

WHAT WE DO IN THE LAMPLIGHT

The first source of artificial illumination, the wax candle, was invented nearly 1600 years ago, and for much of that time, with its dim, flickering light, it was the *only* source. Further innovations in lighting would come many centuries later, beginning with the first oil lamps in 1783, the refinement of petroleum to produce kerosene lighting in the 1850's, and gas-powered lamps, entering the domestic space after the American Civil War. Gas lighting took decades to gain popular acceptance, by which time, the next wave of illumination technology — the incandescent light bulb, invented by Thomas Edison in 1879 — was already nipping at its heels. By 1900, “electric lighting was an accepted fact of urban life,” and the power of electricity became directed to other uses, leading to the development of labor-saving technologies for the home and the workspace, along with innovations in entertainment.

As architect and historian Witold Rybczynski writes in his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, these **improvements in artificial lighting also allowed a level of social connection, and disconnection, that was not previously possible.** Gas lamps could light a full room, rather than a small area, allowing the individual to take more personal space. Sitting close to others becomes a choice, and sometimes a negotiation. Reading and self-study become more common, as oil and gas lighting allow for reading during the night. Brighter domestic spaces bring attention to cleanliness, coinciding with the recent proliferation of Louis Pasteur's germ theory. The end result, as the advertising would have you believe, is brighter, cleaner spaces, available for illuminating discussions and late-night fancies.

For the characters of *In the Next Room*, the reality is more complicated. A new technology comes to represent an uncertainty in their ability to connect with each other. The play sees them navigating how and when technology helps them to reveal themselves to each other, and when it allows them to hide their true wants and desires.