

HIST 126J: Murder and Mayhem in Old New York
Professor Mary Lui

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Randall Spock

Stages of Modernity: The Thaw-Nesbit-White Scandal,
the New York Press, and the Drama of the Century

by Randall Spock

PROLOGUE

Diana, goddess of the hunt, surveyed the city with her usual solemnity. She perched delicately atop the tall tower of Madison Square Garden, her copper skin bathed in electric light. Her thirteen feet of lean, naked metal curved to a single point:¹ an arrow, tautly strung, firmly aimed toward the great white ribbon of Broadway.

Then: a slight breeze. In a single, fluid motion, the goddess spun in place, her arrow swooping toward another street, another set of twinkling lights.

For all its weight, for all its glittering audacity, the great statue would turn with the slightest shift in the winds.²

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New York. June 25th, 1906. 10:50 PM.

Two hundred feet below Diana, the rooftop theater of Madison Square Garden seethed with activity. The musical comedy *Mam'zelle Champagne* was entering its final act, and the frolicking chorus girls on stage were beginning to lose their audience's interest. Some of the nine

¹ Paul R Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White* (New York: Free Press, 1989); p 161.

² *New York Tribune*, 24 June 1906, p 4. Paula Uruburu, *American Eve: Evelyn Nesbit, Stanford White: The Birth of the "It" Girl and the Crime of the Century* (Riverhead Hardcover, 2008); p 67.

hundred theatergoers hooted and hissed; others chatted across their tables while waiters scurried to and fro with drinks.³

Then: an entrance, from the elevator farthest from the stage. A portly, mustachioed figure strode across the theater to a table five rows from the actors. Members of the crowd turned, smiled, and clapped as the man gave a little wave, sat down, and tucked his fist beneath his chin.⁴

The man was Stanford White, and the Garden in which he sat had sprung from his own hand. White had designed every facet of the building, from the vast ballroom under his feet to the soaring minaret above his head. He had chosen the rooftop theater's decorations and arranged for the night's performance. And he had illuminated the naked goddess who loomed over it all.⁵

Gazing at White, and pacing back and forth along the side of his theater, was a man who could easily have been mistaken for one of the costumed performers on stage. Despite the summer heat, he wore an overcoat, and kept its collar turned up around his face. His manner was tense, his gait somewhat unsteady.⁶

The man was Harry K. Thaw, scion of a wealthy Pittsburgh family. And even as he returned to his table, conferred with his friends, and escorted his wife toward the elevator, his eyes slid toward Stanford White.

On the stage, a tenor began to sing the show's climactic number.⁷

I've heard them say so often they could love their wives alone,

But I think that's just foolish; men must have hearts made of stone.

Thaw slipped away from his wife and friends.

³ Uruburu 279.

⁴ *New York Herald*, 26 June 1906.

⁵ Baker 158.

⁶ *New York Times*, 26 June 1906.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Now my heart is made of softer stuff; it melts at each warm glance.

A pretty girl can't look my way, without a new romance.

Thaw paced through the crowd as chorus girls joined the tenor onstage. He reached the front of White's table.

He could love a million girls, a girl with baby curls

In fact I think that he could love about a million girls!

CRACK. A shot. CRACK. CRACK. Two more. Stanford White, his shirt splattered with blood, his face blackened with gunpowder, slumped to the floor.⁸

"My God! He's shot him!"⁹

That quiet gasp was all that Evelyn Nesbit Thaw, still waiting by the elevator, could manage to say. Five years before, at age 16, she had stood at center stage as a chorus girl. Five seconds before, she had stood at the center of a love triangle. Now she stood at the edge of the vast audience and pressed her hand to her lip.¹⁰

The audience remained perfectly still. As Thaw walked toward the exit, gun held high, most of the nine hundred theatergoers stayed in their seats. There were no shouts. No shrieks. Not even the scraping of chairs. There was only a lingering, expectant silence.¹¹ And—according to some—a smattering of applause.¹²

* * *

In that fleeting moment, the audience at *Mam'zelle Champagne* thought the killing was all part of the play. And in a way, they were not very wrong. After a year had run its course—after the silence had yielded to shrieks, after the papers had spilt their gallons of ink, after a jury

⁸ *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1906.

⁹ Deborah Paul, *Tragic Beauty: The Lost 1914 Memoirs of Evelyn Nesbit* (2006); p 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1906.

¹² *Boston Globe*, 26 June 1906.

had returned its first indecisive verdict—journalist Samuel Williams looked back on the episode as a “remarkable cast of characters” on a “legal stage.”¹³

The stage metaphor was always apt. The murder of Stanford White at the hands of Harry K. Thaw, over the honor of Evelyn Nesbit, was indeed a drama of the most turbulent kind. And as that drama unfolded over months of lurid revelations and years of legal wrangling, it traveled through an unprecedented chain of storytelling that revealed as much about its tellers and hearers as its actors.

Like most dramas, this one started with a setting and protagonists. The setting was a New York City poised between tradition and modernity—a global metropolis finally ready for its close-up. The protagonists were three people who embodied some of the greatest contradictions of this historical moment—refinement intermingled with dissipation, prudery with recklessness, “New Womanhood” with age-old female dependency.

But these were merely the raw ingredients of the drama—ingredients that were only turned into narratives by the new class of storytellers known as the mass media. Long content to serve as mouthpieces to their community, New York newspapers now became the “eyes and ears of the world.”¹⁴ They transformed White, Thaw, and Nesbit—heretofore mere people—into characters. And they molded them into storylines that would best fit the old dramatic structure of hero and villain.

But this casting process didn’t end with the press. The final link in the chain of storytelling was the audience—America’s new national reading public. It was they who would have the final say on who was good, who was evil, and what the whole melodrama really meant.

¹³ Samuel Williams, “Reporting the Great Murder Trial,” *Pearson’s Magazine* (April 1907):, 455- 462; p 457.

¹⁴ Williams 456.

And even as these audience members relied upon the modern media for information, they were ready to diverge from it in their final interpretation.

When it was all over, the great White-Nesbit-Thaw saga had not, after all, strayed too far from the scene in Madison Square Garden. Just as Diana's arrow swung from one street to another, so did the press's finger of blame swing from character to character—and finally alight upon Thaw. And just as the audience of June 25th had greeted this cold-blooded killer with tepid applause, the audience of the following decade would greet him with raucous cheers.

* * *

ACT ONE: Introductions

Even before they held the world's attention, Stanford White, Evelyn Nesbit, and Harry Thaw were standing at the center of a grand stage. That stage was New York City at the turn of the century, a place where traditions of an old republic mingled with innovations of a modern metropolis. As America's largest city, with a population of nearly four million, New York was the most vibrant example of the country's urban transformation.¹⁵ Culturally, economically, and sexually, New York at the start of the 20th Century was rushing headlong into "modernity"—a word whose meaning was just beginning to be felt out by bohemian intellectuals and conservative traditionalists alike.¹⁶ The lives that White, Thaw, and Nesbit lived prior to June 25, 1906 embodied the contradictions of this modernizing moment, the clashing norms of a city perched between old and new. White's life showcased an old cultural tradition along with a new uninhibited lifestyle; Thaw's demonstrated an old moral prudery along with a new unhinged self-gratification; Nesbit's illustrated an old female subservience along with a new female autonomy.

¹⁵ Phyllis Leslie Abramson, *Sob Sister Journalism* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990); p 24.

¹⁶ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns* (Metropolitan Books, 2000); pp 1-2.

As their lives intersected, these three figures crystallized much of what made New York both age-old and brand-new—both good to some, and evil to others.

Stanford White was born in New York in 1853.¹⁷ His father, Richard Harding White, was a journalist, Shakespeare scholar, and ardent anglophile who despised what he saw as the coarseness of American manners.¹⁸ Stanford inherited his father’s refinement, but not his studied scorn. Far from simply spurning American tastes, he would enlarge them to encompass the elegance of past cultures and the grandeur of modern times.

White’s career as the most influential American architect of his generation took flight in the 1880s, when (as part of the firm McKim, Mead, and White) he became the foremost designer and decorator for New York’s high society.¹⁹ This thin upper crust, presided over by Mrs. John Jacob Astor, was an insular world of prominent families—an elite based on heredity and culture as well as economic clout.²⁰ Whether it was restricted to the super-elite “Four Hundred” or broadened to the more inclusive “ten thousand,” this sacred order of social betters came to rely on White to design their hallowed temples—homes and clubhouses for an endless series of banquets and balls.²¹ White adapted easily to the rarefied atmosphere of his clientele. Sought after for his company as well as his craft, he became a cherished member of the very clubs he designed.²² Thus, White was first and foremost a representative of the traditional New York establishment; his work a restatement of its time-honored preeminence. One particularly frank client of White surely spoke for much of her “set” when she told the young architect to build a ballroom “in which a person who was not well bred would feel uncomfortable.”²³

¹⁷ Paul R Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White* (Free Press, 1989); p 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 142.

²⁰ Eric Homberger, *Mrs. Astor’s New York* (Yale University Press, 2002); p 2.

²¹ *Ibid.* 4, 2.

²² Baker 148.

²³ Homberger 235.

But as his architectural career progressed, White did far more than kowtow to New York's existing tradition. Rather, he mingled this social tradition with older artistic ones, reaching back especially to the elegant Italian Renaissance style for a series of landmarks that would give New York all the architectural trappings of a great cultural capital.²⁴ Madison Square Garden was merely the most visible of White's formidable body of work, which included the Washington Square Arch, the Herald Building, and the New York University Library.²⁵ In one sense, White's life represented a harmonious link between past and future. He took the refined sensibilities of New York's age-old elite and inflated them to a grand, modern scale.

But while White's professional life was steeped in an old cultural tradition, his personal life was awash with the new pleasures of a New York bohemian. White "joyfully rode the crest of his age's materialism," procuring the most expensive artworks he could find and furnishing his apartments with unrestrained opulence.²⁶ Nor were White's acquisitions limited to inanimate objects. Throughout his middle age, White collected New York chorus girls like so many delicate sculptures—and seemed to find them much easier to throw out. The "Sewer Club," an informal coterie comprised of White and his friends, was a thinly disguised front for sexual liaisons in a New York apartment.²⁷ Even with a wife and son at home, White would spend great sums to advance the careers of young female dancers, then whisk them off to his city apartments to extract proper physical compensation.²⁸ Evelyn Nesbit, whom White met in 1901, was just one link in that long chain of sexual conquests—White sexually assaulted the 16-year-old girl, carried on a friendship with her for several years, and ultimately let her drift toward the margins

²⁴ Baker 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 148, 308.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 399.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 275.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 285.

of his life.²⁹ So prodigious was White's appetite for pleasures that it began to take a toll on his health. Few at the time remarked on the fact, but on June 25, 1906, Stanford White's failing liver and kidneys would probably have killed him within a year without Harry Thaw's intervention.³⁰

Thus, Stanford White stood just before his death as a prime example of both New York's cultural oldness and its sexual newness, its glittering purity and its slimy depravity. In a later autobiography, Evelyn Nesbit nicely summed up the contradictions of White's character: "He was a generously big man—and infinitely mean; he was kind and tender—and preyed upon the defenseless."³¹ In his sophistication as well as his decadence, the great architect "personified the nature, the very essence, of New York City [...] at the turn of the century."³²

* * *

Harry K. Thaw was another man who stood at the border of old-time respectability and new-school hedonism. But at first glance, he seemed to have far less to do with New York than the man he killed. Thaw was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and long after his ascent to notoriety in New York, he called himself Harry K. Thaw "of Pittsburgh."³³ "I'm not a New Yorker," he stated bluntly in one passage of his autobiography.³⁴

Yet Thaw was indeed a creature of New York City. For all his years idling in Pittsburgh and hobnobbing in European capitals, he increasingly turned to Gotham as the center of his peregrinations. And in the end, Thaw became fully enmeshed in the new New York's modern, uninhibited lifestyle—both on the side denouncing it and the side enjoying it.

²⁹ Ibid. 337.

³⁰ Baker 376.

³¹ Uruburu 97.

³² Baker x-xi.

³³ Uruburu 183.

³⁴ Harry K Thaw, *The Traitor, Being the Untampered with, Unrevised Account of the Trial and All That Led to It* (1926); p 88.

Thaw was born in 1871, the scion of one of the richest families in America. The Thaw clan's recent windfall, which sprang from coal and railroads, had left its Presbyterian conservatism unshaken.³⁵ For Harry's father especially, extreme wealth merely buttressed a firmly grounded tradition of philanthropy and moral uprightness.³⁶ Though closer to nouveau riche than old money, the Thaws were well-suited to the role of prim aristocrats—a fact that was fully expressed when Harry's sister Alice married into the British nobility, becoming the Countess of Yarmouth.³⁷

Harry Thaw's years at home and college were marked by illness, petulance, and mental instability.³⁸ But when he first entered New York, he seemed in some ways prepared to carry on his family's legacy of stiff-necked moral rectitude. Beginning around 1901, he became a notable figure in the organized backlash against New York's nascent bohemian lifestyle. Perhaps Thaw's hostility sprang from simple resentment: he had been rejected by many of the clubs that formed the backbone of traditional New York society.³⁹ Whatever the cause, he began to criticize the excesses of the clubs' members—and to focus his censure on “consummate clubman” Stanford White.⁴⁰ In Thaw's (seldom reliable) mind, White appeared as the epitome of modern moral dissipation, “a ravisher” who “boasted of having taken advantage of three hundred seventy-eight girls.”⁴¹

However fevered these imaginings were, they meshed perfectly with an anti-modern movement already very much alive in New York. Thaw found a ready ally in Anthony Comstock, the leader of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, whose crusade against New

³⁵ Uruburu 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 33,189.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 271.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 189.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 180.

⁴⁰ Baker 133.

⁴¹ Thaw 106.

York's abortionists, obscene mailings, and general lewdness had raged since the 1870s.⁴² The aging activist's most recent campaign had targeted Stanford White's repulsive nude goddess atop Madison Square Garden. Comstock exulted as he forced Stanford White and his partners to cover the statue in a cloak, then fumed as a stiff wind blew the garment away.⁴³ Now, Thaw provided Comstock the money for an ongoing investigation of White's sexual misdeeds.⁴⁴ In 1903, Thaw began courting Evelyn Nesbit; when he asked to marry her, she told him the story of White's depredations.⁴⁵ Back in New York, the outraged millionaire took Comstock's anti-vice campaign into his own hands, hiring private detectives to monitor White's movements.⁴⁶ June 25th, 1906, viewed from a certain angle, was simply Thaw's most audible declaration of his ongoing moralizing mission.

But throughout his traditionalist campaign, Thaw's hypocrisy was even starker than White's. Even as he joined Comstock in excoriating the flamboyant architect's break from traditional values, Thaw luxuriated in the rich man's playground of shiny, modern New York. He became, in his own words, "a Broadway animal,"⁴⁷ inspecting Evelyn Nesbit and other shapely showgirls in productions he would watch upwards of 40 times.⁴⁸ The playboy's break with moral convention also took more bizarre forms. On one occasion he rode a horse into the vestibule of the prestigious Union League Club;⁴⁹ on another, he intentionally crashed his newfangled automobile into a shop window on Fifth Avenue.⁵⁰ Such desecration of old city institutions went hand in hand with experimentation with modern vices. By the early 1900s, Thaw had become

⁴² Amy Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); p 98.

⁴³ Uruburu 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Paul 54.

⁴⁶ Baker 351.

⁴⁷ Thaw 100.

⁴⁸ Uruburu 182.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 180.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 11.

addicted to morphine and an injectable version of cocaine,⁵¹ a drug whose name had only entered common usage 15 years before.⁵² And after he married Evelyn, he combined drug use with a streak of sexual sadism as far opposed to Victorian standards of morality as could possibly be imagined.⁵³

Thus, Thaw straddled both sides of the cultural divide so evident in New York City. Born with one foot in a well-heeled, stiff-necked economic elite, he placed his other into a thoroughly hedonistic modern lifestyle. In a way, Thaw personified the same modern contradictions as White, just twisted in a different way. Where White was flamboyant and unconstrained, Thaw was finger-wagging and prudish; where White's was elegant and refined, Thaw was coarse and brutal.

* * *

In the midst of these two men drifted a woman who embodied a very different dichotomy. Evelyn Nesbit's life prior to June 25th, 1906, reflected the norms of both the autonomous, free-living "New Woman" and the traditional, male-dependent female.

Nesbit's newness was most immediately striking. Born Florence Evelyn Nesbit around 1885 to a suburban Pittsburgh family soon to be impoverished by the death of its patriarch, Nesbit caught the eye of local artists with her startlingly perfect features.⁵⁴ By the age of 14, solely by sitting for portraits and photographs, she had become her family's chief breadwinner.⁵⁵ This feat alone defied the old Victorian logic that "a woman's place was in the home"—in step

⁵¹ Baker 332.

⁵² *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵³ Baker 332.

⁵⁴ Uruburu 22, 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 44.

with 2.5 million other women of Nesbit's time, who doubled the ranks of the female work force in the run-up to 1900.⁵⁶

But Nesbit's true leap toward modernity came with her move to New York at the age of 15 and her discovery of a new consumer culture eager to commodify female beauty. The nascent pictorial advertising industry, perhaps New York's most sensational commercial upstart, immediately turned Evelyn into a pitchgirl for products as diverse as Rubifoam dentrifice, Coca-Cola, and Prudential life insurance.⁵⁷ And those in the new business of image-spreading were always willing to sell Evelyn on her own. Prodigiously popular picture postcards of the slender, scantily clad teenager testified to her power to possess men's minds and open their pockets.⁵⁸ Moreover, they gave Evelyn the public cachet she needed to carve out a life on her own terms.

In the imposing metropolis of New York, "New Womanhood turned upon a desire for experience and an attraction to the city's aesthetic possibilities"⁵⁹—and Nesbit's career arc certainly followed that logic. Dazzled by the lights of New York's vibrant Broadway, she became a singing, dancing "*Floradora* girl" on the stage.⁶⁰ Seen in the footlights as well as in ad campaigns, Evelyn's disarming, freely expressed beauty made her seem like something akin to a "sexual anarchist"⁶¹—a woman at the very vanguard of changes in modern female autonomy.

Yet behind this modern costume lay a far more traditional female lifestyle: one of constant dependence on men. Even at the highest points of her career, Nesbit depended on male sponsors, both for ordinary paternal guidance and for money to support her family. Stanford White was one such sponsor and at first seemed like the very model of a benevolent protector.

⁵⁶ Abramson 14, 23.

⁵⁷ Uruburu 67.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Stansell 29.

⁶⁰ Uruburu 79.

⁶¹ Ibid. 14.

The avuncular old man bought the 16-year-old Nesbit furs and gave her a ride on the red velvet swing he kept in his West 24th Street apartment.⁶² When Nesbit's mother left the city for a time, she gave her daughter a single instruction: "Obey Mr. White."⁶³

But White's economic control would soon transition to physical domination. While her mother was away, White lured Nesbit to his apartment, gave her champagne, and raped her as she lay unconscious on his bed.⁶⁴ In a strong indication of her lack of agency, the teenage Nesbit remained enamored of White, and stayed in his hands until she was relentlessly courted by Harry Thaw. Thaw plied Nesbit with gifts, took her to Europe, married her, and revealed a similar streak of vampiric affection: he flogged her mercilessly in the rented room of a gothic castle.⁶⁵

Caught between two men of considerable power and demonstrated brutality, Nesbit undoubtedly played them against each other. Before leaving for France, she accepted \$500 from White to avoid being beholden to Thaw.⁶⁶ Once there, she told Thaw her story in part to protect herself from White. Back in New York, she told White and his attorney of Thaw's violent actions, yet she continued to call White a "blackguard" in Thaw's dangerous presence.⁶⁷ Through certain calculated measures then, Nesbit was able to claw for some measure of personal security. But even for this icon of New York's commercialized sensuality, full independence was never an option.

Thus, as one photographer put it early in the young model's career, Evelyn Nesbit represented "innocence and experience combined."⁶⁸ Some parts of her life were marked by innocuous dependency; others by modern self-sufficiency, celebrity, and manipulative power.

⁶² Uruburu 107.

⁶³ Ibid. 102.

⁶⁴ Uruburu 137.

⁶⁵ Baker 332.

⁶⁶ Uruburu 230.

⁶⁷ Baker 334, 372.

⁶⁸ Uruburu 60.

With her fellow protagonists White and Thaw, Nesbit formed a morally nuanced troika that defied clear labels of “old,” “new,” “good,” or “bad.” The three main actors in the Garden tragedy were not cardboard characters—they were real people.

The transition from person to character required the new storyteller of the New York press. To be sure, all three of these figures did reside before the public eye. White’s buildings stood as monuments to his creativity, Nesbit’s postcards as testaments to her allure. Thaw’s odd antics and courtship of Nesbit got both of them much puzzled press coverage. But the flurry of reports did not quite coalesce—the isolated scenes about White, Thaw, and Nesbit never formed a plot. That would have to wait for a hot night in June.

* * *

ACT TWO: Alarum

On June 26th, 1906, as they did every day, two million five hundred thousand newspapers poured into the streets of New York City.⁶⁹ Like so many playbills, they all blared the same thing. “THAW KILLS STANFORD WHITE,” screamed the *New York Times*; “THAW MURDERS STANFORD WHITE,” retorted the *New York Tribune*. In its front-page story, the *Tribune* rather crassly summed up this most theatrical of murders: “probably one of the most dramatic finales to end a program in this city.”⁷⁰

But the real “program” was just beginning. The drama of the Thaw trial, as staged by the press, would unfold for years. Its first major scene would play out over more than 16 months, in a sensational “trial of the century”—followed by the second, almost perfunctory trial that actually decided Thaw’s fate.

⁶⁹ Williams 457.

⁷⁰ *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1906.

It is easy to see what made the Thaw case such a compelling drama to readers of the day. The three chief actors in the grand drama led interesting lives that pointed to the highs and lows of modernization in New York. But the significance of the Thaw drama lay not only in the distinctiveness of its actors, but in the magnitude and artfulness of its staging. The development of the mass media in New York City ensured that the Thaw case would be amplified and projected to an audience of millions. It was a drama about old and new, told in very new ways. More than any development that preceded it, the Thaw case was a story the modern New York press would tell and the modern world would heed.

* * *

The Thaw case galvanized a New York journalistic establishment that, like the city it occupied, was in the midst of a modernist transformation. For the past decade, a swelling population and developing journalistic establishment had contributed to a massive increase in urban readership. In 1837, at a high point of the city's first "penny press" revolution, the total circulation of New York papers had been 50,000.⁷¹ In 1906, it stood at 2,500,000—a five thousand percent increase.⁷² The Thaw case alone, by certain estimates, gained the New York papers 250,000 readers, quintuple the city's entire reading public in the mid-1800s.⁷³ Clearly, then, even as it built upon a publishing tradition of preceding years, the mass-produced and mass-consumed 20th Century newspaper was something entirely new.

That newness was reflected in each of the major papers that vied for New York's reading public. The venerable *New York Herald*, founded by James G. Bennett and passed along to James G. Bennett Jr., boasted the biggest circulation in the United States, with 511,900 readers.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Srebnick 66.

⁷² Williams 456.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *New York Herald*, 1 April 1907.

Along with the *Times*, the *Tribune*, and the *Post*, it took an increasingly professional and business-like approach to news reporting, and drew much of its revenue from commercial advertisements.

But such stolid publications were inevitably influenced by the most irrepressible phenomenon in turn-of-the-century printing: “Yellow Journalism.” This hard-charging, crowd-pleasing brew of sensationalism and factual content introduced practices that were soon widely imitated—including comic strips, banner headlines, and pictures next to news articles.⁷⁵ New York was the epicenter of this revolution. Together with the pathbreaking *New York Sun*, the two greatest standard-bearers of Yellow Journalism—Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*—competed throughout the turn-of-the-century period for a primarily working-class reading public.⁷⁶ In 1906, Hearst’s campaign for Governor of New York (famously fictionalized in *Citizen Kane*) marked a high-water mark for this populist style’s influence.

But the newness of this mass media had its limits. In most cases, the quality- and circulation-boosting schemes of the New York papers were tailored to a local demographic—the papers of New York City were *for* New York City. Even when they took an active role in world affairs—Hearst famously (and dubiously) claimed credit for sparking the Spanish-American War—they were simply repackaging major global events for a local urban readership. The press’s localism kept it shy of true modernism.

The first Thaw trial would change that. Writing for *Pearson’s Magazine* after most of the tumult had subsided, Samuel Williams marveled, “the newspaper writers and artists in the court represented a public a million times greater than could have crowded within sight and hearing.

⁷⁵ Abramson 20-21.

⁷⁶ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); pp 22-23.

The reporters became the eyes and the ears of the world.”⁷⁷ Suddenly, New York journalists were not just pandering to a local audience—they were riding high on a wave of a new, global print culture that put their city at the center of the map. As Williams reports, “London papers printed more of the Thaw case than of the destruction of San Francisco, and San Francisco papers gave it more attention than the death of Queen Victoria.”⁷⁸ The trial wasn’t just a global story told to New York—it was a global story told *about* New York. Thus, even while they retained their core urban readership, the New York papers stood poised to deliver the world’s authoritative account of the century’s most sensational story. As one historian notes, such a rise in journalistic preeminence was a major cause of New York’s transition from one of America’s “provincial capitals” to the “arbiter of contemporary culture” for the entire United States.⁷⁹ The spotlight that shone upon the Thaw case also glinted off mirrors brandished by the New York press—and illuminated America’s growing cultural capital all the more brightly.

* * *

During the chaotic days following the murder, it sometimes seemed that the New York press was simply blinded by the light. A cacophony of facts and rumors flowed from every news outlet. For the first time, telegraph equipment was set up in a courtroom, sending an unremitting stream of hastily compiled stories across the country and overseas.⁸⁰ For the first time in American history, the jury was “sequestered” for the duration of the trial—shielded from the unprecedented torrent of newspaper coverage.⁸¹ The reading public’s appetite for scandal was

⁷⁷ Williams 456.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 457.

⁷⁹ Stansell 4.

⁸⁰ Lloyd Chiasson, *The Press on Trial* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997); p 70.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

prodigious, and the papers sometimes took novel, often absurd measures to satiate it—“Harry Thaw Has a Cold” blurted one desperate headline in the *Tribune*.⁸²

But as the Thaw case progressed, the New York papers became less like haphazard purveyors of information and more like self-conscious storytellers. Their stream of articles coalesced around three major storylines—each connected to the flaws of one of the protagonists. Far from presenting White, Nesbit and Thaw as people and leaving their life stories uninflected, the newspapers turned them into characters, and grafted them onto shifting narratives of villainy. They drafted these narratives through means both explicit and subtle, employing new techniques of journalistic scripting and stagecraft. And ultimately, they used these narratives to take a stand for or against the currents of change flowing through New York.

As the case progressed, so did the press’s evaluation of the modernity represented by each character. Thus, the early anti-White and anti-Nesbit narratives were mostly anti-modern attacks against New York’s new atmosphere of liberty and license. But the anti-Thaw narrative, around which the press gradually congregated, was as a mostly pro-modern critique of an old, decrepit order. Thus, where the papers that embodied modern New York often sought to align themselves with forces of tradition, they ultimately came down on the side of newness and change.

* * *

In the immediate aftermath of June 25th, it was the dead man who fared worst in the pages of the New York press. The attack on Stanford White’s reputation was swift and sustained. It was also of a prying, explicit character unthinkable in earlier times. As recently as 1893, news columnist Ward McAllister had endured the outrage of the “Four Hundred”—and ultimately a fall from social grace at their hands—merely for publishing pieces about elegant social

⁸² *New York Tribune*, 23 December 1906.

escapades.⁸³ Now such old-style idle gossip paled in comparison to the papers' unstinting revelations about White's philandering. In a telegram to the Herald Building—the one that White himself had designed—Editor-in-Chief James G. Bennett Jr. summed up the game plan of many New York papers: “Give him Hell!”⁸⁴ The *Tribune* immediately printed testimony from an anonymous city cab driver, who opined, “I always thought that fellow would be killed sooner or later, but I thought that it would be a father that would do it—not a husband.”⁸⁵ As time wore on, the prurient speculation became more shockingly specific. By February, Hearst's *Journal* was trumpeting a story it had investigated relentlessly: the lurid tale Susie Johnson, a teenage girl paid \$50 to burst out of a pie at one of White's parties, who then submitted to White's attentions.⁸⁶

But the explicit character of the anti-White narrative only reached its apex after Evelyn Nesbit took the stand in early February. Her unsparing tale of White's ravishing—which Thaw's lawyers claimed had driven their client temporarily insane—was reproduced verbatim by nearly every New York paper, “yellow” and black-and-white alike. Never had such frank, carnal language been so prolifically printed; newspapers elsewhere in the country, such as the *Atlanta Constitution*, simply refused to carry the testimony.⁸⁷ The shock to the established standards of decency reverberated all the way to Washington, where an affronted President Roosevelt demanded that the trial transcripts be censored.⁸⁸ In an editorial opposing this move, the *World* (co-founded, somewhat ironically, by White's father⁸⁹) left little doubt that it viewed the unexpurgated testimony as part of a coherent, purposeful narrative against White's lifestyle.

⁸³ Homberger 156.

⁸⁴ Baker 381.

⁸⁵ *New York Tribune*, 27 June 1906, p 2.

⁸⁶ *New York Journal*, 18 February 1907.

⁸⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 February 1907, p 4.

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, 12 February 1907.

⁸⁹ Baker 9.

“The more frankly, baldly and repulsively these facts are taught,” it insisted, “the more repellent to vice will be their effect.”⁹⁰

Undoubtedly, the explicit coverage of White’s moral failings titillated readers and boosted sales. But as the *World* editorial hinted, it also stood as something more profound: an attack by the New York press on White’s sybaritic brand of modernity. By laying bare the failings of the man, the papers laid bare the moral missteps of their modern city. As a widely reprinted editorial in the *New York Post* put it, the heady new spirit of the age “tended to debase the artist to its own standards.” White’s “frittering away of genius,” it concluded, was “an exhortation to all true artists to master that most difficult art of being in the world, but not of it.”⁹¹ Stanford White was a creature “of” his modern, metropolitan world—and by lining up against him, New York papers held up a mirror to that world’s sinister side. Paradoxically, then, the press’s very modern anti-White narrative arose in defense of old-style tradition.

But the anti-White narrative did not stand alone. It mingled with and gradually yielded to another tale of villainy—this one featuring Evelyn Nesbit. Where the anti-White narrative was grounded in a new journalistic explicitness, the anti-Nesbit narrative was grounded in a new journalistic subtlety. Beyond obvious screeds against modern misconduct, the press turned to more insidious measures, inflecting seemingly evenhanded news coverage in order to raise questions about Nesbit’s worth. While the methods were subtler, the effect was equivalent: an attack by the New York press on another caricatured representative of modernity.

Turn-of-the-century New York papers were global pioneers in the effort to communicate information through means other than text. And just after the murder, the papers laid the groundwork for the anti-Nesbit narrative with the most arresting of their new visual forms: the

⁹⁰ *New York World*, 11 September 1907.

⁹¹ Baker 382.

printed photograph.⁹² Nearly every paper published its first accounts of the murder with an inky triptych of the three key figures. And almost always, the place in the eye-catching center was not granted to the killer or his victim, but to Evelyn Nesbit.⁹³ The *Tribune* even went so far as to make Nesbit's picture twice as large as the men around her.⁹⁴ This image of an alluring woman between two men conveyed an obvious, well-worn plotline: that of a "love triangle" with the seductive female the true source of conflict. Throughout the case, more and more pictures of Nesbit were printed, far eclipsing those of Thaw and White.⁹⁵ Even as the headlines screamed "THAW MURDERS STANFORD WHITE," readers from the very beginning could not help but see Nesbit as the major player in the tragedy. Subtly, even subliminally, this careful journalistic staging brought home more than any mere headline the perception of Nesbit as a behind-the-scenes female manipulator—the "cause of it all."⁹⁶

Nesbit's February testimony provided further openings for subtle aspersions on her "New Womanhood." Even as the young woman's tale of victimization sparked journalists' outrage at White's actions, it produced an undercurrent of indignation at her own immodest frankness. One *New York Times* article, "Roosevelt Plans Thaw Censorship," demonstrated this point so slyly that it merits specific analysis.⁹⁷ On its face a news article with the *Times*' usual modern, polished impartiality, the piece subtly thrusts Nesbit into an unflattering light. Invariably, it refers to the lewd trial transcripts as "the testimony of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw." Nowhere does the article mention the *contents* of that testimony (namely, White's licentious actions), nor even the name Stanford White—the lewdness seems to flow from young Evelyn's mouth alone. The

⁹² Homberger 19.

⁹³ *New York Times*, 26 June 1906; *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1906; *New York Herald*, 26 June 1906.

⁹⁴ *New York Tribune*, 26 June 1906.

⁹⁵ Williams 462.

⁹⁶ Uruburu 5.

⁹⁷ *New York Times*, 12 February 1907.

quotation with which the *Times* closes the article deviously drives home this perception.

Speaking in support of Roosevelt's censorship, and referring to the recent banning of the obscene play "Salome" from the Metropolitan Opera House, a lawyer is quoted as saying, "A thousand 'Salomes' could do less harm than one story of the testimony of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw." The sleight-of-tongue is unmistakable; flimsy quotation marks around the name of the opera cannot erase the image of Evelyn Nesbit as the equivalent of a thousand Salomes. When the article was published, the Biblical allusion could not have been lost on *Times* readers: just as Salome demanded the head of John the Baptist in exchange for her lewd dance, so (perhaps) Evelyn Nesbit demanded the head of Stanford White in exchange for her feminine wiles. In articles like this one, newspapers employed sophisticated subtext to tarnish Nesbit's image without direct attacks on her character.

The final chunk of the anti-Nesbit narrative came in more open form, as journalists of every stripe began to question the veracity of her testimony against White. But such skepticism would be broadcast most damagingly by a single group of newswriters: the entirely new cadre of female "human interest" journalists.⁹⁸ Known as the "Sob Sisters" for their maudlin writing style, these pioneering professional women began to attack Nesbit openly in late March of 1907, when another twist in the trial revealed that Nesbit had drafted an affidavit certifying Thaw's sexual abuse and downplaying White's.⁹⁹ Dorothy Dix, a Sob Sister writing for the *Journal*, wrote sorrowfully that the revelations showed "Evelyn Nesbit lying to Thaw in Paris or lying to White in New York while she lived luxuriously on the money of both."¹⁰⁰ By themselves, words like these were harsh enough. But arguably, the implications of their authorship were even more damning. In 1907, women were still not allowed to serve as jurors in New York State, and their

⁹⁸ Abramson 33.

⁹⁹ Abramson 94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 95.

presence in newspaper offices was still very much an innovation.¹⁰¹ Entering the courtroom, the Sob Sisters were surely as conscious of a continuing male-dominated social order as Nesbit was. Their decision to deny any sort of sisterly solidarity with the sexually abused woman at the witness stand carried a devastating suggestion: even in the eyes of modernized women, Nesbit's manipulations placed her outside of acceptable gender boundaries.

Together, all of the New York press's subtle indications added up to skeptical appraisal of her new feminine autonomy. Far from being a powerless pawn struggling for independence, Nesbit appeared as a manipulative "New Woman" who sought to turn hapless men to her will. Here again, the New York papers issued a harsh judgment of their city's modern transformation: the new female agency, they suggested, had gone too far. That judgment would persist to the end of the trial and receive reinforcement from the District Attorney William Jerome; his closing argument included the direct claim that Nesbit had "egged on" Thaw to kill White.¹⁰²

* * *

By the time of that closing argument, though, even the anti-Nesbit narrative had been edged to the side by the New York press's final plot device: the anti-Thaw narrative. The accused murderer himself, implicitly portrayed as the hero in the anti-White narrative and the dupe in the anti-Nesbit one, finally came to be shown as the villain in his own right. But this final press perspective, around which New York papers found something surprisingly close to consensus, differed from the prior narratives in one striking way: it embraced modernity more than it spurned it.

Of course, much of what the press came to loathe about Thaw revolved around his modern forms of dissipation. A *New York Times* editorial at the close of the trial, the strongest of

¹⁰¹ Jean Marie Lutes, "Sob Sisterhood Revisited," *American Literary History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 504-531. p 515.

¹⁰² *New York Herald*, 11 April 1907.

many indignant voices, called him “degenerate, coarse, dissolute, criminal,” and dubbed his crime a “cowardly Tenderloin murder”—affiliating Thaw with an especially hedonistic quarter of the city.¹⁰³

But often the press preferred to impugn the more “traditional” parts of Thaw’s character—such as the wealth of his upright industrialist family. Incidental details like the \$127.36 found in Thaw’s pockets on the night of the murder¹⁰⁴ (\$3,000 in today’s money) blossomed into open attacks like the *Herald’s* “Thaw’s Millions Ready For Proof of Open Insult,” which suggested that the young millionaire’s family could bribe witnesses into denigrating White.¹⁰⁵ In an age in which J.P. Morgan and other financiers thought “The Committee of Prominent and Wealthy Citizens” a perfectly acceptable name for a charitable organization, such rich-baiting was still a distinctly new phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ It was a vernacular more associated with modern Populism and Progressivism than New York’s conservative capitalist establishment.¹⁰⁷

Thaw’s lawyers consistently sought to envelop him in time-honored traditions other than extreme wealth—but these, too, would come to earn the scorn of the press. First, the Thaw lawyers embraced the old statutes of the New York legal system, which ensured that Nesbit’s testimony about White’s predations would be admissible as evidence of her husband’s mental disquiet, even if it could not be conclusively verified.¹⁰⁸ Next, Thaw’s legal team sought refuge in the most backward-looking argument imaginable: the “unwritten law” that a man may avenge the honor of his defiled wife. In his grandiloquent closing statement, lead Thaw attorney Delphin

¹⁰³ *New York Times*, 13 April 1907.

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times*, 26 June 1906.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Herald*, 1 July 1906.

¹⁰⁶ Beverly Gage, *The Day Wall Street Exploded* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); p 63.

¹⁰⁷ Abramson 12.

¹⁰⁸ Uruburu 342.

Delmas put forth the baldest possible appeal to this pre-modern chivalry. He suggested that Thaw's true mental condition was "Dementia Americana ... that species of insanity that persuades an American that whoever violates the sanctity of his home ... has forfeited the protection of the laws of this state," and asked the jury to acquit "in the name of that religion which has antedated that human law."¹⁰⁹ The jury complied at least partially with Delmas: while seven members voted in favor of the murder conviction, five held out against it.

This result, which necessitated a second trial, sent New York newspapers into a paroxysm of disgust. This time, direct editorials were the journalistic weapon of choice—and all their thrusts had a decidedly anti-traditional bent. The *Post* couched its disappointment in the language of political reform, calling for a revamping of the creaking New York court system.¹¹⁰ The *Tribune* ridiculed the fuzzy nostalgia of "Dementia Americana" and hailed District Attorney Jerome for doing the same.¹¹¹ The *Times* quickly pointed to a "Consensus of New York Papers": the semi-acquittal of Thaw was a travesty, the "unwritten law" a sham.¹¹² Thus, in the New York press's final analysis, Thaw appeared as something more than a lunatic: he was a symbol of an outdated status quo. Thaw's expensive lawyers, influential family, and recourse to a romanticized, anti-modern past were the deepest flaws of his character. Where the papers' other plotlines had attacked modernity, then, the anti-Thaw narrative implicitly extolled it.

Interestingly, as they put the finishing touches on their anti-Thaw narrative, some papers seemed to hint at an anti-jury one. The *Times* castigated the five jurymen who kept Thaw from the electric chair, implying that they had been blindly duped by Delmas's calculated

¹⁰⁹ *New York Herald*, 10 April 1907.

¹¹⁰ *New York Times*, 14 April 1907.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

traditionalism.¹¹³ Taking much the same view, the *Tribune* showed more pity than anger, and blamed the sequestered jury's confusion on its inability to get information from the mass media. "The knowledge of these facts," it insisted, "which the public has through the newspapers, would have helped the jury reach a verdict, as it has, indeed, enabled the public to make up its mind regarding this sensational case."¹¹⁴

Here, at the close of the Thaw trial, was the New York press's ultimate declaration of self-confidence in its storytelling. So powerful were the papers, the *Tribune* suggested, that they could directly turn the public to the truth. The storylines of the New York press could have given the trial its proper outcome—if only the twelve men in the box had been allowed to hear it.

After the frenzied crescendo of Thaw's first trial, his second quickly dwindled into anticlimax. Where the first had taken four months, the second took only four weeks. Thaw's lawyers rapidly decided to argue that their client was permanently and not temporarily insane, and the swift acquiescence of the jury sent Thaw to Mattevean Asylum for the Criminal Insane in upstate New York, where by most accounts he had reasonably comfortable accommodations and freedom of movement.¹¹⁵ And so, for a time, it seemed the curtain had closed on the Thaw drama. The New York media made use of its time in the spotlight by soliloquizing, directly and obliquely, against the lustfulness and female autonomy of its modern era—and also against the chivalric notions and judicial practices of its traditional past. In doing so, it had boldly asserted its power to give narrative shape to the public discourse.

But there was one more act to come. It was a coda that would directly challenge the *Tribune's* confidence in the press's persuasive power. It was, in a way, an abbreviated restaging of the same old performance—but this time, with audience participation.

¹¹³ *New York Times*, 13 April 1907.

¹¹⁴ *New York Tribune*, 13 April 1907.

¹¹⁵ Baker 392.

ACT THREE: Ovation

On August 17, 1913, after six years of appealing to bodies as high as the U.S. Supreme Court for release from his tastefully appointed prison, Harry Thaw simply walked out. As a milkman's cart lumbered out of Matteawan, Thaw slipped out of the gates and into a black limousine waiting for him on the other side of the road.¹¹⁶ His subsequent escape to Canada, followed by months of lengthy diplomatic impasse, then extradition to the United States, landed him back in New York City in the summer of 1915—for the Thaw case's final, decisive trial.

Much of this last scene played out like a flashback. Most of the same figures were present; much of the sensational testimony was retold. But this time Thaw behaved with more calm and composure in the courtroom.¹¹⁷ And this time the jury rewarded him fully: it voted unanimously to declare Thaw sane and set him free.¹¹⁸

All these events were monitored by a New York press which had, in the past eight years, travelled still further along the road of modernization. In 1915, Europe was embroiled by the world's first fully industrialized war, and the New York papers covered it with a discipline that befitted their country-wide importance. In 1907 the *New York Herald* still littered its front page with such parochial items as "Trenton Woman Made Blind by Violent Attack of Sneezing";¹¹⁹ now it included little but the most consequential movements of the Kaiser's armies.¹²⁰

Confronted anew by the Thaw case, nearly all of these modernized New York papers treated it as an old, stale drama, already milked of all its thematic urgency. As the trial unfolded over the first two weeks of July, the *Herald* and *Times* did not give it front-page coverage until the 13th. The *World* nearly ignored Harry Thaw altogether; its headlines about the case named

¹¹⁶ Abramson 126.

¹¹⁷ *New York World*, 2 July 1915.

¹¹⁸ *New York Herald*, 15 July 1915.

¹¹⁹ *New York Herald*, 1 April 1907.

¹²⁰ *New York Herald*, 1-5 July 1915.

only Evelyn Nesbit.¹²¹ The *Tribune* marked the trial's end with a snide, anti-Thaw editorial, next to a cartoon in which the Thaw case was depicted as a festering tooth, pulled from the mouth of a man marked "NY." "My, What a Relief!" read the caption.¹²² The *Herald*, lamenting "the slime of the Thaw money," confidently concurred with its peers: "Most people will be glad to see the State rid of his case."¹²³

But outside of the printed page, something strange was happening: "most people" were not conforming to the press's assumptions. The Thaw drama was no longer confined to the margins of the New York newspapers; it had spilled out into the minds of the American public. And upon that stage of collective consciousness, Thaw was appearing very clearly—as a hero.

Before and after the trial, everywhere he went, Thaw received accolades from spontaneously gathered crowds. In Concord, New Hampshire, where he first surrendered to authorities, three hundred cheered him on to Boston, where "tens of thousands" gave him a "cheering welcome" on his way to New York.¹²⁴ After Thaw's final courtroom triumph, thousands of equivalently worshipful New Yorkers congregated on the courthouse steps to express their jubilation.¹²⁵

For the opinion shapers of the city press, something had gone awry. In 1907 the New York media had emerged as the great connector of current events to public minds. Now, in 1915, the media and the minds seemed totally severed. Each anti-Thaw newspaper was compelled to carry coverage of two parallel universes—that of the journalists' opinions and that of the New York public's. On the same day it ran its editorial denouncing the Thaw "slime," the *World* had to acknowledge on its front page that the murderer left the court "cheered by a multitude,

¹²¹ *New York World*, 8 July 1915.

¹²² *New York Tribune*, 17 July 1915.

¹²³ *New York World*, 15 July 1915.

¹²⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 1915.

¹²⁵ *New York World*, 15 July 1915.

shrieked at by women, shaken by the hand by many men.”¹²⁶ The *Sun* put the press’s palpable frustration into words: “In all this nauseous business, we don’t know which makes the gorge rise more, the pervert buying his way out, or the perverted idiots that hail him with wild huzzas.”¹²⁷

But however “perverted” the pro-Thaw groundswell may have seemed, it was certainly democratic. The thousands of New Yorkers who hailed the murderer were hardly the tuxedoed elite; they were the hoi polloi. They were not limited to men; women mingled and “shrieked” in the audience. In short, the people cheering Thaw were not a curious subculture insulated from the words of the press—they were the very people who had read New York newspapers’ coverage of the Thaw case from the beginning.

Confronted by this parade of the paper-buying populace, one New York paper decided to join right in. It was Hearst’s *Journal*, which in abandoning even the semblance of impartiality or consistency made itself the great exception of the New York press establishment. It granted the trial front-page coverage from the middle of June—and on July 15th, gave Thaw’s provisional release from jail equal billing with the British landing at Gallipoli.¹²⁸ Dorothy Dix—who in 1907 had joined others in speculating that Thaw might be “dragging a young girl through the mire”¹²⁹—now filled the top of an entire page with the headline “THAW’S CHIVALRY TO WIFE STRIKES HUMAN CHORD.”¹³⁰ “He is one of the Peter Pans of life who will never grow up,” Dix wrote fondly in one article. “In that lies his essential charm.”¹³¹ The *Journal* had sided with its readers over its own archives.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ *New York Sun*, 15 July 1915.

¹²⁸ *New York Journal*, 15 July 1915.

¹²⁹ Abramson 96.

¹³⁰ *New York Journal*, 10 July 1915.

¹³¹ *New York Journal*, 16 July 1915.

As the *Journal* cheered and the other papers jeered, none seemed eager to analyze the crowd's motivation from a critical distance. But it is easy to conceive of the pro-Thaw rallies as a double blow against the New York modernity that the papers had both debated and represented.

First and most obviously, the sentiment voiced by the crowd was overtly traditional. By hailing Thaw with unconstrained huzzahs, members of the New York public showed that he appeared to them not as a dupe or a thug, but as an embodiment of honor and nobility. By either ignoring or celebrating Thaw's crime, the crowd gave its most ringing endorsement to the anti-White narrative that New York papers had created and discarded. They even embraced the idea of "Dementia Americana" so ridiculed by the press: the foreman of the jury, the foremost of Thaw's common-man celebrants, stated after the ruling that the "unwritten law" had been his chief influence.¹³² Thus, the New York crowd's cheers formed a resolute attack on modern sexual depravity—and a defense of the most traditional means of refuting it.

But the crowd also delivered a second, subtler blow against New York's modernity. In parting from the consensus of its city's mass media, it demonstrated that this modern journalistic Goliath was far from all-powerful. Journalists could control what the public saw of the drama and could influence how they saw it. They could trumpet opinions, they could craft storylines, and they could unleash powerful narratives on the stage of public discourse. But in the long run, the papers could not control which of these elements their audience would choose to internalize.

Nor could they keep America's new nationalized reading public from cutting both ways. Paradoxically, as the New York papers expanded their reach throughout the country, they could no longer keep their local community within their grasp. The same nationalizing, globalizing forces that allowed New York coverage to flow to the American public allowed American public perception to flow back to New York. Thus, the cheering crowd that greeted Thaw outside the

¹³² *New York Journal*, 19 July 1915.

courthouse was essentially the same as the ones that had greeted him at Concord and Boston, and the one that would soon greet him at Pittsburgh.¹³³

In a newspaper interview, the foreman of the Thaw jury gave the clearest voice to this power of the American public in the face of the modern New York press: “Why, I knew all about the Thaw Case before I read about it in the newspapers.”¹³⁴ Clearly, this blithe statement was a confabulation—the newspapers were the chief way that *every* New Yorker received information about Thaw’s story. But the foreman’s hyperbole touched on a greater truth: the modern press was not a hypodermic needle, injecting opinions into the body politic. It was simply a set of writers, staging a continuously redrafted series of narratives, and hoping the vast audience of the city and country would react as it was supposed to. And if it didn’t—as the *Journal* showed—the audience members could shape the storytelling just as much as the storytelling shaped them. In this case, even as they were informed and entertained by very modern means, the audience of New York newspaper readers emerged from the theater with a greater regard for tradition. And they even managed to perform their own little drama. Staged on courthouse steps, it was a scene of tradition’s fight against the new morals—both ethical and narrative—of the modern metropolis.

EPILOGUE

For the three main players in the Thaw case, the judgment of the populace had very personal consequences. Harry Thaw was allowed to live out his “eccentric” life unmolested—even when he went on to molest a 19-year-old boy—and died in comfort at age 76.¹³⁵ Evelyn Nesbit, discarded by her husband and shrouded in notoriety, descended into morphine addiction

¹³³ *New York Times*, 20 July 1915.

¹³⁴ *New York Journal*, 19 July 1915.

¹³⁵ Abramson 128.

and spent much of her middle age in ever tawdrier nightclubs.¹³⁶ And Stanford White moldered in his grave as his beautiful buildings were knocked down one by one. When the iconic Madison Square Garden was slated for destruction in 1925, the *New York Times* tried to soften the blow with a paean to White’s genius—but conceded, “it has seemed that the hand of destruction has been reaching out for certain representative and popular structures of Stanford White.”¹³⁷ It is tempting to wonder if a great architect with an unsullied reputation would have had his works weeded out so readily.

But stories change with every retelling. In 1955, long after the real Thaw story had faded out of public recollection, Evelyn Nesbit served as the creative consultant for its Hollywood remake: *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*.¹³⁸ Some thought the film too erotic; others found it too “whitewashed.”¹³⁹ But few viewers objected to the basic premises of the plot: Thaw was the clear villain; White the dapper Casanova; Nesbit the innocent victim.¹⁴⁰

It could be said once again that the audience’s reaction said more about themselves than the actors onstage. Fifty years after the murder on the rooftop, ideas had changed, in New York and all of America. And they were still changing—endlessly, inexorably keeping pace with the times. Sometimes the public showed itself willing to embrace newness and change, and sometimes it didn’t. But it was always eager for a new show.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 132.

¹³⁷ *New York Times*, 22 March 1925.

¹³⁸ Stephanie Savage, “Evelyn Nesbit and the Film(ed) Histories of the Thaw-White Scandal,” *Film History* 8, no. 2 (1996): 159-175. p 170.

¹³⁹ Savage 170-172.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 168.