working monument, neither Castle nor Bastille, but a building devoted to communication” (9). In terms of that communication, controlling the GPO had both long and short term effects. In the grand scheme, the significance of the GPO became part of the message. Wills writes, “In the early years of the Irish Free State the events which took place in and around the GPO in 1916 achieved the status of founding myth for the nation... In historical accounts, reconstructions and commemorations, the building has figured as a major character in the story of the rebellion” (9). As writers, the leaders of the Rising created a narrative in which the GPO plays a key role. Moreover, they did it well. In today’s Dublin, it is nigh impossible to avoid the mythos of the Easter Rising, and the GPO is at the center of this creation story of the nation. Though Kiberd highlights the impracticality of the selection, he writes that “As an act of dramatic symbolism, however, it was an inspired choice” (207).

As a more immediate design, the occupation of the GPO also allowed the rebellion to limit and control what information was transmitted during the week. Because the GPO served as a hub of communication, cutting off this network helped both establish Irish autonomy through the reintroduction of distance and create a vacuum into which the rebels could insert their own narrative. As Wills points out, it was a “working monument,” one used daily by the people of Dublin. The closing of the post office disrupted the day-to-day life of the city’s population more
than some of the other more military options would have. The GPO “stood for control but it was also where you bought your stamps. The building managed to function simultaneously as a symbol of empire and of a quotidian aspect of Dublin life” (Wills 8). And it was this simultaneity that made the GPO an appropriate choice for the headquarters of the Easter Rising, focusing on one of the physical representations of British rule while also disrupting the mundane. In 1900, there were 4,562 miles of underground telegraph and telephone cable in Dublin (Cassidy). In 1912, the post office took over the private telephone companies, “creating a state-controlled network across Ireland and Britain” (Cassidy), and by 1914, Ireland was connected telegraphically and/or telephonically to Scotland, Wales, and Britain by submarine cables (Cassidy). The GPO was the center of connectivity for the city of Dublin, both for letters and telecommunications, and a much busier place then than it is today. Its siege not only drew the attention of residents, it gave the rebels access to a telecommunications hub — which is why one of the first strategic actions taken by the rebels after securing the GPO was to cut the telegraph cables, thereby cutting off communication.

The leaders of the Easter Rising had a clear vision of the ways in which telecommunications fostered networks of English control and how to address this during the rebellion. While over 360 miles apart, London had instantaneous connection with Dublin by way of the telegraph. By cutting the line connecting them, Connolly planned to disrupt the English sense that Ireland was under their immediate control and reinstate the physical distance between them. In a joint effort between the Irish Military Archives and the National Archives, thousands of pages of witness statements have been made available to the public through the Bureau of

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111 In addition to telegraphic services, the GPO was a source of banking. Additionally, 20 million letters were handled by the General Post Office annually by 1914, not including the additional 3.5 million postcards and 9 million parcels processed (Cassidy).
Military History 1913-1921. In one of these statements, a man named Martin King describes his part in the “plans for disruption of communications.”

In the latter part of 1915, James Connolly asked me, if he wanted to cut communications with England, how would he set about it. I told him he could cut them at Talbot Street or Lombard Street … On Good Friday morning, 1916, Andy Fitzpatrick brought me on a tour of the principal trunk line centres, with a view to the disruption of communications on Easter Sunday … The cross-channel telegraph cables came in at Newcastle. We came into Brunswick street and examined the cables in the manhole at the corner of Lombard Street. The cables there carried the underground wires from Newcastle to Westland Row. There was, in this cable, a special direct wire between Dublin Castle and London. We decided that the cables should be cut at this point. (1-2)

King continues on in this way, describing both the location of the telegraph and telephone lines and what they connected. The lines connecting Dublin and Ireland to Britain and the outside world were of particular importance to the rebels. They also seem to be concerned with those lines used by government offices and the police. After identifying which lines should be cut and where, the responsibilities were doled out. King recalls that he was “detailed with some Volunteer engineers to disrupt communications at the Telephone Exchange” (2). Notably, the rebels also did not want the wires to be easily fixed: “At the meeting, I instructed the men to cut the cables close to the part where they entered the covering pipes. If done in this way, repairs could only be effected by digging up the street” (2-3), King recalls. As I will show, the rebellion had a plan for communicating their message by other means.

One of the most striking elements of the above statement is the detailed description of the telegraph and telephone wires. Rarely is there such an opportunity to understand the inner-
workings and the geography of telecommunications during this time. With King’s description, one could map many of the more than 4,000 miles of cable running through the city. One can also observe King’s comprehensive understanding of this map and the key points for disruption. Additionally, this testimony highlights the forethought and planning that went into this facet of the uprising. Although the rebels are often criticized for their lack of militaristic maneuvering, one can see here that their actions were certainly not without strategy. As early as 1915 Connolly was beginning to put into motion the events of Easter week 1916. This history reinforces that communication was a key idea in development of the Easter Rising. However, if one is to argue that the focus of the Rising was to communicate a message, does not the destruction of these cables undermine that notion? It does not, necessarily. The shutting down of telecommunications in the city did more than cut off government lines. As discussed above, it also disrupted the day-to-day transmissions of the citizenry, thereby forcing individuals to take notice and creating a space in which the Irish Rising message could be heard.

After shutting down the English’s means of communication and control, the rebels created their own way of annihilating distance and reaching the public both near and far. Fergus O’Kelly, a member of the Irish Volunteers and participant in the Easter Rising, described his role in erecting a wireless telegraph in another testimony collected by the Bureau of Military History:

I was called aside by Joseph Plunkett and instructed to take a few men and take possession of the Wireless School and Reis’ shop and do everything possible to get the transmitting plant and receiving apparatus into working order...The wireless room was sealed by the British military. I broke the seals and David Burke and I entered. The apparatus was disconnected and had been out of use since the start of the war. Quite a lot of work had to be done to put it into working order. (2)
The wireless school was only 190 meters from the GPO, and it was only through the seizure of the Post Office that use of the wireless school was made possible ("Irish Republic declared"). After much work, some of which occurred under the duress of enemy fire, O’Kelly and his men were able to get the transmitter working.

On reporting to H. Q. that the transmitting apparatus was operating, a message was sent over to James Connolly, commanding the Dublin area, for broadcast transmission. As the receiving apparatus could not be got to operate correctly it was not possible to get in direct touch with any station or ship but the message was sent out on the normal commercial wavelength in the hope that some ship would receive it and relay it as interesting news. As far as I can remember, the first message announced the proclaiming of the Irish Republic and the taking over of Dublin city by the Republican Army. (4)

Transmitted in Morse code, Connolly’s broadcast actually read “Irish Republic declared in Dublin today. Irish troops have captured the city and are in full possession. Enemy cannot move in city. The whole country is rising” (qtd. in “Irish Republic declared”). 112 With knowledge of the Easter Rising, one may realize that this statement is not entirely true. Because of the countermanding orders spread by Eoin Mac Neill, the uprising occurred almost exclusively within Dublin, with Ashbourne of Co. Meath the only other town to see significant fighting (Keough). However, because King and his men had already disconnected the telegraph and telephone cables, Connolly was empowered to author the narrative of the Rising as the only voice available. This message was also the first broadcast in Ireland and one of the first in the world.

112 The telegrammatic style of the language used in the broadcast is also notable.
These examples show that technological communications played a significant role in the rebel leaders’ concepts of control – both weakening the control of the English and establishing Ireland’s independence through isolation – and that telecommunication was part of the practical means by which the designers of the Rising enacted this goal. These men, these poets, were focused on communicating a narrative to their people and to those like-minded in the rest of the world. They chose the GPO as headquarters because of its symbolic status and the ways in which it afforded them the means of re-establishing their distance from London and controlling the story. The destruction of the telecommunication cables and the setting up of the wireless telegraph were also strategic and pragmatic maneuvers in their fight for message and autonomy. Ultimately, revolutions in technology set the stage for this political revolution. England’s powerful influence over Ireland, due in part to increased access via telegraph, served as the impetus for the uprising; and the rebels, understanding this connective power, sought to disrupt communication and co-opt the message as some of their first revolutionary actions, ultimately exploiting one revolution to fuel another.

5.3 The Separation of Body and Spirit

Having explored the ways in which emerging nineteenth-century telecommunications could seem to expand, contract, or altogether annihilate space and how these shifting spaces could lead to unexpected power dynamics, we turn now to a different kind of rending – that of spirit from body. The crisis of relativity, and in particular the disembodiment of communication and annihilation of space wrought by the wireless telegraph and telephone, impacted individuals and culture in a profound way that contributed to a rising interest in mysticism and the occult, as well as the popularization of ghost stories and tales of the mysterious and unexplained. A number of examples of short stories and novels from the turn of the century exist that integrate themes of
technological tele-communications, or communications at a distance, with spiritual telecommunications. According to Jill Galvan, “comparisons of the occult and technology amounted to more than the convenient conceits of commentators and fiction writers. Or to be more precise, even these conceits were not necessarily idle but rather sometimes sprang from a sincere interest in exploring resemblances and interrelationships” (9). These texts exhibit the same lack of language to account for the division of objective, measured space from the modern, subjective experience of it. Instead of using metaphorical phrasing like Wells or Mee, however, these works explain the uncanny feeling caused by wireless telegrams and the telephones through the story itself, relying on overarching thematic metaphors and symbolism. Though the results take on different shapes, these stories come from the same place of crisis: being unable to explain not only the technology itself – as we see in “Wireless” – but the uncomfortable feelings that come along with the new technology including subjectivity, relativity, the disconnect between sense experience and reality.

This technological division is also happening in a greater context of scientific and philosophical relativity, where leading thinkers are positing that all experience is subjective and subject to the senses. The idea that one can only know the world through the experience of the senses may not disturb the average person, but the crisis of relativity is likely to be exacerbated when you start hearing disembodied voices over a telephone wire. When one’s sense experiences do not line up – what one sees and what one hears are at odds – what does that say about the world? And if science is able to undermine the senses in such a way, what does that mean about the rest of what goes unseen, such as the spiritual world? Many came to believe that, perhaps, science and spirituality were not that far different. From Franz Anton Mesmer and the Fox sisters to the Cambridge Society for Psychical Research (SPR) that boasted members including Arthur
Conan Doyle, Lewis Carroll, Prime Minister William Gladstone, individuals from all backgrounds and interests looked to discoveries in telecommunications to support or explain mystical beliefs.\footnote{113} After all, if it is possible to commune with someone across the country, why can’t you commune with those in the “undiscovered country”?

Kipling references this idea and explores its ramifications in his short story “Wireless,” first published in \emph{Scribner’s Magazine} in 1902 and later included in the 1904 collection \emph{ Traffics and Discoveries}.\footnote{114} The interaction of science and spirituality in the text shows similar ends gained by different means of communication, and shows that – with the use of a coherer – there is little-to-no distinction between the two. In this story the unnamed narrator witnesses an unexplainable spiritual channeling simultaneous to an experiment using the new wireless telegraph developed by Marconi happening in the adjoining room. Although the narrator’s intention is to witness the telegraphic exchange, the supernatural event in which a member of their party seems to channel the poet Keats at the time of his writing “The Eve of St. Agnes” overshadows the technology, in an episode which leaves the narrator weary and uncertain at the closing of the story.

In addition to the narrator, two characters dominate the action of this tale: Mr. Cashell and Mr. Shaynor. Mr. Cashell is an electrician and wireless telegraph enthusiast. He is also the

\footnote{113} For a well-rounded discussion of these trends and the individuals involved, see Galvan’s introduction to \emph{The Sympathetic Medium}. 

\footnote{114} Kipling’s reputation and standing in the canon often comes under scrutiny today. As Donald Gray admits in his literary biography of Kipling, “He often seems to honor white men and Western technology as agents of desirable dominion over less-progressive peoples and parts of the world” (184). Kipling has also been criticized for a “coarse and common” style when compared to his contemporaries, as “old-fashioned” for early-twentieth-century readers, suspect to readers who believed that “popular was necessarily purchased by undignified concession to vulgar taste and conventional exceptions”, and by some to be generally “simple-minded and even pernicious” (Gray 184). Gray concludes that these criticisms are “just but incomplete” (184). Truly, Kipling’s writing is prolific and offers to readers a wide range of perspectives, ideas, and avenues for analysis; and his astounding popularity at the turn of the century and influence on contemporary authors cannot be ignored – all reasons that Kipling continues to be an important voice in the literary canon despite apt criticism.
nephew of “Old Mr. Cashell,” who owns the chemist’s shop where the events of the story take place. Mr. Shaynor is Old Mr. Cashell’s assistant; Shaynor is a man of science and dedicated to his work as a compounder. The story is set up in parallel, with Cashell in one room preparing the wireless telegraph and eventually channeling messages, and Shaynor in the other room, where he is eventually overtaken by a kind of supernatural trance that results in a metaphysical channeling. The narrator is the intermediary, the one who travels between these two spaces, serving as a kind of transmission wire that keeps each apprised of transpiring events.

While Cashell offers some detailed descriptions of his work and his actions underscore the other events of the story, the narrator’s focus is primarily on Shaynor. Though the science of the marconigraph is unknown to the narrator, and even Cashell finds parts of it inexplicable, the spiritual event happening to Shaynor is, for the narrator, the more interesting of the two events as it deals with a grander, metaphysical kind of unknown.

In the tale, Kipling carefully sets a scene that will ultimately result in Shaynor’s spiritual doubling of John Keats. One facilitator is the biographical parallels between the two men. Keats studied medicine for many years and held an apothecary’s license; similarly, Shaynor is a chemist’s assistant who is dedicated to the profession and uses his free time expanding his knowledge of the field. Keats had a love interest named Fanny Brawne; Shaynor has a love interest named Fanny Brand. Keats died of tuberculosis, and over the course of the story, Kipling reveals that Shaynor is stricken with the same disease. Within the story, these similarities, then, set the stage for Shaynor’s mystical experience.

Kipling’s text is also replete with sensory descriptions of the chemist’s shop, and readers are informed on all five senses. These sensory descriptions suggest the physical setting that

115 Though many scholars now believe “The Eve of St. Agnes” was inspired by Isabelle Jones, not Fanny Brawne.
facilitates Shaynor’s inadvertent channeling. Kipling writes of the disorienting, “confused smells” of the shop, the lights of “monstrous daubs of red, blue, and green, that broke into kaleidoscopic lights on the faceted knobs of the drug-drawers, the cut-glass scent flagons, and the bulbs of the sparklet bottles” (117), the warmth of the room contrasted with the frigid cold of the winter storm outside, and even the contrasting tastes of “cayenne-pepper jujubes and menthol lozenges” (114) that Shaynor and narrator take. This riot of contrasting sensory experiences establishes the scene in which Shaynor’s supernatural experience manifests, due in part, it seems, to the disorienting sights, smells, tastes and temperatures.

Hearing is the only sense that is not overwhelmed in Kipling’s scene. Although some conversation takes place between the men, the scene is otherwise quiet. Compared to the kaleidoscopic lights, no auditory parallel exists: no tinkling of jars or clatter of a cart. Even though a storm brews outside, Kipling makes no mention of its sound; it does not rattle the windows or send a whistling wind through the building. Although Kipling draws no overt connection between the quiet of the room and Shaynor’s spiritual channeling, this omission, when contrasted against the density of other sense descriptions in the story, seems to certainly play a role. Particularly in a story that is about communication, a quiet setting – one in which characters can better listen to the messages relayed – seems important. Though the setting is not included when the narrator tries to determine the cause of Shaynor’s channeling, the detail of Kipling’s description and the high contrast of the sensory experiences sets a disorienting scene ripe for spiritual channeling.

Amidst the sights and smells of the shop, Shaynor has a display that, for him, serves as a shrine to his love, Fanny Brand. The “shrine” includes an advertisement showing a woman that bears some resemblance to Fanny, and Shaynor has placed the image in a part of the shop where
a red light shines onto it from the window. The narrator recalls, “I saw Mr. Shaynor’s eyes bent in the same direction, and by instinct recognized that the flamboyant thing was to him a shrine” (111). Shaynor also lights some “Blaudette’s Cathedral Pastilles” (117), adding to both the sensory overload of the room and the religiosity of the shrine. Shaynor points out that he pays for the incense himself (purporting to use them to soothe his cough), on which the narrator observes that “Evidently the censing of the gay, seven-tinted wench with the teeth was an established ritual which cost something” (117). The attention brought to this shrine applies a spiritual connotation to the physical setting and narratively begins to bridge the gap between the real and metaphysical worlds of the story.

Another factor that affects Shaynor, and according to the narrator precipitates the spiritual event, is the fact that Shaynor is dying of tuberculosis. Although Shaynor continues to deny his illness, referring to it as a simple cough, the blood on his handkerchief tells a different story. The narrator believes that Shaynor’s illness may be playing a critical role in the events of the evening. At one point in the evening, the narrator concocts a drink made from ingredients he finds in the chemist’s shop; the main spirit of which is chloric-ether, a dilution of chloroform in alcohol. Each of the men present partakes of this “new and wildish drink” (115), though it has a more intense effect on Shaynor, causing him to lose consciousness. The others are not too worried however; as Cashell argues, “Consumptives go off in those sorts of doses very often” (118).116

During this doze, Shaynor begins to channel Keats.

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116 Although the surrounding conversation may suggest that this is “dose” as in an amount of medicine or palliative, the immediate context of the word and its use within the sentence suggests reading this as “doze.” This interpretation is supported by the OED’s listing of the spelling “dose” as an alternative form of “doze” through the 1800’s.
The narrator, observing the event unfold, grasps for a reasonable explanation. He concludes that if Shaynor “has read Keats it’s the chloric-ether. If he hasn’t, it’s the identical bacillus, or Hertzian wave of tuberculosis, plus Fanny Brand and the professional status which, in conjunction with the main-stream of subconscious thought common to all mankind, he has thrown up temporarily an induced Keats” (121). As it turns out that Shaynor has not read Keats, nor even heard of him, both the narrator and reader are left to conclude that this spiritual channeling is the result of Shaynor’s illness, compounding with his profession and love interest. Even the narrator, however, questions the validity of his findings: “As dreamers accept and explain the upheaval of landscapes and the resurrection of the dead, with excerpts from the evening hymn or the multiplication-table, so I had accepted the facts, whatever they might be, that I should witness, and had devised a theory, sane and plausible to my mind, that explained them all” (122). Clearly, although the narrator purports to be taking in this event with a scientific eye, he simultaneously recognizes that his conclusions may be more like dream logic than real logic.

Throughout Shaynor’s metaphysical experience, another kind of channeling occurs at the chemist’s shop – young Mr. Cashell’s experiments with the wireless telegraph. He too is intercepting messages from the “ether,” and similarly, they are messages not meant for him. Although Cashell is attempting to communicate with a colleague in Poole, he finds instead that he receives messages from two ships at sea. The ships are trying to communicate with each other, but though the messages are picked up by Cashell, the ships themselves are only able to receive snippets, possibly due to faulty receivers. Cashells describes to the narrator what’s happening, saying “It’s a couple of men-o’-war working Marconi signals off the Isle of Wight. They are trying to talk to each other. Neither can read the other’s messages, but all their
messages are being taken in by our receiver here” (125). This parallel underscores the idea of accidental interlocution, where passing messages can reach the wrong source as perhaps Keat’s creative experience reaches Shaynor.

During the setup of his machine, Cashell explains to the narrator some of the basics of the wireless telegraph’s various mechanical elements. In particular, Cashell informs his listener on the function of the “coherer” – as far as he understands it at least. “He picked up a glass tube not much thicker than a thermometer, in which, almost touching, were two tiny silver plugs, and between them, an infinitesimal pinch of metallic dust. ‘That’s all,’ he said, proudly, as though himself responsible for the wonder. ‘That is the thing that will reveal to us the Powers – whatever the Powers may be – at work – through space – a long distance away’” (116). Cashell goes on to explain how the Hertzian waves (another relative mystery) come through the ether to attract the minute particles together, causing them to cohere and create a connection that allows an electrical current to pass through. These moments of cohesion occur according to an encoded pattern, Morse code in this case, that is sent out from another, far-off device. The timed dots and dashes of cohesion are then recorded and translated back into English.

Kipling sets up a clear comparison between the story’s two communicative events. At first glance these two occasions, one science and one mysticism, seem to be running parallel – that is, simultaneous but separate. However, closer inspection of Kipling’s use of language will expose the surprising connections and crossovers between the two messages. In numerous cases, Kipling uses the same unique word or phrase to describe both events. In addition, science and mysticism seem to switch places with Cashell’s mysterious descriptions of the telegraph’s ability and the narrator’s rational deduction on the cause of Shaynor’s mediumship. Examining the interconnectedness of the two events of the story reveals not only how these ideas relate to one
another within the specific text but also reinforces the larger disruptions to existence, perception and relativity that telegraphy – and wireless telegraphy in particular – incurred on those living at the turn of the century.

Perhaps the most obvious of these linguistic overlaps is Kipling’s use of the phrases “the Power” and “the Powers.” Cashell is the first to use the term; he does so to describe the function of the coherer. “That is the thing that will reveal to us the Powers — whatever the Powers may be — at work — through space — a long distance away” (116). This statement comes in a conversation not only about the functionality of the wireless telegraph at hand but also about electricity itself. When the narrator asks about electricity, Cashell answers, “Ah, if you knew that you’d know something nobody knows. It’s just It” (116). Putting the statements together, we could assume that the “power” Cashell refers to is electricity. However, Cashell seems not to be using the two terms synonymously. That is, when he says that the coherer will reveal the Powers, he is not simply saying that the coherer will reveal the electricity. The use of capitals in “the Powers” and “It,” referring to electricity, adds an air of mystery and mysticism to both elements. They are related, but they are not necessarily one and the same – both electricity and the Powers are too unknown for Cashell to be certain of their relationship. The Powers, with their capital P, become their own entities; they are that which makes the wireless technology work though their true natures remain hidden.

Later, Cashell and the narrator attempt to send a message, and Cashell expresses his enthusiasm for the magic of the telegraph: “‘Grand, isn’t it? That’s the Power — our unknown Power — kicking and fighting to be let loose,’ said young Mr. Cashell. ‘There she goes — kick — kick — kick into space. I never get over the strangeness of it’” (119). Here, there are two important distinctions between this statement by Cashell and his previous one. First, the Power is
singular; second, Cashell refers to it with a feminine pronoun. The repeated capitalization of the word and the addition of the female personification suggests perhaps a deification of the mysterious power on the part of Cashell. Although Kipling presents the character Cashell as a man of science and technology, Cashell also brings a strong element of mysticism to the practice. While he understands enough about the new wireless telegraph not to experience an existential crisis or relative disembodiment, enough mystery remains that Cashell not only spiritualizes the Powers that make the technology possible, he personifies them in a kind of reverse of the crisis of disembodiment.

Cashell, however, is not the only one to invoke this capitalized Power. The narrator does so as well, when describing Shaynor’s trance. At one point Shaynor is particularly distraught, and the narrator recounts “Here again his face grew peaked and anxious with that sense of loss I had first seen when the Power snatched him” (124). Again “the Power” is indicated with a capital letter, and it is again personified, given the agency to “snatch” Shaynor. Is this the same Power the Cashell feels “fighting to be let loose”? This reference to a mysterious Power seems more apt in the context of an unexplainable, spiritual event. Unlike Cashell’s inability to explain the power sources of his machine, the reader is not necessarily surprised that the narrator has no specific name for the mysterious spiritual power overtaking Shaynor. However, the parallel uses of the term suggest a relationship between both unknowables. What’s more, the mystical and metaphysical puzzle that Cashell exemplifies reflects a common feeling and way of thinking of the author’s time.

Another example of this language overlap is with the use of the term “Hertzian waves.” Hertzian waves, or radio waves, were conclusively proven by German physicist Heinrich Hertz in a series of experiments conducted between 1886 and 1889. Although the applications of these
waves was at first unclear, by the time “Wireless” was published in 1902, the importance of this
discovery was beginning to be understood. In particular, the ability to tune into radio waves is of
central importance to the functioning of a wireless telegraph. While instructing the narrator,
Cashell highlights both the necessity of these waves and their mystery. Showing the coherer,
Cashell informs his listener that “the magic – the manifestations – the Hertzian waves – are all
revealed by this” (116). Here, Cashell equates Hertzian waves and magic. While science has
been able to put a name to the phenomenon and to harness it in particular ways, Cashell’s
description shows how little science truly knows, and it reinforces the intersection between
science and mysticism that is at the heart of the text.

Later, when the narrator attempts to rationalize Shaynor’s spiritual channeling, he tells
himself that one of causal factors is the “Hertzian wave of tuberculosis” (122). Although it may
sound scientific enough, this concept is obviously inaccurate. There is no tuberculous radio
wave. This shows both the overlap between science and seance as well as the general mystery of
science – if one can pull messages out of thin air, who is to stay there are not Hertzian waves of
tuberculosis sending messages out into the ether and getting lines of Keats in return? While
unlikely, this example shows readers the kind of scientific stretching the narrator attempts in
order to rationalize what he experiences. Instead of seeing this statement as a mistake, readers
can interpret the rationalization as a reflection of uncertainty in the objective world in light of a
flood of technical and scientific discoveries.

Finally, Kipling utilizes the idea of “induction” in descriptions of both the telegraphic and
spiritual messaging. When describing the wireless telegraph and the function of the coherer in
particular, Cashell tells the narrator that “it’s important to remember that the current is an
induced current. There are a good many kinds of induction –” (118). Here, the narrator interrupts
to ask what, exactly, induction is. Cashell replies, “That’s rather hard to explain untechnically. But the long and the short of it is that when a current of electricity passes through a wire there’s a lot of magnetism present round that wire; and if you put another wire parallel to, and within what we call its magnetic field — why then, the second wire will also become charged with electricity” (118). This explanation is notably more thorough than Cashell’s mysterious description of Power. Here, although the mechanics of the process remain somewhat inscrutable, Cashell attempts to truly explain what is happening. This paragraph may also hint at what is happening to Shaynor – perhaps the spiritual or ethereal “magnetism” of Cashell and his machine charges Shaynor with the same metaphorical power when brought parallel and within their magnetic field. Kipling emphasizes this parallel when the narrator, attempting to determine a scientific reason for Shaynor’s actions, concludes that given all the circumstances, “the result is logical and inevitable. As inevitable as induction” (121).

It is notable that for all of the repeated phrases examined here, Cashell introduces the concept and the narrator repurposes the idea to apply it to Shaynor’s spiritual experience. This co-opting of pseudo-scientific language to describe the metaphysical reiterates not only the intersection of science and spirituality but the growing belief that the spiritual realm was knowable, if yet undiscovered. Advancements in science and technology invited imaging the possibilities of what else could be discovered and harnessed. While disembodied voices and messages through the ether caused, for some, a crisis of relativity; for others, it opened the door to a new realm of possibilities and the coalescence of science and spirituality. The narrator reflects both the belief of what may be possible and the potential to misuse the science, especially when one has only a surface-level understanding.
In each of these instances, Kipling creates a relationship between the telegraphic and spiritual channeling by utilizing the same language. Likewise, mysticism and spirituality are regularly evoked in the discussions of the wireless telegraph, while the narrator seeks to scientifically deduce what occurs with Shaynor. Kipling reinforces this intermingling, sometimes to the point of switching, between science and spirituality in the closing conversation between Cashell and Shaynor. This conversation is the only time in the story the two men speak to each other. Cashell asks, “Have you ever seen a spiritual seance? It reminds me of that sometimes – odds and ends of messages coming out of nowhere” (125). “But mediums are all impostors,” said Mr. Shaynor … “They only do it for the money they can make” (125). Here, then, we have the complete reversal, with the medium disavowing mysticism altogether while the telegraph operator embraces it.

Instead of focusing on Shaynor and Cashell as I have done here, much of the scholarship on “Wireless” looks closely at the role of the narrator. Heather Fielding argues that Kipling’s text becomes an impressionist one as the narrator’s understanding of the world around him crumbles. Fielding shows that for an impressionist narrator “rather than being able to fully share in a known social reality, he or she must rely on his or her own partial, bodily sensations of the world. Paradoxically, the subject’s point of view grows more subjective and private because he or she is hypersensitive to impressions for the world outside” (25). This description certainly rings true for Kipling’s narrator that attempts to make scientific sense of his experience, but whose senses are so overwhelmed that he reverts to empty jargon instead of authentic explanation. By the end, the narrator offers “nothing but his own, uncertain, subjectively colored views that isolate him from rather than connecting him to others” (Fielding 25) as his “authoritative knowledge of the world transforms into isolating, sensual consciousness”
(Fielding 26). Fielding suggests that all of the disorientation wrought upon the narrator comes first and foremost from the fact that he has “internalized the wireless telegraph” (26), explaining that the story “envisions the wireless telegraph as a homologue for the impressionist narrator: they mediate information in similarly estranging, isolating ways” (26). William Dillingham also offers readers a warning on the (un)reliability of the narrator, arguing that his conclusions are “highly subjective” and that he “sees what he wishes to see” (135). Dillingham cautions against a supernatural reading of the story, arguing that the narrator’s conclusion as such is a “false trail” laid by the author (131). However, within the story itself, the narrator seems much more focused on uncovering a scientific explanation rather than a supernatural one, and the ending seems to leave readers more in a curious state of wonder than with any concrete understanding of the source of the night’s events. This echoes Gray’s assessment of Kipling’s work that in his short stories he played with “uncertainties and contingencies against his desire for order” (184) and that he often incorporated fantastic and supernatural elements in to an otherwise realistic story “in order to show the instability or surprise in what is taken to be real life” (185). While the narrator’s reliability is rightfully under scrutiny, what these critics all agree on is the subjective nature of retelling and the isolating effects of the tale’s confounding events.

Ultimately, within the text the “coherer” in its various iterations serves as the connecting point between the ethereal intention of communication and the received or experienced result. The mechanical, though still somewhat mysterious, coherer of the wireless telegraph serves as the medium of communication, not only between Cashell and Poole, but also as the interlocutor between the two ships off the Isle of Wight. Similarly, Shaynor serves as the medium, or coherer, between the spiritual and physical realms, receiving and transcribing the words of Keats.

117 Dillingham also provides a useful history of the story’s reception and various interpretations.
Examining the story in this way makes it clear that the idea of message and of communication is an important theme. What, then, does the reader make of Kipling’s work? If the text is the coherer between the author’s intent and reading receiver, what kind of message do we, as the readers receive? Is it a broken and disjointed message like those between the ships that Cashell calls “quite pathetic” (125)? Or is it like the lines of Keats, which the narrator describes as “pure Magic” and “the clear Vision” (124)? These parallels invite investigation into Kipling’s feelings about his own work, and the questions are compounded when we consider the place writing takes alongside other forms of communication in the story: telegraphing and spiritual channeling.

Likewise, Kipling is known to have written on the subject in authorship, in correspondence with Rider Haggard, “we are only telephone wires” (qtd. in Hesse 127), suggesting again that he sees the act of writing as an act of mediumship, not the creation of an end product. As Galvan points out, the telegraph and the spiritual medium have much in common and have often been placed in parallel, both in texts and scholarship. Kipling takes this a step further by including the act of writing in this set. This story brings together questions on communication and interpretation, highlighting the role the individual plays as medium, interpreter, and coherer.

The short story/ghost story “You May Telephone from Here” by Algernon Blackwood similarly addresses telecommunication’s uncanny feeling of space annihilation, and likewise uses setting and events (instead of metaphor) to address it. Blackwood was a premiere purveyor of the supernatural and wrote more psychic, mystical and supernatural stories and novels than any of his early-twentieth-century contemporaries (Johnson 10), leading to his identification as “the foremost British supernaturalist of the twentieth century” (Bleiler qtd. in Johnson 10). H. P. Lovecraft called Blackwood’s writing “some of the finest spectral literature of this or any age”

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118 Dillinger also discusses this quote and its relationship to Kipling’s references to the Daemon that inspired his writing.
Blackwood had had a long and multi-faceted history with studying the occult and supernatural by the time Ten Minutes Stories was published in 1914, in which “You May Telephone From Here” appears. The story tells of an occurrence of thought transference that the central character experiences as her husband is shipwrecked and drowning in the English Channel. Although the husband is ultimately saved, while unconscious he is able to reach out to his wife telepathically, speaking to her via their home telephone.

Though some contemporary readers may find this idea absurd, the concept of utilizing emerging technology to channel spiritual messaging was not entirely out of the ordinary for Blackwood and his contemporaries. In fact, Atkinson references the renowned astronomer Camille Flammarion in his 1907 Practical Mind Reading as having posited the idea that,

There can be no doubt that our psychical force creates a movement of the ether, which transmits itself afar like all movements of ether and becomes perceptible to brains in harmony with our own. The transformation of a psychic action into an ethereal movement, and the reverse, may be analogous to what takes place on a telephone, where the receptive plate, which is identical with the plate at the other end, reconstructs the sonorous movement transmitted, not by means of sound, but by electricity. (10)

Here Flammarion draws a distinct connection between electricity and ether. Galvan shows that, “For Flammarion, electricity is only a metaphor for ether, converting and carrying sound in the same way that ether does psychic content; but for others, electricity was the actual agent of psychical communication” (10). Like it is for Cashell, here the mysteriousness of electricity both aligns with the unknowable ether and offers to those who would experiment with it a variety of conceptual avenues.
In “You May Telephone from Here,” the central character is an unnamed woman whose husband is out of town and who invites her cousin to stay the night and keep her company. The story takes place in a home in London into which the central character has recently moved along with her husband. The couple are transplants from a farm in the country, while the woman’s cousin seems to have lived in London a while. The cousin takes every opportunity to remind the main character of her rural past and accompanying naivete, calling the woman a “foolish little country mouse” (171) and attempting to teach her the ways of the city, and the ins-and-outs of the telephone in particular. The main character’s husband is off to Paris and the two women are settling in for an evening together when strange things begin to happen, the first of which is the telephone making an odd sound. The cousin assures the woman that the occurrence is common enough, and they call the Exchange to complain. The operator says that there has been some trouble over the line and suggests that the two women leave the phone off the hook for the rest of the evening.

This, however, does not solve matters. The main character continues to feel strangely. She believes she hears a footstep on the stairs and tells her cousin that it feels “almost as if there was someone else in the flat” (173). The cousin has little belief in these “queer” (173) feelings, calling them “only imagination” (173) and then “Rubbish!” (174). The two women retire for the evening, but in the night the central character begins to hear the telephone ring again. “[T]he tinkling of the telephone seemed a whole twenty-four hours away, when suddenly – it began again: first with little soft tentative noises, very faint, troubled, hurried, buried almost out of hearing inside the box; then louder and louder, with sharp jerks – finally with a challenging and alarming peal” (175). The woman screams and runs from her room to the telephone, and answering it, begins to speak to someone on the other end of the line. The scream wakes her
cousin, who does not hear the ring of the phone or the voice on the line. She insists on the impossibility of the entire event, as the phone remains disconnected. However, the main character is insistent and speaks into the phone. While the cousin watches on in amazement, the woman begins to dialogue with the caller, who turns out to be her husband. However, the call is choppy and the content of his message unclear. The reader is made privy only to the woman’s side of the conversation, “Yes, I can just hear, but very faintly. Miles and miles away your voice sounds – What? – A wonderful journey? And sooner than you expected! – Not in Paris? Where, then? – Oh! my darling boy – No, I don’t quite hear; I can’t catch it – I don’t understand…The pain of the sea is nothing – is what?…You know nothing of what…?” (176). The cousin, convinced that something is wrong with the main character, tries to intercede. However, the woman holds her cousin off, describing aloud the ongoing message from the husband. She tells her cousin, “He says – he’s been trying for hours to find me. First he tried my brain direct, and then – then – oh! he says he may not get back again to me” (177). The call concludes, and the woman gives her final pronouncement, “I don’t understand – it’s death, death!” (177).

The close of the story reveals that the husband is not dead after all, but that his ship was part of a collision in the Channel and that he remained unconscious for some hours. The reader is also informed that the hours of the husband’s unconscious state coincide with the time of the story beginning with the wife’s feeling of someone else being in the house and later the phone call. Notably, it does not include the first call, which the cousin heard, and which led the women to disconnect the phone. Although the cousin never heard the husband’s projections and the husband himself does not remember the incident, the readers are left with one suggestion that the events of the night were real: that at the Exchange, “the wire, from midnight till nearly three in
the morning, had emitted sparks and flashes of light no one had been able to account for in any usual manner” (177). Something unaccountable happened over the telephone that night.

On its surface, this is a simple ghost story with a technological twist. Indeed, Blackwood is well-known for his ghost stories, perhaps even to his detriment as Johnson points out that Blackwood has been “pigeonholed as a ghost-story writer and thus underrated” (27); yet even Johnson recognizes the simplicity of *Ten Minute Stories*, comparing them negatively to Blackwood’s earlier works and saying that the later volume “contrasts dramatically” by “length and complexity” with the previous texts. Despite the inauspicious comparison between this collection and Blackwood’s other writings, there are still compelling aspects of this story to uncover, particularly in the relationship between technology and spiritualism – particularly spiritualism as it relates to disembodiment, physical displacement, and the subjective experience.

Blackwood sets up a clear contrast between the main character and her cousin. The first is inexperienced and childlike; she even calls herself a “timid little donkey” (173). The cousin, on the other hand, is worldly and knowledgeable; she takes it upon herself to educate her country cousin. Yet, in being experienced, the cousin is also “finished,” she is assured of the way the world works and is closed off to change, such as a message from the metaphysical world. To say it another way, she seems to consider herself objective: that her experience aligns with the “known” world. The main character, however, for all her simplicity, is open to experiencing the unknown, which makes space for her to be able to commune with her husband when he is in mortal danger. Ultimately, the main character experiences the “truth” of the evening’s events, even though the events are outside the physical world. The results of the night prove that her personal intuition was not silly or childish, it was instead something that she could embrace that the cousin lacked.
Blackwood’s story not only centers around a telephone, but the underlying theme reiterates the subjectivity inherent in instantaneous telecommunications (of any sort). By combating the common perspective that only the observable, measurable world is “real,” Blackwood brings science and mysticism into conversation. In this way, Blackwood upends the hierarchy of science over spirituality, showing that the individual who places her faith exclusively in the rational world is ultimately proven wrong. Through this work he reinforces the belief, held by some like Blackwood and his fellow Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn devotees, that science and spirituality are one and the same. Like Flammarion, Blackwood shows here how the energy or waves of telepathy and the telephone move through the ether in the same way, making it possible for one to utilize modern technology to practice telepathic exercises such as thought transference.

This story, then, is not a ghost story at all. In fact, there are no ghosts as there are no dead. Instead, this tale expresses Blackwood’s belief in the possibilities of science to inform spiritually and to grant humans greater access to the metaphysical. While Blackwood utilizes some tropes of a ghost story – the feeling of an unseen presence, the disembodied voice, the sounding of an inanimate object (in this case a disconnected telephone) – he disrupts this reading by offering a happy ending. The husband is alive; and telepathy, while frightening in the moment, allowed a drowning man to speak to his wife for what he thought may be the last time. This idea of showing the beneficial side of what is otherwise feared can be applied not only to the mystical but also to the scientific. During a time when science was revealing unseen forces and individuals were exposed to concepts of relativity and the subjectivity of the senses, Blackwood shows that those changes – if one is open to them – need not be feared. For
Blackwood’s readers, the disembodied voice, though born of crisis, is revealed to be the voice of a loved one and an idea to be embraced.

5.4 Conclusion

Emerging technologies and scientific theories of relativity created a perfect storm for a crisis of reality. For the average person, the wireless telegraph and telephone produced messages out of thin air through a process that was so inexplicable it may as well be magic. If those messages and voices were possible – if they were produced by science – what, then, was impossible? These advancements undid centuries of common thought on the direct relationship between the individual experience and the objective world, breaking down many individuals’ concepts of truth, and leading to a society that simultaneously embraced the occult as scientific and often rejected science as too mystical. All of these changes left individuals feeling adrift.

The ubiquity of these feelings – that no central “truth” exists and that things are not as they seem – is evident in these texts and in the way they discuss experiences of time and space, how power structures take advantage of connectivity’s distance annihilation to expand their reach, and how fictional “ghost stories” express not only the deep, emotional crisis of these changes but the shifting belief systems of science and the paranormal.
6 ANGER AND PAIN: TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND RELATIONAL DISCONNECTION

In his work *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters points to the technological developments of the nineteenth century as a critical moment in communication’s conceptual development. He notes in particular the coining of two words: “solipsism” in 1874 and “telepathy” in 1882. Peters writes that both words “reflect an individualist culture in which the walls surrounding the mind were a problem, whether blissfully thin (telepathy) or terrifyingly impermeable (solipsism)” (5). Chapter Five’s review of supernatural telecommunications reinforces Peters’ assertion that telepathy and the potential for communication between minds was a prominent consideration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, we will explore the other side of Peters’ coin: the isolation of the individual and resulting inability to communicate. The rise of subjectivity, influenced by emerging technology’s ability to alter perception and disconnect it from reality, helped lead to an isolating form of solipsism where the only thing “known” was the self. Miscommunications and misunderstandings generated either by telecommunications themselves or by human error via telecommunications reinforced this insulated worldview by disrupting interpersonal relationships. According to Peters, the idea of communication simultaneously calls up “the dream of instantaneous access and the nightmare of the labyrinth of solitude” (5), exhibiting the tension that arises from miscommunication not only as a loss of meaning but as a disruption to the desire to be in connection.

While telecommunications’ ability to annihilate distance presented new opportunities for relation, the experience of communication at a distance could also prove particularly isolating. While Chapter Five includes examples of how communities or whole nations can be isolated, as
part of the discussion on the annihilation of distance and what happens when it is suddenly reified, this chapter will examine the emotional and mental disturbance brought about by individuals’ perceptions of failed connection and isolation. The telegraph and telephone may affect one’s perception of distance, but they did not in fact alter the measure of separation – a problem that was compounded by quirks in the emerging technology and an unfamiliarity from users. The gap between the expected benefits of telecommunications and the technology’s failings engendered misunderstandings and miscommunications that also lead to emotional isolation. Where users anticipated enhanced connections, the precipitous fall all the way to disrupted connections proved to be an impactful one. In some cases – and often due not to the technology itself but human error – individuals’ ability to communicate was worsened by the telegraph or telephone. This chapter examines two early-twentieth-century texts that address the complexity of communicating at a distance via new technologies: Howards End by E. M. Forster and A Call: The Tale of Two Passions by Ford Madox Ford. Both formally published in 1910, these texts explore the new trials of communicating in a modern world and the role telecommunications plays in reifying the solitude of individuals, discovering ways to find authentic communion with each other, and the tension between the expectation of connection and the reality of isolation.¹¹⁹

Peters’ assertions about communication present an interestingly complex proposal and a useful framework for the discussion at hand. Peters posits that “Communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication” (6), suggesting that communication as a concept came into being only with the existence of its

¹¹⁹ A Call was first serialized in 1908 then published as a complete text in 1910. In original publications the author is listed as Ford Madox Hueffer, though in 1919 he changed his name to Ford Madox Ford, a name which the majority of scholars use today.
counterpart miscommunication. He goes on to show the intrinsic relationship between miscommunication and telecommunication, arguing that the “potentials for disruption in long-distance ‘communication’ – lost letters, wrong numbers, dubious signals from the dead, downed wires, and missed deliveries – have since come to describe the vexations of face-to-face converse as well” (6). The downfalls of mediated discourse are now synonymous with the downfalls of all discourse. While blaming technology for the breakdown of human connection would be easy – that is, to assert that telecommunications is bad and that face-to-face, personal interactions are good – Peters resists giving any such ethical or moral values to communication types. Instead, he shows how communication at a distance and its increased potential for misunderstanding ignites questions about the capacities of communication as a whole. He also shows how distance communication helps inform our understanding of interpersonal relationships and provides a new vocabulary for connecting, whether in proximity or at a distance. Peters posits that communication “is a homeopathic remedy: the disease and the cure are in cahoots. It is a compensatory idea whose force depends on its contrast with failures and breakdown. Miscommunication is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place” (6). Thus, according to Peters, not only does the concept of communication require miscommunication to define it, miscommunication requires more communication in order to attempt to solve it. Emergent technologies at the end of the nineteenth century were poised to both exacerbate and resolve issues of miscommunication.

Of course, miscommunication was not only a conceptual issue. While it may inspire the individual to reflect on the philosophical nature of interpersonal communication, miscommunication also has real effects on the real world. In his epilogue to A Call, Ford writes that, “no force is ever lost, and the ripple raised by a stone, striking upon the bank of a pool, goes
on communicating its force for ever and ever throughout space and throughout eternity” (300). A misunderstanding, a miscommunication – in the case of Ford’s novel, an unrecognized voice on the other end of a phone line – creates a ripple effect, the consequences of which echo through the story and beyond.

In their texts, Forster and Ford both address issues of miscommunication facilitated by telecommunications and explore the ripple effects of these events throughout the lives of their characters. We see in particular how the disconnection between expectation and reality of telecommunicating manifests in practical ways in the texts, leaving relationship troubles in its wake. In both cases, there is a misunderstanding caused by distanced communication, and in each case, the author utilizes a refrain to show the ripples of effect. Forster’s shifting uses of the phrase “telegrams and anger” draws a connection between events, even as the characters’ personal outlooks and priorities change. In Ford’s text, Dudley Leicester continues to ask who “rang up 4,259 Mayfair”: a question that is at the heart of his mental disturbance and the answer to which is an important step in setting him free. Yet, as Ford points out, even once the question is resolved, the effects of the event continue to ripple throughout Dudley’s life, even past the pages of Ford’s narrative.

This chapter serves as a bookend for the overall project, placed in conversation with all previous chapters, particularly as a contrasting parallel to the first chapter’s discussion of *In the Cage*. While Chapter Three expands on aspects of the female telegraphist introduced in Chapter Two, this chapter continues James’ examination of the downfalls of telecommunications and its powerful ability to disrupt the lives of its users – as it affects the telegraphist, Everard and

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120 Geraint Evans highlights the usefulness of pairing *In the Cage* and *A Call*, noting that they “bracket, more or less, the literary output of Edwardian England and they are particularly interesting examples of the literary response to technological change at the very beginning of modernism” (159).
Bradeen. Like Chapter Four, we will return to Howards End and the importance of Forster’s phrase “telegrams and anger.” Finally, where the previous chapter examines telecommunication’s promises of connectivity, this chapter will look at the technology’s failings and misuses, leading to emotional isolation. Having seen how telecommunications can be used as elements of character development and how the language of telecommunications often required metaphor for its explanation, this chapter studies tangible uses of telecommunications and examines their impact in the lives of users.

6.1 Miscommunication and Missed Communications in Howards End

E. M. Forster’s Howards End opens with epistolary and telegraphic examples of distance communication that result in a “labyrinth of solitude,” as Peters would say. The effects of this event are felt throughout the novel and generate the description of “telegrams and anger” that becomes a refrain. Examining specific instances of the phrase illuminates the connection between the otherwise seemingly disparate ideas of anger and telegrams, and offers insight on both telecommunication’s popular reception and its perceived potential for engendering isolation. The novel begins with the epigraph “Only connect...” However, how one is to connect is not immediately clear. As the reader comes to discover, telecommunication technologies do not necessarily facilitate authentic connection, as Forster sees it.121

An example of Forster’s examination of telecommunications occurs in the opening events of the novel and includes one of Peters’ forms of miscommunication: the missed delivery. The first occurrence of the phrase comes after the debacle of Helen and Paul’s short-lived romance. The novel opens with consecutive letters from Helen, who is at Howards End with the Wilcoxes. The final letter reads, “Dearest, dearest Meg, - I do not know what you will say: Paul and I are in

121 For a review of Forster’s critical reception and the historical context of Howards End see Chapter Four.
love - the younger son who only came here Wednesday” (6). Upon receiving the letter, Margaret decides that their aunt, Mrs. Munt, should go to Howards End to address the family and set the whole affair in order. However, before Munt ever arrives, the engagement has been broken off, and Munt misses Helen’s subsequent telegraph: “All over. Wish I had never written. Tell no one” (13). An almost Shakespearean level of miscommunications and mistaken identities ensues until all but the level-headed, and seemingly divine, Mrs. Wilcox are left in hysteric. The end of the affair is an emotional and embarrassing confrontation between Schlegels and Wilcoxes that results in Munt fainting into a crumpled heap on the steps of Howards End. Although Paul has the idea to send the recant by telegram, he later blames Helen when the endeavor is a failure.

All of the subsequent misunderstandings are set off by Helen’s letter to Margaret. Though certainly more familiar than telegraphy, letters are similarly a technology of communication, simply one that has been integrated into the characters’ lives because of longevity. Letter-writing is also a form of tele-communications in that it is communication that happens at a distance. Though the newer forms of telecommunication were increasingly fast and decreasingly personal – due to mediation, a lack of handwriting, and truncated syntax – Forster shows that letters are just as susceptible to miscommunication as other forms of connection-at-a-distance. In an attempt to connect with her sister, Helen sets off a series of miscommunications that end in near chaos and that affect everything that comes after. The influence of Helen’s letter should not be underrated; it is, after all, the first event of the book, and the narrator underscores the letters’ importance, opening the novel with the line, “One may as well begin with Helen’s letters to her sister” (3).

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122 Letter-writing was also not immune to changes wrought by modernity with the nineteenth century advent of the penny post and the introduction of rail shipment making the medium faster and more accessible than ever.
In this case, the letter causes the initial miscommunication, and as Peters shows, it falls upon additional communication to remedy the problem. Paul and Helen resolve to send a telegram, acknowledging that a follow-up letter will likely not reach Margaret in time. For the pair, a modern telegram is the clear homeopathic cure for a problematic letter. Paul and Helen choose the telegraph for its speed; however, relational disconnect and human discomfort with the technology slows the process, making it ultimately ineffective. Charles Wilcox offers to deliver the telegram to the post office in town, but Paul fears that Charles may read the message and understand the situation. Helen later tells Margaret, “Paul said Charles might read it, and though I wrote it out several times, he always said people would suspect something” (27). Helen’s unfamiliarity with encoded language and subtext keeps her from being able to utilize the medium effectively, or at least to Paul’s standards. Eventually, Paul decides to walk into town to deliver the message himself, but “what with one thing and the other, it was not handed in at the post-office until too late” (27). Helen’s preference for tradition fails her here when she is unable to write an appropriately coded telegram. However Paul’s modern tools also fail – as he does not have access to the car on which he relies for speed, he is not able to deliver the message to the office in time. Because of human fallacy, the promise of the new technology fails its users, and Munt is on the train before the telegram reaches Margaret. Here Forster displays the tension between telecommunication expectations and reality: Despite its promise, the telegraph fails to be useful to Helen and Paul, nor does it manage to diminish distance any better than the letter.

This communication disruption is followed by Charles and Mrs. Munt’s conversation, which proves to be the most disastrous of all. The idea at the root of the event is that communication will set things right, and Munt travels to Howards End to speak to Helen and the Wilcox family in order to clarify the arrangement between the couple. Though the conversation
between Charles and Munt happens face-to-face, each person serves as a proxy for their relative, and their conversation becomes another example of the failures of communication at a distance. Mrs. Munt is there to represent Helen, and Charles serves – accidentally – as a stand-in for Paul. Mrs. Munt also relies on encoded language, attempting to “telegraph” meaning instead of speaking plainly, exacerbating the confusion. Charles, in contrast, is more direct but also more succinct – another quality of telegrammatic communication. He focuses not on discourse but on the failures of the town of Hilton to be sufficiently modern. Though Munt speaks in code, if Charles were more focused on connection than on the speed of attendants or the lack of paved roads, the miscommunication between the pair could have been resolved with ease. Instead, Charles largely ignores Munt, focusing instead on his own preoccupations, and Mrs. Munt continues speaking for quite a while working under false assumptions. Eventually Munt’s opaque suggestions leak into Charles’ awareness, he asks for clarification, and the entire misunderstanding is revealed. This, however, does not resolve the case. Instead, it heightens tensions, and the remainder of the ride to Howards End is filled with Munt and Charles in a “game of Capping Families,” which they play with “unusual vigour” (21), reinforcing their roles as proxy representatives of the Schlegels and Wilcoxes respectively.

At every level, the opening events of *Howards End* demonstrate the failures of communication at a distance, or tele-communications, reinforcing the solipsism of the individual players. We see that proximity does not automatically resolve the “distance” between people. The type of isolation caused by modern practices like telecommunications results in a disconnection between people, even when they use more traditional forms of communication such as speaking or letter writing. The situation is resolved only when Mrs. Wilcox intercedes.

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123 Munt mistakes Charles for Paul and speaks to him as if Charles were his brother, making certain assumptions about what he knows that lead to further miscommunication.
The matriarch of the Wilcox family, Ruth Wilcox presents a clear contrast from the other members of her family. Forster tells readers that she “seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her” (22). In contrast to the egoism of the other players in this event, Mrs. Wilcox’s attunement to nature and to the past offer her a type of telepathy. This allows her to successfully connect to the people around her and to resolve the miscommunications. Not only are the distances between her and those in her orbit “blissfully thin,” as Peters would put it, she is also afforded a spiritual connection to the dead. Forster writes, “assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her. When she saw Charles angry, Paul frightened, and Mrs. Munt in tears, she heard her ancestors say: ‘Separate those human beings who will hurt each other most. The rest can wait.’ So she did not ask questions” (23). Ultimately, Mrs. Wilcox is able to resolve the conflict, not with spoken communication but through communion: an understanding of nature and of the natures of the people involved.

Ultimately we see that for Forster, more means of communication does not necessarily mean better communication. Instead, communication is only useful as a tool to help one better understand one’s place in the universe. The path to connection seems to be not through more frequent or more instantaneous communication but through improved communication, in particular the kinds of communing and communicating that eradicate the solipsism of individuals. Ruth Wilcox knows that objects and people outside of herself exist; and because she exists within a context and not just as a self, she is able to observe other people’s emotions and to tap into an ancestral knowledge that guides her to resolution.
6.2 Howards End’s Telegrams and Grit

For the Schlegel sisters, the events at Howards End come to be embodied in the phrase “telegrams and anger.” Following the debacle, Helen and Margaret discuss what happened and Margaret reflects, “To think that because you and a young man meet for a moment, there must be all these telegrams and anger” (28). Here Margaret uses the term literally, though over the course of the novel the refrain takes on metaphorical meanings. Forster employs the phrase throughout the work to represent what Margaret calls the “outer life,” which she sees performed by the Wilcoxes. Over time Margaret is increasingly drawn to this outer life yet also grows to embody the late Ruth Wilcox, ultimately taking her place as the wife of Henry Wilcox and later the owner of Howards End. Like Ruth, Margaret also becomes a peace-maker and bridge-builder – a role Ruth Wilcox plays in the opening events. Also similarly, Margaret turns to nature, history, and intuition to help her develop a context through which she is able to connect authentically with other people. The ways in which Margaret evokes the phrase “telegrams and anger,” which shift throughout the novel as her estimation of the outer life changes, reflect this change. While the phrase never loses its negative connotation, Margaret also begins to see the practicality and allure of it. As Peters shows, communication can be used for disconnection or connection. While the novel’s first example of tele-communication highlights its failings, Margaret increasingly understands its utility, just as she does the practicality of the Wilcoxes.

Though the Schlegels are socially modern, in the sense that they live carefree and artistic lifestyles that are not restricted by the traditional bounds of etiquette (particularly those of Mrs. Munt), the family is also deeply connected to tradition and to cultural artifacts of an old world by way of their love of fine arts – the aesthetic. Henry Wilcox and his children, in contrast, are continuously focused on industrial modernity: gain, expansion, and “the new.” Even the
Wilcox’s domestic life, as Margaret sees when she visits Ducie Street, echoes their obsession. The narrator describes the entrance hall of the home “as if a motor-car had spawned” (171). Leslie White writes, “The vexed interactions between Schlegels and Wilcoxes reflect larger (and ongoing) cultural tensions, in particular between the aesthetic and the practical” (44). The early misunderstanding with Paul Wilcox, Margaret and Helen’s falling out, and Henry Wilcox’s ultimate regression – all problems that are described by “telegrams and anger” – echo this tension.

Forster makes it clear that the Wilcoxes have replaced the internal life with modernization, what Helen refers to as the “outer life.” However, the Wilcoxes do not just exchange interiority for consumerism or modernism. Instead, as White points out, they eschew the aesthetic and the personal for the practical. For the Wilcoxes, technologies of communication take precedence over interpersonal communication for a reason: these modern communication modes are more distant, less personal, and therefore better serve the Wilcoxes’ transactional ends. As Margaret grows to understand, only through the practicality of people like Henry Wilcox can the aesthetic and personal life of the Schlegels be made possible.

Soon after the opening events at Howards End, Helen and Margaret are talking over the matter, and Margaret reflects on the Wilcoxes’ way of life. In this conversation, she both unpacks her ideas about “telegrams and anger” and explains to Helen her concept of the inner and outer life, delineating the differences between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. This is the first echo of the phrase “telegrams and anger,” and here it serves to highlight the isolation engendered by telecommunications and the influence of the telegrammatic disconnect on the lives of the sisters. Margaret tells Helen,
The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched - a life in which telegrams and anger count. Personal relationships, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements, death, death duties. So far I’m clear. But here my difficulty. This outer life, though obviously horrid, often seems the real one – there’s grit in it. It does breed character. Do personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end? (28)

While here Margaret views the Wilcoxes as leading an isolated type of outer life made up of “telegrams and anger” and disconnected from personal relationships, she also admits to her sister that she finds something appealing in the way the Wilcoxes live. Margaret’s complex feelings about the Wilcox family’s outer life parallels the tension between communication technology’s ability to incite both telepathy and solipsism. The modernity represented by the Wilcoxes intrigues Margaret because it both isolates and invites; it is repellant and appealing. This is an early example of Margaret warring with these contradictions.

The brusque and forward communication style of the Wilcoxes – especially Henry and Charles – suggests that telegraphic language found its way into their everyday speech, as they embody the outer life. Stephen Kern notes that in the field of journalism this concision of language was common because “economy of expression produced monetary savings,” adding that the telegraph also “encouraged the use of unambiguous words to avoid any confusion” (115). Geraint Evans highlights the same issue when he writes, “Telegrams, even more than letters, are characterized by brevity, and telegrams can become opaque because of the concision which is caused by the economics of technology, whereby telegrams are charged by the word” (160). This certainly seems also to describe the way in which the Wilcoxes communicate, and this succinct and forward nature is part of what appeals to Margaret. This is why “grit” is
opposed with “sloppiness” in Margaret’s estimation — the inner life can descend into 
sentimentality, nostalgia, and mushy-headed idealism, but the directness of the Wilcox’s speech 
reflects a literal economy of language, and a willingness to address the material realities of daily 
life. This is true when it comes to the cost of telegrams but also an overall ethos where speed and 
economy are paramount.

Though Margaret finds the outer life intriguing, the experience with Paul leads Helen to 
reject the Wilcoxes’ worldview, concluding that “personal relations are the real life, for ever and 
ever” (28). Although readers are told that “the sisters pursued the life that Helen had 
commended” (28), that is, the life not of “telegrams and anger” but of personal connections, the 
allure of the outer life draws Margaret towards it, leading her on a tumultuous journey. While the 
Schlegels are often set in contrast to the Wilcoxes in the novel, the true complexity of the novel 
shows itself in these instances – the Schlegels are not the same. Helen takes a black-and-white 
view of the inner and outer lives, even saying of herself that she “has no proportion.” This proves 
a problem in a new era where changes in society and technology require individuals to conduct 
themselves in new ways. Margaret seems to succeed in this shift. Ultimately, as Margaret 
becomes more and more like Ruth Wilcox, she is able to bridge the inner and outer life. Margaret 
is the only one to eventually connect with both the ultra-personal Helen and highly practical 
Henry, each who serves as a bastion of their respective worldviews.

When the relationship between the Schlegels and Wilcoxes is reignited, Margaret 
reminisces not about the problems and embarrassments incurred through the “crossed wires” 
incident between Paul and Helen, but about the “grit” she admired so much in the first instance. 
The narrator offers insight into Margaret’s thoughts: “Once past the rocks of emotions, [the 
Wilcoxes] knew so well what to do, whom to send for; their hands were on all the ropes, they
had grit as well as grittiness, and she valued grit enormously. They led a life that she could not attain to - the outer life of ‘telegrams and anger’” (108). Here we see the phrase used again, though its meaning continues to morph. Though Margaret cautiously admits a faint attraction to the Wilcox’s outer life in the previous example, she also calls it “obviously horrid.” Here, Margaret’s fondness seems to have grown. While still qualified, Margaret’s perception of the outer life – that life of telegrams and anger – is something that she cannot attain but that she values enormously. However, the excerpt also begins with, “once over the rocks of emotion,” which makes Margaret’s entire musing predicated on the Wilcoxes’s obvious lack: they are not equipped to handle emotions or emotional scenes. Once they get beyond it however, they are effective managers and efficient overseers. Margaret could never attain this, nor does she necessarily want to – but she sees its value. As Margaret’s opinion of the outer life continues to shift, so does her use of the phrase “telegrams and anger.” However, part of the complexity of the push-and-pull of modernity that is embodied in this refrain is reflected in the fact that the phrase itself does not change meaning; what changes is Margaret’s appreciation, or estimation, of the idea.

This growing acceptance of telegrams and anger puts Margaret in opposition to the rest of her family. Forster writes, “To Margaret, this life was to remain a real force. She could not despise it, as Helen and Tibby affected to do” (108). Perhaps Margaret foresees the rift with her sister, as she finishes her thoughts with a justification: “How dare Schlegels despise Wilcoxes, when it takes all sorts to make a world?” (108). Margaret also recognizes how important the Wilcoxes and the outer life are to maintaining her own way of life – a critical element that the other Schlegel family members fail to appreciate. Therefore, when Maragaret asks this rhetorical
question, she is not simply valuing diverse worldviews, she acknowledges that they literally need people like the Wilcoxes for the Schlegels’ personal world to continue existing.

In the novel’s final iteration of “telegrams and anger,” we see the culmination of Margaret’s life lessons in connectivity; like Ruth in the novel’s first events, here Margaret is within and connecting with the natural world around her, overcoming any telegraphic solipsism. After Margaret’s engagement to Henry Wilcox, the sisters grow apart for a time. Helen follows her obsession with the personal connection to an extreme that almost ruins her, while Margaret focuses her attention on her husband Henry and tries to live a life of “grit.” Eventually, however, the sisters are reconnected: When Charles Wilcox kills Leonard Bast, Margaret, via the narrator, sees that her gritty outer life is over. “She moved through the sunlit garden, gathering narcissi, crimson-eyed and white. There was nothing else to be done; the time for telegrams and anger was over, and it seemed wisest that the hands of Leonard should be folded on his breast and filled with flowers” (346). Over the course of the novel, Margaret becomes increasingly like Ruth Wilcox, and this flower-picking scene is particularly emblematic. It seems that for Margaret in particular the “time for telegrams and anger [is] over” because she is moving away from the part of her own identity that found these concepts, and the outer life as a whole, appealing and is moving towards her personification of Ruth Wilcox – the woman who soothed other’s emotional storms through nature and telepathic intuition.

Though over the course of the text Margaret and Helen both in their own ways fall prey to the lure of telegrams and anger – that is, to technology and modernization – they both eventually revert to an emphasis on the personal, mending not only themselves but also their sisterly relationship. Helen learns most of her lesson early on with the Paul Wilcox fiasco, though she does later try to separate herself from her family, relying on telegrams as the only
means of communication. Neither of these attempts at an outer life are successful, and Helen returns to Howards End fallen and in need of familial support. Margaret, as we have seen, continues to be enthralled by the “grit” of the Wilcoxes’ outer life and by the dry, direct approach of modernization, but she also learns in the end that personal connection is the key. Thus, though Forster presents a number of ways to connect, or at least to communicate, in the text, his injunction to “only connect...” seems, by the end of the novel, to place emphasis not on the type of communication but on the communicator – encouraging any actions and interactions that eschew solipsism, “for ever and ever.” “Amen!” (28).

6.3 Ford Madox Ford’s Telephones and Pain

Published in book form the same year as *Howards End*, Ford Madox Ford’s *A Call: The Tale of Two Passions* describes another disruptive telecommunication, this time a phone call. A *Call* focuses on communication as a central theme, with multiple plot lines examining topics of intuition, muteness, miscommunication, fallacies of control, and of course telecommunications and technology. Through the eponymous pivotal event, Ford examines the damaging potential of assumptions and the characters’ failure to use advancing technology appropriately. Importantly, the tension rests not particularly in the characters’ discomfort with telecommunications but in its perceived familiarity: users incorrectly assume both the efficacy of the technology and their ability to operate it correctly. The disconnect between the characters’ expectations and the reality of communication, particularly at a distance, leads to a variety of trials within the novel.

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124 Geraint Evans draws distinctions between the two texts, though he seems to overlook the question of technology in *Howards End*, comparing instead Forster’s emphasis on culture again Ford’s technology, and arguing that the elements “represent anxieties at the opposite ends of the literary representations of the liberal humanist individual as Forster and Ford explore different aspects of modernity. Ford’s novel argues that there is something challengingly different about this novel form of communication [the telephone] and that its social utility is very much up for debate” (161).

125 Today, scholars largely recognize Ford for his novel *The Good Soldier* and his tetralogy *Parade’s End*. However his other twenty-nine novels have garnered little attention, *A Call* included. Ford was a contemporary and friend of
Though this text in many ways echoes the contemporary concerns of *Howards End*, it is useful to note that for Ford, intuition can be just as faulty as any other form of communication. For a work about communicating, much goes unsaid in *A Call*, and readers see that most of the characters bear faulty intuition. Like Forster, the greatest obstacle to successful communication is solipsism: Ford’s characters assume they know what each other thinks or feels but are actually projecting their own assumptions. In some cases, characters are so shut off they are even unaware of their own desires or feelings. In Ford’s work, there is no Ruth Wilcox coming to save them. Although the text’s two spiritual characters come closest, perhaps, to true connection and an intimacy with the world outside themselves, their ability to help others is fractional, at best. The novel’s events may be resolved by the end, but they are not particularly happy results.

*A Call* has, generally, three story lines, the most prominent of which centers around a phone call. Ultimately, this plotline is the story of a man driven mad by telecommunications. While his wife Pauline is out of town, Dudley Leicester decides late at night to visit the home of another woman. Upon entering, the phone rings, and Leicester answers and is identified by the caller. Wracked with guilt for his indiscretion, Leicester goes mad and then enters a comatose state caused by his need to identify the unknown caller and the fear that his transgression will be discovered by his wife. Unfortunately for Leicester, his guilt-driven fugue state is the true indicator to Pauline that something amiss occurred while she was away. Several events unfold while Leicester is thus indisposed when finally, at the end of the story, his closest friend (and the central narrative figure) Robert Grimshaw admits to being the interrupting caller. In an epistolary epilogue, Ford begrudgingly reveals that Leicester recovered his mental health.

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Joseph Conrad, though Ford’s claims on his level of influence over Conrad’s works sparked a controversy that marred his career. He is an all-around controversial figure who most agree impacted literary modernism, though to what degree remains under discussion (Peterson 109-10).
following the confession from Grimshaw, though the author also makes it clear that this is not
the point of his narrative.

Ford’s particular narrative style plays an important role in the way the central telephone
call is described in the novella. Ford’s better known works *The Good Soldier* and *Parade’s End*
are recognized for their experimentation with form, point of view, and moralizing. *The Good
Soldier* in particular is noted for its unreliable narrator and non-chronological form. Though
written earlier and lesser known, readers can see that in *A Call* Ford is already beginning to
experiment with some of these ideas. The limited omniscient narrative stays mainly focused on
Robert Grimshaw, though it side-tracks to others at key moments in the text. One of these
moments is the pivotal event of the phone call. For that moment, the reader experiences the
world through Dudley Leicester’s point of view, so that the reader knows Leicester’s side of the
conversation, but like Leicester, does not know who is on the other end. At the close of the
novel, Ford makes it known that Robert Grimshaw was the mystery caller all along. Like the
narrator in *The Good Soldier* who reveals the breadth of his knowledge only in the sunset of the
story, Grimshaw here only reveals his role in Leicester’s downfall at the end, though the
narrative has followed him closely throughout.

Leicester’s experience of the phone call is disjointed and confusing, causing a sense of
isolation that leads to his mental collapse. Though he answers the phone with an expectation of
how the call will go, his predictions are immediately dispelled. Because of his lack of familiarity
with the telephone, Leicester is unable to adapt to events as they unfold. Evans describes some of
the downfalls of telephony, which are familiar to users today, but that to Leicester and his
contemporaries were completely new experiences, particularly that phone conversations are
“conducted in real time, with no opportunity to daydream about consequences or to compose a
perfect response” (160). Kern makes a similar observation noting that the telephone allowed people to “respond at once without the time to reflect afforded by written communication. Business and personal exchanges suddenly became instantaneous instead of protracted and sequential” (69). As a way to interact over long distances, the instantaneousness of the telephone was certainly new and novel; though one may wonder if Evans and Kern are overstating the impact, given the existence of face-to-face communication. Evans addresses this, noting that speaking over the telephone “is like conversation but without the social context or any of the visual cues of meaning which make speech comprehensible” (160). Because using the telephone has many similarities to regular conversation, even in its earliest iterations, telephone users were apt to underestimate its important differences. While the telephone offered the expectation that using it would bear little difference from conversation besides the added benefit of anonymity, the reality exposed its downfalls: namely that anonymity goes both ways, and the lack of visual cues disrupts understanding.

The disconnect between expectation and reality upsets Leicester’s ability to manage the conversation, leading to his downfall. Leicester is alone with Etta Hudson, his former fiancee, in her home when her telephone rings. Etta tells Leicester to answer, but to pose as the second footman Muddle and to tell the caller that Husdons are not at home. When Leicester answers the

126 Evans and Kern both seem to argue that the telephone is distinctly different in this regard from the telegraph. Evans says that “the telegram is an evolutionary technology but the telephone is revolutionary” (160). Kern is less emphatic but does assert that the telephone had a “broader impact” than the telegraph or wireless telegraph. While these assertions make sense – and it would be foolish to downplay the impact the telephone has had on the modern world – I argue that the telephone is an evolution of the telegram, not a distinct shift. Evans sees telegraphic communication as episodic, and while that may have been true for the public user, we have ample examples of telegraph professionals utilizing the technology to interact seamlessly and as easily as conversing. Thus the telephone makes that same ability available to the lay-person by removing the need for a specialist. Mechanically, the two technologies are largely the same; the scope of use and the infrastructure mark their differences. If anything, the wireless telegraph is a more distinct technological change than the wired telegraph or telephone. As the precursor to radio and later television, its means of transmission are quite different to other telecommunications at the turn of the century. Yet the wireless is regularly lumped in with the wired telegraph, while the often telephone receives distinction from some scholars.
phone, the caller asks, “Are you 4,259 Mayfair?” But before Leicester can respond, the speaker goes on, saying “don’t go away,” and “get down,” before asking “Is that Sir William Hudson’s?” Leicester, in character, asserts that it is but that the master is gone and the Lady asleep. However, the caller seems to see through his ruse, asking, “Isn’t that Dudley Leicester speaking?” In a panic, Leicester answers “Yes,” before hanging up (76-77). Although Dudley does not recognize the voice on the other end of the line, he assumes that the caller has recognized him. He is confused by the interjections of “don’t go away” and “get down,” putting him on the wrong foot so that, when he is identified by name, Leicester accidentally reveals the truth instead of maintaining his impersonation of Moddle. Evans contextualizes this event, describing how “the conventions of spoken communication without social contact are so new in 1910 that Dudley Leicester has not learned to read this type of text” (162) and goes on to explain that with the phone call, Leicester is “caught in a situation for which there were no precedents of behaviour and, in a society where public behaviour was governed by rules of etiquette and expectations of reciprocal action, this lack of precedent can leave people cruelly exposed” (162). Modern readers understand that the call’s interjections are likely addressed to a third party and not to Leicester, as we are familiar with these kinds of asides. In fact, knowing that Grimshaw has a pet dog to whom he is quite attached, readers may even be able to guess who the mysterious caller is. Leicester, however, has never had such an interaction before and does not understand it.127

On the other end of the line, Grimshaw’s solipsistic overestimation of self is reflected in the way he, too, manages the telephone call. He presents himself as the knowledgeable party – having both insight into the situation at hand and believing in his ability to communicate

127 Likewise, it seems Ford perhaps relies upon the novelty of phone communication to dupe his readers, perhaps offering a hint but not intentionally giving away the whole game.
effectively over the phone.\textsuperscript{128} Having seen Leicester and Etta together, Grimshaw resolves to call Etta’s home to confirm that Leicester is with her and therefore cheating on his wife. While Grimshaw is correct in assuming that Leicester is at the house, Dudley Leicester is so spooked by the phone call that he leaves before anything more can happen with Etta. However, having confirmed Leicester’s location, Grimshaw assumes an ongoing affair. This affects his later actions: even when Grimshaw is made aware that Leicester could recover if he knew the identity of the caller, Grimshaw continues for a time to withhold the information believing that Dudley deserves to suffer. Grimshaw only relents when he discovers that nothing happened between Dudley Leicester and Etta, finally admitting his role in Leicester’s breakdown.

Grimshaw also makes false assumptions about his telecommunicative abilities – meaning to flush Leicester out, Grimshaw’s failure to use the telephone correctly sends Leicester into a complete mental breakdown instead. Grimshaw disrupts the entire communication from the outset by speaking to his dog instead of to Dudley, while continuing to speak with “his lips close to the mouthpiece” (285). That Ford identifies this behavior specifically suggests this is a breach of telephone etiquette. Additionally, although the phone conversation goes awry, Grimshaw mistakenly assumes that Leicester will recognize his voice. He tells himself “At any rate, they’ll know who it was that rung them up” (285). However, as Ford informs the reader, “But Dudley Leicester hadn’t known; he was too stupid, and the tinny sound of the instrument had destroyed the resemblance of any human voice” (285-86). Grimshaw jumps to false conclusions due to his

\textsuperscript{128} Throughout the text, Robert Grimshaw clearly considers himself superior to most, and certainly to Dudley Leicester. Grimshaw relies on his high estimation of his own intuition to be able to correctly arrange the lives of everyone around him. However, Grimshaw is driven by his own priorities of appropriateness, blinding himself to his own true desires and the desires of those around him. Grimshaw orchestrates much of Leicester’s life, including managing his business affairs and bringing Dudley and his wife Pauline together. By the end of the novel, readers see clearly that Grimshaw does not have perfect foresight and has all but ruined anyone’s chance at happiness due to his ego.
failure to think outside his own experience. Having seen Leicester and Etta on the street, Grimshaw knows that Leicester will be the voice on the other end of the line. Leicester, on the other hand, has no visual cues (which, as Evans points out, are critically important to interpretation), and so the distortion of Grimshaw’s voice leaves Leicester “cruelly exposed” (as Evans puts it) to misunderstanding. Failing to imagine what the experience may be to the call’s receiver, particularly when breaking the “rules” of phone etiquette, such as speaking to a third party and holding the receiver too close to his mouth, Grimshaw’s limited empathy creates a crisis that affects his entire social circle.

At the close of events, Ford employs a phrase that is notably similar to Forster’s “telegrams and anger” and “panic and emptiness.” When reflecting on the affair as a whole, Grimshaw concludes that, “it seemed to present himself to him in those terms of strong light, of the unreal sound of voices on the telephone, and of pain, of unceasing pain that had never ‘let up’” (286). The relationship presented here between telephones and pain is surprisingly reflective of Forster’s telegrams and anger. That these texts were being published contemporaneously is a clear exhibit of the kinds of concerns orbiting telecommunications. This not only echoes some of the concerns of Howards End, it also places telecommunications at the heart of the conflict in A Call and identifies it as a generative point for much of the emotional strife that impacts the novel’s characters.

As much as A Call is about communication, it is also a story about silences. Dudley falls into a comatose state where he only raps his fingers and asks who rang up 4,259 Mayfair, and this is paralleled with the story’s other two plotlines: that of Kitty, a child who refuses to speak, and a secret that disrupts Grimshaw’s romantic future. Ford shows that the entanglements of his characters come as much from what they do not say as what from what they do – and that the
solution is to talk it out. As Peters posits, communication, then, is the homeopathic remedy for the ailments of Ford’s solipsistic characters.

Prior to the events that will resolve the novel’s conflicts, Grimshaw, who is Greek, meets a Greek Orthodox priest by coincidence, and the two have an impactful conversation about solipsism and empathy. Here, the spiritual figure encourages Grimshaw to look outside himself for answers – or perhaps more aptly, to look further inside himself. Where telecommunications have caused a breakdown, the priest’s authentic communion with Grimshaw helps him to see past the English appropriateness Grimshaw has been operating under and to embrace the Greek characteristics of authenticity and openness. Much of their conversation revolves around the issue of connection. The priest chastises the English for their disconnection. He tells Grimshaw, “the English do not, like you, seek to come into contact with their fellow-beings or with persons who they may meet by chance. They are always afraid of entanglements – that it may be used against them” (221). Although the priest sees Grimshaw in contrast to the self-isolated English, in the case of Dudley Leicester, Grimshaw’s silence exacerbates and extends his friends’ suffering. The priest exhorts Grimshaw to “Go out into the world; help all that you may; induce all that you may to go into the right paths. Bring one unto to the other, that mutual comprehension may result. That is the way of Christian fellowship; that is the way to bring about the peace of God on earth” (222). In other words, the priest tells Grimshaw to only connect.

The priest gives this advice even knowing that connections are not always beneficial. He tells Grimshaw, “pour out your goods into the outstretched hands of the poor. Then, if you chance to give three scudi into the hands of a robber, and with these three scudi he purchase a knife wherewith he slay his brother, God may well pardon it to you, who hung, omnipotent, upon the Cross, though thereby to Cæsar was left power to oppress many of the Churches” (217). For
the priest, a generosity of spirit and a desire for personal connection are the ultimate goal, even if they may cause additional strife or pain, because ultimately the good outweighs the bad. From the priest’s perspective, Christ's death is good even if it also has negative ramifications. He tells Grimshaw not to get rid of his dog even if the dog’s death will later break Grimshaw’s heart. Mutual understanding is always the goal, even if it comes through difficult means. This adds another layer to Ford’s concept of ripples: that events not only continue to affect outcomes but that the results are a complex mix of highs and lows. At the end of the novel, Grimshaw breaks his silence and admits to Leicester that he was the caller. By communicating this information, Grimshaw attempts to reconnect with Dudley and therefore heal him.

Ford makes it clear that Leicester – as well as the novel’s other characters – are all indelibly affected for better or worse by the communications and miscommunications that lay at the heart of the novel’s affair. Although Ford admits that Dudley recovers, this does not necessarily mean that everything in the lives of the characters is happily resolved. In Ford’s epistolary epilogue, he writes out a relatively happy conclusion for everyone, before undercutting his own ending. He tells his reader that the new ending is not needed and that “all these things appear to me to be sufficiently indicated in the book as I have written it,” (298) and that “these additions appear to me to be ugly, superfluous, and disagreeable” (298). And while he writes that “the foxes have their holes, the birds of the air have nests, and you, together with the great majority of British readers, insist upon a having a happy ending, or, if not a happy ending, at least some sort of an ending” (298), he goes on to insist that “although Dudley Leicester was, as I have tried to indicate, cured almost immediately by the methods of Katya Lascarides, it would be absurd to imagine that the effects of his short breakdown would not influence the whole of his after-life” (299).
By the end of the novel, Ford’s position on silence verses communication seems clear, but where does he land on telecommunications in particular? What does it mean that a phone call is the generator of conflict, while physical touch and face-to-face speech are the healing factors? That Grimshaw equates telephones and pain is a pretty strong indictment of the technology. In a 1923 interview Ford criticized the U. S. for being all “bath-tubs and telephones” (qtd. in Saunders 142), and the potential for miscommunication via telegraph and telephone that Ford displays in later texts such as Parade’s End would also suggest that the author takes a negative view of the technology. Evans concludes as such, arguing that in Ford’s work the telephone “like the dystopic society which it seems to prefigure, offers communication without closeness, connection without family, words without social meaning” (164). While Evans takes an extreme position, the primary text perhaps suggests a more complex characterization of the uses and downfalls of telecommunications. While A Call contains a clear critique of English isolation, Ford does not overtly place telecommunications in a single camp nor give it the same expository treatment.129

In the text, telecommunications can be dehumanizing – as is the case with the telephone’s inhuman voice – but they can also be useful and help create connection when used effectively. An important example of this is in Katya Lascarides’ introduction. Katya’s first appearance in the novel is a scene in third person, limited to her perspective, in which she sends a wireless telegraph. On a ship headed to London, Katya writes to announce her arrival to her sister and to

129 Evans also calls the telephone a “key indicator of modernity” (164), and suggests that Ford sees modernity as the precursor to dystopia. However, in the novel, Ford seems to poke fun at Grimshaw and his fear of modern advancements, characterizing Grimshaw as someone who “suffered from constant panics and ideas of ill-health,” including a fear that “the constant string of vehicles passing us in the streets of London so acted on the optic nerves that general paralysis was often induced” (49).
set some conditions for her stay. She writes to her sister, “Shall reach London noon tomorrow. Beg you not to meet ship or to come to hotel for three days. Writing conditions” (98). Though Katya follows this message with a more detailed letter to her sister, this note sets the stage for Katya’s role in the novel. In addition to offering insight into her character – which Ford underscores by suggesting that most see her as “passionless, practical, and without tides of emotion” (99) – within the plot, the telegraph both indicates Katya’s arrival and creates the accommodations for her success. While *A Call* does not have an altogether happy ending, many of the higher points of the novel occur due to Katya’s arrival in London. That these successes are precipitated by a telegram complicates Ford’s otherwise clear critique of emerging communication technologies. Perhaps, as Evans proposes, the telephone and telegraph are distinct: enough so that Ford can disparage one without maligning the other. I argue, however, that Ford’s concern is not with means of communication but with the empathy required for authentic communication no matter its form.

Katya is a mental health professional, specializing in “obscure forms of nervous diseases” (22), and her ability to connect intuitively with patients has made her a success. Ford shows the counter-point to Grimshaw and Leicester’s solipsism through Katya’s ability to connect as the impetus for many of the novel’s key events. She returns home to London to help her niece Kitty, who has gone mute. Katya is able to see outside her own perspective, intuiting the needs of her niece, and designing the events that lead to Kitty’s returned speech. Katya likewise plays an important role in convincing Grimshaw to confess his role in the telephone call, thereby also healing Leicester. In all of these scenarios, Katya exhibits skill in her communication. Where

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130 This introduction also provides a detailed overview of the practicalities of the “Marconigraph” or wireless telegraph on the ship. We see that it is located in the “companion forward,” in a “little cabin surrounded by what appeared a schemeless jumble of rusty capstans and brown cables,” where it sends out “its cracklings.” When Katya is finished with her message, she hands it in “through a little shutter, to the invisible operator” (98).
Leicester and Grimshaw fail at using the telephone because they are inexperienced, Katya shows that these advancements in telecommunications can be used for good if handled thoughtfully. Where Ford shows that technology causes disruptions to communication for Grimshaw and Leicester leading to isolation and solipsism, he balances this critique through Katya’s uses of telecommunications that are guided by a kind of telepathic intuition.\footnote{That tele-communication, that is communication at a distance, is not all bad in Ford’s estimation is underscored by another, minor character Mr. Held. Held is Leicester’s nurse and believes he can feel sympathetic “waves” from the people around him and that he can mentally synchronize with others (234-36). While somewhat ridiculous, Held does, at a crucial moment, intuit that Pauline Leicester is on the verge of a breakdown, and goes to Grimshaw for help. Though Ford never makes it clear whether Held is simply adept at reading body language or truly has a spiritual gift, Held is another example of a character with sympathetic intentions that has a successful telecommunication (in this case telepathetic) experience.}

6.4 Conclusion: Authentic Connection by Any Means

Both Forster and Ford’s texts identify the utility of modern technologies while making observations on some of telecommunications’ weaknesses, specifically its ability to create distance while seeming to annihilate it. Neither author rejects telecommunications outright; instead they understand that the world is changing and to reject modernity whole-cloth is futile. However, both texts show that addressing the challenges of emerging technologies is a fruitful and important endeavor.

Though both novels appear to critique modern telecommunications by placing these advancements at the center of conflict, closer inspection shows that the technology itself is less of a problem than the human operators. While telegraphs and telephones can potentially exacerbate issues of disconnection and solipsism, the inclination seems already present in their users. Additionally, telecommunications, with its connection to telepathy, arguably also produces the potential for greater authentic connection, if only humans know how to utilize it. These two texts, both written in the first decade of the twentieth century, examine the tension between the
promises and expectation of advancing technology and the resulting reality. While new technologies offer a grand scope of possibility for connection and interaction, user error threatens to disrupt expectations in a way that leads to interpersonal misunderstanding, broken relationships, and emotional isolation.
7 CONCLUSION

This study has sought to investigate the ways in which turn-of-the-century telecommunications including the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone appear in literature and texts from 1880-1913 and to examine how those appearances reflect the socio-historic climate as well as changes wrought by the technology itself. The study pays close attention to changes in the perception of space, time, and the individual. Through a survey of novels, short stories, essays, articles, and historical texts from a broad range of professional and amateur writers, this study proves the importance of telecommunications at the turn of the century and the ubiquity of telecommunications as a subject of discourse and writing. By examining the ways in which authors adopt modes of telecommunications as characterization markers for women telegraphists and businessmen, we see telecommunication’s role in the reality of these professions. The texts in this study exhibit the wide-reaching impact of telecommunication technology on individuals and power structures. By assessing telecommunication’s pervasiveness and use across texts, this study proves the ubiquity and impact of the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone on culture and writing at the turn of the twentieth century.

Following the introduction, the study’s second chapter, “Transgressive Imagination, Reality, and the (Im)mutability of Class in James’ In the Cage,” sets out to assess the importance of class within the novella and to the author and his contemporary society. We saw how the telegraphist character, through her profession, found ways to imagine class transgression and to gain what she perceived as intimate access to individuals outside her station. However, though class boundaries seemed flexible, they were elastic, and the telegraphist is ultimately snapped back into her reality and forced to accept her station. Through a close analysis of the text, we see
the critical role telegraphy plays in this plot, especially in supporting the telegraphist’s imagination. The centrality of telegraphy to this novel invites questions about people, society, and perception that are further explored in later chapters.

In Chapter Three, “Dangerous Connections: Decoding Complex Standards for Women Telegraphists,” we look to both history and literature to understand the social standing of women in the profession, the tenuousness of their acceptance, and some of the criticisms against women telegraphers. With the stage set by our examination of *In the Cage* and through the texts, including historical documents and works by professional telegraphers of both sexes, this chapter proves the conclusion that women telegraphists inhabited a complex borderland of social freedoms and restrictions that were not clearly defined yet could lead to disaster if not performed correctly. This assessment of women telegraphers and their fictional counterparts is then complemented by the following chapter and its assessment of stereotyped businessmen.

The fourth chapter, “The Business of Communicating: Telegraph Use as Character Trope & Social Commentary” sought to analyze writer’s utility of the speculative businessman trope in turn-of-the-century novels and to examine the role the telegraph played in developing and reworking the stereotype. This chapter shows how a character’s fluency with emerging technology communicated to contemporary readers key characterization elements including business acumen and agility. We then saw how authors took advantage of readers’ assumptions to add surprise and complexity to their works, showing how telegraphy, when employed by the wrong people or in the wrong way, could also indicate professional weakness, either as a personal lack of skill or in the face of larger forces. This chapter also made note of how authors employed these character tropes, and the accompanying uses of telecommunications, to comment on or critique changing commercial practices in the late nineteenth century. In contrast to
Chapters Two and Three in which the focus is on telegraphic professionals, in this chapter we see how telegraphy is utilized as a service by the general public.

Chapter Five, “Telegraphic Relativism: Displacement & Disembodiment in Turn of the Century Texts” turns to the abstract, endeavoring to show how, conceptually, emerging telecommunications were part of both a series of new inventions that affected individual’s perceptions of time and space and influential in a multi-disciplinary shift towards relativism and subjectivity. Through the close analysis of literary and historical texts, this chapter exhibits telecommunication’s place in these changes and writers’ struggles to adapt language to these developments. Here, we also see how distance’s annihilation through telecommunications played an integral role in power struggles and the ways in which shifting perceptions of the individual manifest as mysticism in some literature.

This study closes on a somber note with Chapter Six’s “Anger and Pain: Telecommunications and Relational Disconnect.” Having explored the practicalities of telecommunication and the promises they offered, the goal of the final chapter was to examine how these dreams are complicated or annulled by reality and the damaging results of faulty telecommunication. Through an analysis of *Howards End* and *A Call*, this chapter shows how communication at a distance can lead to isolation, emotional turmoil, and solipsism, especially when human error is involved. These failures of communication not only cause mild disappointment or misunderstanding; instead, the extreme difference between telecommunication users’ expectations of improved interpersonal connection and the reality of isolation and confusion often exacerbated the negative outcomes, sometimes even leading to mental anguish and breakdown. As a close to the overall dissertation project, this chapter, like Chapter Two, examines a smaller number of texts, with less attention on historical context and greater time
given to close readings. Where Chapter Two endeavors to create an interpretive framework for the arguments that follow, Chapter Six weaves together the previous conclusions, addressing the psychological impact of the practical applications of telecommunications discussed in earlier chapters.

The overall purpose of this study is to add to the critical conversation and to support and encourage further work in this area of research. Many of the texts I examine have heretofore received little to no academic attention: these texts include works by lesser-known or amateur authors like Ella Cheever Thayer and those included in Johnson’s collection *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes*, works by commercially successful authors who have received little notice from the academy like Algernon Blackwood, and individual texts that receive sparse academic attention but are by otherwise well-known authors such as H. G. Wells’ *Anticipations* and Ford Madox Ford’s *A Call*. By shining light on these texts, their qualities, and the important role they play in this field of study, I hope that the present work encourages future attention and analysis. Similarly, a number of the texts I discuss here have recently fallen out of popularity or their popularity is on the decline, including Howells’ novels *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (which continues to be discussed but at a lower frequency than previous decades). The present project offers new avenues of study and methods of analysis for these canonical texts.

We must also recognize that the role the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone play in literature does not end in 1913, where this study leaves off. The research presented here on the influence of emerging telecommunication technologies, both on society and the individual, offer fruitful lines of analysis for future studies. Telecommunication heavily impacted the First World War, and the war itself changed the way the technology was handled and perceived. Future
research could examine collections of texts and historical documents with an eye to these changes, or one could look to single authors and the parallels or changes in the ways they include telecommunications in their text before, during, or after WWI. For example a comparison of telephone usage in Ford’s A Call and Parade’s End would fit this bill nicely. Another important avenue of research will be the evolution of these technologies into abstractions and metaphor. Today, when one uses the verb “to telegraph” its meaning is metaphorical, not literal. How did this come to be, and when? One may examine how some authors use both meanings and in what context, such as Henry James’ literal use of telegraphy in In the Cage compared to his employment of the metaphor in What Maisie Knew. Finally, future scholarship could examine the evolution of the technology itself and its reception in literature. Does the telegraphically adept businessman have a modern counterpoint? Did individuals experience the same crises of subjectivity at the advent of the internet as they did with the introduction of the telephone? As an example, analyzing solipsism caused by technology, similar to what is done in the previous chapter, across technologies and centuries offers a bounty of research potential. For one, the isolation caused by social media – a product that seems to offer increased connection – echoes many of the problems of the telegraph and telephone. People are often both enamored with “the new” and afraid of change, and while the present study seeks to understand these social forces through literary references to the telegraph, wireless telegraph, and telephone, the same questions could be applied to a wide variety of advancements in communication both before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Even within the narrow timeline of 1880 to 1913, the popularity of these technologies and the ubiquity of their appearances in texts continues to offer a ripe field for continued study.
The overall intentions of this study echo the methodological goals of surface reading. Best and Marcus propose that “the purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself” (12). While “modest,” the intention of surface reading is not to turn criticism into a kind of academic navel-gazing, instead it finds scholastic freedom through attention to what is present in a text. Surface Reading reclaims “the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value)” while understanding “attentiveness to the artwork as itself a kind of freedom” (17). Also, approaching texts in a way “that does not reduce them to instrumental means to an end,” and coming to texts with openness, Best and Marcus argue, is “the best way to say anything accurate and true about them” (16). Ultimately, this methodology seeks to highlight “the agency of the act of bearing witness to the given” (François qtd. in Best and Marcus), while remembering that the critic “is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles” (Latour qtd. in Best and Marcus 19). This study seeks to assemble the evidence present in the texts – that is, the inclusion of oft-overlooked telecommunication technologies – and to bear witness to these important patterns, thus adding to the literary and historical understanding of these works and offering knowledge to bolster and assist in future interpretation.

Over the course of this study, I have sought to synthesize literary and historical knowledge on the subject of turn-of-the-century telecommunications in order to classify appearances of telecommunications in the texts and to draw conclusions through comparison within these taxonomies. This study offers up to the academic discourse new insight on the impact of telecommunications on individuals living between 1880-1913 and how those impacts echo through the literature in both practical and philosophical ways. At its core, I designed this study to contribute replicable knowledge on turn of the century literature and technologies to
support and enhance future analysis and to inspire scholars who will find something of interest included in these pages. My goal has been to give attention to telecommunication as an often-overlooked but important element present in a wide variety of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts. I hope that by doing so I may add to our collective knowledge and spark inspiration that will encourage future study of these subjects.
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