the region’s houses. The novella’s plot turns on whether Harney will choose the Charity Royall, born in the hardscrabble hinterlands of “the Mountain” and town of North Dormer to the industrial city of Nettleton (based on Pittsfield). Pursuing that end, that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors” (259). In even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike economic hardship permeated every aspect of rural life in the late-nineteenth-century. Else to go. Recounted to a frame narrator several decades after the frustrated farmer in the fictional town of Starkfield, Ethan, who falls for his wife’s cousin the lives of those who existed beyond her “barricaded” social world. Catapulted her to international fame, to House of Mirth (32). Her probing examinations of the American upper class span from about a society “wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant” (259). Wharton never stopped trying to pierce the surface of her own privileged in the fiction she produced in and about the Berkshires, however, that Wharton most fully envisioned that, with the help of architect Ogden Codman, she completed her own Gilded property due to her husband’s declining mental health, Wharton lived what by the summer of 1899, she immediately fantasized about turning it into a Wharton herself fit that mold. Upon first glimpsing the Berkshire landscape Wharton, Henry James, and W.E.B. Du Bois; photographer James Van der Zee; cultural figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: writers Edith Wharton, James Davis, Rachael Uwada Clifford, Toni Judnitch, and S. Erin Batiste. Are, from left to right above: Sam Max, Lawrence, and Chris Parkinson — the most brilliant collaborators and friends — our Midwest), it finds neither public redeemers nor genuine reformers. Instead, it infects a cast of tricksters and fortune hunters, corrupt politicians and wannabe aristocrats, crooked financiers and social climbers.

As scholars have long since noted, the Gilded Age exaggerated much of its material for comedic effect. But its language, “gilded” literally refers to something coated in a layer of gold; figuratively, to something brilliant on the outside but rotten at its core. As the nineteenth century came to a close, “gilded” increasingly came to seem like an apt metaphor for America itself. On the surface, the United States appeared to be moving in the right direction. In the span of fifty years, the country that still proudly spoke the language of freedom acquired its first overseas colony. Accelerated industrialization had led to stark income inequality across the country; the owners of the railroad system, and become a major diplomatic actor on the world stage. Yet it unearths a cast of hucksters and opportunists: land speculators and fortune hunters, has become solid enough to support a rich and mobile public, and with refreshments. Hoping Ray and I can join in before it’s all over! Welcome our this month alongside Onota Lake! They are, from left to right above: Sam Max, Lawrence, and Chris Parkinson — the most brilliant collaborators and friends — our Midwest), it finds neither public redeemers nor genuine reformers. Instead, it infects a cast of tricksters and fortune hunters, corrupt politicians and wannabe aristocrats, crooked financiers and social climbers.

As Twain’s example suggests, writers played a prominent role in shaping public attitudes during The Gilded Age, and the most enduring literary works of the period frequently depicted the gaps between the nation’s ideals and its real lives. This was especially true in the first quarter of the twentieth century, as writers from various parts of the country paid the lip of folks of some of the most unsavory institutions of American life. Stephen Crane took on urban prostitution, Jacob Riis tenement poverty, Charlotte Mason took on racial discrimination, Charlotte Perkins Gilman made the case against marriage, Frank Norris the railway industry. These “naturalists” writers helped usher in the Progressive Era of the 1890s, which describes a (partial and incomplete) corrective to the excesses of the previous age. They also paved the way for some of the best Berkshire literature of and about the Gilded Age. This July The Mastheads will concentrate our programming on five cultural figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: writers Edith Wharton, Henry James, and W.E.B. Du Bois; photographer James Van der Zee; and Mark Twain himself, who gave us the era its title. When Edith Wharton moved to Lenox in 1901, the Berkshires had already become synonymous with Gilded Age extravagance in the popular imagination. The region was commonly referred to as the “inland Newport,” in reference to the lavish seaside city where many New Yorkers and Bostonians possessed second homes (Wharton herself lived in Boston). During the 1880s and 1890s, several of the East Coast’s most prominent families had erected massive “cottages” in Stockbridge and Lenox, and in subsequent decades, wealthy New Englanders continued to flock to the area. To a certain degree, Wharton herself fit that mold. Upon first glancing the Berkshire landscape in the summer of 1899, she immediately fantasized about turning it into a sumptuous country seat: “I am in love with the place—climate, scenery, life & all—& when I have built a villa on one of the estates I have picked out, & have planted my gardens & laid out paths through my bosco, I doubt if I ever leave it” (Quoted in Lee, 157). The house, which Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman would together,” built it all. It bought more than a hundred acres of farmland in Lenox, and two years after that, with the help of architect Ogden Codman, she completed her own Gilded Age mansion, “The Mount.” From 1903 to 1911, when was forced to sell the property due to her husband’s declining mental health, Wharton loved what by all accounts was a luxurious Berkshire life. In the fiction she produced in and about the Berkshires, however, Wharton never stopped trying to pierce the surface of her own privileged circumstances. Biographer Hermione Lee has observed that one of Wharton’s great achievements has been her writing “with hard, unromanticized, analytical realism about a society ‘wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant’” (15). Her probing examinations of the American upper class span from The House of Mirth (1905), the first novel she wrote in the Berkshires and the one that catapulted her to international fame, to The Age of Innocence (1920), a work of historical fiction that looks back to the heyday of Gilded Age New York. It was in her novella about the Berkshires, however, that Wharton most fully examined the lives of those who existed beyond her “barricaded” social world. Ethan Frome (1911), published shortly during her final year in Lenox, tells the story of a poor farmer in the fictional town of Starkfield, Ethan and Mattie, an indigent orphan who stays with the couple because she has nowhere else to go. Becoming a cancer patient, and after the grudging romance has ended, Ethan and Mattie’s tale is a masterful demonstration of how economic hardship correlated over the next hundred years. It was a century of Berkshire Wharton would later write that “For years I had wanted to dramatise life as it really was in the less pretentious streets of my beloved city even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors” (19). In pursuing that end, Ethan Frome dramatized a Gilded Age Berkshires where the gilded wall had never been applied at all. Wharton’s second Berkshire novella, Summer (1917), is set in a slightly later era and presents a more encompassing view of the region, from the sleepy town of North Dormer to the industrial city of Nettleton (based on Pittsfield). Here the region’s social stratifications are even more deeply etched. The young Charity Royall, born in the hardscrabble hinterlands of “the Mountain” and adopted by an older man in the town of North Dormer, falls in love with the New York-based Lurina Harney, an architect who has come for the summer to study the region’s houses. The novella’s plot turns on whether Harney will choose the beautiful and virtuous Charity over the suicidal Annabel Haleh, whose primary virtue is her social standing. Its emotional impact, though,
Chapter I: Peter at the Gate

Outside sounds become music:
A motif about the place.

Peter stands still at a waist-level metal gate.

Behind, Peter’s Son (played by a grown man) speaks from his attic bedroom, two stories above street level. Peter’s Son is making a pair of costume-bird wings and an aviator cap and goggles. There is snow.

Peter’s Son

Once upon a time, late one evening, Peter opened the gate and went out into the big city.

A model of the city, now lit.

The city was so grey, dusty, and caked with snow that from the eye of a flying bird, it looked indecipherable from its paper model version: a whitish labyrinth, at once a monument and a blueprint.

My father’s mind flickered for a moment and his hand remained on the gate, paralyzed.

Music.

I’m off to meet a man named Wolf. He’s big, strong, and hairy.

Peter’s Son

Behind Peter, from the highest attic window of his home, appeared the worried face of Peter’s son. “All is quiet,” I chirped, gaily. It was the evening before my eighth birthday.

Peter

I’ll be back by morning. The sooner you sleep, the sooner you can wake up and eat birthday cakes. Your mother’s been hard at work all day. Sifting flour and placing raspberries. It’s all for you, my bird.

Peter’s Son

for me?

Peter

And if you go to sleep, you’ll dream of cakes. Birds made of cakes. The house made of cakes. You’ll wake up licking your pillow thinking it’s made of honey.

Peter’s Son

I shut my attic window against the paper city. I retreated into our salt block of a house, which melted infinite floating flakes around it.

A room of the house unfolds below:

In the kitchen two floors below, I heard my mother open and close the oven, then move toward the kitchen table. The house was very quiet. It was so quiet; you could have heard the laundered sheets my mother was folding. You could have heard each sheet meet the air and fold on itself.

Peter’s Wife’s bed sheet suspended, floating.

As the sound of linen floated up through my bedroom floorboards, I imagined the sheets as ghosts, floating in the middle of a great big solid room: imperceptible as ice shifting in an abandoned glass of water as it melts.

I could not fall asleep.

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JAMES DAVIS

Oh

“an abdominal muscle”
—The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

I’d like just one—the upper left, why not, indented there like the first cookie cut into the sheet of dough— to show off in becomingly posed glossies.

Picture me in profile, reclining poolside, my lower gut hidden under Ulysses, my one dense knot glistening with Coppertone.

Picture me in Vogue Hommes modeling my chum Giorgio’s white silk chemise with its single cutout you know where.

Up yours, ex-lover! Up yours, ennui! I exude core power, very specific core power: you don’t know what you’re missing, do you? Who doesn’t? Touch my tummy right there, yes, there, lick my little navel if you must, ignore the rest, it’s none of your concern, the good old penis. I didn’t suffer this long for you not to touch me where it counts.

Ba

“the eternal soul, in Egyptian mythology”
—The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

I copulate and my ba copulates. When my ba copulates with the men who dwell on the Island of Flames, I copulate with the goddesses.

I am come, shining and ba-full, having swallowed all their magic. I pervade all heavens and make happy the egg which created me. I do not weep over it. I will not be kept from drinking water from the stream.
34. discovering masses of sadness had ravaged my pneumonia; who left behind so much silence
southernness; who left me heavy with her stories and who mothered me as much as she could;
30. the poet: doll-like wife who followed herself into home from a bar for weeks;
27. Christopher v. the third battering ex- a martyr and thermometer for the unrequited
desert
23. 13-23 a martyr and thermometer for the unrequited his seattle apartment
20. my father laid three days dead; the city my father believed held heaven
and neon beaches which blanketed 19. returning to the showy suburbs he didn’t know i knew about
lending him money for coke
15. the repeat offender boyfriend; the family fable it became
14. the safeway plastics i’d packed rushing to leave
13. my mother’s fourth husband; the eight hours he’d held a rifle on us
12. my mother’s fourth husband; the eight hours he’d held a rifle on us
11. the first memory: soft arms flinging me into an old coffee can in the back of my closet. i would get out, the first one in
10. the toy aisle the stranger plucked me from
9. my mother awarded primary custody
8. my father spending rent on Disneyland
7. my mother’s tornadoes that tore everyone apart
6. my two classmates stolen from our first-grade restroom stalls
5. the house lost to a fireplace one winter evening;
4. the volcano bellowing my birth announcement; dedicated to my thirty-seven years
3. my first memory: soft arms flinging me
1. the volcano bellowing my birth announcement;
ders from how vividly it renders Charity’s situation as a financially dependent woman who can never quite break free from her male benefactor. By the end of the novel, after Charity has lost all illusions and finally fallen back on the only option left to her, we feel her standing among the “cross-currents of life as molecular and atomic as if she had been one of the tables screwed to the floor” (238). Wharton’s Berkshire fiction carries the reader far from the upper class worlds of The House of Mme. M and The Age of Innocence yet shares with these works an obsession with how inescapably the economic logic of the Gilded Age conditioned the lives of its men and—particularly its women. Wharton herself was acutely aware of the mordant “novelists” and social critics of the era so insistently censured. But her acute observations on the destructive power of wealth—both for those who lack it and those who possess it in excess—are in time with the other great works of the period. In the Berkshire, guests and regulars hosted in her eight years at The Mount was the novelist Henry James. Twenty years her senior and among the most highly esteemed African American novelists, James had moved, along with his brother, to the United States from Europe for the first time in two decades. At The Mount, James was engaged in reworking his Berkshire life with Edith and Tedesco began his work on his influential travel narrative The American Scene. The opening chapter of “The American Scene” includes a reflection on James’s visit to the Berkshire, noting a “longer medium on which England had changed since the mid-1880s when James had last visited. Writing in his not remotely dense prose, James intimates that the Berkshires are at once an idyllic pastoral—the very “heart of “New England” and a region conditionally dense and extremely unloving. In a passage on the Lenox Shaker Village, for example, he can’t fully decide whether the austere design of the settlement arises from the金山or the missionary’s imposition of a mortification made to “suit” (40). James’s suspicion that the entire village might be a tourist trap is in keeping with his broader belief that Gilded Age America had turned even the most authentic expressions of national culture into consumer commodities. In a letter to his wife, James acknowledged, to identify Gilded Age Berkshire culture only with the affulent Northeasterners who came to Lenox and Stockbridge from the country’s metropolitan centers. Two of Berkshire County’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century were two of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century. Both of Berkshire’s most influential humanitarians in the late 19th century.