Abstract

“Power in Repose” argues that American literature provided its own response to the cult of wakefulness that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Narratives by authors Henry James, Charles Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman emerged from a time in which conceptions of rest were reshaped by the coalescence of America’s Protestant work ethic and industrial advancement. By complicating the separation of public and private space, my chosen texts present characters exhausted by the permeation of the supposedly impervious aspects of modernity, such as artificial light, traffic commotion, and round-the-clock labor and social activity. Marginalized figures are the most vulnerable in these narratives, as they are constantly compelled by the cultural clock and their bodies are pushed to the limits within an increasingly mechanized world. Such fears are no thing of the past and continue to saturate today’s culture, yet literary scholarship lacks an in-depth study of the sleep anxieties that emerged in fin-de-siècle U.S. literature. Thus, “Power in Repose” shines a much-needed light on the pivotal yet enigmatic role sleep plays in American life, offering humanities scholars new ways to understand the circumscription of sleep and social agency in the modern age.