New York City: «Gilt Cage» or «Promised Land»?

Representations of Urban Space in Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska

Bearbeitet von
Irene Billeter Sauter

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New York simply meant peace and freedom to me: it was coming home.

Almost everybody the world over has some claim on the city of New York. This, sadly, is even more so after the terrible events of 09/11 have forever engraved the collapsing Twin Towers in our collective memory. Our rather naïve hopes of an always better tomorrow, mirrored in the lofty designs of the city’s skyscrapers and the endless possibilities of a never sleeping city, were instantly shattered. But even such a traumatic, unimaginable event as that has shown us one thing: New York is still standing, it has not vanished from the map and has shown the world that it will endure.

We all have some prior knowledge of New York City, we have acquired textual or visual images of it that may have been personally experienced or gained from another source. New York City, and more specifically Manhattan, is more than just a place; it often is what we imagine it to be, too. This cosmopolitan city sees itself with no modesty as the very center of the world and the innumerable representations of it in the arts attest to that. By locating itself like this, New York City allows everyone the right to superficial access and understanding. But Manhattan’s layers and nuances are many. While knowledge can be gained by circumferential acquaintance with just a few of its offerings, the richness of it all becomes evident only to the one who is willing to go past its outer layers to the very core, to the heartbeat of a city that constantly reinvents itself, both in real life and in literature.

But not only Manhattan’s mantra is reinvention and change: people, too, flock to the city hoping to transform their lives. Oscar Handlin realized this pointedly when he wrote that “[o]nce I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were America.” This ultimately American characteristic has its roots in its founding history: ever since early European settlement, America has been the land of opportunity and hope, and New York City, being the port of entry, the ultimate city of new arrivals. As Barack Obama put it in his recent victory speech: “For that is the true genius of America that America can change”. He continued that it was entirely pos-
sible to “reclaim the American Dream” even today. Certainly no other American city than New York better reflects this entrepre-
neurial spirit and willingness for constant reinvention. Through-
out its history, New York City has always had a transformational influence and has been an animated figure with human traits rather than simply a geographical locus: “If you live in the city long enough, the city itself becomes a character.”