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# Friends and rivals, Edith Wharton's women

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Friends and Rivals, Edith Wharton's Women

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DISSERTATION

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in  
English

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This dissertation has been examined and approved.



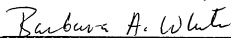
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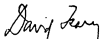
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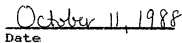
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ABSTRACT

FRIENDS AND RIVALS, EDITH WHARTON'S WOMEN

By

Susan Goodman

University of New Hampshire, December, 1988

Based on primary research, my dissertation, "Friends and Rivals, Edith Wharton's Women," examines the two plots that the author used throughout her career. Her dominant plot is outlined in "Souls Belated" (1899), the tale of a woman who escapes a conventionally stifling marriage only to discover that she and her lover have no choice but to duplicate the union she has just fled. It shows the ways in which Wharton challenged but never escaped the restrictions of the marriage plot. The following year she wrote "Friends" (1900), a story that overtly articulates the subplot that I trace in her fiction. As its name suggests, it is about the meaning and demands of friendship, and its key elements inform nearly all her novels. Women, who seem to be opposites but who are in reality more similar than dissimilar, become the means for the other's growth. By learning to see from the other's perspective, they realize that self-sacrifice gives life meaning and purpose. Using feminist, biographical, and to some extent psychological methodologies, I analyze Wharton's concerns with the allure and danger of romanticism, the development of consciousness, the importance of female artistry, and the continuation of

personal and literary traditions in the context of her period and from the dual perspectives of competition and cooperation.

## INTRODUCTION

"it was always the imaginative side of my work  
that helped me over the ugly details . . . ."

### The Fruit of the Tree

For decades the mosaic that most readers had of Edith Wharton was designed by Percy Lubbock in the memoir Portrait of Edith Wharton (1947).<sup>1</sup> Consisting of a series of sketches and personal reminiscences contributed by her friends and linked by his commentary, it seems informed, as William Tyler has observed, by "a systematic personal hostility."<sup>2</sup> In it he presents a woman who is imperious, insensitive, and belligerent to other women, one who liked and repeated the remark that she was a "'self-made man'" (11). Lubbock heard those words said with a certain self-satisfied pride, but another, more sympathetic listener might have detected in her inflection an ironic undertone or--to borrow a line from Ethan Frome--"depths of sad initiation."<sup>3</sup> This book attempts to determine the many meanings--social, artistic, and personal--that the phrase, "a self-made man," had for Wharton.

Considered an anomaly as a woman pursuing intellectual and artistic interests and as a "woman writer" publishing ironic, "unsentimental" stories, Wharton has been largely defined by a series of absences: lack of love, lack of

children, lack of compassion, lack of social sensitivity, lack of "femaleness."<sup>4</sup> Those critics who have credited her work with a "woman's sensibility" have for the most part failed to examine the implications of that judgment. In a 1906 review of The Touchstone, for example, Henry Dwight Sedgwick states that "her talents and capacities are not only intrinsically feminine, but also, despite her cleverness, which, generally speaking, is a neutral trait, they are specifically feminine."<sup>5</sup> The dilemma that Wharton presented to early critics was this combination of "femininity" and "cleverness" that--to use G. D. Leavis's phrase--made her Henry James's heiress.<sup>6</sup> I examine how she balanced these traits in a society which tended to see them as mutually exclusive.

While Wharton's critical audience was largely male and academy trained, her popular audience was for the most part heavily female and haphazardly tutored. She was able to appeal to these disparate publics because she employed an ironic tone, so highly prized by twentieth-century critics, and because she never wholly divorced herself from a female literary tradition. Lily Bart's final vision of Nellie Struther's baby daughter, Undine Spragg's vocation as a billionaire's wife, and Anna Leath's disillusionment with George Darrow are rooted in that tradition.

Wharton is best known as a novelist of manners, and her treatment of the upperclasses has made her vulnerable to charges of literary elitism; for example, the novelist Robert

Herrick wrote in 1915 that "her talent, a defining, analyzing, and subtilizing talent, has found little that was really congenial or suggestive in the common run of our coarsely accented national life."<sup>7</sup> This accusation would haunt her all her career, as well as the other criticism embedded in Herrick's statement that she had little passion. None of her contemporary readers were as astute as Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who noticed a decided emotional change in the novelist's work after 1910, a change that we now know resulted partially from Wharton's affair with the journalist, Morton Fullerton.

In 1965 Millicent Bell's study of the literary and personal relationship between James and Wharton took the latter out of the master's shadow and helped her to cast her own.<sup>8</sup> By the 1970's, there was a resurgence of critical interest in Wharton prompted by the 1969 unsealing of the author's papers at Yale. Writers such as Wolff and R. W. B. Lewis attempted to answer the question that Blake Nevius had posed in his 1953 study: What was the relationship between Wharton's life and her art?<sup>9</sup> Feminist critics in particular noticed the author's consistent concern with women's issues. Although critics such as Margaret McDowell, Elizabeth Ammons, Wendy Gimbel, Carol Wershoven, and Annette Zilverman have written at length about Wharton's heroines, these studies tend to see her women in isolation and as primarily competitive.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, I use biographical, feminist, and to some extent psychological methodologies to analyze the

relations between women in the major novels while highlighting those interesting intersections of the author's life and what she called her "making up." I discuss why Wharton's professional identity, so irrevocably intertwined and at odds with her sexual identity, made her relationships with other women and with women writers difficult.

Previous discussions of the author's work have tended to neglect the importance of female relations in part because she has for so long been characterized as a woman who did not really care for women. While R. W. B. Lewis's biography of Wharton has helped to correct this image, and the work of Cynthia Griffin Wolff has increased our understanding of the forces that shaped her, the image persists still. In a 1986 review in The New York Times, Janet Malcolm states that in The Custom of the Country Wharton's dislike of women is taken "to a height of venomousness previously unknown in American letters, and probably never surpassed."<sup>12</sup> The writer she describes bears no resemblance to the one whom Elizabeth Ammons sees as consistently having shown a regard for the circumstances of all women.

The seemingly incompatible readings of Malcolm and Ammons reflect Wharton's own conflict about her roles as "woman" and "author." In her guise as "author," the novelist claimed that she had little difficulty stilling the critics. The "best safeguard," she advised, is to put out of one's mind "the quality of praise or blame bestowed . . . by the reviewers and readers, and to write only for the

dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast."<sup>12</sup> As a "woman," though, she found it more difficult to quiet the inherited and internalized voices of her childhood. The volume and resonance of those voices were generations in the making, stretching back three hundred years. They were also predominantly male and always associated with the old New York of her youth in which a woman's charm provided the background and her quiet labor supplied the expertise necessary for the smooth working of the community's great social and civic machine. During the first years of her marriage when Wharton tried to conform to this tradition, she felt as if she had no identity: "I had as yet no personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published--and that was not until 1899" (ABC 112). That volume's title, The Greater Inclination, shows why she chose her future course.

The multiple names given to the novelist in her childhood, "Lily," "Pussy," and "John," highlight the problem of determining the "real" Edith Wharton, as does a 1925 photograph that presents one image but two portraits. It is her most reproduced likeness, and the one she herself chose to greet the readers who opened the covers of her autobiography, A Backward Glance. At first one sees an obviously wealthy, society matron: her hair woven with a strung crown of cameos, her shoulders smokily swathed in furs, and her columnar throat adorned by a finely wrought choker. The gaze is unblinking, imposing, intimidating. On



closer inspection, however, a second portrait emerges: she still staunchly faces the camera, but smudges hollow her sad eyes, her right shoulder, turned delicately and barely raised, recedes into the shadowed background, and the choker checks her pulsing throat. The jaw is strained, set, controlled. The first portrait presents the traditional view of Wharton, while the second is more in keeping with recent revisions of that view which see her as a successful Lily Bart, a survivor of a suffocating and insensitive society; yet, belonging to and joining both portraits, are wisps of hair which poignantly escape their pins and the sheerly veiled décollatage. Wharton, as Virginia Woolf would have said, was neither "this" nor "that," and it is in these more ambiguous, hard to pigeonhole details that a fuller picture of a complex woman begins to emerge. Underneath her picture are two words, "THE AUTHOR," and they stand there at attention as if to reassure the reader that this elegant, gentle-browed woman is indeed the Edith Wharton, who, as one reader complained, has never known "a respectable woman" (ABC 126). The label is needed because in any of these portraits of Wharton, the artist, as well as the artist's alliance with the woman, is obscured.

To survive she had to be as flexible as her created Lily, "a water-plant in the flux of the tides,"<sup>14</sup> and as inflexibly driven as Undine Spragg. Her portrait suggests that Edith Wharton was a woman of many paradoxes: the painfully ignorant bride and the middle-aged adulterous

lover; the stilted, shy guest and the brilliant conversationalist; the society matron and the professional artist; the "unmotherly" woman and the "mother" of countless Belgian refugee children; the rebel, like Charity Royall, and, like Newland Archer, the compromising upholder of the status quo. She was able to forge at best only an uneasy truce with the past, and that turbulent, yet delicate relationship was a limitless imaginative catalyst.

Wharton liked to think of herself as dealing with "eternally human" themes and feelings, and she grumbled in her essay "Permanent Values in Fiction" (1934) that "[t]he novel in its most serious form is tending to become a sort of anthology of the author's ideas."<sup>14</sup> Her own work, however, cannot escape being such an anthology. In trying to find her own place in the past by piecing together her personal history within a broader cultural context, she analyzed and commented upon the roles of women in society and their responsibilities to each other and to themselves. Throughout her career she worked with two plots. Her dominant plot is expressed in "Souls Belated" (1899), the tale of a woman who escapes a conventionally stifling marriage only to discover that she and her lover have no choice but to duplicate the union she has just fled. "Souls Belated" shows how Wharton challenged the concept of marriage but was never able to escape the imperative that women must marry. The following year, she wrote "Friends," a story that overtly articulates the major subplot that I trace in her fiction. Having passed

her childhood and early adulthood starved for good conversation and "cultivated intelligence" (ABC 92), the author knew how transfiguring the meeting of like minds could be, and the story's key themes inform almost all her novels:<sup>15</sup> women, who seem to be opposites, are in reality more similar than dissimilar; they begin to see from the other's perspective; their expanded consciousness is both painful and enriching; the supposed rivals become the means for each other's moral growth; each realizes that being true to another woman means being true to herself; and what appears to be a sacrifice is in reality a touchstone that imbues life with added meaning.

Penelope Bent and Vexilla Thurber are the friends of the early story. Unlike most of Wharton's heroines, they are not "rivals" for a man but for a job. Both are the sole supporters of their families, though Vexilla's cares are greater, since her household includes a grandmother, a younger sister, and a paralyzed brother. Penelope has earned a meager but comfortable living for herself and her mother as a distinguished teacher in the local school, and while she has tried to ease her friend's burden by convincing the board to hire her, they have remained obdurate: Miss Thurber is not "smart enough."<sup>16</sup> They change their minds, however, when Penelope resigns to marry.

After spending all her money on a trousseau and being deserted by her fiancé, Penelope returns to her hometown, desperately hoping to regain her old position. At first she

feels only anger at Vexilla's good fortune, but upon learning that her friend is willing to resign, she finds the courage to begin a new life in New York. The example of Vexilla's loyalty has once again made "life comprehensible and duty a joyful impulse" (213-214). From Fulvia in The Valley of Decision (1902) to Laura Testvalley in The Buccaneers (1938), almost all of Wharton's heroines must decide whether to flee or to embrace a similarly crucial moment. "Friends" outlines the novelist's concern with analyzing where the temptations and the benefits reside in relationships between women, and as the ending illustrates the chief benefit is to one's "self."

Wharton continued to explore, test, and refine this plot throughout her career in short stories, such as "Autres Temps . . . ," "The Lady's Maid's Bell," "Her Son," "Bewitched," and "Roan Fever," as well as in her novellas, The Touchstone, Bunner Sisters, Madame de Treymes, and Sanctuary. In The Reef and The Age of Innocence, the pattern varies when Anna Leath and Sophy Viner and M. y Archer and Ellen Olenska protectively conspire to keep Owen Leath and Newland Archer ignorant of what they have fought to learn. The novelist never looked at women's relations in isolation or through rose-colored spectacles, and her bleakest books, The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country, illustrate what results when women adopt their society's values and play by its rules. Wharton's most repeated symbols reflect her analysis: the frozen tableaux, enchaining adornments,

stifling veils, unvoiced words, and the precarious thresholds that lead to rooms of all types--dangerous, lonely, and locked.

By never rejecting the inevitability and the rightness of marriage, her heroines resemble their author. Their wish for a perfect soulmate, coupled with their inability to envision other structures for their lives, necessitate painful compromises. Stripped of romantic illusions, these women are now "grown-up;" they have graduated beyond "the exercises of the Montessori infant."<sup>17</sup> As Wharton continues in French Ways and Their Meaning, "real living . . . is a deep and complex and slowly developed thing . . . and it has its roots in the fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women" (102). No matter how hard her heroines struggle, they are almost always denied "important relations" with men which makes relations between women, though sometimes strained or crippled, of additional importance. In particular The Reef (1912), The Age of Innocence (1920), and The Buccaneers (1935) examine their potential power.

Wharton's use of the marriage plot and the subplot outlined in "Friends" cannot be isolated from the context of her other concerns: the development of personal consciousness; the allure and danger of romanticism; the possibilities of female artistry; and the continuation of personal and literary traditions. From different angles of vision, she examined and re-examined these issues. Although

her thoughts do not follow a clear linear progression, they do tend to fluctuate between two paradoxical poles, one marking female competition and the other, female cooperation. Wharton's relationship with her mother, Lucretia Jones, falls under the shadow of the first pole, while her friendship with Sara Norton illuminates the second. Her fiction incorporates both; for example, in "Roman Fever" Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley's girlhood rivalry continues well into middle age, perversely feeding their intimacy; and in The Reef, The Age of Innocence, and The Buccaneers women deliberately choose to aid each other--even at the expense of their own "best" interests.

In its form and content my study attempts to reflect the complexity of Wharton's thinking as it fluctuates between these two poles. For that reason, its structure is less linear and chronological than circular and textured. In designing my format, I have tried to avoid imposing an interpretive overlay that would mute the tenor of the texts' intricacies or veil their ambiguities; rather I have attempted to give a sense of the accumulative effect of reading Wharton.

Chapter one focuses on the writer's antagonistic relationship with her mother as presented in her autobiography, A Backward Glance, and provides the background for succeeding discussion, while the second chapter describes her supportive relationship with Sara Norton by examining their 1899-1922 correspondence. Early in their friendship

Wharton wrote that the memory of a day spent with Norton could "Isurprise the soul's December air / With June's forgotten scent."<sup>14</sup> Similar expressions of sentiment run like colored ribbons throughout the correspondence and collaborate William Tyler's memoirs of a loving friend, whose spirit is absent from the pages of Lubbock's book. At the beginning of their association, Norton's understanding and sensitivity probably made her friend's marriage more tolerable, and in that respect their relationship was possibly a model for Wharton's fiction in which relationships between women enhance the marriages that are seen as the foundation of an ordered civilization. With slight variations, the pattern is a repeated theme in works, such as The Touchstone, The Fruit of the Tree, The Reef, The Age of Innocence, The Mother's Recompense, The Old Maid, and The Buccaneers.

Chapter three discusses The House of Mirth (1905) and The Custom of the Country (1913) as the social context for Wharton's work. Speaking for her author, Lily Bart asks, "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (15). Analyzing the source of this question, Wharton finds that part of the answer lies in her own past and her unsatisfactory relationship with her mother; however, a possible solution--reflected in the image of Gerty Farish holding Lily in her arms after Gus Trenor's attempted rape--lies in her present, rich in female support. In this way, Sara Norton provides the

foreground of Wharton's fiction and her mother the background. Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country is Wharton's response to a system that persists in making "a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine" (House 5). The cataclysmic chaos she wrecks is merely a nightmarish extension of the status quo. It is also the manifestation of the author's own anger at the lessons she was taught (or not taught) in her mother's drawing room.

Wharton left the scene of her mother's drawing room when she wrote Ethan Frome (1911). Chapter four discusses the "buried fables" in that novel and its companion work, Summer (1917). "Buried fable" is a term that Gary Lindberg defines as "a story of inward rescue,"<sup>19</sup> and Ethan Frome contains two: one, an allegory of authorship that testifies to Wharton's rescue of herself from impoverished, tradition-bound "ways of seeing;" the other, a gothic tale of incest that proclaims her emancipation from a demanding and overbearing mother. In Summer, the story of lawyer Royall and his foster daughter, Charity, Wharton examines the latter fable from a different gender perspective and suggests that the imagination has a re-visionary power capable of healing.

From her friendship with Sara Norton, Wharton knew the benefits women missed when they viewed each other as rivals. In The Reef (1912) and The Age of Innocence (1920) her vision coalesces: women have the power to unbandage one another's eyes. Although The Reef is a story of sexual awakening, it is primarily a story of Anna's "awakening" to



the similarities she and Sophy share, and Wharton undermines "romantic" plot expectations by making these "rivals" the means of each other's mutual growth. Darrow's role as "rescuer" or "initiator" is negligible, for Sophy initiates Anna by making her aware of "the human problem" "without fear and without hypocrisy" (288), and Anna makes Sophy conscious of values other than the ones she has observed in her career.

Wharton was to use this theme again in The Age of Innocence when May Archer and Ellen Olenska conspire to protect the man they both love, Newland Archer. Like The Reef it shows the women, who have been victimized by a system that institutionalizes "innocence," working to perpetuate the status quo, and in this way, The Age of Innocence is as scathing a comment on society's myopia as either The House of Mirth or The Custom of the Country. The ending to Wharton's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel especially illustrates the difficulties inherent in trying to determine the consistency and coherence of her vision.

The Age of Innocence raises a question that Wharton would continue to explore in the fiction of her last two decades: Can a woman achieve more than a precarious balance between her social responsibilities and her private inclinations? As the author strives for a satisfactory resolution to this conflict, she shows an increased willingness to examine fictionally issues that personally pained her; for example, The Mother's Recompense (1925) addresses the question of marriage and the conundrum of

"mother." Some critics have noted a lack of mothers in Wharton's work or, like Annette Zilversait, stressed the competition between them and their daughters. But I see mothers, such as Kate Clephane in The Mother's Recompense (1925) or Rose Sellars in The Children (1928), trying to reconcile the needs of "womanhood" with the demands of "motherhood."<sup>20</sup> Chapter six concentrates on those novels and The Old Maid (1921).

Wharton tried to achieve a similar harmony between biology and vocation in Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and The Gods Arrive (1932). The last chapter presents her alternative as well as her last word, The Buccaneers (1938). The first two novels are about Vance Weston, a writer from the Midwest, whose story is the second part of Wharton's bildungsroman begun with Ethan Frome. Like his creator, Vance envisions a personal and artistic fusion. Searching for an appropriate artistic form and a unique voice, he comes under the tutelage of Halo Spear. The twin sirens of vanity and glory seduce him away from her, but he finds her again in Goethe's image of "The Mothers," the dark source of creative power. Returning to the pregnant Halo, Weston kneels and embraces her. With their union Wharton is able symbolically to embrace the part of herself that she saw as the "self-made man" and the part that she saw as purely female. This insight preceded her most concise statement about adult identity and the merits of female alliance.

In her last and posthumously published novel, The

Buccaneers, Wharton traces the careers of a band of Americans who invade Britain under the tutelage of an English governess.<sup>11</sup> By never "going back on each other"--to paraphrase Lily Bart--the girls vanquish older and more experienced rivals and win the chance to "buy their own experience." Wharton's answer to the "new woman," Nan St. George, buys hers with an unhappy marriage to the Duke of Tintagel, and it transforms her into the "grown-up" woman described in French Ways and Their Meaning.

For the first time in a Wharton novel, one character does not try to protect another from seeing--what she termed--the Gorgon, and the change implies that the author had re-evaluated the cost of that vision. One of her first, autobiographical stories "The Fullness of Life" shows the ultimate price she imagined:

I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature was like a house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room,

the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and  
waits for a footstep that never comes.\*\*

At the end of her life, the price was not as extravagant as the image implies. Like Vance Weston, Wharton learned that her solitary quest into the darkened corners of that innermost room fed her art and made it hers--hers alone. Not many people could follow her to that sanctum's threshold, but there were those whose feet found the path and whose lips found the "right word," who knew--as Wharton wrote to Sara Norton in "Uses"--the "sweet content" that word could bring. As readers we are still trying to determine that word, to which perhaps only the soul sitting in "the holy of holies" can give breath.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1947) 11. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>William R. Tyler, "Personal Memories of Edith Wharton," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 85 (1973): 94.

<sup>3</sup>Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911; 1939) 11.

<sup>4</sup>See Judith Saunders, "Becoming the Mask: Edith Wharton's Ingenues," Massachusetts Studies in English 8 (1982): 33-39. Saunders discusses the absences in Wharton's heroines but does not link them to their author.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Dwight Sedgwick, "The Novels of Mrs. Wharton," Atlantic 86 (6 Aug. 1906): 219.

<sup>6</sup>Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James's Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton," Scrutiny 7 (1938-39): 261-276.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted from Robert Herrick in an unsigned article, "Edith Wharton: Two Conflicting Estimates of Her Art," Current Opinion 58 (15 Apr. 1915): 272.

<sup>8</sup>See Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: A Biography of Their Friendship (NY: George Braziller, 1965).

<sup>9</sup>See R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Publishing Co., 1975). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. Also see Cynthia Griffin Wolff (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977)

and Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953).

<sup>14</sup>See Margaret McDowell, "Viewing the Custom of Her Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism," Contemporary Literature 15 (1974): 521-538; Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980); Annette Claire Schreiber Zilvermit, "Mothers and Daughters: The Heroines of Edith Wharton's Novels," DAI 41 (1981): 5104A; Carol Wershoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982); and Wendy Gimbel, Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival (Praeger, NY: Landmark Dissertations, 1984).

<sup>15</sup>Janet Malcolm, "The Woman Who Hated Women," The New York Times Book Review 16 Nov. 1986: 11.

<sup>16</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1934) 92. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905; 1933; rpt. 1975) 57. All subsequent references to this text are noted parenthetically.

<sup>18</sup>Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," The Saturday Review of Literature 7 April 1934 (x): 603. The handwritten draft of the sentence quoted shows far less disapproval and reads: "The novel, in short, in its most serious form is a sort of anthology of the author's ideas."

<sup>19</sup>The Valley of Decision (1902) and A Son at the Front

(1923) are not included in this study because they do not contain the subplot I discuss. Although The Glimpses of the Moon (1922) provides another example of the subplot outlined in "Friends" and Twilight Sleep (1927) can be read in the context of Wharton's relationship with her mother, Lucretia Jones, I have chosen not to discuss them, since they are two of Wharton's least successful novels, and for my purposes, texts such as The Fruit of the Tree, The Children, or The Mother's Recompense can be used as illustrations more effectively.

<sup>16</sup>Edith Wharton, "Friends," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 200. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup>Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1919; 1930) 102. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>18</sup>Edith Wharton, "Uses," Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. "Uses" was published in Scribner's Magazine 31, no. 2 (Feb. 1902): 180.

<sup>19</sup>Gary H. Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977) 45.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Wharton, The Children (NY: Appleton, 1928). Geoffrey Walton sees Wharton criticizing her own fastidiousness through her characterization of the lady-like

Rose Sellars (165). What she "peddles" is a mature version of May Archer's innocence.

\*1See Carol Wershoven, "Edith Wharton's Final Vision: The Buccaneers," American Literary Realism 15 (1982): 209-220. Wershoven describes that vision as one of female alliance.

\*2Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 14.



## CHAPTER I

### More than a Glance Backward

Mothers and daughters are part of each other's consciousness, in different degrees and in a different way, but still with the mutual sense of something which has always been there.

#### The Mother's Recompense

A Backward Glance is Wharton's attempt as "her work reaches its close" to determine for herself whether her contribution was "either nothing or far more than they know."<sup>1</sup> Before she could make that evaluation, though, the "author" had to have a clear vision of her own identity, a vision that she could not have without first understanding the most influential person in her life, her mother, Lucretia Jones. Wharton was an elderly woman when she wrote her autobiography, but in it she is a daughter still struggling to put her mother into focus, so that she can do the same for herself. Once the mother's image is framed, fixed, and captured, the daughter's position to that image can also be determined.<sup>2</sup>

At stake are two identities. Wharton must recall, re-evaluate, and recreate her mother's image if she is to reconcile the past and its values with those of the

present; if she is to validate her history within a larger social context; if she is to become concurrently "woman" and "author." In this respect, her choice of title is interesting as both a tribute to the poet, Walt Whitman, and to the man, who like her had to "make up" an identity.<sup>3</sup> Wharton's memory of the past is not an objective recreation of that time. It is the story of her feelings, and as in any first person narration, how the story is told tells most about the teller. What she tells is the family myth.

In her memoir, Wharton is both the "autobiographer" of herself and the "biographer" of others. Unlike Henry James, Vernon Lee, and Bernard Berenson, her parents are of significance only in relationship to her. While being the empowering stuff of every child's dream, this situation also establishes a curious tension between the biographer and the subject. From her own experience as the biographer of Margaret Fuller, Bell Gale Chevigny notes that the recording of another's life engenders a feeling of identification with that person which can make the writer want to rationalize certain disturbing "facts." The urge to protect, rescue, and lionize is particularly strong when writing about someone of the same sex because coming to terms with another's life involves coming to terms, at least for a time, with one's own.<sup>4</sup> Wharton experienced this dilemma when writing about the mother whom she felt crippled and misdirected

her life.<sup>5</sup> Although Cynthia Griffin Wolff emphasizes the life-and-death struggle for autonomy that a child had to fight against such a mother and from which she sees the novelist emerging battle-scarred but triumphant,<sup>6</sup> A Backward Glance shows the battle still waging. Only the positions of the generals have shifted.

Wharton need not have warned her readers that she had to make "the most of unsensational material." A Backward Glance may tell a familiar mother-daughter story, but it is no less "sensational."<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein describes a mother as both supporter and enemy, the granter and denier of selfhood.<sup>8</sup> Lucretia Jones was all this, and Wharton felt her mother's fearful power in the alternately comforting and terrifying world she ruled. As she wrote in the first draft of her autobiography, "Life and I," "I was never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please--God & my mother--who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behavior, differed totally as to their application."<sup>9</sup>

From the beginning the identities of mother and daughter were interdependent; for example, even one of the novelist's earliest memories about her father is framed by her other parent. Wharton recalls walking with him and meeting a little boy who suddenly "put out a chubby hand, lifted the little girl's veil, and boldly planted a kiss on her cheek" (3). She describes that

experience as being "wakened to conscious life by two tremendous forces of vanity and love" (3), and while that awakening mimics the myth of "Sleeping Beauty," it clearly aligns the daughter with her mother.<sup>10</sup>

The person Wharton woke as was her mother, "the best-dressed woman in New York" (20), a woman whose greatest raptures were for the trunk of Parisian dresses that arrived each year: "for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment--so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine me in the little girl's vague soul" (2). The simultaneous twin birthing of consciousness and femininity illustrates how inseparable the two are, and this awareness forever divides her from her beloved father by making him "other."<sup>11</sup> In The Reef a mature Anna Leath learns the pain of this dual awakening.

"Life and I" reveals the author's need to control and to dominate in conflict with her need to please. The latter she describes as the form her feminine instinct took in her young womanhood (1-2): "As it had been in my little-girlhood, so it was now: I led, I dominated, I was conscious of 'counting' wherever I went--but I inspired no romantic passions!" (45). Wharton writes that though she knew she had "more will" and "more strength" than her childhood companions, she did not care to use it or know to what use to put it. She asserts, "I did not want to

dominate--I wanted to be adored!" (36). In old New York, however, an adored woman could subtly and without censure dominate.

Wharton's equation of "femininity" with polite compliance was one that was particularly difficult to reconcile with the most compelling passion of her entire life, the gnawing, insatiable appetite for intellectual stimulation.<sup>12</sup> Wharton never felt adequately loved, either by her mother or by her several suitors, and while she again and again bitterly regretted this, one must question whether she indeed truly desired that kind of intimacy. In "Life and I," for example, she writes that Emelyn Washburn, the daughter of the Jones's clergyman, was "morbidity attached" to her, because she poured "mental nourishment" upon her in "reckless profusion" (29-30). Although the two were close friends and it is speculated that Wharton wrote her first novel Fast and Loose for Emelyn's amusement, the quotations from her memoir show a more overriding desire for distance.<sup>13</sup>

As a child, Wharton found a way to maintain a safe distance while simultaneously feeding her vanity and having control: she could "make up" stories. When this overwhelming impulse seized the young author, she would grab Washington Irving's The Alhambra and holding it upside down imperiously travel the terrain of some secluded room reading aloud her own spontaneous stories.<sup>14</sup> For someone who had been "swept off full sail

on the sea of dreams" (35), Wharton had a surprisingly accurate and detailed memory of those she left on shore: "Parents and nurses, peeping at me through the cracks of doors (I always had to be alone to 'make up'), noticed that I often held the book upside down, but that I never failed to turn the pages, and that I turned them at about the right place for a person reading aloud as passionately and precipitately as was my habit" (34-35). She obviously did not "always have to be alone to 'make up,'" and, in fact, the child, who had an audience of parents and nurses enthralled as she strode the floor reciting, was much more an actress than an author. Decades later she recalled that "[t]he fact that I could not read added to the completeness of the illusion, for from those mysterious blank pages I could evoke whatever my fancy chose" (34). What she chose to construct was a narcissistic kingdom in which she ruled by virtue of her presence (the performance) and her speaking ("making up"), and that creation was both an imitation of and a challenge to her mother's feminine and polite reign in the drawing room.

On one level, the story highlights the appeal that writing fiction would have for Wharton, but on another, it undercores the difficulty she would always have trying to integrate her roles as woman and author. She began life learning that it was acceptable to act--instead of be--"the author;" and as the example of Lily Bart in

The House of Mirth illustrates, she later more clearly identified "acting" as a feminine skill regrettably necessary for a woman's prescribed public role. When Wharton no longer wanted to mimic an author, she had to leave the stage. An adoring audience was only appropriate in the Jones's circle for a beautiful and / or a charming woman; consequently, any woman writer was cleft in two.

One way Wharton later responded to her dilemma was to develop two distinct identities, which she kept separate by dividing the day in half--the mornings for work and the afternoons for socializing. For the second half of the day, her mother's example of "dressing-up" offered a far more typical and socially accepted form of "making up." Since each new costume had its attendant identity, a woman could--without censure--author a public identity. Wharton's afternoons and her picture in A Backward Glance, which shows her shoulders teased by stray wisps of furs or feathers and her hands hidden in a muff, illustrate the duration and the source of her dilemma. To discard, integrate, or redefine this one of her many "selves," she would have to acknowledge the mother she did not reject and have to accept the one she imitated. Only "radical surgery," to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, could keep the daughter's personality from dangerously blurring and overlapping with her mother's.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly Lucretia's sculpted image in A Backward

Glance retains some traces of the surgeon's scalpel.

Wharton saw her mother with double vision: she was part of old New York's "prosaic" society and part of another tradition waiting to be "made up:"

. . . I know less than nothing of the particular virtues, gifts and modest accomplishments of the young women with pearls in their looped hair or cambric ruffs round their slim necks, who prepared the way for my generation. A few shreds of anecdote, no more than the faded flowers between the leaves of a great-grandmother's Bible, are all that remain to me. (15)

Although their gifts to her--"a few shreds of anecdote," "the faded flowers between the leaves of great-grandmother's Bible"--were less substantial than the fort named in honor of Great-Grandfather Major-General Ebenezer Stevens's military exploits, their ghostlike voices and presence were the muted background against which her mother stood in sharp relief.<sup>16</sup> Describing her mother's girlhood, the daughter aligns her with them: "The little girls were taught needle-work, music, drawing and 'the languages' . . . They suffered, like all young ladies of their day, from chilblains and excruciating sick-headaches . . ." (16-17). Wharton,

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who herself later suffered "excruciating sick-headaches, sees her mother's childhood as unnurturing and her education as deficient as her own. This identification prompts Wharton to treat Lucretia as a character in A Backward Glance much more sympathetically before she becomes a mother; for example, she imbues her father's courtship of "the eldest of 'the poor Rhinelander' girls" with romance, as he turns an oar into a mast and a bed-quilt into a sail to enable him to cross the Sound to "his lady's feet" (18). When she repeats the anecdote in "False Dawn," the family story becomes art.

Most poignant is the story of her mother's "coming out":

. . . she wore a home-made gown of white tarlatan, looped up with red and white camellias from the greenhouse, and her mother's old white satin slippers; and her feet being of a different shape from grandaama's, she suffered martyrdom, and never ceased to resent the indignity inflicted on her, and the impediment to dancing, the more so as her younger sisters, who were prettier and probably more indulged, were given new slippers when their turn came. (17)

By telling Lucretia's tale, the daughter is in part telling her own. In a sense, she too had to struggle to conform to ill-fitting and hand-me-down slippers. Like her mother, Wharton saw herself as the least attractive member of her family, and the self-loathing that perception generated can be read in her lifelong inability to overcome an "abhorrence" for "ugly" people ("Life" 3).

As a young martyr Lucretia won Wharton's empathy. But motherhood soon transformed Cinderella into the wicked step-mother. Nowhere is she more insensitive than when responding to her daughter's first prose effort:

My first attempt (at the age of eleven) was a novel, which began: "'Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?' said Mrs. Tompkins. 'If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room.'" Timorously I submitted this to my mother, and never shall I forget the sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy." (73)

This story, which shows a directly corresponding relationship between Wharton's creativity and her mother's judgment, functions on many levels: it is an

expression of anger and humiliation, a retrospective justification of the child, and a tribute from a successful novelist of manners. Underlying the telling is Wharton's life-long appreciation of irony and a good joke--this time on herself. The standard her first reader set for the veracity of details was one her later readers demanded when they faulted her research of factory work in The Fruit of the Tree (1907).<sup>17</sup> No doubt the phrase, "Drawing-rooms are always tidy," never ceased to rankle, but the lesson was valuable; for example, the author's insistence on "the exact dates when Mae Christine Nilsson sang Faust at the old Academy of Music, when Delmonico's moved north to Twenty-sixth Street, and the times of the first Patriarchs' Balls, the Assemblies, and the Friday Evening Dancing Classes" (Lewis 430) helped to forestall similar criticisms when The Age of Innocence was published.<sup>18</sup> "Tidy drawing rooms" is also a metaphor that describes the reticence Wharton exercised in her life and the lives of her characters who are swept by passions and tumults off stage.

The same mother who could potentially cripple a future novelist also "tried in vain" to "take down" her daughter's stories, but since the daughter "gallop[ed] around the racecourse of imagination" at such a speed, dictation was impossible (43). When Wharton was sixteen, her mother paid for the publication of a volume of her verse, which she discreetly distributed among family

friends. Mrs. Jones's actions would usually imply pride in her daughter's precocity, but in A Feast of Words Wolff sees these actions more sinisterly as rape: "Certainly she [Lucretia] succeeded . . . in swooping into her daughter's private retreat, possessing herself of what was intimate and personal, and in an act of perverse 'generosity' making every fault of youth available to the tolerant eyes of family and friend" (47). Wolff's interpretation grows from the child's need to see her mother negatively; however, their battle was also symbolic of the much greater one Wharton fought with the societal definitions of womanhood that her mother represented.

Wharton's rejection of and competition with her mother isolated Lucretia from the intimate parts of her daughter's life. After her mother's death, Wharton discovered that she had kept "brouillons" (rough copies) of letters that her daughter had written to aunts and godmothers ("Life" 15). In this context, Lucretia's "swooping" and "possessing" can be seen more sympathetically as the desperate act of a mother trying to understand and get closer to her child. A similar tension exists between Kate Clephane and her daughter, Anne, in The Mother's Recompense (1925), but the contested possession is a man, Chris Fenno. Wharton treats Kate sympathetically, as she tries to determine her daughter's relationship to her own ex-lover; however,

in the novel--as in its author's life--the child ultimately wins.

The story of Lucretia Jones and her daughter is similar to those of many nineteenth-century women writers, who identified with and were dependent upon their fathers. As Elaine Showalter notes, these earlier writers also suffered loss of or alienation from their mothers.<sup>19</sup> Wharton's own difficulty in fixing her mother's image makes her particularly vulnerable to assessments that go against the accepted and "acceptable" plot of motherhood. What needs to be taken into account, though, is the fact that Wharton, even in her seventies, still had a great deal invested in seeing herself as "different." Being "different" was always more important to her than being "beautiful," as some of her most memorable heroines, such as Justine Brent, Sophy Viner, Ellen Olenaks, and Nen St. George, can testify.

Wharton saw herself as a changeling, living in a world where "our Sunday evening guest was the only person who ever showed signs of knowing anything about the secret-story world in which I lived" ("Life" 14). It is a world as isolated as Rapunzel's tower and only penetrable by a stranger. Its fictional counterpart appears first in "The Fullness of Life" and is overtly sexual, for the author compares a woman's nature to a house full of unused rooms, "the handles of whose doors are never turned."<sup>20</sup> Later the image is repeated in

Ralph Marvell's secret cave (The Custom of the Country [1913]), Newland Archer's inner sanctuary (The Age of Innocence [1920]), and Nan St. George's imprisonment in the Tintagel castle (The Buccaneers [1938]). The image is still sexual, but as an inviolate and necessary haven for the "self" it also reflects a change in Wharton's thinking.

The atmosphere of her home may have starved heart and soul, yet it provided the background against which Wharton could see herself as "special" and "apart." Her very difference lent her a significance to herself and made her the heroine of her own drama.<sup>24</sup> The drama was more empowering than disabling since the fault lay outside herself. The beggarmaid may doubt herself and live in enforced silence, but she knows herself to be a princess; tomorrow might see her enemies crushed and herself acclaimed. With her father Wharton may have been Sleeping Beauty, but with her mother she was a second generation Cinderella--her role imitating and repeating a maternal familial pattern.

In the standard version of this drama, the beggarmaid is usually suppressed by an older, competitive mother-figure, such as the wicked Queen in Gilbert and Gubar's reading of "Snow White."<sup>25</sup> Wolff sees Lucretia as being such a figure in her appropriation of her daughter's work, and by extension, the appropriation of her daughter's identity. In "Life and I," Wharton writes:

"My mother took an inarticulate interest in my youthful productions and kept a blank book in which she copied many of them" (38). Lucretia's behavior fits equally that of "the good mother," one who encourages, and "the bad mother," one who suppresses.

Either characterization fails to reconstruct the dynamic underlying the mother-daughter relationship, in which the mother, though perhaps superficially less vulnerable than the daughter, is nevertheless still vulnerable. Writing The Mother's Recompense and The Buccaneers, Wharton understood both positions, and in the latter dramatically shows how women as disparate and antagonistic as Nan St. George and her mother-in-law, the Duchess of Tintagel, cannot deny that gender and its attendant experiences make them akin.

As a child, however, Wharton wanted to deny such kinship by emphasizing her differences from her mother. Her prodigious energy for "making-up" and her precocious versifying can be construed from the parent's point of view as passive / aggressive attacks. When young Edith told her mother, "Mamma, you must go and entertain that little girl for me. I've got to make up" (ABC 35), she was neatly reversing their roles, and very tellingly the room to which she fled was her mother's bedroom ("Life" 12). By dismissing the mother's lifestyle, the child dismissed the mother. In fact, Wharton has made her mother one of "those mysterious blank pages" that she

evoked when pretending to read The Alhambra upside down (34). The author may characterize herself as the model of ladylike repression, much as she described Anna Leath in The Reef, and see herself dutifully trying to trace her mother's footsteps, but her interests obviously called that behavior into question and can be read as a maternal repudiation. They were a quiet challenge to the mother, and just as we must feel compassion for the child who had to scribble her stories on used wrapping paper, we must feel some compassion for the mother whose daughter reduces her to "inarticulateness."

Wharton's retelling places her mother at a disadvantage and is curiously revealing about Wharton herself. The novelist's image of her mother, as Judith Fryer observes, is a created one (168), and here she makes her both dumb and "blank." In one way, she is a blank book the daughter can inscribe. In another, the mother has no words and no identity other than what she can "copy" from the daughter. Wharton may have seen her mother's actions as a form of stealing her identity, but she more than retaliates by turning her into a nonentity. There is no one to tell what regrets the mother had to suppress in transforming herself from the romantic young woman who ran down to the shore in the morning's wee hours to meet her lover into the "cold" matron her daughter recalls. And there is no one to tell how much of the daughter's "making up" and the mother's copying



down were "inarticulate" and ineffectual efforts by both to "make up." Perhaps because Lucretia read "ephemeral rubbish" (ABC 65), Wharton never considered her a great reader; nevertheless, she does remember that activity occupying her mother for hours, and the early desire to "make-up" might easily have originated from a wish to occupy, impress, and entertain her.

As an adult, Wharton was always particularly bitter about her mother's inability to speak about intimate sexual matters, but the kind of education Lucretia Rhinelander received did not give her the training or the vocabulary to do so. In Life and I, Wharton recalls:

A few days before my marriage, I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, and begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me 'what being married was like.' Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. 'I never heard such a ridiculous question!' she said impatiently; and I felt at once how vulgar she thought me. But in the extremity of my need I persisted. (34)

Inadequately trained or educated to comply to this request, Lucretia resembles the mother in Mary Austin's novel, A Woman of Genius, who must confess to her daughter that she could not, rather than would not, tell her about birth control. Lucretia's secrecy and Wharton's response to it are indicative of the women's struggle. What the daughter most resents is the power symbolized by her mother's knowledge. Seeking initiation, she is ostracized, and this betrayal is particularly painful, since it reveals the wish on the mother's part to inhibit the development of a more equal relationship. It also disconcertingly recalls the daughter's efforts to hide her poems from prying eyes. Guarding their privacy, each woman needed an area in which she could reign supreme. Wharton settles the score years later when she acknowledges that her ignorance "in the end" neither falsified nor misdirected her life; "it only strengthened the conclusion that one is what one is, & that education may delay but cannot deflect one's growth" ("Life" 35).

Just as there are two pictures of the daughter in A Backward Glance, there are two pictures of the mother; for example, in discussing her parents' appreciation and reverence for the English language, as well as the high standard of spoken English they demanded, Wharton contradicts the image of her "indolent" and "capricious" mother:

My mother, herself so little a reader, was exaggeratedly scrupulous about the books I read; not so much the "grown-up" books as those written for children. I was never allowed to read the popular American children's books of my day because, as my mother said, the children spoke bad English without the author's knowing it. You could do what you liked with the language if you did it consciously, and for a given purpose . . . (51)

What better legacy for a future writer, and what better advice from one woman to another when applied to the business of living--permission to break the rules as long as you did it consciously. This axiom or its inversion, permission not to break the rules so long as you did it consciously, was dear to the heart of the "priestess of reason" and would thread its ways through the lives of Wharton's characters, such as Justine Brent, Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, Susy and Nick Lansing, and Nan St. George. Wharton would also apply it to her personal life when at the age of forty-five she decided to have an affair with Morton Fullerton and later when she made the very painful and difficult decision to divorce her husband, Teddy.

Wharton's uneven characterization of her mother in A Backward Glance makes any discussion of her seem less than straightforward. At times she even seems to be groping backward toward the young woman her father clandestinely courted. First, she tells the "story" of her mother the way she has always told it to herself, and it has several variations: the "insensitive" mother of the "sensitive" daughter; the "prosaic" mother of the "lyrical" daughter; the "limited" mother of the "expansive" daughter. Then she modifies it and corrects it. In one anecdote, she describes her mother's character much as she would later and more sympathetically describe Mrs. St. George's in The Buccaneers (1938): as "perplexed by the discovery that she had produced an omnivorous reader, and not knowing how to direct my reading, had perhaps expected the governess to do it for her" (65).<sup>23</sup> In her memoir, Wharton continues:

Being an indolent woman, she finally turned the difficulty by reviving a rule of her own schoolroom days, and decreeing that I should never read a novel without asking her permission. I was a painfully conscientious child and, conforming literally to this decree, I submitted every work of fiction which

attracted my fancy. In order to save further trouble she almost always refused to let me read it--a fact hardly to be wondered at, since her own mother had forbidden her to read any of Scott's novels, except "Waverly", till after she was married! (65)

Until the dash, this anecdote is congruous with the picture of the mother who said, "Drawing-rooms are always tidy!" The sentence embodies Wharton's ambivalence, for what follows the dash is an explanation and a justification for her behavior. The very tone of the sentence reflects this change, shifting from cynicism to understanding and sympathy. A similar instance of a double tone occurs when Wharton writes: "There were no clubs as yet in New York, and my mother, whose view of life was incurably prosaic, always said that this accounted for the early marriages, as the young men of that day 'had nowhere else to go'" (21). The wit speaks for itself, and the daughter would not have repeated it if it were not witty.

The examples reflect Wharton's two voices. One speaks for the part of her that would always remain the misunderstood, unappreciated, and abandoned child, forever angry and competitive with a mother such like the one Charlotte Yonge remembered: "She [Mrs. Yonge] was

much afraid of my being vain. Once, on venturing to ask if I was pretty, I was answered that all young animals, pigs and all, were pretty." The other speaks for the more assured and successful adult able to sympathize with the mother who was never able to overcome the same cultural disabilities the daughter surmounted. Together they sound a whole note heard in the following passage:

At all events, of the many prohibitions imposed on me--most of which, as I look back, I see little reason for regret--there is none for which I am more grateful than this, though it extended its rigors even to one of the works of Charlotte M. Yonge! By denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish my mother threw me back on the great classics, and thereby helped to give my mind a temper which my too-easy studies could not have produced. (65-66)

For all her deficiencies, Mrs. Jones did help prepare the future novelist for her career better than Mrs. Bart prepared Lily or Mrs. Spragg, Undine. The excerpt shows Wharton first ruminating on and then evaluating the past. The surface text reads that "all turned out for the best," but the thinly disguised subtext implies that the

lazy mother did what the daughter could not, waste her time over ephemeral rubbish. It taxes the imagination, though, to believe that Wharton never peeked between the covers of those forbidden books or that their mystique was not the subject for secret musing, since in later life she apologized to the "decorous shade" of Grace Aguilar, "loved of our grandmothers, for appropriating and applying to uses so different the title of one of the most admired of her tales."<sup>25</sup> Her repeated and almost shrill insistence on her careful and obedient avoidance of most novels authored by women reads as an attempt to avoid all charges of influence. It is another assertion of her "difference" and a variation on the theme of the brilliant child of prosaic parents.

Wharton's ambivalence toward her mother affected her relations with older, established women writers, such as Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Rhoda Broughton. Broughton, for example, was the author of Not Wisely But Too Well and one of the writers prohibited in her youth. Wharton visited her in England, and though Percy Lubbock says their meeting was unsuccessful, his word cannot necessarily be trusted.<sup>26</sup> As a sensation novelist of the 1870's, Broughton made--according to Elaine Showalter--a "genuinely radical female protest against marriage and women's economic oppressions" (29). She may have treated her subjects "still in the framework of feminine conventions that demanded the

erring heroine's destruction" (Showalter 29), but the subjects themselves as well as Broughton's pioneering efforts must have interested the author of The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country. Viola Hopkins Winner contends that the young Wharton did in fact read at least one of Broughton's novels, Goodbye, Sweetheart!, which she used as a model for East and Loose. Winner states that from Broughton she "derived hints for the character of Georgie as capricious, self-willed, and flirtatious" and that she also adopted Mrs. Broughton's shorthand method of setting the scene with a series of visual details set forth like stage directions.<sup>27</sup> An observer other than Lubbock might have seen Wharton paying her respects to a literary foremother or repeating her behavior toward her mother--wanting to embrace and to deny.

In Wharton's narrative of her family, her father had a role much like her own; he is characterized as the thwarted artist. Of him she says:

I imagine there was a time when his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy; and in later years I remember his reading only Macaulay,



Prescott, Washington Irving, and every book of travel he could find. Arctic explorations especially absorbed him, and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure. (39)

This description of Frederick Jones contains many of the elements Wharton explored in her fiction. First, there is a weaker but nobler nature checked by one less sensitive; and second, there is the prison of inarticulateness, what she calls in the "Love Journal," "the poor shut-in soul," "Ah! pauvre ame close!" (Lewis 207). Critics have complained about Wharton's weak, dilettantish men, and one doesn't have to look much "farther" than this passage to find Newland Archer's archetype. The similarity helps explain Wharton's sympathy for the Newland Archers of this world.

To reject them would also be to reject the beloved parent. Buried in her analysis, however, is a clue to his role in his daughter's life. Wharton's selection of Washington Irving's The Alhambra for her "making up" shows a desire to gain her father's attention and approval by emulating his behavior, and it implies that

his absence as a forceful presence in her childhood could have had almost as much negative effect on her development into womanhood as her mother's presence. One of the stories included in The Greater Inclination (1899) suggests that Wharton may have begun rethinking their relationship.<sup>24</sup> In "The Portrait," a young woman, who idealizes her unsavory father, sees him as he is reflected in the eyes of his portraitist, and the rending of her veil kills her. If Wharton's own veil was wearing thin, it would explain in part her difficulty in compiling the volume and the emotional problems that ensued after its completion. Even more dramatically, a rejection of her father would necessitate a painful re-evaluation of the "prosaic" mother.

Wharton may have thought her autobiography reticent in comparison to the "memorializer," who "'spared no one', set down in every defect and absurdity in others, and every resentment in the writer" (viii), but "between the lines" A Backward Glance reveals more than she might have recognized. From its pages her mother vividly emerges as the most influential person in her early life. Wharton expresses pity for "all the children who have not had a Doyley--a nurse who has always been there, who is as established as the sky and as warm as the sun, who understands everything, feels everything, can arrange everything, and combines all the powers of Divinity with the compassion of a mortal heart like one's own (26),"

but Doyley's very perfection and her unconditional love makes her easy to take for granted. For most of her life Wharton was never without a Doyley. She loved and depended upon her secretary, Anna Bahlmann, and her housekeeper, Catherine Gross, but as she said of herself in "A Little Girl's New York," "the creative mind thrives on a reduced diet."<sup>29</sup>

The memoir testifies to her need to define herself in opposition, of her continuing struggle to fashion an identity, which could include the woman who was like mother and the woman who was unlike mother, as well as the artist who was unlike anybody. It guarantees that Lucretia's image will never have to be reconstructed from anything as fragile and insubstantial as "faded flowers" pressed "between the leaves of a great-grandmother's Bible." Lewis sees "Lucretia Jones as ever was" (326) in the characterizations of Mrs. Welland in The Age of Innocence and in Anna Leath's mother-in-law in The Reef. Those portraits are unflattering: the "originally unpredictable" Madame de Chantelle is "now staid and narrow and aroused only by questions of fashion and property" (Lewis 326) and Mrs. Welland's "lifelong mastery over trifles had given her an air of factitious authority."<sup>30</sup> Lucretia Jones's presence in her daughter's work is even more subtle, though, since she was the lens and the filter used to envision the many mothers Wharton created. Mrs. Bart, Mrs. Welland, Mrs. Spragg, Mrs.

Manford, the two Mrs. Amhersts, and even Mrs. Struthers all owe something to Mrs. Jones.

As a teenager, Wharton wrote a poem in which she observed that opportunity was "in the narrow present close at hand" ("Life" 39), and those words remained true for the author who never wrote anything without a backward glance. The magnitude of Lucretia Jones's influence can be seen in her daughter's affinity for the novel of manners. Wharton's choice of genre is an attempt to fuse those two seemingly antithetical forces that ruled her early life: God and mother. God she associated with "truth" and mother, with "politeness." Her work, which studies manners as a means of testing truths, reconciles the two. Wharton was able to join the two, because as A Backward Glance illustrates, she was always actively engaged in a dialogue with herself, always scrupulously willing to re-vision and to re-evaluate, always full of intelligence, humor, compassion, and spunk, always searching. "Thinking back through her mother," to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, "she was able to imagine herself,"<sup>21</sup> and the legacy she leaves is much more than a dated, nostalgic reminiscence, it is the background of her fiction and a blueprint for living.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time (NY: The Viking Press, 1971) 173. The quotation is in response to a review of The Mother's Recompense and is taken from a letter that Wharton wrote to Margaret "Daisy" Chanler. In it she writes, "You will wonder that the priestess of reason should take such things to heart, and I wonder too. I have never minded before, but as my work reaches it close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing or far more than they know. And I wonder a little desolately which."

<sup>2</sup>See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977). She observes that the first part of A Backward Glance is devoted to a discussion of the mother's ancestral line (33). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>Wharton also greatly admired George Sand, another writer whose greatest work of art might have been herself. In a A Motor-Flight Through France (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), Wharton writes of Madame Dudevant "turning into the great George Sand" (46) and of "the passionate experiment of her life" (47). Also see Judith Fryer, Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Wills Cather (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1986) 149.

<sup>4</sup>Bell Gale Chevigny, "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory

of Women's Biography," Between Women, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 356-379.

<sup>5</sup>See R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Publishing Corp., 1975) esp. 22-24, 30, 51, 53-55, 67-68. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup>See Wolff 9-54 esp.

<sup>7</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934) viii. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup>Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise (NY: Harper & Row, 1976) 111, 112.

<sup>9</sup>Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 6. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>10</sup>See Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument With America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 56-96. She discusses the myth of Prince Charming in Wharton's fiction.

<sup>11</sup>See Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). She describes female development as a process in which the child forms her identity by seeing herself as similar and dissimilar to her

mother. Also see Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978). As object-relations theorists, they argue that identity is established by a sense of relatedness to and difference from another. Since mother and daughter share the same gender, the process of differentiation can be more difficult than for a son (Chodorow 166-167).

<sup>12</sup>In "Life and I" Wharton apologizes for her "vanity" by calling it an "aesthetic desire" "to make the picture prettier." This explanation makes her recede into that picture, since her importance is only as a part of the pleasing whole. In her revision, Wharton dominates the picture.

<sup>13</sup>Wharton's attitude toward Emelyn was both compassionate and dismissive. Wharton saved a letter that Emelyn had written her after reading her "reminiscences." In it Emelyn wrote: "I loved your mother dearly. She was very good to me. I can't write about your book. I care and feel too much to write" (Jan 14, 1935). How Wharton responded to her mother's praise can only be conjectured. She felt that Emelyn was always wailing about her poverty and her health, and yet she was very generous to her financially. The author was particularly exasperated that "a brilliantly educated woman, a remarkable linguist, & a really learned mind," never tried to earn a living and develop herself; nevertheless, the two were friends for over fifty years. The quotation is from

a letter to Mary Cadwalader Jones, dated Jan. 30, 1924, Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed analysis of Wharton's "making-up" and her use of The Alhambra, see Judith Fryer, "Edith Wharton's 'Tact of Omission': Harmony and Proportion in A Backward Glance," Biography 6 (1983): 148-169. All subsequent references to this text are noted parenthetically. Also see Fryer's Felicitous Spaces 152-161.

<sup>15</sup>Adrienne Rich, Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (NY: Norton, 1976) 236.

<sup>16</sup>For information on Ebenezer Stevens, see A Backward Glance 11-14.

<sup>17</sup>Lewis 181.

<sup>18</sup>For her last novel, The Buccaneers, Wharton was still scrupulously checking details about life in Saratoga sixty years before by sending a typewritten questionnaire to a friend. See the notebook numbered III, 1928, "Notes & Subjects, The Gods Arrive, The Buccaneers," in the Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>19</sup>Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 61. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY:



Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 14.

<sup>21</sup>The expression is taken from Rachel Brownstein, Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels (NY: Viking, 1982). She discusses how a female reader's identification with fictional heroines allows her to admire her own image and prompts her to interpret her own life through their plots. She argues that the marriage plots of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels have been influential in shaping the female imagination.

<sup>22</sup>See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 54-57. Their reading of "Snow White" has many parallels with Wharton's relationship with her mother; for example, they note the absent King and that motherhood transforms the Queen into a monster (37). Since Gilbert and Gubar see the Queen and Snow White as two parts of one whole, "artist" and "angel in the house," the fairy tale mirrors Wharton's own struggle to intergrate her artistic and feminine "selves." She too is both Queen and step-daughter, and her mother represents the part of herself she would like to kill (Snow White) and the part she would like to have (Queen) (41).

<sup>23</sup>See Edith Wharton, The Buccaneers (NY: D. Appleton-Century, 1938) 50-51. When the governess asks Mrs. St. George what stage her daughter, Annabel, has reached in her studies, she answers with the inspiration born of panic, "I

have always left these things to the girls' teachers" (51).

<sup>28</sup>Showalter, 61, from Romana, Charlotte Mary Yonge, 19.

<sup>29</sup>Edith Wharton, The Mother's Recompense (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1925).

<sup>30</sup>See Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1947) 71-72. For background information on Lubbock's relationship with Wharton, see Lewis 515-516.

<sup>31</sup>See Viola Hopkins Winner, ed., "Introduction," to Edith Wharton's Fast and Loose, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977) xxi.

<sup>32</sup>Edith Wharton, "The Portrait," The Greater Inclination (NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1899) 229-254. The story is the last in the volume, and its position creates the effect of "closing a chapter."

<sup>33</sup>Edith Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," Harper's Magazine CLXXVI (March 1938): 357.

<sup>34</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (NY: D. Appleton, 1920; NY: Charles Scribner's, 1968) 145-146, as quoted in Lewis 24.

<sup>35</sup>Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (Harcourt, Brace, and World,, 1929) 79.

## CHAPTER II

### A Safe Forum: Edith Wharton's Correspondence With Sara Norton

How quickly fall the hours!  
It needs no touch of mind or rime  
To loose such facile flowers.

"Uses"

Edith Wharton and Sara Norton corresponded from 1899 to 1922. Although the frequency of their correspondence varied, especially during the war, the two communicated for many years a little less than twice monthly. By 1901 Wharton was writing, "It was so pleasant to find that we're d'accord on the more inaccessible subjects that one doesn't get at in the ordinary course of acquaintance, and that form either a barrier or a bridge to real friendship--such as I should like ours to be."<sup>1</sup> Norton concurred and left the following instructions in 1906: "In case of my death--I wish all Edith Wharton's letters to me returned to her . . . She may burn the letters, I can't." Neither could Wharton, who found herself and her "dear Sally" once more d'accord.

The dialogue of letter writing encouraged confidences in a relatively unthreatening manner and provided a safe forum in which Wharton could articulate and achieve a fuller understanding of herself personally and professionally.<sup>2</sup> The letters are some of her most intimate, and while their tone, style, and intensity

do not match the often fulsome and impassioned exchanges between the nineteenth-century correspondents whom Carrol Smith-Rosenberg studied, they are often emotionally similar in substance.<sup>2</sup> "Don't ever regret having cried out your pain to me," Wharton wrote her friend in 1908 during Charles Eliot Norton's last months, "or how shall I feel over my self-abandonment? Let us rather be glad that such outcries do help a little, sometimes--."

As Wharton's two trailing qualifiers ("a little" and "sometimes") suggest, there were boundaries beyond which one could only help one's self. The letters show her desire for close communication tempered by her need for distance; for example, she never wrote to Norton about her affair with Norton Fullerton, although as R. W. B. Lewis notes, her 1907 letters are uncharacteristic in their playful enthusiasm about her new acquaintance.<sup>3</sup> She did, however, write about her mother's death; her own mental and physical problems; and her increasing worries about her husband's growing erratic behavior, her desire to believe that it resulted from "gout" in the head, and her small hope that a change of scene would refresh him. The author and her husband had little to say to each other, but each valued the haven of structure and the force of habit. By supplementing Teddy Wharton's emotional and intellectual deficiencies, Norton helped to make a union which resembled "the deaf-and-dumb asylum" that May and Newland Archer shared in The Age of Innocence more tolerable. In this respect, the friendship was possibly a model for Wharton's fiction in which relationships between women enhance the marriages that are the foundation of an ordered

civilization. With slight variations, the pattern is repeated in works such as The Touchstone, The Fruit of the Tree, The Reef, The Age of Innocence, The Mother's Recompense, The Old Maid, and The Buccaneers.

Wharton's friendship with Sara Norton was less susceptible to the ambivalences common to Wharton's relationships with other women, and the letters can be read as the author's rebuttal to her decades-long characterization as a woman "who doesn't really care for women."<sup>6</sup> Marion Bell's testimony in Percy Lubbock's Portrait of Edith Wharton (1947), "many women who only knew her slightly have said to me, "She looks at me as if I were a worm'" (28), is still quoted as evidence of the author's "cold dislike of women."<sup>7</sup> Bell is also the woman who said, "Being a very normal person she preferred men to women, and often terrified the latter with a cold stare" (28), and this statement coupled with her first exposes some of the reasons why Wharton's relations with women were problematic.

Marion Bell, Sara Norton, and Edith Wharton did live at a time when it was considered "normal" to prefer men to women, and this belief had a divisive and inhibiting effect on women's relationships. As Nancy Sahli says in "Smashing: Women's Relationships After the Fall" the network of intimate, supportive relationships between women that existed for many American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries was "subjected to increasing stress after about 1875."<sup>8</sup> By the turn of the century, "the female world of

love and ritual," which Carroll Smith-Rosenberg records, was under attack. Relationships between women, having "a high degree of emotional, sensual, and even sexual content," were later seen as "abnormal" (Sahli 18). Born in 1862, Wharton came to maturity during this change of attitude and in her maturity, for example, wondered if a very close childhood friend had had a "streak of 'degeneracy'--that is, lesbianism."<sup>9</sup>

The post-Freudian introduction of evaluative words, such as "homosexual" or "lesbian," to describe close relationships between women in part contributed to the dramatic change in how women defined themselves and related to each other.<sup>10</sup> No longer as comfortably at home in a cooperative "female world," they more frequently sought tenancy in the competitive prevailing culture that saw them as "other" and encouraged them to do the same. Women like Wharton, who wanted recognition as an "artist" and not as a "woman artist," often felt it necessary to distinguish themselves from others of their sex.

Wharton certainly had a great deal at stake--emotionally and artistically--in seeing herself as the "extraordinary woman" in a fraternity of male writers.<sup>11</sup> Discussing Ethan Frome, for example, she made a deliberate point of separating herself from two other "regional" women writers, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, who Wharton says saw New England "through rose-coloured spectacles." Instead she aligned herself with Nathaniel Hawthorne.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Virginia

Woolf, she did not proclaim her indebtedness to all her "ordinary" predecessors, and in this sense, Wharton is as vulnerable as her heroine, Lily Bart, to the speculation that "a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her."<sup>13</sup>

This feeling underlies the reminiscences of Wharton's female acquaintances and in part explains their ambivalent tone. Wharton was privileged, socially, economically, and creatively, and those meeting Edith Wharton, "the author," saw her in that context. Her natural reserve was frequently read as snobbishness or disinterest, and it catalyzed crises of confidence that prompted people self-protectively to look for flaws and sources of resentment. Marion Bell again provides an example: "I remember once when I first knew her, looking up and finding her staring at me with what seemed an unfriendly gaze. I said, 'What have I done to be looked at so disapprovingly?'--and she said, 'Oh no, I was just thinking that I like your hat'" (Lubbock 28). The anecdote, which both excuses and condemns, illustrates the tensions inherent in many of Wharton's female relationships. Her "extraordinary" success was a challenge and a reproach to other women, and as even Henry James knew, it could have a demoralizing effect.<sup>14</sup> It also had the potential for making her pass her life like one of the rare books encased behind gilt trellising in Elmer Moffat's seldom visited library.

Someone like Marion Bell--to borrow the metaphor from "The Fullness of Life"--never got past the author's drawing

room, the place "where one receives formal visits." Sara Norton, however, approached her innermost room, "the holy of holies," where the soula sits alone.<sup>15</sup> Although Wharton had extended correspondences with a number of men such as John Hugh Smith and women such as Margaret Chanler and her sister-in-law Mary Cadwalader Jones, Norton provided the perfect audience for a developing writer. No other relationship fulfilled a similar function. Wharton's relations with most other women and to women writers were troubled by the difficulties mentioned, and though she frequently talked with Walter Berry, Henry James, and Norton Fullerton about her work, Berry was the man who taught her how to write; James, the literary father she had rejected but held dear; and Fullerton, the enigmatic lover.<sup>16</sup> All these friendships were implicitly less egalitarian than her friendship with Norton. As the younger daughter of Charles Eliot Norton, the Dante scholar and Harvard's distinguished fine arts professor, Sara had been at home in intellectual and literary circles since Carlyle had held "his little sweetheart" on his knee and given her a gold locket that contained his own hair.<sup>17</sup> Besides Wharton, her friends included Annie Fields, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James. In many ways, she and her father provided Wharton with the ideal family. There was no Mrs. Norton to withhold love or to be critical and competitive in the ways that Wharton remembered her own mother being, and Mr. Norton was the perfect substitute father for a literary daughter.



The friendship began at a crucial time for Wharton, 1899. That year she published her first book of short stories, and as she recalled in A Backward Glance, "The publishing of 'The Greater Inclination' broke the chains which held me so long in a kind of torpor. For nearly twelve years I had tried to adjust myself to the life I had led since my marriage; but now I was overmastered by the longing to meet people who shared my interests" (112). Those interests included a special empathy for dogs and an unbounded love of literature. Their similarities were as superficial and class-bound as a horror of Roman teas ("they are too awful, I don't wonder you shrink from them") and the new moneyed "invaders" of established society: "the Vanderbilt entertainment was just what you say--but for a novelist gathering documents for an American novel, it was all the more valuable, alas!"<sup>16</sup> More importantly, though, the two strongly identified with European values as a result of having spent part of their early lives abroad: "the contrast between the old & the new, between the stored beauty & tradition & amenity over there, & the crassness here" made Wharton feel they were like "wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house."<sup>17</sup> Wharton's fiction is full of "wretched exotics," such as Ellen Olenaka and Fanny de Melrive, but as critics have demonstrated, not many Americans were sympathetic to their point of view. Sharing conflicted feelings about their nationality made the friends feel akin to the man in one of Wharton's favorite Schopenhauer

analogies: "the intelligent person in the world is like a man whose watch keeps the right time in a town where all the public time-pieces are wrong. He knows what time it is; but what good does it do him?"<sup>20</sup> As this quotation from a 1901 letter shows, the two women prided themselves on being "outsiders."

Besides belying the image of Wharton as a misogynist, the letters reveal no split between "woman" and "artist." The diligent writer, who after a full morning's labor, descended at the stroke of noon transformed into the perfect but belligerently inertistic hostess is nowhere in view. Wharton wants and needs to explain herself:

I am so afraid of encouraging vague emotions about art or literature--so sure that it is better to let them die if they are not strong enough to fight their own way to the front--that I had my doubts about the wisdom of doing anything [for a joint acquaintance]. I hope this doesn't sound brutal to you. I have so much incipient art & poetry & fiction brought to me, which might so much better have been plain hem-stitching or pumpkin-pie or double-entry book-keeping, that I suppose I have grown rather callous.<sup>21</sup>

The passage shows Wharton as author and critic of her own text. The "author" articulates a belief ("vague emotions about art and literature" should be discouraged) about which the "critic" recognizes a need for qualification. The process of writing involves the reading and re-reading of one's text, and this quotation shows that Wharton was not satisfied with what she read, since she attempts to make the "speaker" of the letter congruous with her image of herself. Her recognition that literary and domestic arts originate from the same "artistic" impulse, for example, makes her aware of the "callousness" she would like to deny. Not succeeding, she asks Norton to do it for her ("I hope this doesn't sound brutal to you"), and in this way treats her as a mirror of her own conscience. Wharton may well expect the asked-for answer, "No, the discouragement of inferior art is ultimately more humane," but she is still risking an alternative and morally censoring reply. The letter shows Wharton's strong identification with Norton (the mirror) while concurrently crediting her differentiation (moral critic).

Wharton's awareness of her own bias does not mean that she sees the two activities as equivalent, since she has internalized her culture's evaluation of the relative values of domestic and literary arts; nevertheless, her hierarchal evaluation causes her some discomfort and again highlights the dilemma of the "extraordinary woman," who must validate

her efforts by devaluing other forms of women's work. The woman "artist," forced to suppress her connection and appreciation of female artistic traditions, is one step away from seeing herself as a "self-made man," originating from and continuing a genderless, "universal" artistic tradition. Wharton's resistance to the dominant literary tradition can be seen in the characterizations of Lily Bart and Ellen Olenaska who are artists in their own spheres, but like Henry James, she could be a severe critic when literary values were at stake.<sup>22</sup> Thirty-three years later she would write authoritatively in A Backward Glance, "the greatest service a writer can render to letters is to follow his conscience" (140), but in 1901, she struggles to articulate her position and asks for Norton's understanding and validation of that stance.

During this period (1901) of artistic resolve and definition, Wharton lost her mother, Lucretia Jones. At the time of Lucretia's death, mother and daughter were effectively estranged after years of misunderstanding, competition, and recriminations. Cynthia Griffin Wolff sees their relationship as the major inhibiting force in Wharton's life and argues that she would never have emerged as an artist without winning independence from her mother's influence.<sup>23</sup> With such a history, Wharton could only be expected to write, as Lewis notes, "conventionally" to Norton about the event (100), but what the letter does not say is unconventional. There is no expression of grief or regret or

(as Sara was later to express on the death of her father) guilt.

I must begin by saying that this paper [black-edged notepaper] signifies that my poor mother died suddenly and unexpectedly the day after you left. She had been hopelessly ill for fourteen months, paralyzed & unconscious for nearly a year--but it was one of the cases in which it seemed that life--that kind of life--might go on for years; and there is no room for anything but thankfulness at this sudden conclusion of it all.<sup>24</sup>

Wharton had a horror of that kind of suspended existence to the extent that in 1908 she would write of a dying friend: "But, oh, if I had morphine in reach, as she has, how quickly I'd cut the knot."<sup>25</sup> Norton was of like mind and did not see anything peculiar in Wharton's almost gushing her relief at the death of Sally's aunt in 1916: "First of all, thank heaven, your poor aunt is dead! I am so glad to think that the misery is over for her, and the long cruel strain for you."<sup>26</sup> Knowing her audience, Wharton directed Norton's response to prohibit "conventional" expressions of sympathy. Lucretia's condition made relief at her death appropriate, and her daughter's words, "there is no room for anything but

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thankfulness at the sudden conclusion of it all," function equally well as an expression of conscious and subconscious feelings.

The tone of Wharton's news and her removed stance mask the feelings that she must have had difficulty in trying to control at this time: grief and regret for the past, self-pity for her mother's emotional abandonment, a longing to atone, and despair that the past could never be repaired. Wharton's inevitable confusion about her own feelings would have made it painfully difficult for her to react comfortably to expressions of sympathy. Her sparse communication tells Norton in what manner and in what degree of sympathy she should respond and shows that good "reading" skills were one of the keystones of this friendship.

In turn Wharton was the logical confidante for Norton as her father became progressively ill. The author was able to see each of her friends' points of view, and though she felt great distress at the father's discomfort, she clearly sympathized more with the difficulties his condition created for the daughter. Sally wanted to do what pleased her father and would make him most comfortable, but there was no ideal action which could do both. Wharton helped her cope with her feelings of inadequacy and guilt:

Now that you tell me the Doctor is on your side, I can't help advising you to go to Ashfield when the next "hot spell" comes.

It will cost you a struggle, but the struggle will really be worse for you than for your father. After a certain age it becomes necessary now & then to "passer outre" in dealing with old people, even the most intelligent & reasonable--& it is often a relief to them to be "dealt with" & over-ruled. I think it would be in this case, & I am sure the moral effect of getting to Ashfield, especially the new & improved Ashfield, would be of great good, & probably soon dispell the nervous apprehensions.<sup>27</sup>

The letter strikes just the right tone by clearly aligning the writer with Norton without showing her father any disrespect.

During times of extreme emotional distress and breakdown, the letters provided comfort, sympathy, and reassurance. At the beginning of their correspondence, Wharton wrote: "Don't I know that feeling you describe, when one longs to go to a hospital & have something cut out, & come out minus an organ, but alive & active & like other people, instead of dragging on with this bloodless existence!! Only I fear you will never find a surgeon who will do that service."<sup>28</sup> In Sally, Wharton finally found the understanding of a fellow sufferer, which the syntax and the repetition of Wharton's phrase, "Don't I know," emphasize:

"but don't I know so well the state of mind & body in which the things one likes are precisely those that seem to use one up most severely."<sup>29</sup> Since Norton experienced the same symptoms, Wharton did not have to suppress or to deny her own. Rather, she now had a place where she could discuss them, and as modern psychology will attest, that is crucial for the beginning of the "talking cure."

Wharton had a serious breakdown in 1902, which the following March 9 letter describes:

Last week is a kind of nightmare to me.  
I am just coming back to the realities,  
& yesterday I was seized by a sudden fear  
that I had not sent you word when I found  
I should have to give up my Boston visit--I  
remember scrawling a line in pencil, to say  
that I had postponed my departure; but I  
can't recall writing or telegraphing that it  
was definitely given up . . . I mean it was  
rather confusing--If, therefore, I failed to  
let you know, please, please forgive me!  
I have not for a long time had such a bad  
breakdown. You, who know what such things are,  
will make allowances I am sure.

Norton experienced a similar state in 1905, and Wharton responded:



It seems so strange to think of you at Newport, all alone in Catherine St. I wish just this once that I were back at Land's End & could take you in. I am so sorry that you have had this break-down. No one knows better than I do (at least few know better) the unutterable weariness of pulling out of the tide of life into the drydock for repairs. The first time one does it there comes a certain refreshment; after that, though no doubt the physical effect is good, the mental & moral results are less exhilarating.<sup>20</sup>

Often characterized as "reserved," Wharton was readily unreserved about herself when she could help "repair" a friend, as the case of Norton's sister, Elizabeth ("Lily"), illustrates:

What a detestable year [1908] you have all had, you poor dear Shady Hillers, & how I wish I could wave a wand & lift all the clouds!--Tell Lily, if it's any comfort, that for twelve years I seldom knew what it was to be, for more than an hour or two of the twenty four, without an intense feeling of nausea,

and such unutterable fatigue that when I got up I was always more tired than when I lay down. This form of neurasthenia consumed the best years of my youth, & left in some sort, an irreparable shade on my life. Mais quoi! I worked through it, & came out on the other side, & so will she, in a much shorter time, I hope.<sup>21</sup>

Wharton, herself caring for an emotionally disabled husband, could only have the greatest sympathy for her friend's comparable position.

As the friendship progressed, it changed subtly. Wharton became an increasingly prolific, well-known, and self-assured author, and Norton had her own authorial success in editing her father's letters. Older and more self-assured, the women were not afraid of disagreeing or asking for clarification. The letters in part chronicle the development of Wharton's "critical" voice, heard in A Backward Glance (1934) and The Writing of Fiction (1925), and show how the friendship's flexibility and its ability to tolerate each partner's individuality provided a forum for the testing of that voice.

When Wharton wrote her first novel, The Valley of Decision (1902), she actively sought her friend's criticism: "Here I am like a mother rushing to the defense of her deformed child! I hoped, when I sent you the advance sheets,

that you might be interested enough to tell me just where you thought I had made mistakes--& I rather expected you to put your finger on what is undoubtedly the weak spot from the novel-reader's (sic) point of view."<sup>22</sup> Wharton is asking Sully to articulate and to corroborate what she herself suspected was the novel's "weak spot," its characterization. The degree of her chiding is a measure of her reliance on Norton's criticism at this time. When the book was published, the reviews were generally positive, but the one that justified the novel's emphasis on period rather than character particularly delighted Wharton, who wrote: "I am childishly pleased by a review of my book in "The Mail Express," in which the writer says that the book should be regarded as the picture of a period, not of one or two persons & that Italy is my hero--or heroine, if you prefer."<sup>23</sup>

With Sara Wharton did not have to effect a well-bred disinterest in the critical reception of her work, and she could safely venture critical opinions before asserting them in more "professional" and competitive company. In this way, writing to Norton helped Wharton further articulate her own aesthetics. The following excerpt from a 1902 letter about Henry James's The Wings of the Dove illustrates this process:

Alas, alas! One doesn't know what to say.  
The book seems to me, in a sense, quite  
ignoble; & you know I don't think this

simply of what are called "unpleasant subjects." This is an unpleasant subject, but chiefly so, to me, because the author hasn't seen beyond it, has accepted it without a revolt. And then the style! It is délirant . . . I can't reconcile myself to such an end for the mind which could conceive Roderick Hudson, The Portrait of a Lady, & how many of the earlier short stories.<sup>24</sup>

As Millicent Bell clearly shows, Wharton was never James's apprentice. She mourns what she sees as his decline, but to justify her feeling, she is compelled to analyze its source. Rejecting the idea that her dislike of the novel is simply personal and particular, she must attempt to define again the source of her feeling.

Her second definition is more theoretical: "This is an unpleasant subject, but chiefly so, to me, because the author hasn't seen beyond it, has accepted it without a revolt." She says much the same years later in A Backward Glance: "there are only two essential rules: one, that the novelist should deal with what is within his reach, literally and figuratively (in most cases the two are synonymous), and the other that the value of the subject depends almost entirely on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see into it" (206). This idea originates from Wharton's own

psychological history. She would not have been "Edith Wharton, the author," if she had not seen beyond, revolted, and escaped the prison cell of her background and its "inherited obligations." Like their author, her most memorable characters, Newland Archer, Lily Bart, Charity Royall, and Ethan Frome, all see possibilities beyond their restrictive environments for self-expression that reveal to them the dignity and meaning in accepting and maintaining certain traditions and loyalties. Unfortunately readers, who think that the endings to novels, such as The Age of Innocence and The Mother's Recompense, seem unfair and forced, have also been known to "revolt." Why should Newland Archer not have Ellen Olenka and "the world beyond"? Why should Kate Clephane have to give up her daughter a second time and have to return to the seediness of her former life?

The answer is related to the standard of judgment Wharton applies to James: the author must revolt against his or her subject by seeing beyond the autobiographical. Wharton had done so, and her protagonists who resignedly accept compromise, denial, and loss do the same. In turn they are rewarded with the perception that life has a moral significance beyond individual concerns. James, however, could not resolve emotional and spiritual complexities this neatly in his portrayal of Kate Croy. As Wharton articulates her feelings about James's novel, she transforms a personal insight (why it is an unpleasant subject) into a standard that determines literary merit. In other words, Wharton is

saying that notable literature results from an author's own struggle with and transcendence of personal issues when the knowledge is imparted to his or her characters. Although Wharton's criticism faults James's novel, Merton Densher's reverence for Milly Theale could be compared to Lawrence Selden's belated awareness of his love for Lily Bart, and Kate Croy's manipulations are more subtle than any Undine Spragg practiced.

Soon after Wharton mailed Sally and her father a typewritten copy of a letter that Henry James had sent her. It contained his now famous advice to "do New York," itself a subtle criticism of Wharton's treatment of subject in The Valley of Decision. Although prompted by pride in James's recognition of her talent, the gesture was an assertion of independence and authorial identity.<sup>25</sup>

The benefits of the relationship were not all on Wharton's side. Norton herself wrote poetry and published a collection of jingoistic verse in 1916 called "New Nursery Rhymes on Old Lines By an American."<sup>26</sup> In 1905, when a mutual friend's sister died after a long illness, Wharton showed how much she valued the consoling power of Norton's verses:

I am very glad you sent me the lines  
on Ethel, dear Sally, not only because of  
my own interest in reading them, but  
because I know how deeply they will touch

Henrietta's heart. I am not even going to ask your leave to send them to her, feeling sure that you will understand my wish to do so.--They are charmingly done, & I am wondering why you have kept this gift so long a secret from me.?"

In this passage Wharton expressed something she would probably not have voiced elsewhere, her admiration for obituary verse. Considering her own use of irony and her efforts to separate herself from other women writers, her acknowledgement of the value and power of Norton's verse seems all the more remarkable.

The published novelist responds to Norton's work as to an equal in the following excerpt from a 1906 letter:

I was sorry you would not let me re-read your poems while I was with you yesterday. I did not want to write about them because I wanted to show you, in detail, just how & where I think they need to be changed. I don't know that I can sum up my meaning on paper, unless by saying that, where you say that you have tried not to be "poetic"--by which, of course, you mean ornate, rhetorical, imagé--I think you are trying to skip a necessary "étape on

the way to Parnassus.--Such bareness as "she neither feels nor sees" is the result of a great deal of writing, of a long & expert process of elimination, selection, concentration of idea & expression. It is not being simple so much as being excessively subtle; & the less-practised simplicity is apt to have too loose a "weave." That is the criticism I wanted--with much more explicitness & illumination--to make on your lines, which I should like to re-read with you some day in that light. Personally, I think a long apprenticeship should be given to form before it is thrown overboard--& I don't see why, with your bent, you don't give it. Here is as much as I can make clear without a talk--but that, I hope, will come soon.<sup>22</sup>

Wharton's advice reveals that she had a sound understanding of the basis of modern poetry. It is also advice that she herself practiced. Her own prose drafts, for example, provide an example of the process of "elimination, selection, concentration of idea & expression."

In turn, Wharton good-naturedly accepted criticism from Norton on her heroines, Lily Bart and Justine Brent. The friends' disagreements were part of their on-going literary discussion; for example, Wharton expressed her



admiration for James's Prefaces and Norton wrote about her pleasure in Turgenev. By 1912, however, the women had been corresponding for thirteen years and felt safe enough to address the times when they did not feel exactly the same:

I don't know why you ever think it necessary to buy my books. Don't you trust my sending them to you? The order to send you "The Reef" went to Appleton over a month ago. Nor do I know where you get the idea that I don't care to have my friends talk to me of my books. Nothing gives me greater pleasure--naturally--than their being sufficiently interested to do so. But I'm never surprised, or disappointed, if they don't, because their liking, or not liking, what I write seems so unimportant a part of the general pleasure of the relation.<sup>29</sup>

Wharton sees Sally's gesture as critical. Her friend should know that she would never consciously act inconsiderately toward her. Wharton's hurt stems from Norton's lack of trust, but her irritation most likely stems from guilt: the implied criticism has some truth in it. Wharton's question ("Don't you trust my sending them to you?") is designed, whether consciously or unconsciously, to unnerve Norton before she gets to her real grievance: "Nor do I know where

you get the idea that I don't care to have my friends talk to me of my books." Obviously she got the idea from Sally and feels defensive. She would like to see herself as "naturally" accepting criticism, but the "unnatural" insertion of the adverb, "naturally," belies her contention that nothing gives her greater pleasure.

The excerpt is full of double-messages: "I want you to read my books but treat them as a gift"; "I want your criticism, but I don't value it"; "I appreciate my friends' comments but not in comparison to their other attributes." Because neither friend was afraid of confrontation, the friendship survived for nearly a quarter of a century, and Norton's clear statement of her feelings to Wharton is evidence of the its democratic nature. Wharton probably did not fully recognize the tone of this 1912 letter, since during this period, she bemusedly wrote: "I am puzzling my head to know why my last letter held you 'at arms' length.' In arms' length is where I hold my friends, & as I have long, strong arms they ought to feel secure there!"<sup>40</sup> Wharton sought similar reassurance the next year when Henry James hotly refused her efforts to present him with a birthday remembrance from his American friends.

Although other obligations and physical and emotional weariness often made it difficult to write during the war years, Wharton assumed that such communication was unnecessary, since she knew as she wrote in 1914 that Norton would feel the same and be in the same state of mind.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately, that bond was subject to time, and to borrow Wharton's own words from an earlier 1907 letter, she "could only look on & feel unavailing sympathy," when Norton was found to have a cancerous tumor in 1922.<sup>42</sup> By May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Norton didn't need a scribe and Wharton answered: "When I saw those closely written pages of yours yesterday I was almost as cross as I was pleased, & 'applauded with both hands' the little scolding that your admirable Doctor gave you when he caught you in the act! Still, it was a great satisfaction to read this report of yourself in your own hand--as firm & beautiful as ever it was--& I'm glad he didn't catch you till you'd nearly done." Wharton "rejoiced" in Norton's progress, but her euphoria was not to last--that summer her friend suffered a relapse and died.

By offering an alternative model to Mrs. Bell's for female relations, Norton left a legacy that enriched Wharton's fiction. In it men and women seldom find the right word to say to each other, and for this reason women's relationships with other women have added significance. Even in The House of Mirth (1905) and The Custom of the Country (1913) women are not "natural" enemies. When women are competitive with or cruel to each other, the blame clearly belongs to society. In The Reef (1912), Wharton re-defines relationships between women and between women and men by showing how women can grow through their relationships with each other, instead of under the tutelage of a lover. Her last, unfinished, and posthumously published work, The

Buccaneers (1938), depicts the advantages of cooperation between women, as well as the similarities between women as disparate as the young American, Nan St. George, and the Duchess of Tintagel. These fictional relationships do not deny that women's relationships have problems and jealousies, as the examples of Bertha Dorset, Undine Spragg, and the case of May Archer and Ellen Olenska illustrate, but they do offer a reasoned way to recover from the "fall" that Nancy Sahli describes. Honest communication, such as Anna Leath and Sophy Viner experience, necessitates seeing with another's eyes, and that expanded vision is the first step toward revising inherited myths about our own natures. Being true to another woman can provide a touchstone, a means of being true to one's self. Wharton's friendship with Sara Norton challenged assumptions that women's relationships either had to be "unnatural" or competitive, and although women's partnerships in her fiction are not an alternative to male-female relationships, they can have, as Wharton wrote Norton in the poem "Uses," their own "sweet content."<sup>2</sup>

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, letter to Sara Norton, June 3, 1901, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. All subsequently quoted letters are in the Wharton collection at The Beinecke Library and will be noted solely by date.

<sup>2</sup>See Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (NY: Methuen & Co., 1982), and Judith Gardiner, "The (US)es of (I)dentify: A Response to Abel on (E)merging Identities," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 6, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 438. Ong argues the importance of writing for the formation of more abstract, analytical, and interiorized thinking, and Abel observes that threats to identity are lessened when one is in relationship with "an absent other who can be recreated in imagination and memory" (438).

<sup>3</sup>Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Women's Relations in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1 (1975): 1-27.

<sup>4</sup>October 19, 1908.

<sup>5</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Publishing Co., 1975) 183. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup>Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1947) 28. All subsequent

references to this text are noted parenthetically.

<sup>7</sup>Janet Malcolm, "The Woman Who Hated Women," The New York Times Book Review 16 Nov. 1986: 11. Malcolm describes Wharton as a "misogynist." Percy Lubbock's "portrait," which is a series of her friend's recollections strung together with his commentary, reinforces this view. For a discussion of Lubbock's bias, see William R. Tyler, "Personal Memories of Edith Wharton," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 85 (1973): 91-104 and Lewis 515-516. Tyler presents his own "portrait" of Wharton whom he remembers as a loving and supportive friend, and Lewis discusses the disintegration of Lubbock and Wharton's friendship following his marriage to Sybil Cutting. Although most critics now recognize the warped tone of Lubbock's book, the image of Wharton personally preferring the company of men to women has yet to be adjusted. This is not to say that Wharton preferred the company of women to men, since either "portrait" is reductive.

<sup>8</sup>Nancy Sahli, "Smashing: Women's Relationships After the Fall," Chrysalis 8 (1979): 17-27. All subsequent references to this article will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>9</sup>Edith Wharton, "Life and I," The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut, 34-35. She is referring to Emelyn Washburn whom she helped to support. See Lewis 27.

<sup>10</sup>See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936,"

Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America

(NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 245-296.

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Woolf outlines the problems of the "extraordinary" women and her debt to all "ordinary" women in her essay, "Women and Fiction," Collected Essays (NY: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1967) 142.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934) 293. Wharton's insistence on her difference from Jewett and Wilkins almost begs one to see her debt, especially in the case of Wilkins whose treatment of the New England poor is akin to Wharton's. In fact, Wharton's novel The Fruit of the Tree (1907) in part deals with the plight of factory workers, a topic which was of concern to Wilkins in her novel The Portion of Labor (1901).

<sup>13</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905; 1933; rpt. 1975) 5.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of James and Wharton's personal and literary friendship, see Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (NY: George Braziller, 1965).

<sup>15</sup>Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 14.

<sup>16</sup>In A Backward Glance Wharton gives Berry credit for teaching her whatever she knows about "the writing of clear concise English" (108). Also see A Backward Glance, 114-117. For a different view of their relationship, see Lubbock 42-

45. Bell discusses Wharton and James's suppressed rivalry for the recognition of the critics and the paying public. For insight into Wharton's personal and literary relationship with Fullerton, see Claire Colquitt, "Unpacking Her Treasures: Edith Wharton's 'Mysterious Correspondence' with Morton Fullerton," Library Chronicle of the University of Texas 31 (1985): 73-107; and Alan Gribben, "'The Heart Is Insetiable': Edith Wharton's Letters to Morton Fullerton," Library Chronicle of the University of Texas 31 (1985): 7-18.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Eliot Norton, Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, ed. Sara Norton and M. A. DeWolfe Howe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913) 491. He had a wide circle of friends that included Darwin, Dickens, Gaskell, Arnold, Ruskin, Dante Rossetti, Emerson, and Leslie Stephen.

<sup>18</sup>March 23, 1903 and Sept. 1, 1902 respectively.

<sup>19</sup>June 5, 1903.

<sup>20</sup>Nov. 22, 1901.

<sup>21</sup>Sat., 1901.

<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of the woman artist in Wharton's fiction, see Elizabeth Ammons, "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art," American Novelists Revisited, ed. Fritz Fleischman (Boston: Hall, 1982) 217-223 esp.

<sup>23</sup>See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) and Lewis 1001-101.

<sup>24</sup>June 3, 1901.



<sup>25</sup>July 7, 1908.

<sup>26</sup>July 9, 1916.

<sup>27</sup>June 12, 1908.

<sup>28</sup>Jan. 24, 1902.

<sup>29</sup>Jan. 11, 1902.

<sup>30</sup>Dec. 4, 1905.

<sup>31</sup>Apr. 12, 1908.

<sup>32</sup>Feb. 13, 1902.

<sup>33</sup>Feb. 24, 1902.

<sup>34</sup>Sept. 1, 1902.

<sup>35</sup>The James letter is dated Aug. 17, 1902.

<sup>36</sup>Sara Norton privately printed "New Nursery Rhymes on Old Lines By an American" (Boston: 1916). The family donated a copy in 1927 to the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The book was originally sold for the benefit of The American Volunteer Motor-Ambulance Corps.

<sup>37</sup>Sept. 30, 1905.

<sup>38</sup>Aug. 7, 1906.

<sup>39</sup>Nov. 1, 1912.

<sup>40</sup>Jan. 26, 1911 / 1912 folder.

<sup>41</sup>Nov. 26, 1914.

<sup>42</sup>Aug. 23, 1907.

<sup>43</sup>The poem is dated Nov. 18, 1904 and was published in Scribner's 31, no. 2 (Feb. 1902): 180.

### CHAPTER III

Alone in the "Flux of the Tides": Lily Bart and Undine Spragg

"After all, what's the meaning of 'self-realization' if you're to let your life be conditioned and contracted by somebody else?"

"Joy in the House"

Both The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country expose society's ruthlessness and as a result have been used to illustrate the lack of female community in Edith Wharton's novels. Joan Lidoff, for example, faults Wharton in The House of Mirth for placing the "blame for the inadequacies of the whole socializing process" on "the women who teach and enforce social paradigms," and sees "[t]he primary motivations that determine the plot" as being "feelings of resentment and revenge among women."<sup>1</sup> Janet Malcolm goes a step further by stating that the "symbolic world of Edith Wharton's fiction is a world "where 'strange experiments' (that is deviations from the social norm) inexorably lead to tragedy, and where the callousness and heartlessness by which this universe is ruled is the callousness and heartlessness of women."<sup>2</sup> Certainly Bertha Dorset exemplifies the cruelties that women are capable of committing against each other, but Wharton uses her to focus on the forces that inhibit women's relationships. By making her the source of

Lily's salvation, Wharton reveals the potential power inherent in the most unlikely of alliances. Lily's economic and social descent from Mrs. Peniston's parlour to Gus Trenor's study to Mrs. Hatch's hotel suite to the boardinghouse's common room marks her closer identification with her own sex, and though her world is restricted, it offers her more opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth.

Without resources, Lily Bart sits alone "in the flux of the tides," waiting for her small boat to capsize.<sup>3</sup> As in Stephen Crane's story, "The Open Boat," God and Nature have turned an indifferent cheek.<sup>4</sup> Since the Trenor set exists in a deterministic and merciless universe where "the custom of the country" is competition, distrust and jealousy are naturally fostered among women. Yet they resist to the best of their ability. Lily resists until death, and her death is Wharton's plea that no more women suffer her fate. For that to happen, however, society must re-think and relax its strict and divisive definitions of women into categories, such as "nice" and "not nice." It must make room for children whose parents teach them to be both beautiful and useful. If the world persists in turning a deaf ear, Wharton warns, future Lily Barts will grow up to be Undine Spraggs, women who assume that their rightful place in the universe is in the lobby of the Nouveau Luxe. Once Undine's hand grasps the helm, she seeks the new and stylish as relentlessly as Ahab sought his whale, and though the ultimate victim of her

and quest is herself, she has an apocalyptic effect on every culture she encounters.

Undine appears to set her own course, but in reality she is rudderless without a first mate. In a book that Wharton considered "a neglected masterpiece," Susan Lennox: Her Fall and Rise (1917), David Graham Phillips describes the dilemma: "In none of these women, none of the women of the prosperous classes would be there but for the assistance and protection of men."<sup>5</sup> Phillips owes a debt of gratitude to Wharton, for his character combines the sensitivity of Lily Bart with the drive and energy of Undine Spragg. Married off to an ignorant and brutal farmer, Susan learns what Lily suspects: not much separates the business of marriage from the business of prostitution. Preferring to earn an "honest" living, Susan chooses the latter, for as she reasons, a prostitute sells her time and not her soul. Her thinking is a logical extension of Lily's and one that Wharton assigns to Mrs. Hazeldean in New Year's Day (1924). It is also more honest, since Lily wants to play on this knowledge and still remain respectable; for example, she sexually manipulates Gus Trenor to invest her small funds for her at great profit, thinking that "surely to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side" (85). As numerous critics have discussed, Lily knows that she must eventually pay for the favors of her crassly materialistic world in its terms, but she balks at paying the required pound of flesh.<sup>6</sup> Since her society believes that any woman

who is disobedient of its rules has in a sense collaborated in her own destruction, it views Lily's punishment as deserved. By making Lily's nature a composite of the women, "nice" and "not nice," who people The House of Mirth, Wharton exposes how this thinking harms them all.

Lily defies classification, and her moral appeal stems from her persistent refusal to define herself as a commodity comparable to Percy Gryce's Americana, "the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (49). Lily knows that the lady-like "barter" she must effect would necessitate her giving up the little sense of "self" she possesses, and that is a form of living suicide to which she cannot contract. Already too often she forgets the spectre of her inner "self" imprisoned behind one of her mind's carefully avoided "closed doors" (82); and though she rebels against being consumed as greedily as the pastry with which her last name rhymes, she nonetheless sees some justification in Gus Trenor's reasoning: "hang it, the man who pays for dinner is usually allowed a seat at the table" (145). As a character, Lily defines herself most clearly at her final tea with Rosedale when she asserts: "I have lived too long on my friends" (239).

Wharton agrees; economic independence is necessary for identity. Selden was correct in thinking "that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (5). In the pages of The House of Mirth, she

cannot avoid their acquaintance--the Miss Kilroys in Mme. Regina's workroom, "the sallow preoccupied women, with their bags and note-books and rolls of music" (302), the thousands and thousands of women like Miss Silverton "slinking about to employment agencies, and trying to sell painted blotting-pads to Women's Exchanges" (267), the "shallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans" (5). Without their sacrifices and cheap labor there would be no Judy Trenors, no poetical Ned Silvertons, and no Lily Barts. The muckraking reporter, David Graham Phillips, made the same point more overtly in his story of Susan Lenox: "respectable" women maintain their honored position because other women are exploited. Each step Lily descends on the social ladder marks her increasing awareness of this point and brings her into closer relation with all women regardless of class. In this way, her spiritual growth and her identification with her own sex are interdependent.

Lily first learns the full measure of economic exploitation in Regina's work-room where others more competent than she arrange Mrs. Trenor's "green Paradise" and Mrs. Dorset's "blue tulle" (285), and where her inability to sew spangles on straight is humiliatingly self-revelatory: "Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose; but the discovery put an end to her consoling sense of universal efficiency" (297). Her present demands a re-

evaluation of the past. Then she had always felt a sympathy for those who served her: "She had been long enough in bondage to other people's pleasure to be considerate of those who depended on hers, and in her bitter moods it sometimes struck her that she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly" (28). Her empathy, though, was of the same kind as Judy Trenor's: "the daily nibble of small temptations to expenditure, were trials as far out of her experience as the domestic problems of the char-woman" (77). Just as Judy could not truly understand Lily's pecuniary difficulties, it was impossible for Miss Bart to understand the depth of her maid's frustrated longing, anger, and self-pity as she hung up a crumpled dress before returning to her rented room.

Lily's own experience subsequently educates her. After her dismissal from Regina's, Lily can claim "the same position," but driven to make use of Mrs. Dorset's letters, she more resembles the "char-woman" at the Benedick, Mrs. Haffen, than the maid. Lily's plight asks us to reconsider our first unfavorable impression of the seemingly opportunistic Mrs. Haffen. In retrospect her actions seem more understandable. As she explained to Lily, "I brought 'em to you to sell, because I ain't got no other way of raising money, and if we don't pay our rent by tomorrow night we'll be put out. I never done anythin' of the kind before . . ." (105). Mrs. Haffen probably never did, since she goes on to ask Lily to use her influence with Rosedale

or Selden to have her and her husband reinstated at the Benedick. An embarrassed Lily, however, only hears the implied threat in "I seen you talking to Mr. Rosedale that day you come out of Mr. Selden's rooms--" (105). Like Lily, Mrs. Haffen would prefer to support herself without resorting to blackmail.

This scene and related ones are the seed from which Wharton's next novel, The Fruit of the Tree (1907), grew, for it too developed from the author's political and sociological concerns with class. In it her heroine, Justine Brent, is a self-supporting nurse deeply committed to easing the problems of the working class by implementing humane working and living conditions in the town in which her husband, John Amherst, manages the mill.<sup>7</sup> By making parallels between Lily and other working women, such as Mrs. Haffen, Carrie Fisher, Gerty Farish, and Nettie Struthers, Wharton is asking her readers to re-examine the entire fabric of society, not just the upper-class world of Bellomont. She is also stating that society--to differing degrees and in different ways--exploits all women; only learned attitudes and social training separate the women who wear silk from those who wear homespun.

The twice-divorced Carrie Fisher, who supports herself and her daughter by parenting the nouveau riche, has the most insight into Lily's predicament, and she is the person to whom Lily speaks most openly. Taking Lily under her wing, Carrie counsels her that the world is "not a pretty place; and the only way to keep a footing in it is to fight it on



its own terms--and above all, my dear, not alone!" (252).  
Lily has tried to follow Carrie's advice, but she has  
mistaken the source of her help. As Elaine Showalter notes:

Lily is stranded between two worlds of  
experience: the intense female  
friendships and mother-daughter bonds  
characteristic of nineteenth-century  
American women's culture, which Carroll  
Smith-Rosenberg has called "the  
female world of love and ritual," and the  
dissolution of single-sex relationships  
in the interest of more intimate friendships  
between men and women that was part of the  
gender crisis at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup>

Lily accepts the fact that men's money assists and protects,  
but she mistakenly assumes that it also naturally empowers,  
for in the Trenors' and Gormers' worlds of "conspicuous  
consumption," the wives rule with a ruthlessness that  
Rosedale would appreciate on Wall Street.<sup>3</sup>

The novel opens with these women trying to include Lily  
in their world by the only means available to them, securing  
her marriage to Percy Gryce and his Americans:

. . . Lily found herself the centre  
of that feminine solicitude which

envelops a young woman in mating season.  
A solitude was tacitly created for her  
in the crowded existence of Bellomont,  
and her friends could not have shown  
a greater readiness for self-effacement  
had her wooing been adorned with all the  
attributes of romance. In Lily's set this  
conduct implied a sympathetic comprehension  
of her motives, and Mr. Gryce rose in her  
esteem as she saw the consideration he  
inspired. (46)

Although appreciative of their efforts, Lily feels that Mr. Gryce's doing her the honour of "boring her for life" is not honour enough (25). She would prefer an elegant and richly appointed room of her own. Selden is the only person in Lily's circle who seems incapable of furthering her material ascendancy, and as a result, he is her logical confidant: "I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard with you" (9).

Lily never rejects the world that Percy Gryce represents; she is like Rappaccini's daughter whose beauty and delicacy are nourished by her exotic, poisoned environment: "her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (236). Everyone at Bellomont, male and female, accepts the premise of male authority and female

submission, and that system eventually corrupts all. Lily, for example, must always be "on guard" because her economic dependence, whether for last year's dresses or this season's opera tickets, and it taints all her relationships. The only commodity she can offer in exchange is her charm and affability, two traits often circumspective of honesty. Lily's lack of honesty, what Jennifer Raden calls her "self-deception," makes her in part responsible for her plight.<sup>10</sup> In turn Judy's privilege has essentially turned her into a nonentity:

The collective nature of her interests exempted her from the ordinary rivalries of her sex, and she knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself. As her social talents, backed by Mr. Trenor's back-account, almost always assured her ultimate triumph in such competitions, success had developed in her an unscrupulous good nature toward the rest of her sex, and in Miss Bart's utilitarian classification of her friends, Mrs. Trenor ranked as the woman who was the least likely to "go back" on her.

(41)

Wharton's description of Mrs. Trenor is developed from the stereotypical assumption that women are most likely to "go back" on each other.<sup>11</sup> Usually Lily is seen as being of finer stuff than those around her, but her behavior to Judy belies the point and loses her a most powerful and needed ally. She herself "believed in the sincerity of her friend's affection, though it sometimes showed itself in self-interested ways" and "if her roaming sympathies had struck root anywhere, it was in her friendship with Judy Trenor" (129). Lily is decidedly self-serving and disloyal when she follows Carrie Fisher's example and takes money from Mr. Trenor, fully knowing Judy's feelings about such behavior: Carrie Fisher's "'a perfect vulture, you know; and she hasn't the least moral sense. She is always getting Gus to speculate for her, and I'm sure she never pays when she loses'" (86). Judy tells Lily, "'There's nothing I wouldn't do, you poor duck, to see you happy!'" (46), but of course there is: she is not willing to be made a fool. As Showalter notes, "she is no different from the 'best friends' she describes to Selden as those women who 'use me or abuse me; but . . . don't care a straw what happens to me'" (130).

Bertha Dorset usually wins distinction as the villain of The House of Mirth, however, even her behavior has some previous justification.<sup>12</sup> Fully intending to marry Percy Gryce, Lily rather callously contemplates playing with Lawrence Selden: "If Selden had come at Mrs. Dorset's call, it was at her own that he would stay" (53).<sup>13</sup> In this way,

she behaves as her society expects women to behave, and she enjoys discomfoting Bertha when she surprises her and Selden in the Bellomont library. Since Lily drew the original battlelines, it is no wonder that Bertha never trusts her again.

When Lily exhibits more integrity, she is "ruined." Forgetting Judy's accurate analysis of Bertha's nastiness, she assumes a relationship even though the two, who have been cruising the Mediterranean for months, have never been on confidential terms. Lily's possession of Bertha's love letters to Selden gives her a mistaken and unshared sense of their intimacy. Lily has the power to "overthrow with a touch the whole structure of her existence" (104): "If she had destroyed Mrs. Dorset's letters, she might have continued to hate her; but the fact that they remained in her possession had fed her resentment to satiety" (119). Bertha has not had a similarly uplifting experience, and when she must desperately hide any knowledge of her affair with Ned Silverton from her husband, Lily becomes the logical scapegoat.

Having already staked Bertha, Lily mistakenly expects that "the barrier of reserve must surely fall" (205), but as far as Bertha is concerned, Lily can be expected to respond "tit for tat." In the past Lily might have, but owning and not employing the means of Bertha's demise enhances her sense of moral superiority and allows her to feel compassion for the former rival whom she now

tragically misreads as "a friend in need." Ironically, Lily is unable to profit from her keen social sensibilities. She does not see Bertha's point of view; rather she sacrifices her own to her, and it nearly bankrupts her. In the past Lily aligned herself with Gus Trenor, forsaking her friend Judy, but here she does not hesitate to support Bertha. Her response marks the beginning of her closer identification with her own sex as well as her moral rise. The flux of the tides has changed when Lily sees Bertha as what she will later in truth be: the symbolic representation of Lily's youthful desire to exercise a "power for good" (35). As the temptation to use the letters increases, they function much as Penelope's desire for her old job does in the story, "Friends." They become the characters Lily uses to spell out her identity. Significantly the means of Lily's spiritual salvation comes from another woman (the most unlikely one of her acquaintance) and reverses plot expectations that Selden will come to her rescue.

The source of her rescue has been foreshadowed by her relationship with Gerty Farish. Unlike Mrs. Peniston, Lily is "heroic on a desert island" (36). Even Gerty with all her social work experience does not understand her friend's true position or its temptations; nevertheless, she proves to be the one friend who takes Lily on faith and never "goes back" on her. Her love is unconditional. Not knowing that Gerty too feels locked out, Lily instinctively flees to her embrace after Gus Trenor's

attempted rape: "she [Gerty] had felt at home in his [Selden's] heart. And now she was thrust out, and the door barred against her by Lily's hand! Lily, for whose admission there she herself had pleaded!!" (161) Selden's repetition of Lily's name has plunged Gerty into her own form of dreadful, engulfing darkness. The women are twins, but each is ignorant of the source of the other's pain. When Gerty embraces her nemesis as "sister" and pulls Lily across her threshold, she rescues them both from the "dingy" moral wilderness outside. Even though "every fiber in her body shrank from Lily's nearness" (167), Gerty cannot deny her comfort:

"Hold me, Gerty, hold me, or I shall think of things," she moaned; and Gerty silently slipped an arm under her, pillowing her head in its hollow as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child. In the warm hollow Lily lay still and her breathing grew low and regular. Her hand still clung to Gerty's as if to ward off evil dreams, but the hold of her fingers relaxed, her head sank deeper into its shelter, and Gerty felt that she slept.

(167)

The moving picture of Gerty holding Lily belies stereotyped images of both the "scorned" and the "beloved" woman, and

since readers know the exact frequency, measure, and duration of Selden's "seldom" heroics, Gerty's gesture becomes the novel's moral measure. By re-befriending and sheltering Lily, Gerty saves her own soul and Lily's sanity, and if Lily were not so much the product of "the civilization which had produced her" (7), she might have saved her life. In this way, The House of Mirth seems an alternative answer to James's Bostonians which ends with Basil Ransom effectively separating the two friends, Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor.<sup>14</sup> Occuring near the narrative's center, the image of the embracing women is the novel's moral and emotional heart; and as Carolyn Karcher suggests, it "points toward the creation of a feminine support network that promises to facilitate women's achievement of independence."<sup>15</sup>

The image of Lily and Gerty grows in significance as it is elaborated and repeated at the novel's end when Lily recognizes that "Nettie Struther's child was lying on her arm":

. . . she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder. She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. She settled herself into an easier position, hollowing her arm to



pillow the round downy head, and holding her  
breath lest a sound should disturb the  
sleeping child. (323)

Nettie Struther's kitchen, where one woman can speak plainly to another, is a living example of the "Republic of the Spirit." There female continuance and matriarchal heritage are emphasized. Lawrence Selden envisions his own version of this land but always evades it, because he views Lily as Vanderbank views Nanda in Henry James's The Awkward Age: too knowledgeable to be marriageable.<sup>16</sup> Selden's thinking dictates that his "Republic of the Spirit" must be a kingdom of one.

When Lily can no longer explain herself to Selden, when her "mute lips" "refuse" to continue her narrative, her career and Wharton's argument are simultaneously laid to rest (329). Susan Gubar sees Lily's death as illustrating the history of the "flesh made word" and suggests that the "word," which Lily and Selden could never voice is in fact Lily's dead body; "for she is now converted completely into a script for his edification, a text not unlike the letters and checks she left behind to vindicate her life."<sup>17</sup> Selden may "now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there" (House 329), but there is no escaping the concrete reality: her dead body is the final word. Selden most likely will, as Gubar argues, use her body to author his own text, "to draw from it courage not to accuse himself for

failing to reach the height of his opportunity" (House 329), but his method of "authoring" is inadequate. The "word" which passes between the lovers and makes "all clear" is left forever unclear and subject to debate in comparison to the "picture" of Lily's "expressionless" body that "speaks a thousand words." That image, repeated countless times in the more emotive fiction of the nineteenth-century women writers whom Nina Baym describes,<sup>14</sup> effectively silences Selden. He may imagine that "in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (329), but it is a word which only the angels can hear. Wharton's refusal to give it breath forces her readers to try and give it form, and every time we ask how this might not have happened, every time we offer a criticism or suggest an alternative, a new letter takes shape.

The comfort Lily receives from the imagined weight of Nettie's daughter on her arm and the comfort she returns to the nestling child is all the more poignant when one considers Lily's own orphanhood.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Bart raised her daughter with much the same motivation and purpose as Miss Havisham raised Estella in Great Expectations: "Only one thought consoled her [Mrs. Bart], and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance" (34). Lily envies the "lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of a mother's love . . . it takes a mother's unerring vigilance and foresight to land her

daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability" (91). Her thinking shows the insidious effect of her culture's values, as "the shelter of a mother's love" is translated into dollars. Nettie Struthers's daughter, named after an actress who reminded the mother of Miss Bart, represents the potential of what Lily herself could have become with the love and protection of a mother. When Lily holds the baby, she feels "the soft weight sink trustfully against her":

The child's confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life, and she bent over, wondering at the rosy blur of the little face, the empty clearness of the eyes, the vague tendrilly motions of the folding and unfolding fingers. At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered and became part of herself. (316)

The featureless child is like an earlier Lily, "as malleable as wax" (53), and the baby's "tendrilly motions" are reminiscent of Wharton's description of Lily as "a water-plant in the flux of the tides" (53). Their identification

becomes complete when Lily feels the child penetrate and enter her body as no lover could.

All her life, Lily has fled intimacy and kept others at a distance, but here she absorbs another, as the imagery suggests, into her womb. When Lily sleeps that final time, the child she cradles is herself. Through a painful process of establishing limits, by saying "no" to George Trenor, "no" to Mrs. Hatch, "no" to George Dorset, "no" to Sim Rosedale, "no" to blackmail, and "no" even to the well-intentioned Gerty Ferish and Lawrence Selden, Lily gives birth to her "self."

In 1932, Ellen Glasgow's novel The Sheltered Life made the same point but came to a different conclusion.<sup>20</sup> Like Lily Bert, Eva Birdsong lives in a society which is primarily maintained by women's silence and the feigning of ignorance. As Adrienne Rich notes, whether lying is done "with words" or "with silence," it widens the gulf between the "public" and the "private" selves and puts women in the untenable position of lying to and trivializing themselves.<sup>21</sup> Eva too is an object d'art, the flesh and blood embodiment of the myth of southern womanhood. Her dilemma resembles Lily's: "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (House 15), and the price she pays for homage and chivalry is as dear as Lily's: "As late as the spring of 1906, she was still regarded less as a woman than as a memorable occasion" (SL 7). Eva is ultimately unable to lie to herself or to maintain a willful

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blindness to her husband's affairs. When she discovers him kissing the young neighbor, who has been a surrogate daughter, she shoots and kills him. Her act is seen as a moment of madness brought on by post-operative depression, but it can also be interpreted as an act of sanity and read as a warning.

Glasgow and Wharton have given their stories alternative endings, but the message is similar: lying thwarts the development of an emotionally and intellectually rich inner life; refusing to lie to one's self is the means of becoming empowered. Showalter notes that in Lily's world women are "spoken for" and unable to speak for themselves (136). In consequence Lily's telling her own story to Rosedale is comparable to her assuming responsibility and fixing her identity: "She made the statement clearly, deliberately with pauses between the sentences, so that each should have time to sink deeply into the hearer's mind" (292). The future belongs to Rosedale. His affectionate response to Carrie Fisher's child makes him the only other character besides Lily closely identified with the next generation, and as such it is fitting that he is the one witness who can testify to Lily's nobler impulses. It is just possible that someday he will disclose to Selden the history of Bertha's letters, making it possible for Lily vicariously to voice the final word.==

Lily transcends her fate when her "poor little tenacles of self" cling to the baby on her arm (319). The struggle

kills her and suggests, as did The Story of Avis (1887), that it may take three generations to make an independent woman artist.<sup>22</sup> Wolff's observation that [one of Lily's genuine virtues is that she never fully loses her naiveté, never completely corrupts the artistic finish of her nature" (117) is in keeping with Wharton's ending, which implies that the "clay" (the baby's unformed personality) is there with as yet no "hard glaze" to its exterior.

Hope for the future lies with the daughters of women like Nettie Struthers, who have the chance of growing up to be "useful" as well "ornamental." Showalter writes that the The House of Mirth ends with a death that offers "a vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which Gerty Farish and Nettie Struthers will struggle hopefully and courageously" (145), and Elizabeth Ammons notes that the lady of the leisure class holding the infant of working class parents promises the hope of the New Woman (42-43). The images of mother and child also imply, though, that Lily's death is unnecessary and that the "lady" and the "New Woman" are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the novel shows their sisterhood and seems to plead for a time when there is a less divisive definition of "woman" so that a lady, such as Lily, will know how to respond to the sympathy of a Miss Kilroy. Previous definitions of "woman" have proved inadequate and unreliable, since by the novel's end Lily has become "unmarriageable" and Gerty with the "points" Selden observes promises to be marriageable: "really, some good

fellow might do worse" (154). Lily's own experience has taught her to have compassion and to feel a sense of kinship with even her flesh-and-blood Fury, Bertha Dorset. Wharton's indictment of society is not a comprehensive criticism of the "lady," for Lily has many admirable qualities; and rather than banish her to another land, like the "lost lady" of Willa Cather's fiction, or lose her altogether, society should re-define her.<sup>24</sup> The image of Lily and child, which represents the grafting of the artistic (the "purely decorative") with the utilitarian, embodies Wharton's definition of "woman" and can serve as a metaphor for her art, which both "delights" and instructs (301). It also suggests what will happen to the child, if attitudes do not change: she will be laid to rest on a bed of "lilies."

In The Custom of the Country (1913), Wharton continues to explore societal restrictions on women by showing what Lily could have become, if she had not had the tenacity to say "no." Undine Spragg may be misguided in what she thinks she wants, but once sure she stops for no one. The Wharton heroine with the least self illusions, she is also the one with the least "self." Her private life finds expression in the hackneyed vocabulary of romances, like When the Kissing Had to Stop, and her public life is summarized by tabloid headlines, such as "New York Beauty Weds French Nobleman."<sup>25</sup> At the novel's end, Undine is no more "real" than the story her publicist can manufacture for the morning paper.

Contrary to most plot expectations, her material rise, with its few minor setbacks, is not inversely proportionate to her spiritual fortunes. From first to last she displays "a kind of epic effrontery" (254) toward any spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, historical, or cultural values. She is the hallucinatory resurrection of a Lily Bart who has no limits.

Lily had a talent for trimming hats, but the force and scope of her gift seem paltry in comparison to Undine's keen sense of business, and Wolff observes that "if Lily had simply decided to manage her career (instead of slipping into the comforting sleep of oblivion), she might have been more like Undine" (247). Undine's lack of emotional coloration, her ability to plan and focus on long-term goals, her keen social instinct, her imitative ability, and her singular lack of altruism would guarantee her the type of success and power her father chases on Wall Street. But Wall Street is as closed to her as it was to Miss Bart, and all her energy and ambition must be contained within the embossed walls of the drawing room; the only deals she can hatch are on the marriage market.<sup>26</sup>

Undine is always associated with the sign of anger, glittering and blinding light; only the windows of her mind are curtained. When The Custom of the Country was published in 1913, Wharton was in command of her powers as a writer and a woman. Her passionate affair with Morton Fullerton, which by now had cooled to friendship, made her even more acutely aware of and angry at the lessons of suppression she learned



and practiced in her mother's drawing room. Undine's ferocity, her frenetic, dervish intensity all point to her creator's own fury, for as Lewis notes there are obvious similarities between the heroine and her author: Wharton has given her heroine her own nickname, "Puss;" her love of dressing-up; her ambivalence about marriage; her disdain for "fossilized" modes of conduct; and her incredible, all-consuming energy (349-350). Undine is a child of Wharton's shadow side, one kept imprisoned behind a seldom opened "closed door" in her own mind, and the havoc she has Undine wreck on each of the old and established civilizations she invades is like a nuclear explosion in comparison to Eva Birdsong's single bullet. The number of years it took for Undine to see "the light of day" (1908-1913) suggests her author's difficulty in opening that door.

The genuineness of Wharton's own anger in this text also in part explains Undine's fascination. We may not share her values, but it is hard not to root for her as she goes about getting exactly what she wants. Her appeal is two-sided: she is the "outsider" in the Marvell's and the de Chelles's sets who makes it "inside" and once "inside" thumbs her nose at them. Wharton wants us to feel angry for Undine, who like Lily is the product of her civilization, a perfect blank screen upon which someone like Ralph Marvell can project his romantic and sexual ideals: "he had been walking with a ghost: the miserable ghost of his illusion. Only he had somehow vivified, coloured, substantiated it, by the force of

his own great need--" (221-222). Justice is served when the "ornament" becomes a retributive "tool" of destruction. At the same time we can identify with Undine, we also feel a certain superiority toward her shallowness, and the more successful she and Elmer Moffatt are, the more self-congratulatory we become on our superior taste. In this way, the reader, like Undine herself, who goes from Moffatt to Moffatt, is brought full circle and realigned with Ralph Marvell's values; however, our sympathy for Undine lets us see those values from a fuller perspective after understanding the pathos of her situation when she meets Moffatt at St. Desert: "Here was some one who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed intelligent, eloquent and interesting" (536). Since society has always denied Undine an individualized vocabulary, it is not surprising that she is either inarticulate or can only repeat phrases from "Town Talk." Just as Lily Bert is "manacled" by the links of the bracelet "chaining her to fate" (7), Undine is tragically limited by a society that does not value intelligence or eloquence in women until after they are safely married. Moffatt's example shows the cost of this system is not limited to women, for the man who wants only the best gets Undine.

The Custom of the Country is rightly discussed as an indictment of American marriages, but it is often

overlooked as an indictment of irresponsibly permissive child-rearing practices. From a slightly different angle it is an extension of Wharton's argument about Lily's poor parenting in The House of Mirth. Mrs. Spragg is presented as "a partially-melted wax figure" (4) who "had no ambition for herself--she seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child--but she was passionately resolved that Undine should have what she wanted" (11). As a result, Undine learned to rule by making the house "uninhabitable" until she had exactly "what she wanted" and has matured into an overgrown child, who believes that "if only everyone would do as she wished she would never be unreasonable" (266).

Undine's selfishness and ignorance are the products of her parents' misguided pride and altruism. If she had been taught how to "think" instead of how to "look" (86), Mr. Dragonet's prediction, "My child, if you look like that you'll get it" (96), might not have been so ironically true. Mr. Dragonet is referring to the "everything" he imagines his future daughter-in-law wants to embrace--life, love, health, wealth, and children. Little does he realize that Undine has already caught "it," the disease that will continue to shrivel her soul.

The Spraggs' "passive stoicism" makes them Undine's most pathetic victims. They have touchingly sacrificed to give their daughter her "chance" but not made her aware of any reciprocal obligation. They have no more substance for their daughter than Mr. Bart had for his, who "seemed always to

have seen him through a blur--" (House 33). Undine is annoyed when her mother, who has waited up for her after the Marvell dinner, pleads, "I just had to, Undie--I told father I had to. I wanted to hear all about it" (104). At the same time, Undine cannot imagine her parents as existing apart from her: "She had never paused to consider what her father and mother were 'interested' in, and challenged to specify, could have named--with sincerity--only herself" (92). Undine manipulates both, expecting her mother to be her advocate ("If she and her mother did not hold together in such a crisis she would have twice the work to do") and expecting her father to cough up "extras" on the strength of her charms (45). Resembling Mrs. Bart, she has been taught to believe that men go "down town" "to bring back the spoils to their women" (44), and if they do not, they are being perverse.

Both the Spraggs have abdicated their parental roles; it is no wonder that Undine's forgery of her mother's signature, Mrs. Leota B. Spragg, shows her garbled conception of her mother's identity or that when her father asserts his authority and orders Undine to return Peter Van Degen's pearls, his daughter sells them and pockets the money. At the novel's conclusion, the Spraggs are effectively excluded from their daughter's life and will see less of their grandson, who now has no father to bring him to the sitting rooms of their hotels. Mr. Spragg's betrayal of Mr. Rolliver (and his resulting financial decline) has also been in vain, since it was prompted by his desire to separate his daughter

and Moffatt. To realize that his grandaon would have been better off with his father than his mother, Mr. Spragg has had to see his daughter unveiled, and the old couple end their days in the harsh light of disillusionment.

Undine seems the most selfish of all Wharton's heroines and the least able to sustain any kind of relationship. Since she has no intimacy with herself, it follows that she experiences no real intimacy with others, and even though she is sexually active by Wharton's standards, she is not "asexual." As in her relationship with Peter Van Degen, she is willing to sell "low" if the return promises to be "high." Undine's willingness to trade on her physical attractiveness is one reason for her success, but in fact she owes much of it to the support and mentorship of other women, a group that she manipulates with more expertise and more crude honesty than does Lily Bart.

In a modern sense, Mrs. Heeny, Mabel Liscomb, Madame de Trézac, Princess Estradina, Indiana Frusk, and even Claire Van Degen are her "network." They are willing to help her, if she in turn helps them and "plays square." Indiana tells her "up front" that she will not tolerate Undine's ingratiating herself with Mr. Rolliver in the same way she did with Millard Binch back in Apex, but once that is understood, she is her ally. Later her confidante Madame de Trézac instructs her on the finer points of French etiquette toward mistresses and flagrantlly flaunts her "in the face of the Faubourg like a particularly showy

specimen of her national banner" (484); and all the while--from the Stentorian, to Washington Square, to St. Desert, to Paris--Undine keeps Mrs. Heeny's advice in mind, "Go steady, Undine, and you'll go anywhere" (25). That advice echoes Judy Trenor's to Lily Bart, "Oh, Lily, do go slowly" (45). Undine, though, differs from the more impulsive Lily in her self-protectiveness and ability to parlay present failure into future success. Planning her strategy with Peter Van Degen, Undine reasons: "Already in her short experience she had seen enough of women who sacrifice future security for immediate success, and she meant to lay solid foundations before she began to build up the light superstructure of enjoyment" (234-235). These traits are not endearing, but they allow her to survive better than does Lily's plasticity.

Undine and her best friend, Indiana Frusk, are two of a kind, disdainful like Daisy Miller of anything "poky" (8) and believing that an American woman doesn't need to know a lot about Europe's "old rules" (162). Their relationship, based on life-long rivalry and competition for the "new and stylish," resembles Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade's in "Roman Fever." Even though Undine and Indiana's partnership is also cooperative, Carol Wershoven sees it as having nothing to do with friendship, since it is an "alliance" that works for their mutual benefit;<sup>27</sup> however, there is no denying that they understand each other as no one else in the novel can. Belonging to the future, to the "showy and the promiscuous" (193), they concur that "if a girl marries a man who don't

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come up to what she expected, people consider it to her credit to want to change" (96).

Wharton's warning is not limited to men; playing by this society's rules can transform a woman into someone who resembles Undine. Like Lily Bart, she has the power to save and to redefine herself, but having squandered it "getting and spending," she is in danger of looking in the mirror and seeing a blank glass. By misusing her intelligence and creativity, Lily also "lays waste" her powers. Her death and Undine's spiritual and emotional bareness are the end results of participating--even successfully--in a corrupt and immoral system.

The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country urge women not to squander their talents. Susan Lenox, the heroine who is reminiscent of Wharton's two and whom she admired, is a good example. She survives with her self-respect intact, because she creates her own image of her mother Lorella Lenox, brave, loving, and resistant to the tyranny of marriage: "My mother never let any man marry her. They say she was disgraced, but I understand now. She wouldn't stoop to let any man marry her" (188). True or not, that image helps the daughter and is a personal grail. Susan's predecessor, Lily, looks for her grail elsewhere and finds it in Nettie Struther's warm kitchen. It too is of her own making. All three books speak to the artistic and imaginative power of women. Wharton was able to harness her own creative power and its force enriched her life. Undine

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is an example of the pathological implications of that force, misguided and unchecked, and Lily, an example of its wasted potential. Wharton knew from her own experience that each of us is alone in "the flux of the tides," and that the only sure rescuer is oneself. Lily's and Undine's cases show the need for women to abandon models of female behavior that emphasize self-destructive competition. Lily's experience in particular shows the magnitude of the risk; nevertheless, Wharton is adamant: women need to direct their energies inward, and (if you "play square") other women can be a source of help, a reef in "the flux of the tides." Only then can there be a "new" woman and a new world.



#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Joan Lidoff, "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in The House of Mirth," American Quarterly 32 (1980): 535.

<sup>2</sup>Janet Malcolm, The New York Times Book Review 16 Nov., 1986: 11. All subsequent references to this article will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905; 1933; rpt. 1975) 53. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>Crane's story, "The Open Boat," was published in 1897. Wharton is more frequently compared with another "naturalist," Theodore Dreiser. See Alan Price, "Lily Bart and Carrie Meebler: Cultural Sisters," American Literary Realism 13 (1980): 238-245. Also see Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953) 58-59. Nevius states, "The quality in the novel [The House of Mirth] that seizes and holds the reader, and that accounts more than any other for its persistent vitality, is the same which we find in the novels of Dreiser. In the spectacle of a lonely struggle with the hostile forces of environment, there is a particular kind of fascination which is not at all diminished by the certainty of defeat."

<sup>5</sup>David Graham Phillips, Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise (NY: D. Appleton Co., 1917; Upper Saddle River, NJ: The Gregg  
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Press, 1968) 104. Wharton calls Susan Lenox "a neglected masterpiece" in her autobiography, A Backward Glance, (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934) 235. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. Phillips is perhaps better known as the journalist whose 1902 Cosmopolitan article, "Treason in the Senate," inspired an incensed Theodore Roosevelt to coin the term "muckraker." Roosevelt, however, showed more restraint than the men who believed that his sister was the model for the character of Margaret Severance in The Fashionable Adventures of Joshua Craig. That unflattering portrait of an upper-class American female cost Phillips his life just days before the publication of Susan Lenox when the avenging brother fired six bullets into his body (i-ii).

Numerous critics have made this point. See Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument With America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 26-37, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) 117. All subsequent references to these texts will be noted parenthetically. Also see Nevius, 55-58; Robert Shulman, "Divided Selves and the Market Society," Perspectives on Contemporary Literature (1985): 10-19; Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth," PMLA (1985): 783-792; Irving Howe, "A Reading of The House of Mirth," Edith Wharton, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) 119-129; Alfred Kazin, "Edith Wharton," Edith Wharton, ed.

Irving Howe, 89-94; Cathy N. Davidson, "Kept Women in the House of Mirth," Markham Review 9 (1979): 10-13; Judith Fetterley, "The 'Temptation to Be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth," Studies in American Fiction 5 (1977): 199-211; Judith Saunders, "A New Look at the Oldest Profession in Wharton's New Year's Day," Studies in Short Fiction 17 (1980): 121-126. Saunders draws a parallel between the heroine of New Year's Day and Lily Bart.

<sup>7</sup>Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907).

<sup>8</sup>Elaine Showalter, "The Death of a Lady (Novelist): Edith Wharton's House of Mirth," Representations (1985): 134. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. Showalter's analysis of Lily also serves to describe the author's predicament of being professionally "stranded" between two literary traditions, one male and the other female. Wanting to be critically recognized as a "writer" and not as a "woman writer," she felt it necessary to distinguish herself from "sister" writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, and to align herself with "fellow" writers, such as Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, and later Sinclair Lewis.

<sup>9</sup>For the organization of old New York society in The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence, see Mary Ellis Gibson, "The Ethnography of Old New York," Studies in American Fiction 13 (Spring 1985): 57-69,

60 esp.

<sup>10</sup>Jennifer Radden, "Defining Self Deception," Dialogue (1984): 103-120.

<sup>11</sup>Margaret McDowell, "Viewing the Custom of Her Country: Edith Wharton's *Feminism*," Contemporary Literature 15 (1974): 521-538. McDowell notes that Wharton often initially sets up stereotypical assumptions about women's behavior and then undercuts those assumptions.

<sup>12</sup>Showalter sees Bertha as Lily's "nemesis" (139), and Ammons describes the relationships between women in this novel as "frequently hostile" (39). Also see Janet Malcolm, The New York Times Book Review 16 Nov. 1987. She characterizes Bertha as "the personification of female treachery and malevolence" (11).

<sup>13</sup>Later Lily smiles "to think of recapturing him [Grycel] from Evie Van Osburgh" (92). She enjoys the sexual competition for the advantage it gives her over the women with whom she cannot compete materially. This theme with slight variations is the basis of several of Wharton's short stories, including "Her Son," "Roman Fever," "Pomegranate Seed," and "Bewitched."

<sup>14</sup>Henry James, The Bostonians (NY: Macmillan, 1886).

<sup>15</sup>Carolyn Kercher, "Male Vision; Female Revision in James's The Wings of the Dove and Wharton's The House of Mirth," Women's Studies (1984): 241. Kercher states that in The House of Mirth, "Wharton seems to be suggesting that the availability of satisfying and remunerative careers is a

prerequisite for ending women's dependency" (241).

<sup>16</sup> Henry James, The Awkward Age (NY: Harpers, 1899).

<sup>17</sup>Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 81.

<sup>18</sup>Nina Baym, Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978). The novels Baym describes are concerned with the psychology of women and show that "the woman cast out of childhood's garden of Eden has the opportunity to develop a truly moral and intellectual nature" (20). The authors were also advocating marriages of equality or "a union of equals" (41). The same generalizations can apply to The House of Mirth.

<sup>19</sup>See Wendy Gimbel, Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival (Praeger, NY: Landmark Dissertation, 1984). See Gibson 60. She describes Lily as "an orphan to old traditions," who is "unable to accommodate to the new promiscuity."

<sup>20</sup>Ellen Glasgow, The Sheltered Life (London: Virago Press Limited, 1981).

<sup>21</sup>Adrienne Rich, On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979).

<sup>22</sup>The wording of the following passage suggests that someday Selden may learn the truth:

. . . he remembered long afterward how the

red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes. She knelt there for a few moments in silence; a silence which he dared not break. When she rose he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time (underlining mine). (310)

<sup>23</sup>Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Story of Avis (1877; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup>Willa Cather, A Lost Lady (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923; Vintage, 1972). Also see Marianne Hirsch, "Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm," The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983). Hirsch makes the point that inward journeys which heroines such as Lily make often end in death but do not have to be interpreted as personal failures.

<sup>25</sup>Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913; rpt. n. d.). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>26</sup>See Elizabeth Ammons, "The Business of Marriage in The Custom of the Country," Criticism 16 (1974): 326-338.

<sup>27</sup>Carol Wershoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of  
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Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1982)

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## CHAPTER IV

### The Buried Fables in Ethan Frome and Summer

" . . . one way of finding out whether a risk is worth taking is not to take it, and then to see what one becomes in the long run, and draw one's inferences."

"The Long Run"

Edith Wharton's New England novels, Ethan Frome and Summer, proclaim her psychological and artistic emancipation from the internalized voices of the past. In them she attempts to do--personally and aesthetically--what she demanded of Henry James in The Wings of the Dove: to see "beyond" an "unpleasant subject."<sup>1</sup> On the surface, these texts seem fairly straightforward and familiar. Ethan Frome is--as Wharton tells us in A Backward Glance--her response to "the rose and lavender pages of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins,"<sup>2</sup> and Summer is a variation of the "seduced and abandoned theme."<sup>3</sup> Beneath the surface, though, each tells a "buried fable" about an "unpleasant subject," incest. "Buried fable" is a term that Gary Lindberg uses to define "a story of inward rescue."<sup>4</sup> Ethan Frome contains two. One is an allegory of authorship, and the other, which it shares with Summer, is a family drama for survival.

Her first New England novel is not a "cruel" book, as Lionel Trilling has argued, or a gauge "of the



destructiveness of the void" in its author's imagination, as Alan Rose has stated:<sup>5</sup> rather, it is Wharton's rescue of herself from impoverished and tradition-bound ways of seeing. "It was not until I wrote 'Ethan Frome,'" the author records in her autobiography, "that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements" (209). She felt that she could now claim her place in American letters because its narrative structure shows her seeing beyond the narrator's simple tale of two women and one man to her own "larger categories," in this case, the difference between "prosaic" imagination and artistic "vision."

The 1922 introduction to Ethan Frome emphasizes how much she was concerned with technique: "I have written this brief analysis--the first I have ever published of any of my books--because, as an author's introduction to his work, I can imagine nothing of any value to his readers except a statement as to why he selected one form rather than another for its embodiment."<sup>6</sup> Before this novel, as Blake Nevius states, "the narrators employed in Edith Wharton's early stories are always men."<sup>7</sup> It seems significant, therefore, that the next story Wharton chose to tell--The Reef (1912)--is of Anna Leath's growing consciousness, told primarily from her point of view. The change in narrative perspective suggests that the writing of Ethan Frome helped prepare its author to assume a narrative voice closer to her own and to sustain it for an extended time.

Wharton's unnamed narrator is an example of what she saw

herself becoming if she could not find new ways of using old plots. He is a "self" she sheds. In her article, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," Joanna Russ argues that male plots are inadequate for describing a female writer's experience; for example, she asks who ever read a short story about a girl going off into the wilderness alone, killing a bear, and returning a woman.<sup>2</sup> Wharton is grappling with the same issue in Ethan Frome. Her narrator sees what he has been primed to see culturally and literarily. By undercutting his authority and reliability, she disassociates herself from his error: telling the wrong story. As the ghostly landscape of the novel suggests, she saw that road ending in frozen creativity.

The story he tells of two women and one man is a story Wharton told all her life, but unlike her, he does not highlight the falsity of categorizing and stereotyping the women, nor does he challenge the traditional formulation through which society has defined their acceptable roles.<sup>3</sup> To him, the phrase, "two women and one man," is explanation enough for why the Frome farmhouse is not a "home." If Wharton had seen only as much as her narrator, she would have lost her individual identity as a writer in much the same way that Frome becomes a part of "the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe" (14).

The narrator's identification with Ethan determines the method he uses and the point of view he assumes, which is suggested by reversing that protagonist's first and last

naeas. "From" Ethan he visions this tale of triangular passion: Ethan has been married to his sickly wife, Zeena, for seven years when his wife's cousin, Mattie Silver, comes to stay with them to help around the house. Ethan and Mattie fell in love and a jealous Zeena sends her young cousin packing. Rather than face separation, the lovers decide to commit suicide by sledding down a steep hill into the massive elm tree at its base. A second before they are to crash, Ethan has a vision of Zeena's face and swerves the sled. He immediately rights it, but instead of dying, the two are maimed. The accident leaves Ethan with his own personal mark of Cain, a large red gash across his forehead, and with a pronounced limp. Mattie is so crippled that Zeena must now "do" for her. Confined to a chair, which like herself is "a soiled relic of luxury" (174), Mattie is forever frozen in the Froese's cheerless hearthside tableau.

The narrator's "vision," though, is just that--a vision. It is only one of many possible ways of telling the story; for example, Mattie Silver could speak for all poor relations, who have no choice but to suffer a cousin's querulous tongue and the advances of her husband. Wharton goes to excessive length, or one could say, to excessive ellipsis to make this point. Forced to take shelter from a blizzard in the Froese farmhouse, the narrator tells us: "I found the clue to Ethan Froese, and began to put together this vision of his story . . . . .  
. . . . .

. . . . . " (25). The heavy-handed ellipsis emphasizes that what follows is just what the narrator has said, only a vision of Ethan Frome, and it has been largely determined by the narrator's initial glimpse of and identification with him. As he noted, "the sight pulled me up sharp. Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man" (3). When the narrator crosses the threshold of the Frome farmhouse, he "fleshes out" this original fragment, which might be titled "The Ruin of a Striking Man."

Ethan is the narrator's creation just as surely as the narrator is Wharton's, and in fact "Ethan" the character appears to the narrator in much the same way that Wharton describes her characters intruding upon her consciousness:

I may be strolling about casually  
in my mind, and suddenly a character will  
start up, coming seemingly from nowhere.  
Again, but more breathlessly, I watch; and  
presently the character draws nearer, and  
seems to become aware of me, and to feel  
the shy but desperate need to unfold his  
story.<sup>10</sup>

As she explains in her introduction, he functions as a limited authorial alter-ego:<sup>11</sup>

Each of my chroniclers [Hamon Gow and Mrs. Ned Hale] contributes to the narrative just so much as he or she is capable of understanding of what, to them, is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger categories. (ix)

Although this quotation appears to present the narrator as a reliable witness, his "larger categories," which are in part Aristotelian and decidedly determined by the male point of view, are not Wharton's. In "The Criticism of Fiction," for example, she writes:

Above all, the general conclusions which disengage themselves from the tale--as they must from any contemplation of life that goes below its surface--these conclusions must be sought, not in the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it, but in the kind of atmosphere the telling of their history creates, the light it casts on questions beyond its borders.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the narrator's identification with his subject leads him to see only himself, as he mistakes such superficial likenesses as an interest in popular science and joint sojourns in Florida for deeper similarities between himself and Ethan.<sup>13</sup> Believing that good books resulted from the author's ability to see beyond his or her characters, Wharton herself always tried to avoid this error. As she argues in The Writing of Fiction,

A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context.<sup>14</sup>

Not questioning the concept of a "universal" vision, she valued it for having, what she called, "human significance,"<sup>15</sup> and by her standards, the narrator's personal involvement is a handicap, since it makes his vision "personal" rather than "universal": he is able to see the still figure in the foreground (Ethan) but misses the expansive background, teeming with other life (Zeena and Nettie). In describing the two men as if they were puppets (Ethan's lameness checks each of his steps "like the jerk of

a chain" and his observer is "pulled up sharp" (33), she undercores her own distance from them and her narrative command.

In an allegorical reading of the novel, the narrator is a pilgrim, who is traveling to a critical Junction. Like the speaker in the Robert Frost poem, he must choose one of the two roads. The one he is on now leads to his desired destination, the Corbury power-plant, but the previously traveled track has become swallowed by a snowstorm, which prevents his seeing ahead. If he is to reach his goal, if he is to be "empowered," he must continue by forging an original path. Wharton articulated the narrator's challenge in The Decoration of Houses (1898): "originality," she said, "lies not in discarding the necessary laws of thought, but in using them to express new intellectual conceptions."<sup>16</sup> T. S. Eliot would later make much the same point in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917). The narrator's dilemma--whether to retreat or to continue--is also his opportunity. Although others have reached the same destination, the form of his path would be individual. Instead he chooses a road that leads into an infertile and frozen landscape past "an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe" (19-20). This road ends at the Frome farmhouse, but like the road to Corbury Junction it too could lead--as it did for Wharton--to an original story on familiar lines; however, the narrator

relies on the formula of two women and one man and imagines that the tragedy he sees in the Frome kitchen has resulted from the women's competition for Ethan. Wharton, though, sees beyond his "vision," and by focusing on narrative form manages to have her narrator tell an old story while suggesting a new one.

The narrator's story is a romantic tragedy, and Wharton uses his characterization of Ethan to illustrate the inadequacies of that form and its perspective. Ethan, for example, is the hero, whose only fatal flaw has been an excess of kindness and responsibility; Zeena is the false lover, and Mattie, the true. Ethan's vision of his life (according to the narrator) is determined by these simplistic and stereotypical categories; for example, the kitchen is either a cold "vault" or a "warm and bright" space depending on whether it is occupied by his wife or his lover: "the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire in a cold hearth" (33), but "it was surprising what a homelike look the mere fact of Zeena's absence gave it" (67-68). Mattie's presence makes the kitchen cozy, and Ethan, who feels "an illusion of long-established intimacy which no outburst of emotion could have given" (90), sets "his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evening thus and would always go on doing so . . ." (90).

Yet Ethan no more sees Mattie than he saw Zeena before he married her:



She laughed at him for not knowing the simplest sick-bed duties and told him to "go right along out" and leave her to see to things. The mere fact of obeying her orders, of feeling free to go about his business again and talk with other men, restored his shaken balance and magnified his sense of what he owed her. Her efficiency shamed and dazzled him. (70)

Then Zeena's "volubility was music in his ears" (69). In fact she "seemed to understand his case at a glance" (69) and her presence saved him from going crazy like his mother. By the novel's end this dynamo is transformed into a ghoul:

A slatternly calico wrapper hung from her shoulders and the wisps of her thin grey hair were drawn away from a high forehead and fastened at the back by a broken comb. She had pale opaque eyes which revealed nothing and reflected nothing, and her narrow lips were of the same sallow colour as her face. (173)

The reason is obvious; Zeena is like one of her geraniums

with the faded, yellow leaves that "pine away when they ain't cared for" (138). Ethan has already proved a silent, remote husband, who offers his wife no choice but to "endure" as did his mother, Endurance Frome. Not only has he broken the promise he made her before their marriage, which was to move to a larger city, but he has done so on the pretext that there "she would have suffered a complete loss of identity" (70). In passive retaliation, Zeena assumes a new identity, "the hypochondriac." Whether her illnesses result from a need for attention or suppressed anger, they are symptomatic of the Frome's marriage, and in that sense Ethan is also diseased.

Despite the narrative point of view, Zeena is a sympathetic character when she berates Mattie for breaking the red glass pickle dish that was a present from her Philadelphia relatives: "You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always know it. It's the way your father began, and I was warned of it when I took you, and tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em--and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all--" (127). Zeena has a right to be aggrieved, and that neither the narrator nor her husband credits it again shows Wharton's distance from them and her criticism of their shared perspective. Mattie and Ethan have shattered Zeena's heart as thoroughly as they have the dish; and although Wharton's choice of dish humorously puns on Mattie and Ethan's situation (they're in a pickle), our sympathy must extend to Zeena. Her own romantic fantasy

of living in the city with a loving husband has materialized into hours of unappreciated drudgery. The narrative's masculine perspective excludes her story which could be one of unbearable loneliness, emotional and economic deprivation, or physical and psychological abuse.<sup>17</sup> Zeena's characterization makes one particularly aware of what the narrator said at the beginning of his tale "the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps" (7), and the reader must fill them in.

Ethan's inability to find the key to his house when he and Mattie return from the dance is symbolic of his inability to find the key to either woman. He lives in a world that Wharton describes as "an empty world glimmering" (44), one waiting to be imagined. Unfortunately, the narrator's choice of form dictates that Ethan's "romantic" vision of Mattie has an attendant image of Zeena as the wicked witch.<sup>18</sup> Herself a realist and a realistic writer, Wharton knew the dangers of romantic notions or of romance plots obscuring the actual, and Ethan's failure really belongs to his author, the narrator, who has not succeeded in characterizing either Mattie and Zeena "in the round."

The women's pairing throughout the story reinforces how little individuality they have in the narrator's mind. Mattie comes to the Froese house to help as Zeena came to care for Ethan's ailing mother seven years before. The women merge first in the narrator's imagination when he enters the Froese kitchen, and then in the vision he attributes to Ethan:

"She stood just as Zeena had stood, a lifted lamp in her hand, against the black background of the kitchen. She held the light at the same level, and it drew out with the same distinctness her slim young throat and the brown wrist no bigger than a child's" (81). Wharton exposes the self-serving nature of romantic visions by having Ethan's desire affect his perception, as before his eyes she becomes "taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion" (82). Although lovely, Mattie is possibly the most inarticulate and uninteresting heroine in American literature, and her name is indicative of her position and treatment in the Frone household. She is indeed as Ethan notes a "serviceable creature" (33)--either as Zeena's doormat or Ethan's dream lover. The only substance she has is what Ethan imagines; for example, when she responds to the sunset by saying, "'It looks just as if it were painted!' it seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul . . ." (34). Her appeal is that he sees her as an extension of himself:

even in his unhappiest moments field  
and sky spoke to him with a deep  
and powerful persuasion. But hitherto  
the emotion had remained in him as a  
silent ache, veiling with sadness the  
beauty that evoked it. He did not even  
know if any one else in the world felt

as he did, or whether he was the sole  
victim of this mournful privilege. Then  
he learned that one other spirit had  
trebled with the same touch of wonder.

(33-34)

She is his twin, and her face, "like a window that has caught  
the sunset" (35), is a mirror that reflects his own image.

The only way that Mattie and Ethan can be joined is  
through a act of the imagination, the creation of a "fiction"  
that nothing differentiates them.<sup>12</sup> They finally become one  
on that winter night's ride down Corbury Road when "[a]s they  
flew toward the tree . . . her blood seemed to be in his  
veins" (169-70). In the narrator's telling, Ethan has been  
the author of this fiction, and as the quotation illustrates,  
it ends with the appropriation of Mattie's identity.

The lovers' vision of dying wedded in each other arms,  
resembles the deaths of Tom and Maggie Tulliver in George  
Eliot's novel The Mill on the Floss.<sup>13</sup> In Eliot's novel,  
Maggie and Tom Tulliver die in a flood, and their embrace  
joins them in a way that the brother and sister never could  
be or were in life. All their training and schooling worked  
to separate them, and their deaths are partly Eliot's  
criticism of a system that persists in treating men and women  
differently. Eliot was one of Wharton's favorite authors,  
and her ending to Ethan Frome is in some ways a tribute to  
and a comment on that novel. Like Tom and Maggie, Ethan and

Mattie are two parts of one whole, representing maleness and femaleness. Wharton was well aware that society treated men and women differently and that being a writer made her an anomaly as both a "writer" and a "woman." She did not receive the same schooling her brothers did, and her old New York society did not encourage artistic and intellectual interests in anyone, above all, young girls. To become a financially and critically successful author, Wharton had to become in a sense "a self-made man," and, as noted in the introduction, Percy Lubbock relates that the author liked and frequently repeated the remark that she was one.<sup>41</sup> To become a "self-made man," though, Wharton had to feel keenly the division between her professional and her sexual definitions of "self." That division is represented by Froese, who goes about his business and talks with men, and Mattie, who is imprisoned forever in the Froese farmhouse. Their botched suicide attempt shows that in 1911 when a woman had to become a "self-made man," the novelist did not foresee the possibility of wedding male and female aspects of the "self."

She knew that everyday reality cannot be ignored or denied, and Ethan discovers the same when he wakes after the accident to find his "dream" diminished and Mattie making a sound "like a field mouse," "a small frightened cheep" (171).<sup>42</sup> The lovers' crippling shows the danger of "cheap" romantic fantasies: "The return to reality was as painful as the return to consciousness after taking anesthetic" (95). Ethan's imaginative projection of Mattie has seduced him away

from life, and Ruth Hale is correct when she says of Mattie, "if she'd ha' died, Ethen might ha' lived" (181). His "romantic" vision imprisons him as surely as the Frome's cape in winter or the waiting plots in the family graveyard,<sup>22</sup> for as Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, the visionary imagination can be dangerous if it "calls one to passivity, to dreams rather than action."<sup>23</sup>

Everyone on the Starkfield farm is a victim of the romantic plot's inadequacy for dealing with life's day-to-day plodding and day-to-day boredom. No rescuer will appear, and no fortunes will be reversed. Doomed to pass all this life and the next in each other's company, Mattie, Zeena, and Ethan's predicament predates Sartre's vision of hell in his 1945 play, No Exit. In this way, Wharton's novel justifies her choice of literary realism, and the ultimate moral of Ethan Frome is, as Wolff writes, the "clear and controlled distinction between 'vision' and 'reality.'"<sup>24</sup> Mattie's arms may encircle Ethan on that fateful ride as Maggie Tulliver hugs her brother Tom, but she and Ethan are predestined to be torn apart; the fiction of their union cannot be sustained.

In "The Criticism of Fiction" Wharton made a point that summarizes Ethan Frome: meaning, she wrote, is not to be found in "the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it" (230). Instead it results from a story's "atmosphere." The decidedly unsettling atmosphere of Ethan Frome emanates from its second "buried fable." If we take the story "from Wharton" instead of "from Ethan," the

narrative focus still shifts from the standard love plot, but the tale becomes a family drama for survival. In it Wharton explores her own struggle for independence from a demanding and overbearing mother. Although she may show her indebtedness to Hawthorne by appropriating the names "Ethan" from "Ethan Brand" and "Zenobia" from The Blithedale Romance, her tale is more akin to Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical Long Day's Journey into Night (1941),<sup>26</sup> for a narrator, whether the created narrator of Ethan Frome or Wharton herself, cannot escape from telling at least a part of his or her own narrative. The very selection, arrangement, and interpretation of events are all self-revealing.

Wharton's relationship with her own mother, Lucretia Jones, was troubled by miscommunication and misunderstanding, by jealousies and resentments. Feeling that her mother withheld love and approval, Wharton frequently characterized her as "prosaic," "cold," "disapproving," and "distant"--all adjectives that could be applied to Zenobia.<sup>27</sup> In comparison, she identified with her father, whom she saw as another victim of her prosaic mother. Although Wharton feared being subsumed by her mother, she also appreciated her wit, style of dressing, and care in demanding a strict standard of spoken English in the house.

A story in the first draft of her autobiography, "Life and I," demonstrates how these conflicting feelings made the author's struggle for independence difficult and complex. Wharton remembers being sent to a small dancing class taught



by Mlle. Michelet. The teacher's "small bearded" mother observed all the classes, and Wharton could not look at her "without disgust."<sup>22</sup> She revealed her disgust to a classmate, which he delightedly repeated: Mlle. Michelet's mother was "une vieille chevre" (4), an old goat. Feeling guilty for saying something about Mlle. Michelet's mother which she "would not have said to her, and which it was consequently 'naughty' to say, or even to think" (4), Wharton decided to atone by making a public confession to all the members of her dancing class. She was disappointed, however, "when, instead of recognizing and commending the heroism" of her conduct, Mlle. Michelet gave a furious scolding for her impertinence (6).

Wharton's behavior, as Wolff observes, probably resulted from the anger she felt uncomfortable expressing to Lucretia (22); yet it had another target, herself. The real victim of Wharton's childhood unkindness was not Mme. Michelet but Mlle. Michelet. The child's frustration with herself for not being able to confront her mother was covertly directed at another daughter in (what she perceived to be) a similar situation. At the same time, Wharton obviously expected more sympathy from the other daughter, and her attack on Mme. Michelet could be read as a misguided defense of her teacher, who is still and forever a daughter. Mlle. Michelet's example predates Mattie Silver's, but the lesson has not changed, for the alternative they choose--not to leave mother--ends with living in or being buried under a mother's

"icy" shadow."<sup>29</sup> The final scene in the Frome kitchen where a "alatternly" Zenobia tends her querulous witch-like twin exposes the horror inherent in that option.

Wharton's relationship with her mother is a useful context for analyzing her statement about the composition of Ethan Frome: "For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett" (293). Her evaluation of both authors and of Mary Wilkins in particular is self-serving and incorrect, but it accomplishes its purpose, which is to separate her work from that of women local colorists.<sup>30</sup> While her statement stands as an aggressive defense of her singular vision, it is also a declaration of power, for unlike the narrator of her tale, she did not choose the predictable path. They also reveal the novelist's competitive drive and need for autonomy by effectively casting Jewett and Wilkins in the role usually reserved for her own mother, Lucretia Jones.

In Ethan Frome, Lucretia's role is assigned to Zeena and those of Wharton and her father to Mattie and Ethan. The orphaned Mattie's tenancy is dependent on Zeena, and she worries that she "won't suit" (47). Her abilities to "trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite 'Curfew shall not ring to-night,' and play 'The Lost Chord' and a pot-pourri from 'Carmen'" (59) are not sufficient to provide her with

economic independence, and though she is of adult age, twenty-one, her household skills prove that she is incapable of caring for herself. She is more "suited" to be the childless Zeena's daughter than her replacement, and her gold locket and fairy princess looks pair her with the only other child mentioned in the novel, the daughter of a man who left his wife to go West "with the girl he cared for" (131).

As the only adult in the story, Zeena does her best to give Mattie a chance to make a home of her own; it is her idea that Mattie attend the young people's dances, and she wants to encourage the idea of Denis Eady as a suitor. When Mattie stands on the threshold of the Froese kitchen, "with all its implications of conformity and order" (93), she has a choice: to be like Zeena or to be herself. Joseph Brennan notes that the house is "a stronghold of moral convention and conformity" as opposed to the open countryside, which is a symbol of natural freedom and passionate abandon" (350). Mattie's decision, symbolized by the broken red glass of the pickle dish, shows the self-destructiveness inherent in incestuous fantasies. Summer explores the father-daughter component of this theme more thoroughly and directly, for Ethan Froese focuses on what happens when a woman chooses to compete or remain with her mother in perpetual girlhood. As the ending shows, she can--at best--hope to spend eternity in a cheate single bed in the family graveyard.<sup>21</sup> Mattie's confinement and Zeena's martyrdom articulate those dangers for both daughter and mother.

Mattie's decision also has broader social consequences, since her sexual usurption of Zeena in her own home disrupts social order; for example, Ethan does not even want her to see him follow his wife upstairs to their bedroom, because of its obvious implications, and it is there in the couple's intimate enclosure that they have their first "incident of open anger . . . in their seven sad years together" (112). This incident is, as Brennan observes, a foreshadowing of "his subsequent resolution to desert Zeena and run away with Mattie" (355).

Ethan's ability to begin a new life with Mattie, however, has always been questionable. He married Zeena, because he liked "obeying orders" (70) and has since been incapable of confronting the mother who replaced his own. It is debatable whether it is Zeena or Ethan who would have lost a sense of identity in the big city. Through the entire novel, Zeena acts as the parent figure or super-ego, checking Ethan's impulses, and he grows to loathe her:

She was no longer the listless creature who had lived at his side in a state of sullen self-absorption, but a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years of silent brooding. There had never been anything in her that one could appeal to; but as long as he could ignore and command he had

remained indifferent. Now she had  
mastered him and he abhorred her. (117-118)

Ethan's sense of command was another fiction, since he  
"alternately burned with the desire to see Mattie defy her  
and trembled with fear of the result" (60). He nevertheless  
has a need to feel dominant, and it accounts for a large part  
of his attraction to the childlike Mattie:

his soul swelled with pride as he  
saw how his tone subdued her. She  
did not even ask what he had done. Except  
when he was steering a big log down the  
mountain to his mill he had never known  
such a thrilling sense of mastery. (87)

Despite the passage's overtly sexual imagery, Ethan and  
Mattie resemble Hansel and Gretel more than they do Paolo and  
Francesca. Their example demonstrates that the failure to  
gain independence results in death--or worse--maiming. That  
realization may have been a literal "life-saver" for Wharton,  
and she re-stated it more overtly and strongly the next year  
in a verse play, titled "Pomegranate Seed" (1912). In her  
rewriting of the Demeter-Persephone myth, Persephone does not  
make Mattie Silver's mistake. Instead she chooses to leave

her mother and return to Hades,<sup>22</sup> and that return foreshadows Charity Royall's return to her guardian's house in Wharton's other New England novel, Summer (1917).

In several key ways, Summer is a recasting of Ethan Frome; the season and the gender of her protagonist have changed, but not the dominant themes. Still concerned with questions of personal vision and identity, Wharton dubbed this tale of a young woman's burgeoning sexuality and its attendant responsibility the "Hot Ethan."<sup>23</sup> The daughter of a prostitute and a drunken convict, Charity has been raised as a "Christian" by lawyer Royall and his late wife. She knows she should be thankful, but instead she hates everything--her guardian, the small, "sleepy" town of North Dormer, the mouldy and seldom frequented Hatcherd Memorial Library, where she works as a librarian as few hours as possible; and most of all, she hates the part of herself that comes from the Mountain, that bad and shameful place from which she was thankfully rescued and about which she must hold her tongue.

Pitiless and ungrateful, only Charity stands between Royall and solitude. As the following passage from a Backward Glance illustrates, there was "a time" that Wharton might have envied her situation:

The new Tennysonian rhythms also moved my  
father greatly; and I imagine there was  
a time when his rather rudimentary love of

verse might have developed had he had any one with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy . . . and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained I am sure. (39)

Royall's characterization is reminiscent of this description of Frederick Jones. Wharton implies that her father could have been a different and more realized man if he were married to someone less like her mother and more like herself. Childhood seems to have taught her first-hand the emotional appeal that being the second Mrs. Royall would have for her character. When Bernard Berenson expressed his admiration for Royall, Wharton exclaimed, "Of course he's the book" (Lewis 397); he is also the key to the novel's "buried fable," which attempts to answer two questions: "What would Frederick Jones have been like without his "matter-of-fact" wife?" "What would the consequences have been for his daughter?" The answers show the impossibility of Ethan Frome's fantasy; a wife's death may leave one free to marry a childbride, but the ending is not unqualifiedly happy-- "charity does not necessarily begin at home."

Summer opens with the mother figure effectively

banished. Mrs. Royall is dead, but unlike Zeena Frome's absence, hers has not made her house any cheerier. It is as much of a "prison-house" as the tomb-like Hatchard Memorial Library.<sup>24</sup> Resembling the Frome farmhouse in a different season, it is decorated with its own "wraithlike creeper," "a sickly Crimson Rambler" (15), and its yard is being devoured by "traveler's joy" and the encroaching "wilderness of rock and fern" (15). The yard is symbolic of Charity's nature and stage of development; eager for sensation, she is a precursor of Faulkner's Dewey Dell, more at home under the ceiling of the open sky: "[s]he was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded" (13).

In comparison, her guardian has spent his summers and tries to deny his ward the squandering of her own. Royall's sexual advances to Charity several years earlier and his subsequent shame and dumb need assure that the man who rules in North Dorset is mastered by his foster daughter at home. Lewis observes that this novel "gives off intimations of something darker, stranger, more ominous--a domain of experience she [Wharton] normally approached only in her ghost stories" (397). He sees the Mountain as the source of these disturbing intimations and argues that "it is by artful contrast with the Mountainfolk that Lawyer Royall appears so basically humane" (397). Although right about the novel's unsettling undercurrent, Lewis is mistaken about its source. As Royall's actions show not much separates the Mountain and



its outpost of civilization, North Dorset. The dark current emanates from Royall himself, just as Zeena Frome "secreted" "an evil energy" (117-118), and foreshadows Wharton's overt treatment of incest in the Beatrice Palmato fragment (c.1919).

Wolff discovered Beatrice's story in the Wharton archives at Yale and suggests that it is a rehearsal for a longer piece. It consists of three parts, the cover sheet, a summary of the story, and a piece of fiction entitled "unpublishable fragment of Beatrice Palmato" (Wolff 301). In the graphically erotic story of an incestuous relationship between a father and his daughter, Wharton perhaps defines in sexual terms what she felt missing from her childhood, the need for adoration. "I want you all," the "gluttonous" (304) Mr. Palmato whispers to "his little girl" (305). The sex between father and daughter has a positive allure. When Mr. Palmato draws his daughter to "the deep divan," "his touch had never been tenderer," and "[a]lready she felt every fibre vibrating under it, as of old, only now with the more passionate eagerness bred of privation, and of the dull misery of her marriage" (Wolff 303). Although the fragment begins with the father's implied admonition, "I have been you see . . . so perfectly patient," the daughter through her submission exercises mastery. Mr. Palmato is literally on his knees as he tirelessly devours Beatrice with his lips and his eyes. The tale shows Beatrice's needs for adoration and domination being concurrently gratified, and in this respect,

Wharton perhaps envied her character. At the same time, Wharton qualifies the surface text. Mr. Palmato is unappealing in his gluttony, and his seduction of his daughter precipitates madness and death.

Summer's surface and subtexts are the reverse of those in the Beatrice Palmato fragment, and the novel's dark intimations grow mostly from the text working against itself. On the surface, as Elizabeth Ammons observes, the incestuous relationship between father and daughter is identified as unhealthy (131); however, it also has its unconscious fascination. Summer's concurrent and contradictory texts in part explain the disputed interpretations of Charity's return to North Dormer. Wharton never satisfactorily resolves the conflict; in a disturbing reversal at the novel's conclusion, incest is condoned by the community, and Charity and Harney's love is the thing not named.

Fictionally the dilemma is partly resolved by pairing the two men in Charity's life. Together they form a whole, fire and ice, earth and sky; for example, Charity naturally sees Harney as a younger version of Royall: "Charity divined that the young man symbolized all his ruined and unforgotten past" (49). Harney is an architect who is visiting a relative and studying old houses in the area, and as his name promises, he embodies the "luscious" sweetness of first love. With him, Charity awakens to the joys of sexual love, and together they feel as if they "were the only living beings in the great hollow of earth and sky" (57). The natural world

cradles them just as Charity's womb will soon cradle their child.

Their love, however, can only exist outside of society. Class, education, and sensibility separate them as surely as the ocean separates continents. Passion and youth are the common denominators, and the couple try to live in a deserted old house, whose walk is overgrown with lush roses "run wild" and "crowding grasses" (122). It is "as dry and pure as the interior of a long-empty shell" waiting to be filled, and as such it symbolizes the receptacle of Charity's body. When the two are forced to seek protection from the rain, they visit a nightmarish version of their elegantly dilapidated nest. Set in a swamp, this house is a picture of their own in a later season, and its frame holds a weak-minded old woman, ragged children, an unkempt, fearful mother, and a man "sleeping off his liquor" (60-61).

Lawyer Royall offers much more: marriage with him promises protection within the respectable bounds of lawful domesticity and the fulfillment of unconscious incestuous fantasies. To choose Royall consciously, though, Charity must first define herself in relation to her own mother and to the child she carries. Projected motherhood has made her more keenly aware of her own motherlessness, and her journey to the mountain, prompted by desperate need, is itself a quest for identity. Charity's first impulse was to support her child in the only way available to her--as a prostitute in Nettleton--but her soul recoiled from it. Her mother, who

"could hardly help remembering the past, and receiving a daughter who was facing the trouble she had known" (178), is an alternative.

Once on the Mountain, Charity awakens from this dream, as she sees the consequences of ungovernable passions and the squalor of moral isolation in the inhuman figure of her mother, who resembles a "dead dog in a ditch" (186). Across her mother's corrupted body, she sees her own face reflected in her nameless half-sister. Charity rejects this image, and Wharton shows that even from the worst possible mother (whether a Zeena Frowe or a Lucretia Jones), one can learn, if only by rejecting her example.

Charity, however, does not simply deny her similarities with her mother; she also embraces them. When she puts herself in her mother's place, when she sleeps where "her dead mother's body had lain" (192), she experiences a second "awakening" more powerful than the one she had with Harney in the deserted house. The mother in Charity responds to and bonds with the dead woman whom she no longer blames for abandoning her: "was her mother so much to blame? . . . What mother would not want to save her child from such a life?" (193).<sup>25</sup> Charity both buries and resurrects her mother when she realizes that for her own child, she is willing to do anything, whether it is stealing food to feed the developing embryo or walking the streets of Nettleton. Assuming responsibility for her child thrusts her across the threshold of adulthood and eventually across the threshold of lawyer

Royall's house as his bride.

Both the child and the woman in Charity have seen her mother. The child is repulsed, but the woman, who has more distance and more sympathy, sees another woman; and as women and mothers they are kin. This split perspective mirrors Wharton's rejection of and identification with her mother. In fiction and in life distance helps one to survive while sympathy perhaps helps one to accept.

The ability to see into and beyond a subject that Wharton thought so necessary for the creation of "literature" is equally vital for the creation of a mature, autonomous "self." Free from the curse of the Mountain, Charity is now free to embrace herself without feeling ashamed of the part of her that is her mother. The minister's words at her mother's funeral have come to fruition: "In my flesh shall I see God!" (187); for in her mother's flesh Charity has found redemption and in her own, salvation.

The benefits of Charity's return to North Dormer have been hotly debated. The novel's ending is eerily reminiscent of Ethan Frome, for again a daughter has not been able to gain autonomy. In Ethan Frome the result was graphically illustrated by Mattie's twisted spine; here the maiming is more subtle. Royall's praise, "You're a good girl, Charity" (216), seems the equivalent of Mattie's broken back. Both result in never-ending girlhood, for as she tells Herney, "Things don't change in North Dormer: people just get used to them" (89). If one interprets the novel as ending in her

imprisonment (she passively awaits "a fate she could not avert" [159]), then things don't change, and one can even get used to an incestuous marriage. This reading shows Wharton reiterating the point she made in her previous New England novel: the failure to leave home thwarts the growth of identity.<sup>26</sup> "Father's" house is no safer than "Mother's," for there one can only be the puppet ruler of a diseased state. In this way, Summer mirrors Ethan Frome: the faded red house imprisons Charity as surely as the Frome farmhouse does Zeena and Mattie. Her body is her destiny; she will people worlds, not create them.

At the same time, Charity's pattern of growth, which is far less retrogressive than Ethan and Mattie's, supports a slightly more optimistic reading: she may return to Royall's house, but she crosses its threshold with new eyes. Carol Wershoven, for example, effectively demonstrates how both Charity and Royall grow as characters.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the standard "seduced and abandoned" plot, Charity ultimately rejects Harney as a husband; while not questioning his love, she has never been able to picture herself as his wife, living with others of his class and education. With relief she urges him to honor his engagement to her rival, Annabel Balch (163): "Behind the frail screen of her lover's caress was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people--with other women--his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man's life is

entangled" (145). Charity knows enough about herself to know that she will feel uncomfortable and inadequate in his world, and she is not willing to be powerless. She also knows that she is the stronger (129) and that he is not the person with whom she can feel the "sweetness of dependence" (15).

That person turns out to be Royall, whose look makes her "feel ashamed and yet secure" (216), and this second reading shows the regenerative power of the imagination hinted at in Ethan Frome. He is no longer someone to humiliate, outwit, or dominate, someone whom she sees only in relation to herself (81); and she is no longer a mere presence that separates him from the void. Both begin to wonder who the other really is. Like Nettie Struther's husband in The House of Mirth, he marries her knowing her past. In turn she knows his weaknesses firsthand. The two have been able to communicate for the first time in Mrs. Hobarth's honey kitchen, and a marriage contracted in its warm and nourishing enclosure promises to be more substantial than sex furtively demanded to stay loneliness or passion luxuriously spent in an empty house. As Royall pretends to sleep on their wedding night, Charity sees him more clearly: "Mr. Royall's presence began to detach itself with rocky firmness from this elusive background" (204). He promises to be less of a stranger than Harney appeared to be when the word "marriage" intruded on their idyll "as if some strange death had surprised them" (155). What surprises and challenges Charity and Royall is life; since experience has taught them both the nature of

genuine charity, the lives they fashion for themselves and for their child need not be as empty as a deserted house or as cheerless as the Froese kitchen. To use Royall's words from his Fourth of July speech, the newly married couple come back to North Dorset with the "feeling in their minds--that they wanted to come back for good . . . and not for bad . . . or just for indifference . . ." (143). Potentially they are the story's true architects. In this reading, the answers to the questions posed in the "buried fable" are more positive but still qualified. Frederick Jones may have been a different man if he had married someone like his daughter, but she, like Charity, may never have known that independence is a "sweeter" sensation than dependence.

If we see the door permanently closing on Charity after her marriage, then Wharton's second look at New England is not radically different from her first; but if we see the door remaining partly open for the development of a mutually respectful relationship between husband and wife, then Wharton seems to be suggesting that within realistic parameters the imagination has the potential for healing. At the same time, the ending is a replay of the beginning. The novel comes full circle when Charity sees the old proposal--still shadowed by what Lewis calls "intimations of something darker, stranger, more ominous" (397)--in new terms. A more mature, more whole vision demands this kind of qualification, however, and as Charity's visit to her mother illustrates, the shadow side can also be a source of illumination.<sup>26</sup> For



those critics, such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Marilyn French, who view the conclusion optimistically, Charity's pregnancy offers her a new canvas,<sup>29</sup> and although the novel itself ends with the couple returning in the "cold autumn moonlight" (216), Charity's baby is a portent of spring.

Because its characters are able to re-vision their lives, Summer is less bleak than Ethan Frome. The new vision may never have the wondrous brilliance of the old, but it is one built on experience rather than innocent ignorance. The summer of Charity Royall's seventeenth year will never be again, but she and her child will have many more, and the past could, as Margaret McDowell notes, make "her aware of the potentiality that emotion holds for a mature woman" (71). Charity cares far less about love than she does about having somebody belong to her, "the way other folks have" (35), and for this reason, her marriage may provide something she values and needs more than "the flower of life." Autumn is a time for taking stock, building winter storehouses, and planning next year's garden. If Charity and Royall pass it wisely, they need not resemble their silent neighbors in Starkfield.

Wharton thought that all readers asked themselves, "What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain?" (WF 27). Ethan Frome and Summer show the author's recognition that love, such as Ethan and Mattie and Charity and Herney had, is likely to be as fleeting as a New England summer. If one is to survive, if life is to have its

moments of quiet triumph and intrinsic joy, it must ultimately come from within. In this way, Charity's future child is as symbolic as Lily Bart's vision of Nellie Struther's infant girl; it represents the "self" she will continue to create. The future of that baby promises to be more hopeful than Lily Bart's namesake, for as a child of the middle class, he or she in particular has a better chance of reaching maturity.

The author's two questions are important to readers, but so is a third: "Why is this particular writer telling this particular story?" Summer is a story about mother-daughter reconciliation, and the peace that Charity seeks stretches backwards and forwards. The theme is even more pronounced in The Mother's Recompense (1925), but there the solution is concrete rather than imaginative. Kate Clephane and her grown daughter negotiate a solution to the past and for the future. Wharton was not able to achieve a similar peace with her mother, except the peace established by distance, but her work can be read as a record of her own efforts to hammer out an equitable truce. Her wish for good faith is seen in her repeated use of babies--from Nettie's in The House of Mirth (1905) to Halo's in The Gods Arrive (1932)--as a symbol of renewal and hope. In "The Mission of Jane," for example, an estranged couple is united by their mutual relief in finally marrying off their adopted daughter Jane.

Wharton's later novels in particular show her weighing and often balancing the two sides of mother-daughter

relationships. The progression of her thinking about this issue from the child's point of view moves back and forth from anger to dismissal to a qualified acceptance, while it acknowledges--as in The Fruit of the Tree (1907) or Summer--the need to find or create one's own mother if the original seems as inadequate as Mrs. Bart in The House of Mirth (1905), Mrs. Spragg in The Custom of the Country (1913), or Mrs. Manford in Twilight Sleep (1927). In her fiction, Wharton was increasingly able to reflect the belief that mothers and daughters (or mother and daughter figures) are capable of seeing from the other's perspective. Instead of emphasizing conflicts between women of different generations and sensibilities, she makes their similarities apparent to the reader, if not to themselves. Whether from distinct classes, like Anna Leath and Sophy Viner of The Reef (1912), or from distinct cultures, like Ellen Olenaka and May Archer in The Age of Innocence (1920), her heroines in general struggle to protect the man they both love. Their cooperation is often mutually beneficial. In this way the fiction expresses a wish unrealized in its author's life.

Wharton's treatment of the mother-daughter theme shows a recognition of the competition between them and suggests a way to transcend it: scrupulous self-analysis, such as her characters practice and which she vicariously practiced through them, can lead to personal insight and growth. It can lead to an ever increasing distance from the crippling effects of the past and toward the making of books which grow

from a "contemplation of life that goes below its surface"  
("CF" 230).

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Letter to Sara Norton dated Sept. 1, 1902, Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934) 293. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>For discussions of this theme, see Barbara White, "Edith Wharton's Summer and 'Woman's Fiction,'" Essays in Literature 11-12 (1984): 223-235. Also see Nancy Walker, "'Seduced and Abandoned': Convention and Reality in Edith Wharton's Summer," Studies in American Literature 11 (1983): 107-114; Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970; revised 1982) 94; Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953) 173. All subsequent references to the last two texts will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>Gary H. Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975) 45.

<sup>5</sup>Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," Great Moral Dilemmas, ed. R. M. MacIver (NY: Harper & Row 1957): 37; and Alan Rose, "'Such Depths of Sad Initiation': Edith Wharton and New England," New England Quarterly 50 (1977): 427. Also

see Irving Howe, "Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton," Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962). He describes the novel as "a severe depiction of gratuitous suffering in a New England village" (5). See Marilyn Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959) 130n. She finds "no element of justice" in the novel. Jo Agnew McManis in "Edith Wharton's Hyena to Respectability," Southern Review vii (1971), argues that the novel's harshness results from the author's need to punish her characters for her own moral transgressions with Walter Berry. Wharton makes the characters conform where she did not (988).

<sup>6</sup>Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911) x. All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>7</sup>See Nevius 123. Also see Orlene Murad, "Edith Wharton and Ethan Frome," Modern Language Studies 13 iii (1983): 94.

<sup>8</sup>Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," Images of Women in Fiction, ed. Susan Koppleman (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973; rpt. 1973) 3-20.

<sup>9</sup>Margaret B. McDowell, "Viewing the Custom of Her Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism," Contemporary Literature 15 (1974): 530.

<sup>10</sup>The quotation is from A Backward Glance 200; also see 199-205. For further information on Wharton's ideas about

the treatment of character, see Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1925) 26-29, 72-73, 86-87 esp.

<sup>11</sup>See See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) 170-172 esp.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," Times Literary Supplement 14 May 1914: 230. The article is later parenthetically referred to as "CF."

<sup>13</sup>See Joseph X. Brennan, "Ethan Frome: Structure and Metaphor," Modern Fiction Studies xii (Winter 1961-1962): 347-356. He notes the narrator's identification with Ethan and concludes, "[i]t seems to me, therefore, that it would be much more reasonable to judge the novel in terms of the special character of the narrator's mind . . . rather than in terms of psychological realism" (356). Wolff starts her discussion of the novel from this point, according to R. B. Hovey in his essay, "Ethan Frome: A Controversy About Modernizing It," American Literary Realism 19 (Fall 1986): 4-20.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (1925; rpt. NY: Octagon Books, 1977) 28-29. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>15</sup>See Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," Saturday Review of Literature 10 (7 Apr. 1934): 603.

<sup>16</sup>Edith Wharton, The Decoration of Houses (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898) 9.

<sup>17</sup>For a reading of the economic and emotional

deprivation suffered by the women Zeena represents, see Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 68-73.

<sup>14</sup>See Ammons, who states that the final vision of Mattie is Ethan's romantic vision "brought to its sterile conclusion" (76). See also David Eggenschwiler, "The Ordered Disorder of Ethan Frome," Studies in the Novel 9 (1977): 237-46. He argues that Frome's fancies vacillate between "romantic adventure and domestic stability" (240).

<sup>15</sup>For alternative views, see Peter L. Hays, "First and last in Ethan Frome," Notes on Modern American Literature 1: Item 15, no. 10259. He views Ethan as a caretaker, who positions himself first on the sled to protect Mattie and to absorb the full impact of the crash. Also see Carol Weerahoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1982) 21-22. She describes Mattie as courageous and energetic.

<sup>16</sup>George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss ed. Gordon Haight (1860; Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961).

<sup>17</sup>Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1947) 11.

<sup>18</sup>Brennan categorizes the imagery symbolically associated with Mattie as having to do with birds, lovely and delicate objects, nature, and the color red. In contrast, Zeena is linked with her cat, a predator, and things unnatural.

<sup>19</sup>Wolff notes the allure of retrogression in her



discussion and states that there is "a sensuous attraction in the notion of annihilation--of comforting nothingness" (174-175). She describes the novel as "the explication of a private nightmare": "It was among other things, the fear of muteness, of helplessness, of confinement to those elemental activities of eating and sleeping . . . her nightmare was a fear of that part of herself that forevermore longed to retreat from adult complexities into the terrible diminishments of such a world" (183). In contrast, I see the novel as Wharton's rejection of this script in relation to her mother. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

==Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Edith Wharton and the 'Visionary' Imagination," Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies 2 iii (1977) 28. She notes that throughout Wharton's life the term "visionary" applied "both to simple daydreaming and to the more rigorous act of preparing to write fiction" and that as she grew older and matured as an artist, she developed a more "flexible and comfortable understanding of the 'visionary'" (25).

==Wolff, "Edith Wharton and the 'Visionary' Imagination," 28.

==The point is noted by Wolff 163-164 and Ammons 76.

==Hovey wonders why Wolff leaves Zeena out of her discussion, since her link to Lucretia Jones seems important (9).

==Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Wharton Archives, The 166

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University,  
New Haven, Connecticut.

==For a discussion of winter imagery as it relates to  
the narrator's identification with Ethan, see Wolff 170-172  
esp.

==Wharton's insistence on her difference from Jewett and  
Freeman begs one to see the debt, especially in the case of  
Wilkins whose treatment of the New England poor is akin to  
Wharton's. Similarly Wilkins's "factory" novel The Fruit of  
Tree (1907) is indebted to Freeman's The Portion of Labor  
(1901). See Josephine Donovan, New England Local Color  
Literature: A Women's Tradition (NY: Frederick Ungar, 1983).  
She notes a connection between Rose Terry Cooke, Mary  
Wilkins, and Edith Wharton in terms of literary realism.

==I am indebted to Eggenchwiler for this image (241).  
He sees Ethan and Mattie lying side by side in "chaste twin  
beds of the graveyard."

==Edith Wharton, "Pomegranate Seed," Scribner's Magazine  
51 (Mr. 1912): 284-291.

==R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: From  
International Pub. Co., 1975) 396. All subsequent references  
to this text will be noted parenthetically.

==Edith Wharton, Summer (Appleton, 1917; Charles  
Scribner's Sons, [1972]) 8. All subsequent references to  
this text will be noted parenthetically.

==See Margaret B. McDowell, Edith Wharton, (Boston: G.  
K. Hall & Co., 1976) 70. She sees Charity's mother's death

as yet another abandonment.

<sup>26</sup>Critics who see the ending as a form of perpetual imprisonment and daughterhood include Elizabeth Ammons 133, 136-137, 141; Geoffrey Walton 91, 97-98; Blake Nevius 168-171; and Judith Fryer, Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 199; and John W. Crowley, "The Unmastered Streak: Feminist Themes in Edith Wharton's Summer," American Literary Realism 15 (1982): 33-39.

<sup>27</sup>See Carol Wershoven, "The Divided Conflict of Edith Wharton's Summer," Colby Library Quarterly 21 (1985): 5-10. Also see Wolff 273. McDowell disagrees with Wershoven and asserts that "Charity's development represents no improvement, for she is no more sensitive to other people than ever, and still prefers nature to humanity" (70).

<sup>28</sup>See Wolff 290.

<sup>29</sup>See Wolff 290; Marilyn French, "Introduction," Summer (NY: Berkeley Books, 1981) xlviii; and White 233.

## CHAPTER V

### Female Partnerships in the Business of Living

Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not ensure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered.

"Bunner Sisters"

Except for The Buccaneers (1938), The Reef (1912) is Wharton's most concise statement about the possibilities and the limitations of women's partnerships. Its plot, which involves two women in love with the same man, resembles Ethan Frome (1911), but its themes more nearly match her earlier story "Friends" (1900). Like Vexilla and Penelope, Anna Leath and Sophy Viner seem to be opposites but are in reality more similar than dissimilar; they gradually and painfully learn what it feels like to be the other, and that expanded consciousness leads to personal growth. Ending with Sophy's exile, The Reef foreshadows Ellen Olenska's departure for Europe in The Age of Innocence (1920) and repeats the conclusion of "Friends," in which Penelope travels to New York, feeling that her altruism has given life renewed significance.

Occurring so often in Wharton's fiction, this ending seems almost formulaic and raises questions about whether it is possible in her world view for women to co-exist in

equally beneficial and self-enhancing ways. Wharton's heroines see marriage as destiny, and although the endings to The Reef and The Age of Innocence show the novelist rebelling against this given and struggling to rewrite the marriage plot, it ultimately holds her captive.

The reasons are multiple: her gender, her Victorian childhood, her unhappy marriage, and perhaps most significantly, her need for emotional distance. Wharton's letters to Morton Fullerton, for example, show an impassioned and vulnerable woman, often asking and sometimes demanding more considerate treatment. At the same time, they show an acceptance and even an emphasis on the transitory nature of their affair. Wharton's ambivalence about intimacy also was a factor her relationship with the most important men in her adult life, Walter Berry. The author describes this friend and adviser in A Backward Glance as an expansion and interpretation of her own soul.<sup>1</sup> Berry himself had a history of beginning and terminating strong attachments, and his relationship with Wharton was characterized by long separations. When the Whartons were divorced, the novelist's friends thought Berry was a cad not to marry her, but she seems to have shown no similar regret.<sup>2</sup> Although she may well have secretly hoped for a more traditional arrangement with him, the independence of her position very much suited her personality and lifestyle. The tension in her fiction arises from similar contradictions. Her work revolves around a belief in the perfect soulmate and the happy ending, but it

also systematically and sometimes ruthlessly exposes the naiveté of those principles for organizing one's life. Pain primarily propels her heroines across the threshold that separates the ignorant romanticism of girlhood from the hardwon consciousness of adulthood.

Even though Wharton repeatedly voiced the senselessness of self-sacrifice, her work often appears to revolve around the sacrifice of one woman for another who represents the status quo. "Life and I," the first draft of the author's autobiography, ends with an anecdote that provides a context for analyzing the qualified and often ambiguous conclusions to novels such as The Reef, The Age of Innocence, or The Mother's Recompense. Wharton confesses that on a trip to Germany with her parents she was "rather bored, & tired" and decided to distract herself by flirting with another young woman's unacknowledged fiancé.<sup>2</sup> She makes a point of writing that it was "the only 'flirtation' which I have ever indulged in" (51) and continues: "I had never cared for 'flirting,' since I was totally indifferent to the admiration of men whom I did not like, & far too proud to pay any man the honour of feigning to like him more than I really did" (51-52); nevertheless, she entered into this flirtation because it appealed to her sense of humor (51). The man she chose to dally with was engaged to "a dull & rather solemn" (51) heiress who bored him. From the onset, Wharton knew that the whole episode would be a mere intermezzo in both their lives and assumed that the man shared her motive for the interlude:

"to keep his poor fiancée on the rack for a few weeks" (52). She ends, "It was an innocent enough adventure, but it is the only one on which I ever embarked with malice forepense--& I did make the other girl miserable!" (52).

Despite Wharton's testimony, the "episode" was only "innocent" in its lack of consummation. The amusing and intelligent young man found Wharton "very much to his taste" (52), but she found him bland fare in comparison to the stimulating diet of making the other woman miserable. On the surface, the memory is a successful enactment of the family drama, the daily struggle between mother and daughter for the cherished father, and in this context, it is not surprising that she picked an unattainable lover and a rival as "prosaic" as her own mother. The man is as negligible in Wharton's telling as Darrow is in The Reef. She needed to prove herself in relation to another woman, and even decades later, she cannot disguise a note of gleeful triumph. The incident obviously had great emotional import for her, and since there is no record that it was repeated, it appears as if this isolated experience exorcized some inner demon. Perhaps she learned that the price of this type of adoration was too dear for her self-respect.

The outline of the anecdote in its mother-daughter version can be traced in the plots of The Children, Ethan Frome, The Reef, The Mother's Recompense, "Lea Metteurs en scène," and especially in several of the ghost stories, such as "Bewitched" and "Pomegranate Seed," in which the dead

refuse to relinquish their lovers to a replacement. After Lily Bart, however, her heroines deliberately preferred not to make other women feel miserable for their own amusement, though they did often choose to leave the scenes of their victories. Of course, the lover, as Annette Silvermit notes, may not have been unattainable to the well-to-do Miss Jones; however, her choice to see him as such is significant, for it reveals the novelist's own need for distance. It explains why readers are often allied with the exiled woman: more often than not, she has the enviable position. Wharton always pairs heroines, whose fair or dark hair finally becomes their most distinguishing feature, and as the marriage plot dictates, one becomes a wife while the other remains independent. Although both women must make compromises with their ideals, the "chosen" woman is usually worse off than her freer sister. These split heroines symbolize Wharton's own ambivalence about the desirability of marriage and even of intimacy. Her problematic endings are really compromises that wed these feelings with her conception of what is "realistic."

The Reef and The Age of Innocence are examples. In the former, Anna Leath's and Sophy Viner's lives are irrevocably intertwined. The factors that would normally distinguish the two women, such as age, education, and class, are purposefully blurred, and though each loves George Darrow, their relationship is further complicated by the fact that Sophy became engaged to Anna's stepson, Owen, while employed



as a governess for her daughter, Effie. Sophy is now Effie's surrogate mother and in the future Anna will be Sophy's mother-in-law. As Elizabeth Ammons writes, the women's similarities suggest a figurative sisterhood.<sup>5</sup> George Darrow inspires passion in both, yet neither Sophy's nor Anna's sexual "awakening" is nearly as profound as their "awakening" to the similarities that they share. Instead of vying for Darrow's affection, these "rivals" become the means of each other's mutual growth.<sup>6</sup> By subverting "romantic" plot expectations, their relationship asks readers to question traditional roles in heterosexual courtship.

"I put most of myself into that opus," Wharton told her friend and editor William Brownell after the novel's publication,<sup>7</sup> and in some ways, the novel can be read as a comment on her own experience. R. W. B. Lewis goes as far as to say that "[i]n the presentation of Anna Leath, Edith Wharton almost literally began to write her autobiography" (326). It was composed after her affair with Morton Fullerton ended, but she still relied heavily on his advice; for example, she wrote him in June 1912:

I want your opinion on what I have written here, & have asked Anna [her secretary] to make you a duplicate copy of the last chapters. Vous les rattacherez tant bien que mal ["You will connect them somehow or other"] to what you've already

read: your memory of the general situation will suffice. After this point I can go on alone, but I want your opinion about the chapter in which, between Darrow & Anna, the truth begins to come out. It's not conventional, but I believe it's true.<sup>2</sup>

Fullerton could certainly rely on his memory, since Wharton was drawing on their history.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of their relationship he made her feel as if she now knew "what happy women feel" (Lewis 208). Unfortunately he was also making his cousin and adopted sister Katherine feel the same. She was engaged to Fullerton when Wharton met him in 1907, and as his relationship with the author developed, he began increasingly to neglect his fiancée. Thinking of Katherine as Fullerton's sister, Wharton had even invited her to visit the Mount,<sup>20</sup> however, "the indescribable current of communication" that Wharton felt flowing between herself and Fullerton (Lewis 205) was interrupted when she learned of his engagement. Likewise, an anguished Katherine knew of her fiancé's involvement with the novelist.

The women could not fail to note his similar treatment of them both. Writing him Wharton admonished:

. . . a certain consistency of affection  
is a fundamental part of friendship.

One must know à quoi s'en tenir ["where

one stands"}. And just as I think we have reached that stage, you revert abruptly to the other relation, & assume that I have noticed no change in you, & that I have not suffered or wondered at it, but have carried on my life in serene insensibility until you chose to enter again suddenly into it.<sup>11</sup>

Two years later, she felt that Fullerton was avoiding her "on the pretext of illness" and complained: "The one thing I can't bear is the thought that I represent to you the woman who has to be lied to . . . sometimes I feel I can't go on like this . . . --being left to feel that I have been like a 'course' served & cleared away!"<sup>12</sup> As Clare Colquitt observes, Wharton's letters eerily echo Katherine's (and vice versa), "for both women often expressed their sorrow at Fullerton's failure to answer their love--or their letters-- 'with equal sincerity.'<sup>13</sup> Morton Fullerton may have removed "the gauze" that separated Edith Wharton from sensual experience, but he proved to be--like George Darrow--not fully trustworthy. Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that Wharton's discovery of Fullerton's engagement "touched the novelist's sensibilities deeply . . . and it may . . . have facilitated the gradual decline of her affair in 1910" (198). Stories such as "The Letters," "The Day of the Funeral," "Joy in the House," "Diagnosis," "The Pretext," "The Other Two,"

"The Line of Least Resistance," and "The Lamp of Psyche" revolve around a similar moment of revelation and subsequent disillusionment. Although Wharton never considered marrying Fullerton and most likely chose him as a lover for that very reason, the irony of their affair spanning almost exactly the years of Katherine's engagement to her cousin would not have eluded her. The end of the Fullerton-Wharton liaison also marked the end of the cousins' engagement, and Katherine later married Gordon Gerould, an English instructor at Princeton. Alan Gribben may state that Fullerton's "involvements with other women merely struck Wharton as milder versions of her own dilemma and helped give her the courage to break free of the entangling conventions that restrained her," but she most likely identified with Katherine and experienced some guilt.<sup>14</sup>

As in The Reef and in Wharton's fiction in general, the women did not act as "rivals" and, in fact, in 1922 when The Glimpses of the Moon was published, Katherine wrote a favorable review of it for The New York Times. The review pleased Wharton, since she wrote her editor Rutger Jewett that Katherine "is a cousin of my old friend Morton Fullerton, and it was I who sent her first ms. to Mr. Scribner, and called his attention to the literary promise which she already gave. So you see I deserve a good word from her" (Lewis 445). Similarly Wharton was pleased when Katherine Gerould wrote a sensitive and laudative critical essay on her fiction that Appleton published as a little

brochure.<sup>15</sup> The two women acted responsibly toward each other, and the tone of their relationship reflects the importance Wharton placed on female cooperation. In this way, The Reef is an exploration and comment on her own experience: women need not see each other as rivals.

In The Reef, as in Ethan Frome, the love plot is secondary, but complicated. In Part I, George Darrow's fiancée, Anna Leath, postpones their meeting for what he supposes are minor reasons. Disgruntled with Anna, he meets the friendless but plucky Sophy Viner, who has just been dismissed as a secretary to the disreputable Mrs. Murrett. Darrow decides to give her a holiday and an affair develops. Five months later when Darrow again meets Sophy at Anna's country estate, Givré, the moral dilemma for him is fairly straightforward. As Sophy tells him, ". . . you'd rather I didn't marry any friend of yours."<sup>16</sup> For Anna, the problem is not so simple. As Book II opens, she is literally frozen between her past and an unknown future: "In the court, halfway between the house and the drive, a lady stood" (83). This is the first of the many thresholds throughout the novel that Anna will choose to cross or to avoid if she is to emerge into true adulthood. Her first marriage only protracted her protected girlhood, and the problem she now faces is essentially one of adolescence: how can the old "self" incorporate this newly sexual "self"? Her hesitations, retreats, and attempts to suppress her burgeoning and almost uncontrollable feelings provide much of

the novel's tension.

On one side of the threshold is the "she" she was brought up to be, "a model of ladylike repression" (87); this "she" is represented by the chateau: "a dull house, an inconvenient house, of which one knew all the defects, the shabbinesses, the discomforts, but to which one was so used that one could hardly, after so long a time, think one's self away without suffering a certain loss of identity" (84-85). On the other side, is the "self" she would like to be, the one that could find the "right words" to say to George Darrow. Anna yearns to remove the veil "that had always hung between her and life," because then she can experience "all the passions and sensations which formed the stuff of great poetry and memorable action" (86). The experience, though, proves to be as illusionary as Ethan Frome's romance, not "all fine feelings and beauty" (92), and reveals a part of herself that she would like to keep hidden (like Lily Bart) behind one of her mind's carefully closed doors.

Anna has lived her girlhood and married life as if "the substance of life" was "a mere canvas for the embroideries of poet and painter, and its little swept and fenced and tended surface as its actual substance" (87). She prides herself, however, that "it was in the visioned region of action and emotion that her fullest hours were spent" (87). Her interior life is lived in a space that she would like to share with Darrow, a place reminiscent of "the holy of holies" or Lawrence Selden's "republic of the spirit."<sup>17</sup> If

life with Mr. Leath had been like "a walk through a carefully classified museum, where, in moments of doubt, one had only to look at the number and refer to one's catalogue" (95), life with Darrow promises to penetrate "every sense as the sunlight steeped the landscape" (111). His kiss will awaken her to a "world of hidden beauty" (87) in which she will finally learn to be like other women, "wider awake," "more alert, and surer" (87) of her wants.<sup>16</sup> In the journal that Wharton kept during her affair with Fullerton, she said that she wanted the same thing, but Anna Leath's example shows its impossibility. As previously noted, Lewis sees Anna as being closely synonymous with her author, and perhaps for this reason Wharton treats her more sympathetically than Ethan; nevertheless, she still learns his lesson: romantic dreams are just that--dreams.

Sophy Viner reminds Anna of Kitty Mayne, whose flirtation with Darrow caused her to lie awake wondering, "What was she saying to him? How shall I learn to say such things?" (90). George Darrow is her first love miraculously restored to her as her second chance. Anna means to take it, but she senses that Kitty and Sophy possess some "vital secret" that has escaped her. In many ways Sophy represents the "self" Anna wants to become. She is not a lady in Anna's sense, for the business of earning a living has rent the veil which hangs between her and life (86). Sophy's charm for Darrow stems from her lack of conventional, formal responses. He "saw how easy it was to explain things to her. She would

either accept his suggestion or she would not: but at least she would waste no time in protestations and objections, or any vain sacrifice to the idols of conformity" (37). But because "some of her enquiries were of a kind that it is not in the habit of young girls to make" (49), she is also vulnerable:

Meanwhile, such expertness qualified by such candor made it impossible to guess the extent of her personal experience, or to estimate its effect on her character. She might be any one of a dozen definable types, or she might--more disconcertingly to her companion and more perilously to herself--be a shifting and uncrystallized mixture of them all. (61)

In other words, Darrow asks himself the question Winterbourne asked about Daisy Miller: "Is she nice or not nice?" This question could never conceivably be raised about his fiancée, since he feels that marriage and motherhood have brought her no nearer to life in the last fourteen years than when he first knew her.<sup>19</sup> In this Darrow is right, for marriage to Mr. Leath was like being tied to "a gilt console screwed to the wall," and studying the portrait of her predecessor, Anna often wondered if she too would die "long before they buried her" (99), waiting for visitors who never came.<sup>20</sup>



Ironically, though, the directness and naturalness that first attract Darrow to Sophy later repel him, for it is not in keeping with his inherited notions of women's behavior. He prefers Anna's predictability, and as a betrothed couple, they resemble an older and more privileged version of Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden: "the irresistible word fled with a least wing beat into the golden mist of her illusions . . ." (90).<sup>21</sup> Darrow also prefers to forget his own morally irresponsible behavior. Willing to admit that emotionally he "hadn't spent a penny" (167), he is still unwilling to acknowledge "the excitement of pursuit" (70) he experienced and his own motives in making use of Sophy to feel "less drearily alone" (56). "More and more aware of his inability to test the moral atmosphere about him" (208), he successfully avoids confronting his own darker nature and never once examines the double standard he applies to Sophy when he feels that (like himself) she might have forgotten or trivialized their Paris interlude (225).

Darrow blames Anna's sheltered girlhood for making her "unfit" for "all subsequent contact with life" (29), and she is hardly more prepared now. Anna herself is terrified that the private "self" she has been waiting to share and bring out into the light of day has been permanently trapped behind the veil that "always hung between her and life" (86). Worse yet is her suspicion that there is no hidden treasure--her private and public "selves" are indistinguishable. She realizes that the process of becoming a lady has deadened

her, and she envies Sophy for her directness, her receptivity, her hunger for experience, and eventually for her sexual intimacy with Darrow. The recognition of her own potential for such publicly despised behavior rattles the foundations of her own identity much as it does for Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892). In turn Sophy envies Anna for her stability, grace, discernment, and appropriateness. Most of all, Anna's life represents a kind of haven from "the business of living."

Both Anna and Darrow believe that he is the "divine" means of her "self-renewal;" he alone can "put warath in her veins and light in her eyes," make "her a woman through and through" (30). Without him, she is "fated to wane into old age repeating the same gestures, echoing the same words she had always heard, and perhaps never guessing that, just outside her glazed and curtained consciousness, life rolled away, a vast blackness starred with lights, like the night landscape beyond the windows of the train" (30). In contrast, life has taught Sophy what Charity Royall will later discover; she must be the source of her own "self-renewal," and depending on one's interpretation of the ending, Anna learns the same. No matter how much Anna wants Darrow to utter her secret soul, his words are as inadequate as Mattie Silver's exclamation that the sunset looks just as if it were painted. As the imagery suggests, her "awakening" is to be sexual, but in a reversal of and rebellion against the typical romantic plot, Wharton substitutes Sophy for

Darrow as Anna's initiator into the mysteries of "real" living.

Although supposedly worldly, Sophy has been as repressed and starved as Anna: "The girl had been dying for some one to talk to, some one before whom she could unfold and shake out to the light her poor little shut-away emotions. Years of repression were revealed in her sudden burst of confidence; and the pity she inspired made Darrow long to fill her few free hours to the brim" (39). In her own way, Sophy is as ignorant as Anna: "'life'--the word was often on her lips" (61). She saw her guardian's death as freeing her from "bondage" and occasioning "her immediate plunge into the wide bright sea of life surrounding the island of her captivity" (24). As in most Wharton novels, if Sophy and Anna were combined they would make the perfect woman, that combination of fire and ice Newland Archer yearns for in The Age of Innocence. Initially Sophy is fire and Anna ice, but soon those categories are inadequate for explaining Anna's "selfishness" and Sophy's "altruism." By pairing the heroines, Wharton establishes a dialectic and provides each a model for change. In the other, they can see their evolving "selves."

When Anna feels ready to risk marriage again, she defines it in the imprisoning terms of romance. Desiring "to make herself the shadow and echo of Darrow's mood," "[s]he wanted to linger with him in a world of fancy and yet to walk at his side in the world of fact. She wanted him to feel her power

and yet to love her ignorance and humility. She felt like a slave, and a goddess, and a girl in her teens . . . " (125). Anna is not unlike the adolescent Charity Royall who feels that under her lover's touch "things deep down in her struggled to the light and sprang up like flowers in the sunshine . . . It seemed as if the places he had been in, and the people he had been with, must cease to exist when he left them, just as her own life was suspended in his absence;"<sup>22</sup> and like Charity, Anna is also afraid of being subaumed.

Naturally reticent, she fears that the sexual communion she desires will overwhelm and obliterate her sense of self. In this, Anna recalls her creator who, as Lewis notes, felt unsure of herself at the beginning of her affair with Fullerton: "She felt, simultaneously, eager to invite him into a closer kind of intimacy and frightened that, if he responded, she would fail him" (206). Her letters to Fullerton show her experiencing hesitations that are later attributed to Anna:

if I still remained inexpressive,  
unwilling, "always drawing away," as you  
said, it was because I discovered in myself  
such possibilities of feeling on that side  
that I feared, if I let you love me too much,  
I might lose courage when the time came to go  
away!<sup>23</sup>

Anna's romantic illusions are more pronounced and her sensibilities even finer than Wharton's, since she cannot bear the thought that Darrow might have met Sophy on his way to her. Even though she wants full communication between them, she is not prepared for how engulfing it will be to have Darrow really know her or for how difficult it will be to know and to accept him. Above all, she is unprepared to accept the part of herself that feels jealousy, passion, and self-interest. Such knowledge distances her from Givré and threatens "a certain loss of identity" (85). For these reasons, Anna both likes and is repulsed by Sophy. Before knowing about Sophy's affair, she welcomes the girl into the family and envisions her marriage to Owen as a happy and fulfilling recasting of her own disappointing union with Fraser Leath. But when she learns of the girl's past, she feels revulsion and fascination.

Meanwhile Darrow is both more and less than Anna supposes him, being more "real" than her romantic fantasy and less unconventional. Anna made a similar mistake with her first husband when she thought he belonged to a society "at once freer and finer, which observed the traditional forms but had discarded the underlying prejudices" (92). Darrow too is a connoisseur and a collector, who "reflects with satisfaction" that Anna "was the kind of woman with whom one would like to be seen in public" (130): "She was like a picture so hung that it can be seen only at a certain angle: an angle known to no one but its possessor. The thought

flattered his sense of possessorship . . . " (130). Darrow muses that he and Anna were "made for each other" but actually she was made for him: "[h]e dwelt with pardonable pride on the fact that fate had so early marked him for the high privilege of possessing her" (129). In Paris he felt the same kind of conceit in being seen with Sophy, "the primitive complacency of the man at whose companion other men stare" (50); his natural pairing of Anna and Sophy underscores the arbitrariness of classifications for women such as "nice" and "not nice": "from the point at which he was placed his eyes could not take in the one face without the other" (227). His thinking shows that gender is fate when neither "ideal" nor "real" woman can avoid being "owned." Anna's fear of intimacy in part grows from the knowledge that the more she reveals, the more she risks losing her "self."

As Anna imagines how much he meant to Sophy and how little he perceived or felt, she reads her own future, like Anna Karenina, in the looking glass: "Did such self-possession imply indifference or insincerity? In that problem her mind perpetually revolved; and she dreaded the one answer as much as the other" (326).<sup>64</sup> Darrow is obviously not going to rescue anyone, and Anna has the choice of living with her illusion of "real life" or experiencing it, and in this way her choice is similar to Mattie Silver's.<sup>65</sup>

Anna chooses a different path from Wharton's New England

heroine, and Sophy becomes her guide. At first, their relationship is traditional in the sense that Anna mentors the younger woman, hoping to ease her way into Givré's domestic and social world, but as the dénouement ominously crescendoes and each is forced to experience the other's point of view, the relationship becomes more egalitarian.<sup>26</sup> The two change positions as Sophy realizes she cannot marry a man she does not love, and Anna realizes that she must and will make love to Darrow. The European influence and the isolation of Givré diffuse the issue of the individual in conflict with societal standards and focus attention on the individual's struggle with self. Anna's thought, "Don't I feel things as other women do?" (342) echoes Wharton's words in the love journal, "I have never in my life known what it is to be happy (as a woman knows happiness) for a single hour--" (Lewis 207).

Anna learns the happiness of a single hour, and she also learns its inverse, how to "suffer as a hurt animal must, blindly, furiously, with the single fierce animal longing that the awful pain would stop . . ." (285). Darrow underestimates Anna when he tells her that Sophy had "the excuse of her loneliness, her unhappiness--of misery and humiliations that a woman like you can't even guess" (290), for Sophy's weeping has revealed the full import of the night at the theatre, and now Anna knows that it is not "happy" but "unhappy" women who "understand best!" (282).

Darrow, who was to have unbandaged his bride's eyes, does all

he can to stay her growing consciousness, and much of the novel's tension in the last four books centers on scenes in which either Anna or Sophy try to get a straight answer from him. In his defense, Anna and her mother-in-law make his position untenable by asking for his evaluation and intercession with the governess. In addition Anna simultaneously wants to legitimize his relationship with Sophy in order to keep her illusions and desires to expose it in order to expand her consciousness.

Ironically, Anna, who wants experience, and Sophy, who asserts that she regrets nothing of hers, do everything possible to keep Owen innocent. Owen himself tells Darrow: "I understand lately that if it [Givré] belonged to me it would gradually gobble me up. I want to get out of it, into a life that's big and ugly and struggling. If I can extract beauty out of all that, so much the better: that'll prove my vocation, but I want to make beauty, not be drowned in the ready-made, like a bee in a pot of honey" (145). Feeling so, Owen is correct in thinking that Sophy would make him a good wife and partner, but that decision is denied him, even though Anna has already testified that

"What I want most for him [Owen], and shall want for Effie, is that they shall always feel free to make their own mistakes, and never, if possible, be persuaded to make other people's. Even if Owen's



marriage is a mistake, and has to be paid for, I believe he'll learn and grow in the paying." (120)

The freedom to make mistakes becomes an increasingly predominant theme in Wharton's later work, such as The Mother's Recompense, The Children, Hudson River Bracketed, The Gods Arrive, and The Buccaneers. Sophy's words--"I wanted it--I chose it" (283); "I'm not ashamed of having loved him; no; and I'm not ashamed of telling you so" (306)--echo Wharton's own as expressed in a letter to Fullerton:

No, I want you to know once for all what that feeling is--how grave & deep & tender-- & how it has so illuminated my life & kindled my heart, that even now, with the certainty ahead of profound pain & a long, long abnegation, I give thanks, I rejoice, I exult in it. I would not exchange my lot for that of any other woman--except, dearest, alas! that of the woman who succeeds me in your heart . . . 27

Sophy and Anna's mutual understanding illustrates the potential Lily Bart mistakenly assumed in her relationship with Bertha Dorset. The power Wharton envisions in relationships between women, such as Anna and Sophy, who

never "go back" on each other, is manifested in their concern for one another's welfare and their ability to work together and trust each other in spite of personal hurt. The women's collusion to save Owen's illusions, however, dooms him--temporarily at least--to a prolonged boyhood. Their behavior is an oddly humorous and sadly ironic comment on the novel's underlying premise that men possess superior knowledge of the world,<sup>22</sup> but even more ironically, it shows the women preserving a system that both victimizes and diminishes themselves. They are perpetuating what they know to be an inadequate and false vision of life. As the example of Lily Bart has already shown, the fiction of perpetual innocence thwarts the moral development of women and of society in general. To use one of Wharton's phrases from French Ways and Their Meaning, no one has the possibility of becoming "grown-up," since there are no "constant and interesting and important relations between men and women."<sup>23</sup> She shows that for a woman "the real business of living" necessitates painful and risky commerce with all aspects of life.

Sophy is the lone person on whom Anna can count, since her firmness of purpose and commitment to her word are living examples of the code of behavior that the older woman has been forced to re-examine. She is also the only person Anna can believe; as Sophy explains to her: "It's my fault for not knowing how to say what I want you to hear. Your words are different; you know how to choose them. Mine offend you . . . and the dread of it makes me blunder. That's

why the other day I couldn't say anything . . . couldn't make things clear to you. But now I must even if you hate it!" (305) Anna's dread of seeing Sophy is her dread of seeing herself: "It was humiliating to her pride to recognize kindred impulses in a character which she would have liked to feel completely alien to her" (319). In reaction, she attempts one last time to believe that "[t]here was a such a love as she had dreamed . . . she was worthy of . . . ." (302). Sophy's words, however, cannot be retracted, and they thrust Anna across the threshold into the "hard teachings of experience" where she learns to read "the intricacies and contradictions of other hearts" (278) as well as her own.

In Anna's attempt to renounce Darrow, she transfers her romantic illusions to Sophy:

It was Sophy Viner only who could save  
her--Sophy Viner only who could give  
back her lost serenity. She would seek  
the girl out and tell her that she had  
given Darrow up; that step once taken  
there would be no retracing it, and  
she would perforce have to go forward  
alone. (360)

Wharton herself did not believe in such forms of "sterile pain" (to borrow a phrase from The Mother's Recompense), and Anna's idealization of Sophy and her attempted renunciation

are only final stabs at self-suppression. Anna hopes that by self-denial she can return to her old "self," but such hopes are futile; there is no going back. Life is "just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits" (313). Always herself interested and keenly alive to the "human interest" (38), Sophy is the fitting person to initiate Anna into the "human problem" "without fear and without hypocrisy" (282). Through Sophy's agency, Anna sheds the veils which separate her from life. By not giving up Darrow, she has the chance to have more than the illusion of a "relationship." That relationship may be at best a mosaic of "broken bits," but it need not be any the less artful or satisfying.<sup>20</sup>

Sophy's consciousness has also been expanded, since foreshadowing Ellen Olenska, she is influenced by the values that Givré represents. Her sacrifice, if giving up a man you do not love is in reality a sacrifice, gives her life direction to the extent that she most nearly matches the literary heroines Anna admired. At the same time, Sophy has an opportunity for a richer and fuller life. Although as poor as Lily Bart, she is not a "lady" in her sense and can therefore market her real skills more profitably. Her words to Darrow might come true: "Then, when I met you again, I suddenly saw that I had risked more, but that I'd won more, too--such worlds!" (259). Her action has indeed won her new worlds not open to the girl Anna Summers was. Sophy's disregard of conventional behavior for unmarried women may prevent her marriage with someone like Darrow, but it also

frees her to live a more interesting and less tradition-bound existence, and as Lewis quotes Ralph Curtis saying, one can only hope that she will "marry a peer's son in Sims and end up the intimate friend of the Mayfair aristocracy" (327). She is not necessarily doomed, as Blake Nevius suggests, to become her sister Mrs. McTervie-Birch. The tableau of that sister, her dog, and her masseur is one Sophy has chosen to flee, and one that Wharton has purposefully designed to upset her readers' complacency. Who can know Sophy and not question the status quo, not search for alternatives?

Sophy's exile is finally a judgement on a society that has no place for "grown-up" women. She is the single character, who has consistently lived by the creed "that not missing things matters most" (104), and once she has the opportunity "to compare and estimate," she may think Darrow less "brilliant" (59). Although she is again with Mrs. Murrett, her journey to a new continent may provide her with an environment "at once freer and finer" (92), one that appreciates a woman who cannot be categorized, one like Countess Ellen Olenka. If anything, Sophy is receptive and with luck that quality will help her to make more memories instead of choosing one as a means of self-definition. Her last name suggests that she may find her own reef to cling to, one on which she can plant strong roots that will sprout new tendrils. Carol Werahoven has proposed that she is the reef against which Anna and Darrow crash (98), but in a sea where everyone is drowning, a reef offers a sure footing, and

already the example of Sophy's determination and courage have grounded Anna.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond expanding their visions of the world, Sophy and Anna's relationship has sculpted their visions of themselves, and in this way, the women are artists.<sup>22</sup> The process has required them to be skilled readers of nuance and interpreters of the unspoken and implied; it demands that they supply, flesh out, and create the characters of those around them as well as their own. The Reef is in part Wharton's analysis of that quest. In 1908, she wrote Fullerton: "You woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement; literally, all one side of me was asleep."<sup>23</sup> The author was grateful to her lover for rousing her from her long sleep, but her heroines complete the story of that "waking" by exposing the pain involved in living "in the round."<sup>24</sup>

Focusing even more directly on marriage, The Age of Innocence continues to explore the theme of "awakened" consciousness. This 1920 novel repeats much of The Reef's plot and ends by both condoning and repudiating the protagonist's final vision. It also utilizes many of the earlier novel's symbols: veils, thresholds, stifling enclosures, and unspoken words. Wharton believed that what Charles Bowen called "the custom of the country" ruined both men and women.<sup>25</sup> As she later argued in French Ways and Their Meaning (1919), the practice of "parenthesizing" women, instead of placing them "in the very middle of the picture"

(207), keeps women immature. The Age of Innocence articulates the damage it also does to men. Since beauty, passion, and danger were excluded from life in old New York, Wharton observed that "men were almost as starved as the women."<sup>26</sup> The Age of Innocence focuses on the slow desiccation of Newland Archer, a cross between Ralph Marvell and George Darrow.

Although the story is his, its congruence and integrity are made possible by the artistry of his wife, May, and the woman he thinks he should have married, her cousin Ellen.<sup>27</sup> Again, the fair and dark women together make a perfect whole: May is as fresh and virginal and definitive as her name, and Ellen is as dramatic and passionate and mysterious as a "hot-house exotic."<sup>28</sup> When Ellen returns home after leaving her morally corrupt husband, Count Olenska, old New York does not know how to respond to a woman who might or might not have sexually "rewarded" the secretary who helped her escape her husband's house; however, her family, the Mingotts, decide to champion her cause so long as she does not demand a divorce. About to marry into the family, Archer is elected its spokesperson, and as he defends her point of view, he begins to reassess his own: "he was once more conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values . . ." (206). As the bandages fall from his eyes, it frightens him "to think what must have gone into the making" of Ellen's eyes (63); nevertheless, their look leads him to repeat Prufrock's

question, "Do I dare disturb the universe?"

Rebelling against the values of his insular society, Archer distances himself more and more from May. He increasingly sees her as the repository of his discarded opinions, and his boredom with her is a form of self-disgust. Before Ellen's intrusion, Archer liked in May what he now wants to escape: the predictable and the suitable. Their marriage was to be based on their compatibility:

The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than an explanation would have done. (17)

Archer, however, soon sees May as "the mother of all deadly sins" (208), the symbol of all that is rigid, oppressive, and stifling. If only free of her, he reasons, he could escape "the only death [that] is monotony" (208).

Assuming that familiarity excludes complexity, Archer egregiously sins against his wife.<sup>39</sup> Although the novel is told from his point of view, Wharton subtly illustrates--such as she undermines the narrator of Ethan Frome--how limited that point of view is. Archer particularly feels the suffocating, "deadly monotony" (293) of his marriage when he is clearly in the wrong; for example,



after forgetting to meet May at her grandmother's, he unwillingly returns home. Ellen has just told him that there is no country where they can "be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter" (290). Furthermore she has insisted that ". . . we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin, and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of people who trust them" (291), and that definition of both herself and Archer in terms of May makes the weight of his marriage bond and the image of May even more oppressive:

She was so placed that Archer, by merely raising his eyes, could see her bent above her work-frame, her ruffled elbow-sleeves slipping back from her firm round arms, that betrothal sapphire shining on her left hand above her broad gold wedding-ring, and the right hand slowly and laboriously stabbing the canvas. (294)

In this long periodic sentence, each successive phrase reads like another shovelful of dirt thrown on his coffin; however, it is May--and not Archer--who is fixed in place. His choice of historical reading material has determined that she will pass the evening embroidering instead of listening to him

read and discuss poetry. In either case, she is reacting to him, and Wharton's use of the passive tense, the verb "bent," and the qualifier "so" physically anchor her while conveying her helplessness.

May's stabs at the embroidery canvas are her silent protest at Archer's suspected infidelity. Marriage, though, demands that she surrender a part of her identity. She must not berate her husband for failing to meet her, and she must not mention Madame Olenaka. Prominent as an actor in Book I, May recedes into the background after her wedding until the farewell dinner, and her gradual removal from the plot in part reflects her decreased individuality as a wife. Given a choice, she would rather be riding or rowing, "but since other wives embroidered cushions for their husbands she did not wish to omit this last link in her devotion" (294). May's position in the drawing-room, which denies her the active, physical life to which she is suited, chains her as securely as her husband. She is the better sport though; and her good nature and seeming passivity are all the more galling to Archer, who feels guilty for not fulfilling his obligations.

Archer thinks that "by merely raising his eyes" he can see his wife, but the slight action is indicative of how little effort he makes throughout the novel to understand or truly perceive her. He has, for example, missed the meaning of each angry stab that demands an answer. He has persistently refused to analyze the "invisible claws" that

clasped May as soon as she accepted his betrothal sapphire and which are now beginning to lock him within their grasp. For him, "it was less trouble to conform with tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try and put into practice the theories with which his untrammelled bachelorhood had dallied" (195). Archer prefers to see her as a type rather than an individual, and the picture of her at her work-frame is another in a long tradition of women immortalized doing similar handiwork. This failure of both effort and creativity within accepted forms is what differentiates him from Ellen, makes his life predictable, and leaves him at the novel's end little changed from the young dilettante for whom "thinking over a pleasure to come often gave . . . a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (4).

It also explains the inherent egoism in his decision to retain memories of Ellen of which he is the sole author. Ellen functions more as a symbol for his struggling "self" than as a flesh-and-blood person, and his interactions with her are another form of his interactions with May, "hieroglyphic" dialogue composed of "arbitrary signs" (45), pauses, and silences. Archer's misreading of those signs, his "resolute determination to carry to its utmost limit that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant'" (26), leads him mistakenly to assume that Ellen is "guilty" of a liaison with her husband's secretary. That assumption determines the advice he gives her and his future. When Ellen tells Archer

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that they don't speak the same language, she knows that the topics and the openness of their speech, which includes words such as "adultery" and "mistress," do not disguise the fact that he never really hears her need for the values that he is preparing to cast aside. He has never truly seen her either, for he has always defined her by type, "the foreigner," "the worldly adventuress," "the wronged woman," "his deliverer." In Archer's defense, it is culturally determined that he will never be able to understand either Ellen or May. When a society insists on treating its women as children even after marriage has supposedly plunged them into the real business of living, there can be no adult conversation. Just as the slave and the slaveholder are equally debased, the protector and the protected are equally denied the opportunity of sharing anything but a "deaf-and-dumb asylum" (356).

For there to be an "age of innocence," "fire" cannot be "ice" and vice versa; however, May and Ellen are more similar than Archer suspects. After all, both are granddaughters of "Catherine the Great" and possess to some extent her "strength of will," "hardness of heart, and a kind of haughty effrontery that was somehow justified by the extreme decency and dignity of her private life" (14). The cousins' last "long, good" talk brings them to a closer understanding of each other and Archer's dilemma. Underlying their mutual desire to protect Archer from himself is the assumption that he could not escape becoming the prisoner of a hackneyed vocabulary; adultery is adultery, and the individual case

does not mitigate that act.

Their relationship resembles Anna and Sophy's in the sense that the two collude to keep Archer innocent by participating in what Wolff calls "a remarkable unvoiced conspiracy" (325). Wershoven notes that once Archer makes his decision to marry May, Ellen holds him to his choice (85). May in turn knows from nearly the beginning that the "other woman" is not Mrs. Thorley Rushworth, for she sends Ellen news of the accelerated wedding date before Archer. Ellen is also the first to know of May's pregnancy. Although May lies about its technical verification, she does not necessarily lie about her intuition of it, and as all her other divinations have been correct, there is no reason to suspect that this one is not. Likewise, Ellen can be credited with understanding the feelings that prompt May's confidence, since she has already switched positions with Archer as a spokesperson for his culture by the time she tells him:

" . . . if it's not worthwhile to have  
given up, to have missed things, so  
that others may be saved from disillusionment  
and misery--then everything I came home for,  
everything that made my other life seem  
so bare and so poor because no one there took  
account of them--all these things are a sham  
and a dream--" (242)

That statement clearly aligns Ellen with May's values and explains why Ellen now seems like her old self to May (315).<sup>40</sup>

Neither Ellen nor May are "innocent" of the other's feelings, and this awareness makes each a symbol for the other in the sense that May's life makes Ellen's renunciation worthwhile, and Ellen's exile validates May's stand for decency and loyalty and domesticity. Wharton, however, calls into question just how much of a sacrifice that is. As Wolff and Fryer point out, for example, it is hard to imagine Archer and Ellen content with each other, and an earlier draft of the ending in which they flee, are unhappy, and separate shows Wharton agreeing. Like Lawrence Selden before him, all of Archer's training would go against their union, which over time would probably at best resemble his with May. "Souls Belated," published in 1899, makes such the same point when its heroine discovers that her lover wants to duplicate the stiflingly conventional marriage that she has just fled. Ellen's end, which is a more positive version of Sophy Viner's, seems preferable to either Archer's or May's; she at least has enjoyed good conversation.

Archer's life has little prepared him to meet a "grown-up" woman, who has lived and loved independently, and his decision not to see her after his wife's death, shows the parameters of his fear. When life has come calling, he has always retreated to an inner sanctuary that houses his most

intimate self, and this is no exception. Although the context of his decision makes it appear as a tribute to his life with May, it is primarily motivated by his desire to keep that inner sanctuary his alone. Inviting a visitor would necessitate a collaborative vision of life, and Archer has never wanted to negotiate that. As a result, his "innermost" room was nothing more than a tastefully appointed and comfortable prison.

Dallas exposes the waste and pathos of his parents' when he confesses: "She [May] said she knew we were safe with you and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (356). Dallas's indiscretion removes "an iron band from his [Archer's] heart": "someone had guessed and pitied . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably" (356-357). Archer rediscovers that his original vision of their life together proved to be correct: "Evidently she was always going to understand; she was always going to say the right thing" (24). The resurrection of May's image demands a revision of the past and shows how misguided and wrongheaded was the collusion of husband and children to keep her innocent (348). Like John Marcher in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," Archer must now contend with all those wasted, silent years in which May (perhaps tragically or heroically or contentedly) occupied her own separate sanctuary. She emerges as the novel's true heroine, for as Ellen told Archer years ago: "The real loneliness is living

among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend" (78). In this context, May resembles the wives in numerous short stories by Wharton, such as "Joy in the House," "The Letters," "The Quicksand," and "The Leap of Psyche."

The irony of both The Reef and The Age of Innocence is that even those who have been victimized by a system that institutionalizes "innocence" work to perpetuate it. The "fall" may be fortunate, but those who have experienced it rather chauvinistically dread it happening to those they love. By doing all they can to protect Owen and Archer, Anna and Sophy and Ellen and May condemn themselves to living with them in "a deaf-and-dumb asylum" (356) in which the inhabitants--none of whom are artless, naive, or guiltless--are "innocent" of completely understanding each other. In The Age of Innocence, Wharton draws attention to the absurdity of the situation while paradoxically seeming to support it, as if only a lifetime of inarticulation (356) can maintain the type of "innocence" necessary to preserve concepts, such as "loyalty," and "fidelity." All of Wharton's short stories that deal with the marriage question have qualified endings. "The Quicksand," for example, ends with a mother cautioning the young woman who loves her son not to marry him because he "believes in his work; he adores it--it is a kind of hideous idol to which he would make human sacrifices!"<sup>41</sup> That work is the publication of a family newspaper that specializes in yellow journalism, and the mother confesses, "He loves you still--I've been honest with



you--but his love wouldn't change him. It is you who would have to change--to die gradually, as I have died, till there is only one live point left in me" (410). If May's story were told it too would be a chronicle of small wakes.

Ultimately Archer's example shows that a society that remains innocent of the shadow side destroys both men and women and loses many of life's layered meanings. For this reason Wharton asks us to see beyond the appealing image of Newland Archer reaffirming his past to that of a "gentleman who simply stayed home and abstained" (126). Instead he resembles the protagonist in "The Long Run," who shies from risk and realizes too late what he has missed. The women in these novels do much more than "abstain;" they act either to save or to reconstruct their worlds, but their seeing "beyond" is not enough. In their creative power lies the potential to fashion a world in which "fire" and "ice" can co-exist, and men and women do not have to occupy separate sanctuaries. For that to happen, however, the next generation must refuse to spend "an inarticulate lifetime" (356). They must speak, and if speaking aloud shatters the illusion of knowing more about one another's thoughts than one's own, then the "broken bits" will have to be pieced together. All consciousness, all communication, all time is "just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits," and even a "pieced together" vessel can be still serviceable.

This is the conclusion to which Wharton draws her readers, and Lindberg rightly argues that "[i]t is difficult

to fault either the understanding or the moral seriousness informing Wharton's portrait of Newland Archer, yet to accept what she says makes one feel somehow smaller" (137), especially when, as Wershoven writes, all the sacrifice seems futile (90). On the surface Archer may accept, as Wolff suggests, "the responsibilities that necessarily precede maturity and individual integrity" (328) but the cost has been "the flower of life" (347). As a result, the ending rings false and does so in part because Archer's vision is so myopic. He has spent his life hiding. The fiction he preserves, the renunciation he embraces, and the kind of deaf-and-dumb theatrical he has chosen are all self-protective ways of avoiding the "business of living" outside the private sanctuary for one. Unlike Ellen and unlike his author, he has not used creatively the freedom his privacy permits. Ellen may also occupy a single sanctuary, but since she has fearlessly met life--rather than eluded it--it is hard to imagine her missing its blossom. Critics such as Wolff, who see the ending as confirming "the integrity of his life" (325), are championing a day whose values have proved inadequate for dealing with the "individual case." As the "case" of Dallas Archer and Beaufort's "bastard," Fanny, shows, the world is well rid of many of old New York's values.

Wharton herself seems to agree, but covertly, for these books show the intellectual and emotional limitations of marriage without really challenging the assumption that men

and women must marry. While Sophy does not marry, and Ellen lives apart from her husband, they are still ultimately defined in the context of their society by their marital status. Ellen has more respect as Madame Olenska than as the divorced wife of a Count, and as a young, pretty, and dependent single young woman, Sophy is particularly vulnerable. Wharton exposes and analyzes the cultural forces that result when women are defined by their mate's status; however, she offers no replacement; for example, she never suggests, as did Mary Wilkins, that women remain single, nor did she consider women's emotional and/or sexual relationships with each other as an alternative.

Instead she accepted the status quo and raged against it. Although her own life after her divorce from Teddy Wharton resembled Ellen Olenska's, she did not advocate it for others or approve of the "new women." In this way, Wharton was herself a romantic, who could not abandon the belief that there was a perfect soulmate for most people, even if there was not one for her, even if she did not in her "heart of hearts" really want one. This assumption makes her a prisoner of the marriage plot, and while she may revolt against it and see beyond it, she still perpetuates it—at least on the surface of her texts. The Fruit of the Tree (1907) is an earlier illustration of this tension. Justine Brent has the courage to leave her husband when he no longer believes in her, but does not have the heart to destroy the illusion (that eases her return) of his first wife's

beneficence. In this way, the dominant text tells the story of diminished dreams and expectations. The subtext, however, challenges the notion of female sexual competition and implies that in a more perfect society women could play a central role in each other's lives. Before Beasy Amherst's death, for example, Justine never wavers in her allegiance to her, although she is in love with her husband, and after her friend's death, Justine preserves her memory and cherishes her child.

Marriage, though, necessarily separates and inhibits relationships between women. Since the meaning with which marriage or romance is supposed to imbue life is simply absent from any Wharton novel, the only logical conclusion is that life is at best a compromise lived within a solitary sanctuary. However, what Wharton either held back or perhaps did not know about herself was just how satisfying that arrangement was for her, how very much--as the anecdote about her youthful flirtation illustrates--it was to her taste.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934) 115.

<sup>2</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Publishing Co., 1975) 48-49, 238, 344. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 51. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>See Annette Clair Schreiber Zilverman, "Mothers and Daughters: The Heroines in the Novels of Edith Wharton," DAI 41 (1981): 5104A. She emphasizes the female rivalry in this anecdote and sees it underlying most of Wharton's work. Women chose men, who are attached, as a way of fleeing adult sexuality and independence (23). I see the choice as necessary, rather than retrogressive, and identify it as one Wharton found vital for her own artistic development.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 91. All subsequent references to these texts will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup>Critics who accuse Wharton of unnecessary cruelty toward Sophy Viner might be unduly influenced by the "expected" plot. Ammons notes that it is as if writing Ethan

Frome freed Wharton to write The Reef but finds it hard to see how writing the former cleared the way for the latter (78).

<sup>7</sup>Letter to William Brownell, Aug. 29, 1918, Wharton Archives, Amherst College as quoted in Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) 218.

<sup>8</sup>Clare Colquitt, "Unpacking her Treasures: Edith Wharton's 'Mysterious Correspondence' with Morton Fullerton," Library Chronicle of the University of Texas 31 (1985): 100. The letter is dated June 10, 1912.

<sup>9</sup>See Jean Gooder, "Unlocking Edith Wharton: An Introduction to The Reef," The Cambridge Quarterly 15, no. 1 (1986): 49. She notes that in the midst of writing The Reef Wharton made "a dash" to visit George Sand's estates as if "Sand provided some necessary touchstone" (45). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>10</sup>See Lewis for detailed information on the Fullerton-Wharton relationship, 203-328, and for background on Fullerton's relationship with his adopted sister Katherine, see 200-203, 211-212, 248-250, 285-287 esp. Colquitt quotes from a June 8, 1908 letter that Wharton wrote Fullerton in which she asked, "Is there any possibility of [Katherine] coming our way before she goes to Europe?" (96). Also see Wolff 145-151 and 198-202 esp. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>11</sup>Letter of 1909 as quoted in Colquitt 91.

<sup>12</sup>Letter of 1911 as quoted in Colquitt 84.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of [1909] as quoted in Colquitt 90-91.

Colquitt uses the brackets to indicate letters dated in the Zeitlen and Ver Brugge Booksellers catalogue accompanying the collection of Wharton's letters to Fullerton housed in the Harry Ranson Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas.

<sup>14</sup>Alan Gribben, "'The Heart is Insatiable': Edith Wharton's letters to Morton Fullerton," Library Chronicle of the University of Texas 31 (1985): 16.

<sup>15</sup>In her critical study of Wharton, Katherine Fullerton Gerould defends Wharton against charges of being James's "prize" pupil (6), dealing with the privileged, and of not dealing with a broader American theme. "She is an author passionately preoccupied with her country," Katherine asserted, who "disdains equally the popularly sentimental and the fashionably subversive . . ." (9-10). She especially praised Wharton's technical achievement and saw it as a reason for her work's popularity. The critic agreed with the novelist that "inhibitions are as necessary to real drama as passions" (8).

<sup>16</sup>Edith Wharton, The Reef (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912; reprt. 1965) 8. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup>See Edith Wharton The Collected Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 212

1968) 14, and Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905; 1933; rpt. 1975) 68. Anna's "visioned region" also functions like Alexandra Bergson's underground river in Willa Cather's, O Pioneers! (NY: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913).

\*Ammons compares Wharton's treatment of Anna in The Reef to "Sleeping Beauty" and her characterization of Sophy to "Cinderella" (29).

\*This question similarly concerns Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence (NY: D. Appleton-Century, 1920; NY: Charles Scribner's Sons; 1968) 44, 83. He bemoans the fact that a "nice" woman like May cannot claim the kind of freedom that would allow her individuality to emerge, but an Ellen Olenska, no matter how wronged, is somehow always to blame (97). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

\*The image repeats the one that Wharton used in "The Fullness of Life," in which the soul sits alone "and waits for the footstep that never comes" (14).

\*Sophy is also associated with that earlier heroine, since Darrow's "man-to man" talk with Sophy is reminiscent of Rosedale's with Lily (71).

\*Edith Wharton, Summer (NY: Appleton, 1917; Charles Scribner's Sons [1972]) 135. Also see James Gargano, "Edith Wharton's The Reef: The Genteel Woman's Quest for Knowledge," Novel 10, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 41. He notes that Anna's last name "suggests the sexual energy and fertility Wharton



associates with the riot of physical 'nature' in her  
novellette Summer.

"Letter of March 31 [1908\*] as quoted in Colquitt 84.  
Colquitt uses the asterisk to indicate tentatively assigned  
dates.

"Other echoes of Tolstoy's heroine include: "She  
wondered what she had to hold or satisfy him. He loved her  
now; she had no doubt of that; but how could she hope to keep  
him? They were so nearly of an age that already she felt  
herself his senior. As yet the difference was not visible;  
outwardly at least they were matched; but ill-health or  
unhappiness would soon do away with this equality" (329);  
"She knew how he disliked these idle returns on the  
irrevocable, and her fear of doing or saying what he disliked  
was tinged by a new instinct of subserviency against which  
her pride revolted. She thought to herself: 'He will see the  
change, and grow indifferent to her as he did to her . . . '"  
(346-347).

"See Gary H. Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of  
Manners (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975)  
46-60. He describes Wharton's use of the "rescue" plot.

"Lindberg makes this point about Wharton's fiction in  
general stating that "[t]he moral crises . . . so often  
emerge from such changes in perception that the essence of a  
character's moral development seems to involve shifts in his  
ways of seeing" (57). Nevius makes the same point more  
specifically about Archer and Ellen in The Age of Innocence

(187).

<sup>27</sup>Letter of March 31 [1908\*] as quoted in Colquitt 84.

<sup>28</sup>Similarly Archer at first believes it is his privilege and pleasure to initiate his bride (7).

<sup>29</sup>Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (NY: D. Appleton Co., 1919; 1930) 102.

<sup>30</sup>Critics are divided on how to read the ambiguous ending. Gargano envisions Anna repudiating Darrow and Sophy and reads the final scene as exposing "the tawdriness and banality of the 'romantic lie' which promotes the idea of personal indulgence against the interests of the human order" (47). Gooder also thinks that Anna gives up Darrow, because they have struck the dangerous realities of feelings from the unmapped regions of experience" (52). For alternative readings to the ending, see Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953). Nevius imagines Sophy's future "foreshadowed in the vulgar outlines of her sister's career" (135), while Anna and Darrow retreat to the status quo. See also Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Study (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970; updated 1982). Walton interprets the contrast between Sophy and her sister as heavily underlining all the novel's implied criticism of Anna; it diminishes her tragedy. He sees only qualified happiness for Anna and Darrow in the open ending. Carol Werahoven agrees that any marriage between them will be disappointing for "Anna will bring the eternal surveillance

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of a jealous and disillusioned woman" (107), but she also sees the final scene demonstrating Sophy's strength to transcend her environment in The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1982).

<sup>21</sup>Also see Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Heroines: Studies in Aspiration and Compliance (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois, 1974) 50. She describes "the reef" as the double standard on which Anna's dreams shatter.

<sup>22</sup>See Judith Gardiner, "The (Us)es of (I)dentify: A Response to Abel on '(E)merging Identities," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 6, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 438. Gardiner suggests that in the Bildungsroman or the novel of female development the artist is represented by a pair of women. That pattern coincides with Wharton's perpetual pairing of heroines.

<sup>23</sup>Letter of Aug. 26, 1908 (letter 6) as quoted in Gribben 18.

<sup>24</sup>Letter of (1910) as quoted in Colquitt 16.

<sup>25</sup>Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913; rpt. n.d.) 206.

<sup>26</sup>Edith Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," Harper's Monthly Magazine 176 (March 1938): 357.

<sup>27</sup>Ammons sees Ellen as an artist at heart "whose creative medium is her own life" (145), but sees May as another of Wharton's child-women (147). She interprets their relationship as hostile and based on rivalry (151).

<sup>28</sup>Wharton's description is reminiscent of her

description of herself and Sara Norton as "wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house." Letter to Sara Norton June 5, 1903, Yale University, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>39</sup>Wolff notes May's often overlooked complexity (323) as does Lindberg (135-136).

<sup>40</sup>Fryer observes that May is what Wharton might have become if she remained in old New York (127), and Geoffrey Walton notes that in the combined characterizations of Anna Leath, Rose Sellars in The Children, and Ellen Olenka, Wharton idealizes and partly criticizes her own nature (145-146).

<sup>41</sup>Edith Wharton, "The Quicksand," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 410. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically. "The Dilettante" is related to this story. In it a man's betrothed decides not to marry him after visiting his mistress.

## CHAPTER VI

### Edith Wharton's *Recompense*: Her Wink and Link to the Past

A deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired convictions and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books.

"George Eliot"

In a brief explanatory note which also serves as an introduction to *The Mother's Recompense*, Edith Wharton apologizes "to the decorous shade of Grace Aguilar, loved of our grandmothers, for deliberately appropriating and applying to uses so different, the title of one of the most adaired of her tales."<sup>1</sup> As Wharton humorously but also affectionately notes, she "has come a long way" from this deaure literary foremother. Her description of Aguilar as "decorous" might be read only as a critical evaluation of her work, but coming from someone who never chose her words lightly, who herself was so conscious of the value of "decoration," who desired both to appear "decorous" and to act with "decorum," the adjective is a tribute to the woman and a compliment to a professional predecessor.

As discussed earlier, Wharton went to great lengths to disassociate herself from the local colorist tradition and the "rose-coloured" ranks of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary

Wilkins. Here, however, fourteen years after the publication of Ethan Frome, she is drawing attention to a connection with Aguilar, a "sentimentalist." Although a generation separates their authors, Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Clephane exist in a similar atmosphere, one that Geoffrey Walton describes as a "sentimental haze."<sup>2</sup> Critics such as Adeline Tintner, who tend to see Wharton's use of the earlier title as an ironic comment on changes effected not only in decorum but also in the moral complexity of mother-daughter relationships, overlook the additional fact that her "appropriation" commits her to a dialogue with Aguilar.<sup>3</sup> This marks a change from Wharton's usual pattern of almost belligerently declaring her differences from (and implied superiority to) other women writers. Thinking that the differences speak for themselves perhaps, she is unthreatened and willing to risk comparison between her work and that of another woman writer, whom she would have characterized as belonging to a literary tradition antithetical to hers. Seen together, however, the two novels do not offer as much an index of social change as Wharton probably assumed, for in a significant way, they are akin: both are constrained by the marriage plot and by the social context in which they were written.

Aguilar's five hundred-some-page "tale," which could be subtitled "Mother Knows Best," was written as a sequel to Home Influence and fulfills the promise of its title: a mother, who has taught her children piety, duty, and control, is rewarded when her children achieve her own felicity of

mind. The most serious threat to the family occurs when one daughter in her vanity supposes herself in love with a man of poor character. To prove her independence, she plans to deceive her parents and elope. Unbeknownst to her, the man is already married. Fortunately, at the crucial moment of moral crisis, the image of her mother appears to her, and the daughter instead flees home. Surrounded at the novel's end by her grandchildren, Mrs. Hamilton, can truly say, "There are many sorrows and many cares inseparable from maternal love, but they are forgotten, utterly forgotten, or only remembered to enhance the sweetness of the recompense that ever follows."<sup>4</sup> The mother in Wharton's novel, Kate Clephane, would agree that pain helps to define and sharpen "sweetness"; however, she does not receive a similar "recompense" until she herself has paid a requital to the past. Unlike Mrs. Hamilton's reward, Kate's does not have the added boon of forgetfulness, nor is it as wholeheartedly fulfilling. Her characterization shows how difficult it was for Wharton to mold the standard plot of two women and one man satisfactorily to her own literary and psychological uses. The novelist's selection of title and subject supports Virginia Woolf's contention that women think back through their mothers,<sup>5</sup> for they are both a wink and a link to Wharton's personal and literary past.

As a woman writer, Wharton was atypical. Her wealthy, upperclass old New York background and own trust income separated her from those primarily "scribbling" from economic

necessity. Her well balanced, Latinate sentences, comprising "unsentimental," bleak stories, such as the enormously successful The House of Mirth and Ethan Frome, made her writing seem to be more "masculine" than "feminine," and though her subject matter--adultery, incest, suicide, mercy-killing--was often sensational, she wrote with restraint. The author's personal restraint often made people feel socially uncomfortable, but her artistic restraint received critical admiration and is probably tied to the notion (which she herself shared) of her having a "masculine" mind. The Mother's Recompense does not fit or reinforce this image, and for this reason, critics, such as Margaret McDowell and Marilyn Jones Lyde, see it as inferior to previous work.<sup>6</sup>

Its plot would make a good television mini-series: Kate Clephane is called home by the grown daughter she deserted eighteen years before when she left her husband and ran off with "another," long-since forgotten man. During her absence she has led an aimless, blameless, and unrealized life, except for the time of her affair with a man eleven years her junior, Chris Fenno, who made "her soul's lungs" seem "full of air" (18).<sup>7</sup> Kate slowly realizes that her daughter plans to marry her ex-lover and then torments herself about the advisability of revealing the past and preventing it. Deciding not to cause unnecessary "sterile pain" (226) and to let Anne have her own chance, Kate rejects a marriage proposal from an old friend, Fred Landers, and returns to her previous life. The plot is constructed like a standard



"cliff-hanger," having the same rises and declines of tension that Aguilar used to effect.

Wharton's claim that other women writers exerted no influence on her work is as accurate as saying that her mother had no effect on her life. In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf argues that Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot could not have written without forerunners, such as Aphra Behn, and the same holds true for Wharton (113). In his biography of Wharton, R. W. B. Lewis discusses the novelist herself as one of these "forerunners" when he describes The Mother's Recompense as reflecting "Edith's clarifying sense of herself as a woman and a writer of a certain age, testing out her relationship to those younger than she."<sup>8</sup> He observes that when Wharton talked about the relation between generations in the 1920's, she most often "meant literary generations--more particularly, her own relation, as a woman in her sixties who had come to literary fruition twenty years before, with the younger writers who were appearing on the postwar scene to varying acclaim" (465). Noting a similarity between Wharton and Kate Clephane in their expatriation, Lewis speculates that one layer of the novel expresses the author's desire to establish contact with the new generation of American authors.

The writers, Lewis mentions, with whom she felt the generational literary gap most bridgeable--F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis--were male. Kate Clephane, though, comes home to her daughter, and this distinction is

important because, if we accept Lewis's speculation, it suggests that Wharton yearned for a literary daughter, rather than a literary son. Lewis accurately interprets Wharton as a person whose "identity as a human being and a writer could only be forged, and reformed, by effecting ties in both directions" (465). Unfortunately, she never forged effective and lasting ties with a younger woman writer.<sup>9</sup> Reviewers who tended to discuss Wharton and Virginia Woolf together, for example, and who saw Wharton in comparison as hopelessly old-fashioned must have increased her sense of isolation from the new generation of women writers. Lewis's discussion of the novel emphasizes Wharton's ties to the future, but her borrowing of Aguilar's title is one of those powerful ties backward, beyond "the age of innocence" she so affectingly wrote about five years earlier in 1920, and shows Wharton's recognition of her link to a women's literary tradition.

The Mother's Recompense further marks a willingness on the novelist's part to examine fictionally the relationship with her own mother, Lucretia Jones Jones, that gave her so much pain personally. It is perhaps significant that after its completion, her work broadened in Twilight Sleep (1927) and The Children (1928) to include more obvious examples of poor fathering. Wharton's sensitivity to her fictional mother's dilemma and her exploration of Kate's growth suggest a re-thinking of her own mother-daughter drama. In The Mother's Recompense, Wharton creates a mother, who is in many ways the opposite of Lucretia. Kate Clephane, for example,

thinks that "[r]eality and durability were the attitudes of the humdrum, the prosaic, and the dreary" (5). Disliking the prosaic, which Lucretia so represented, Kate recognizes and approves of her daughter's need for an independent artistic life. In a revision of the disastrous "drawing rooms are always tidy" scene between the author and her own mother, Kate does not make Lucretia's mistake. Instead she is rewarded by her daughter's pleasure when she instinctively compliments Anne's "rough but vivid oil-sketch of a branch of magnolia" (42).

The Mother's Recompense has as many layered meanings as A Backward Glance. It can be read in part as a wishful rewriting of Wharton's history with her mother, in which she creates a mother who is sensitive and appreciative--even a little beholden to and awed by her daughter's character and talents. In this reading, the daughter is a magnanimous, "elevated" heroine, and though mother and daughter must part, the daughter is the mother's reward. Underlying this interpretation is the assumption that the mother does not quite "deserve" the daughter; only her altruism allows her to reclaim the relationship--and that from a distance of Europe. It is not hard to imagine the part of Wharton, which would always remain the rejected and misunderstood child, the child who needed to see Lucretia as not quite "deserving," if she were to preserve her own sense of self-worth. From this perspective, Kate's dependence on her daughter's judgment of herself as a worthy companion and her intermittent fear of

Anne's withdrawal of her approval seem a logical and empowering rewrite. It is also not difficult to imagine Wharton creating a mother to replace her own and developing a fantasy in which the daughter re-shapes the mother. The puns in Kate's last name (cléf and fain), for example, underscore the need for another to unlock her. In this reading, which I will develop, Kate Clephane becomes a "good" mother, a morally and emotionally richer person, through her relationship with her daughter, who is both child, woman, and mother to her mother. The Clephanes' example represents the perfect psychological solution for the child who had to "wake up" in her mother's bedroom.

Returning to the scene of her unhappy marriage and to the stranger who is her daughter, Kate is the prodigal. She, and not Anne, is like the female child, whom Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan describe as concurrently needing to see herself as "other" and the "same" as mother.<sup>10</sup> Kate's dilemma is that she knows her relationship with Anne depends on her respecting Anne's "otherness," but at the same time, Kate's image of herself depends on seeing the "sameness." Anne, rich, powerful, beloved, and unassailed by self-doubt, possesses the characteristics often equated with maturity. In comparison, Kate has lived in a succession of shabby, cramped rooms in third-rate hotels in the company of people who "want to forget" (5) and who live in "a chronic state of mental inaccuracy, excitement and inertia, which made it vaguely exhilarating to lie and definitely fatiguing to be

truthful" (27). In such company, Kate cannot conceive of unbaring her secret, naming her daughter (34). In truth, she cannot actually "name" Anne, since the child has always been more a concept, a dream, a part of the romance and tragedy of her own narrative, than a reality. Even her initial longing for Anne finds imaginative expression through another's story: Anna Karenina's midnight visit to her child's nursery (18). Seeing herself as a character removes Kate from her own experience, even though her anguish may equal that of Tolstoy's heroine. This stance becomes habit, and as the narrator tells us, "being face to face with her own thoughts was like facing a stranger" (21).

Anticipating her reunion with Anne, Kate projects a future drama: "'My daughter . . . my daughter Anne . . . Oh, you don't know my little girl? She has changed, hasn't she? Growing up is a way children have . . . Yes, it is ageing for a poor mother to trot about such a young giantess . . . Oh, I'm going gray already, you know--here, on the temples'"(15). Her self-absorbed fantasy underscores Kate's own immaturity, for Kate is only "grown up" in a worldly sense (knowing "what is what"), and not by the standards of the old New York of her early marriage where old Mrs. Clephane would have been the first to censor such vanity and implied sexual competition between mother and daughter. When Anne becomes the vehicle for Kate's learning that mothers also must "grow up" and change, Kate does not again reject the now outdated standards of her youth. Her exile at the novel's end is a

replay of the past in its repetition of action, but not in its motivation. If, in fact, Kate's first leavetaking was impulsive and selfish, the second is deliberate and altruistic. Even if one agrees with Adeline Tintner that the decision to leave is an assertion of her identity, it does not necessarily follow that the identities of "woman" and "mother" are mutually exclusive, though they may have been if Kate had decided to remain in New York and play grandmother to Anne and Chris's children. Kate's homecoming forces her to re-evaluate her younger self, and when the illusion of herself as the youthful mother of a young Amazon proves woefully inadequate, she must re-formulate her definition of "motherhood."

Living for nearly twenty years "with women of her own kind" has ill-prepared Kate for the role of mother. As Wolff notes, the telegram leading to her recall reads "Mrs. Clephane dead," simultaneously heralding the death of one Mrs. Clephane and the second birth of another (362). The "new" Kate is a "babe," innocent of the changes wrought by her daughter's generation and the war on the old New York of her first youth. Anne takes her in and protects her: "'You must never be tired or worried about things any more; I won't have it; we won't any of us have it. Remember, I'm here to look after you now--and so is Uncle Fred'" (57). In Book II, it is Kate who lets her hand droop against her daughter's strong young shoulder and sinks "down into a Bethesda-pool of forgetfulness and peace" (57); Kate, who needs and likes to

be "mothered in that fond blundering way the young have of mothering their elders" (59). Wharton's descriptions of Kate in the first stages of that relationship emphasize her decreasing individuality, her urge for union with, as opposed to differentiation from, Anne: "Kate felt as if they were two parts of some delicate instrument which fitted together as perfectly as if they had never been disjoined--as if Anne were that other half of her life, the half she had dreamed of and never lived" (75-76). The image is reminiscent of Lily Bart cradling Nettie Struther's baby in her arms.

Experiencing "the blessed anonymity of motherhood," Kate understands "how exposed and defenseless her poor unsupported personality had been through all those lonely years" (81). She is acutely aware of discovering the miracle of mothering, but less aware of the joy of being "mothered," as Anne performs for her many of the traditional motherly services: providing security, shelter, safety, and most importantly, the respectability necessary to re-launch her into society. Kate herself recognizes that "Anne's very insistence on treating her as the mistress of the house only emphasized her sense of not being so by right: it was the verbal courtesy of the Spaniard who puts all his possessions at the disposal of a casual visitor" (88).

Kate is more than that. We know that before her arrival Anne was lonely, that she and old Mrs. Clephane often disagreed, but since we see everything through Kate's often limited consciousness, we can only guess to what extent Anne

shares Kate's wish:

To be with Anne, to play the part of Anne's mother--the one part, she now saw, that fate had meant for her--that was what she wanted with all her starved and world-worn soul. To be the background, the atmosphere, of her daughter's life; to depend on Anne, to feel that Anne depended on her; it was the one perfect companionship she had ever known, and the only close tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust. The mere restfulness of it had made her contracted soul expand as if it were sinking into a warm bath. (87)

The womb imagery of this passage blurs the distinction between mother and child and undercores the innocence and naivety of Kate's wish. By agreeing to Anne's right to take her own chance with Chris and "to buy her own experience" (234), Kate does provide the background, the atmosphere, for Anne's life. She is also consenting--at much cost to herself--to be relegated "to the background." Living in Anne's background and Anne's atmosphere has worked its own magic and helped her to recognize her need to re-assess and readjust her own sense of her identity. Even though Kate has done her best "to organize her life in such a way that it



should fit into Anne's without awkward overlapping," it is an impossibility; "dissimulation and distrust" become a necessary part of life, if she is to protect her daughter. As readers, we might well question if Anne and Chris can have a successful marriage; if it were ever possible for Kate to protect Anne; if Kate's silence is another way of not permitting Anne "to buy her own experience;" and if Kate's self-administered dose of "sterile pain" is a form of self-flagellation and martyrdom.

Certainly when Anne wants to marry Chris Fenno, Kate is forced to struggle with the conflicting feelings of mother and woman. She feels that "life without Anne," "like life before Anne" is now unthinkable" (105), and it is precisely this feeling, with all its anguished love, which makes life without Anne thinkable. A "mother," the "new being" Kate feels, has "her center of gravity in a life not here" (104). Motherhood is no longer a pleasant daydream, an illusion; it is a needle in the heart. At the same time, it gives life a new dimension of dignity.

Kate's final renunciation allows her to retain this sense of life's expanded worth, which she has only discerned through her relationship with her daughter. Previously defining herself by her relationships with men, Kate thought that her real self had been born at thirty-nine and that without Chris, "she would never have had a self" (18), but she learns that "there was one thing much closer to her now than any conceivable act of Chris's could ever be; and that

was her own relation to Anne" (134). "Mother" and "woman" are not mutually exclusive, but now as the "mother" of a young woman, Kate's sense of herself is integrally determined by women. This shift in her orientation is reminiscent of Lily Bart and in part explains her refusal to marry Fred; in this context, it would seem retrogressive.

The shift means giving up the illusion that Chris left her for another woman, instead of growing tired of her or outgrowing her; it means recognizing that what she dislikes in her flamboyant niece, Lilla, is what she dislikes in herself; it means living with the knowledge that "she would never, as long as she lived, be able to think evil of Chris without its hurting her" (164); it means confronting her own jealousy of her daughter and realizing that there must always be some hurtful truth in Anne's assertion, "You don't know me either, mother!" (191); it means acquiring a grudging respect for the old Mrs. Clephane, whom Anne in part resembles; finally it means facing the fact that she and Fred Landers are nearly the same age. Inherent in all these examples of Kate's growing consciousness and maturation is a recognition of lost fictions and a lost definition of self. She has been living as if the past were irrevocable and now finds it is not. This realization makes Kate's last twenty years seem even more seedy to herself in retrospect and leads to the self-abasing and guilt-ridden thought that she was incapable of raising a daughter like Anne: "She was rewarded for having given up her daughter; if she had not, could she ever have

known such a moment as this?" (83). Her wish to see Anne living the other half of her life, "to help shape the perfection she had sought and missed" (76) also comes from a sense of her own inadequacy and a desire to re-do her own life through Anne's.

The novel's incestuous undercurrent reinforces this sense of Kate and Anne's merger, and it is no mistake that the maid at the Fenno's house thinks that Anne is Kate, the woman who came before and made a scene (198). Kate herself is more repulsed by the idea of her daughter marrying her ex-lover than are any of her confidants, and this discrepancy partly reflects the self-destructiveness inherent in Kate's nearly total identification with Anne. While the incest motif to some degree finds a parallel in Wharton's own struggle with her mother for possession of her father,<sup>14</sup> the primary focus in The Mother's Recompense--as it was in Ethan Frome--is on the same sex bond. The women's identification goes far beyond physical and emotional similarities. At one time, Kate feels that "her own sobs were shaking her daughter's body" and that "[s]he no longer knew what she herself was feeling. All her consciousness had passed into Anne" (236). Kate's definition of mothers and daughters explains this sensation: "Mothers and daughters are part of each other's consciousness, in different degrees and in a different way, but still with the mutual sense of something which has always been there" (194). In other words, mothers and daughters are so much of each other that they are

"unconscious" of each other. Kate wanted this kind of relationship with Anne without realizing that it also implies an underlying sense of loss, a decrease in conscious intimacy, a decrease in the intensity of living in and breathing each other's atmosphere. This is the hardest of all illusions for her to surrender. Giving it up means that she must re-define her concept of "mother" as being identical to "daughter" and see mothers and daughters more in terms of the model of being "same" and "other." Kate's acceptance of her difference and separation from Anne brings a feeling of loss, but it also allows her to choose her own identity at the end of the novel, for if her interests were identical to Anne's, then marriage with Fred Landers would almost inevitably be the surest way of securing Anne's peace of mind.

The pain Kate assumes in her decision not to tell Anne the real nature of her relationship with Chris is inherent in Wharton's concept of motherhood, which two other Wharton stories, "Autres Temps . . ." and The Old Maid, help illustrate.<sup>12</sup> In the former, a mother, Charlotte Lovell, protects her daughter from the stain of illegitimacy by having her cousin raise her as her own. "Aunt" Charlotte lives in the same house as her daughter Tina and must suffer as she sees her daughter confide in and love another first. She must endure the fact that Tina will never truly know her and that what Tina does know about her (she is an "old maid") diminishes her in her daughter's eyes. In this story,

Charlotte's recompense is that Tina is safely married and does not make her own mistake. Her cousin, Delia, publicly and effortlessly reaps all the commonly accepted joys and tributes of motherhood, but Charlotte too has her joy. Hiding the fact of her actual relationship to Tina adds a poignant and enriching resonance to her life. Every interaction has a nuance known only to herself and to some degree to Delia. Charlotte's secret makes her heroic. It also secretly empowers her by allowing her a hidden and superior pleasure over those who persist in summing her up as "the old maid." In this way, she resembles Mrs. Analey in "Roman Fever," whose knowledge about her daughter's birth and parentage helps her to maintain a sense of amused tolerance with her best friend and rival, Mrs. Slade.

In "Autres Temps . . ." a mother, ostracized by society upon her divorce, returns home to protect her daughter in a similar situation and finds, ironically, that times have indeed changed for the younger generation but not for hers. She can take some comfort in the fact that the same is not true for her daughter, even if she will always be the woman whom the ambassador's wife cuts. The mothers in The Old Maid and "Autres Temps . . ." refuse to be protected, rescued, or pitied. Even if life is a painful, compromised affair, at least it is one of their own choosing. Kate is not unlike them. The idea that suffering is a component of love and loneliness a component of intimacy echoes The Old Maid, just as Kate's return to her former life echoes the ending of

"Autres Temps . . . ." Only after Anne, suspicious of her mother's history with Chris, gravely wounds her with the words, "a relation . . . can't be improvised in a day," "you must leave me to manage my life in my own way," does Kate claim her daughter by whispering, "Goodnight--my child" (202).

Kate's recognition of the waste in causing "sterile pain" is reminiscent of Ellen Olenaka's feeling that it was worthwhile to have missed things, "so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery."<sup>12</sup> This reasoning also further helps to explain Kate's later refusal to marry Uncle Fred: "it seems to me . . . my refusing . . . the one thing that keeps me from being too hopeless, too unhappy . . . It's what I live by'" (341). In this reading, Fred's acceptance of Kate and her past is symbolic of the best of old New York, and as such, Kate can bless him "for giving her the strength to hold out against his pleadings" (342). Kate's new identity, then, is defined by being able to say to herself "that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her" (342). "The best thing" in this case is not Fred's love, but his recognition of and respect for her as an individual. Her received recompense is Anne's life and her sense of herself as a woman who has stood for something. The recompense she makes is to the past, by seeing the beneficial, as well as the destructive, side of old New York. Kate's enlarged vision allows her to make

peace with "her husband's point of view" and "her mother-in-law's standards," even to see them a little nostalgically, since they have proved such inadequate barricades "against the alarming business of living" (73). Marrying Fred would protect Kate from the life to which she returns, but it would also mean giving up a large degree of her own autonomy to live in a society in which she does not feel comfortable. In this vein, Tintner argues that Kate's recompense "is the restitution of her own personality which confirms an existence beyond her relation to a husband or a child" (152). What is disturbing, though, about Kate's return to her previous lifestyle is its resemblance--at least on the surface--to Hester Prynne's return to her New England village and her re-donning of the scarlet letter. Like Hester, Kate proudly and defiantly chooses to define herself as an "outsider." It highlights how very much she has changed, especially since her growth is a result of her relationship with another woman, her daughter. Even the man who made her feel first born could not affect her to this degree.

In either reading, the ending seems unsatisfactory, as if Kate must indeed sell her soul, her memories, and her future for her daughter (276). It also shows Wharton rebelling against the marriage plot's neat and tidy ending and having no satisfactory alternative for disposing of Kate. For this reason Elizabeth Ammons sees the novel as a "harsh book" and one that exposes Wharton's belief that "mothers oughtn't ever to leave their daughters" (MR 235); however,

instead of sacrificing Kate "as a person to her theoretical preoccupation with Kate the mother," as Ammons argues, Wharton is trying to give Kate her own plot.<sup>14</sup> Her solution is ironically an endorsement of Aguilar's vision. Like Sophy Viner before her, Kate deserves another chapter several years hence.

If in creating the character of Kate, Wharton is creating a substitute for her own mother, the substitute has its problems also. No matter how appealing the idea of unconditional love, it can tacitly exact an oppressive remittance: a mother who feels each pulse of her daughter risks her own identity and threatens to subsume her child's. For mother and daughter to be individuals, they must separate, pursue their own interests, "buy their own experience," no matter how others judge it. Each must think of the other as Wharton thought of Morton Fullerton: "I judged you long ago, & I accepted you as you are."<sup>15</sup> This definition of "love" is embedded in the novel's conclusion. Acceptance does not guarantee approval, and as a working out of this psychological conundrum, perhaps The Mother's Recompense must come to an unsatisfactory conclusion.

Anne becomes Anne Clephane Fenno, a person whom we and she cannot yet define and for whom we cannot predict the future; Kate becomes a mother, her definition of that role having changed from one of near total identification with her child to one of controlled and respectful distance. Kate will probably never feel that Chris is the right husband for



Anne, but she gives Anne the chance "to buy her own experience." Kate cannot refuse her daughter the same chance that she herself more than once has asserted her right to choose; and her acceptance of Anne's right to fashion her own life is itself an affirmation of that life, warts and all. It is also a variation from Wharton's usual pattern, since Kate does not protect Anne in the same way that Anna and Sophy protect Owen in The Reef. It again suggests that women must help each other to be "grown-up" and if Anne, for example, were to ask Kate (as Wharton asked her mother) to explain what happens after marriage, Kate would tell her in sufficient detail. We can only hope that the daughter will not deny her mother the same chance to make her own mistakes and that Anne will respond to her opportunity by becoming more open to her mother's past and present life, following the example of Aunt Enid in response to her daughter, Lilla, instead of the example of her grandmother, old Mrs. Clephane.

Although Kate has changed and grown as our perception and understanding of her has grown, her return brings her novel full circle. The process of writing a mother-daughter story brings Wharton herself full circle; the writer-daughter is also the mother-creator. The ending to The Mother's Recompense shows a mother and daughter who have made a qualified peace, and if Kate in some ways functions as Lucretia Jones, it suggests that Wharton was able to do the same. Lucretia, for her daughter, may always remain "prosaic" and blindly insensitive, but she was also the least

pretty daughter who had to make do with hand-me-down slippers and who therefore grew up to have an inordinate love of clothes instead of literature. At the same time, a part of Wharton herself may be embedded in Kate's characterization, the part that longed for a child. In this context, Kate's abdication of her motherly role, her expatriation, her unmarried state, and her independence are all signs of the author's satisfaction with the choices that she bought with her own experience.

Such insight can bring its own recompense, a sense of greater freedom from the constraint and restraint of the past and its internalized voices that manacle the heart. Loosing those chains would give one more latitude to forge ties to the future without losing the often restrictive but also comforting tether to the past. It would make Wharton's hope possible: "to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and tomorrow, to lose, in the ardour of new experiment, the least that may be of the long rich heritage of human experience."<sup>16</sup> For Wharton, the stakes in a literary and in a personal past marked an artistic well. The ending to The Mother's Recompense suggests that as she grew older, the waters tasted less bitter.

Wharton's plea to let one live his or her own life is reiterated three years later in The Children, a story of a foster father's love of a fifteen-year old girl. Originally its ending would have echoed the ending of Summer. Martin Boyne, the surrogate father, considers himself "a critical

cautious man of forty-six, whom nobody could possibly associate with the romantic or the unexpected," but he is captivated by both in the person of the eldest Wheeler child, Judith.<sup>17</sup> She has assumed responsibility for all the children and step-children of her parents' multiple marriages and has sworn to keep them together. Boyne admires her efforts, and she soon replaces his fiancée as "the fixed point on which his need for permanence could build" (82).

In Wharton's first version, Boyne marries Judy, who is now seventeen years old and heartbroken after the death of her brother, Terry. The outline she sent to Appleton read: "He sees the folly of the marriage, and yet is so frightened by her loneliness . . . that, having obtained the consent of her parents, Boyne marries her--but as if he were taking a little sister home . . . . The story ends on this note of quiet emotion, sad yet hopeful."<sup>18</sup> This conclusion imprisons Judy in perpetual childhood; as Boyne's "little sister" she can never fully be his wife. The protection his home offers her and her siblings is at the cost of "the waking consciousness of her beauty and the power it exercised . . ." (347). Such a marriage would be retrogressive; it can never be one in which "the power of each sex is balanced by the other;" it can never be--what Wharton termed in French Ways and Their Meaning--"grown-up."<sup>19</sup>

The ending on which Wharton decided, however, not only gives Judy her chance to grow up, but it also empowers her. When Boyne delicately proposes to Judy, she responds: "do

you really mean you're going to adopt us all, and we're all going to stay with you forever?" (309). Her question marks the end of Boyne's second boyhood and the beginning of his "long apprenticeship" to "this perpetual obsession, this clinging nearness, this breaking on the rack of every bone, and tearing apart of every fibre" (323). His illusion is as painful to surrender as Kate Clephane's fantasy of her Amazon daughter. More importantly, Judy's question marks her chance "to buy her own experience."

Like the ending to The Mother's Recompense, the ending to The Children could also be called "harsh." Boyne's fiancée, Rose Sellers is a mature, sensitive, and ethical woman, but she is found wanting and returned home.<sup>20</sup> By Boyne's standards, her failure to inspire his passion or to embrace a ready-made family makes her "unwomanly." His definition of femininity is obviously inadequate, for Rose cannot speak her mind without being metaphorically stripped of the twin graces of sexuality and maternity. Wharton, however, does not offer any better model. Judy's mother, for example, is an overaged flapper, and Judy herself is largely unformed, untutored, and uncultured.<sup>21</sup> Wharton has some difficulty in imagining a society in which Kate Clephane would flourish, but it is simply impossible for her to envision her own giving birth to a "new woman," who retains the graces and subtleties of the old. In a Wharton novel, for example, a female equivalent of the American Adam would be doomed, especially since Lewis defines him as

an individual emancipated from history,  
happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and  
undefiled by the usual inheritances of  
family and race; an individual standing alone,  
self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to  
confront whatever awaited him with the aid  
of his own unique and inherent resources."<sup>24</sup>

This Adam's Eve is inconceivable to an author who above all  
valued "taste, reverence, continuity, and intellectual  
honesty."<sup>25</sup>

A woman enters the world, as Wharton knows it, already  
defiled "by the usual inheritances of family and race."  
Society dictates that she never stand alone or unprotected  
and does everything possible to prohibit her becoming "self-  
reliant and self-propelling." Women exist only in community,  
only in a social context, and they can neither create utopian  
communities in the wilderness nor revolutionize the status  
quo. The outcome of Justine Brent's social evangelism, for  
example, is at the cost of personal integrity. In this way,  
Wharton's and Auguilar's purposes are not opposed. In French  
Ways and Their Meaning Wharton explains that

[t]he woman whose mind is attuned to men's  
minds has a much larger view of the world,  
and attaches much less importance to trifles,  
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because men, being usually brought by circumstances into closer contact with reality, insensibly communicate their breadth of view to women. (119)

She attributed this "breadth of view" to French women and saw it denied to her own compatriots.

Even her heroines, such as Sophy Viner, who most defy categorization, have no really viable alternative to marriage. Wharton could not summarily dismiss the importance of an institution that she believed necessary for the continuation of the family--and by extension--culture (French Ways 128). Belonging to a European tradition, Ellen Olenska perhaps best utilizes her "own unique and inherent resources," but she does so at the cost of expatriation.<sup>24</sup> Although Ellen and Justine most resemble the self-reliant, independent women of Mary Wilkins, they are seen through a social filter that reduces their images. Wharton agreed that what William Dean Howells said of the American theatre was true for "the whole American attitude toward life": "what the American public wants is a tragedy with a happy ending" (French Ways 65). Believing that "every serious picture of life contains a thesis" and that only method separates "the literary artist from the professed moralist,"<sup>25</sup> she was not willing to give the public "the happy ending": "'The sheltered life,' whether of the individual or of a nation, must either have a violent or tragic awakening--or never wake

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up at all (French Ways 66). By tipping her hat to the status quo and by qualifying the potential happiness of her single heroines, Wharton hoped to wake her readers to rebellion but not to anarchy.

Only if we compare Ellen Olenska's position with May Archer's do we see its advantages. This is as far as Wharton overtly revolts, and it leaves her with only a few more options than Aguilar; the values by which Kate has chosen to structure her life are not so very dissimilar from those of her literary sister, Mrs. Hamilton. Both have received their recompense or their reward through the lives of their children, and if Mrs. Clephane and Mrs. Hamilton ever shared tea together, Mrs. Clephane would agree--perhaps for different reasons--that the many sorrows and many cares which are inseparable from maternal love are "only remembered to enhance the sweetness of the recompense that ever follows" (498).

It is true that in a Wharton novel Mrs. Hamilton's wayward daughter might have run off with a disreputable man and then be sent to Europe to live the rest of her life in seclusion; or, as an old woman, she might unsuccessfully attempt to stop a younger version of herself from making the same mistake. In either case, however, the underlying and assumed values are the same, and that is why in A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf observed the revolutionary nature of Mary Carmichael's line, "Chloe liked Olivia" (86), for until a woman could pen that line and accept its myriad

social, political, and sexual ramifications, there was little alternative to the marriage plot.



#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, The Mother's Recompense (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1925). All subsequent references to this text are noted parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Study (Rutherford: Ferleigh Dickinson Press, 1970; revised 1980) 147.

<sup>3</sup>For background information on Aguilar and a discussion of The Mother's Recompense, see Adeline R. Tintner, "Mothers, Daughters, and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton," The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (NY: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1980) 147-156. Both Aguilar's and Wharton's novels are mostly told from the mothers' points of view, and for this reason Tintner sees Wharton as "a lineal--if rebellious--descendant of Grace Aguilar" (155). All subsequent references to this article will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>Grace Aguilar, The Mother's Recompense (NY: D. Appleton, 1859) 498.

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929) 132. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup>See Margaret B. McDowell, Edith Wharton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976) 40-41 and 142-143. Also see Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959) 160-

161. For a slight note of dissension, see Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Critical Study (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953) 202. He commends Wharton's fiction for a "willingness to test the clichés of her fellow novelists in the double light of her obdurate rationalism and what we suppose to be her bitter private experience."

<sup>7</sup>See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) 360-362. She discusses the difficulty of determining ages and the passage of time in the novel and its importance to an understanding of Kate's character, which she describes as a delicate composite of illusion, self-deception, and reality. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Pub. Co., 1975) 465. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>9</sup>Wharton's influence can be seen in the work of Jean Stafford, another ironically comedic observer of manners. See Louis Achinclosa, "Edith Wharton and Her Letters," Hofstra Review II, no. 3 (Winter 1967): 1-7. He recounts that Stafford was interested in writing a biography of Wharton, but when she heard the (discredited) rumor that the novelist's real father might have been her brothers' English tutor, she exclaimed, "I'll do the tutor instead" (2). Another writer, who admired Wharton, was her slightly younger contemporary Zona Gale (1874-1938), the author of Mias Lulu

Bett (1920). She wrote Appleton's, praising The Glimpses of the Moon, and Wharton's editor sent the letter to her. Wharton replied by praising Miss Lulu Bett and Main Street as "the two significant books in recent American fiction." A copy of letter is in The Beinecke Library. The women intermittently corresponded. Zona Gale began her career writing sentimental verse and romance novels but gradually moved toward the local color tradition and realism. Wharton was very fond of Philomène de Lévis-Mirepoix, who was a journalist and wrote under the pen name of Claude Sylve. She also wrote a work of autobiographical fiction, Cité des Lampes (1912). (Lewis 438-9).

<sup>10</sup>Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Women, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); and Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>Wolff states that "'incest' was absorbed into Wharton's fictional vocabulary as a significant mode of representation" (380). She suggests that Wharton's unresolved feelings for her father might have affected all subsequent sexual, as well as cross-generational, relationships (379). See also Tintner who sees the struggle between mothers and daughters in Wharton's late novels as the struggle for the father (155).

<sup>10</sup>Edith Wharton, The Old Maid (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1924) and Edith Wharton, "Autrea Tempa . . .," The Collected Stories of Edith Wharton, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribners Sons, 1968) 257-281.

<sup>11</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (NY: D. Appleton and Co., 1920; NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.) 242.

<sup>12</sup>Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 163.

<sup>13</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, "Edith Wharton in Love: 'My Life Was Better Before I Knew You,'" The New York Times Book Review 1 May 1988: 30.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Wharton, A Motor-Flight Through France (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908) 11.

<sup>15</sup>Edith Wharton, The Children (NY: D. Appleton, 1928) 3. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>16</sup>See Wolff 381.

<sup>17</sup>Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (NY: D. Appleton & Co. 1919; 1930) 113 and 100 respectively.

<sup>18</sup>Walton observes that in Rose Sellers Edith Wharton created a character rather like herself, and he sees an element of self-criticism in her portrayal (165).

<sup>19</sup>See Ann Abigail Hambley, "The Jamesian Note in Edith Wharton's The Children," University Review 31 (1966): 209-211. She notes the similarities between Judith and James's Maizie and Nanda Brookenham (210).

<sup>20</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy 249

and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 5.

==Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 22.

==See Elizabeth Ammons, "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art," in American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischman (Boston: Hall, 1982) 209-224. She makes the comparison between Ellen Olenska and her author and argues that as a woman writer Wharton had to be an expatriot.

==Edith Wharton, "Fiction and Criticism," Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 4.

## CHAPTER VII

### The Self-Made Man, the Female Artist, and A Grown-Up Woman

The years had not been exactly what she had dreamed; but if they had taken away certain illusions they had left richer realities in their stead.

#### "The Letters"

The two novels in which Edith Wharton most directly attempted to examine the development of an artist, Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and The Gods Arrive (1932) are considered among her worst. After reading the latter, a reviewer for The Saturday Review of Literature declared that "despite the title, the gods have not yet arrived at the end of the book."<sup>1</sup> Wharton's last book, The Buccaneers, which shows her heroine, Nan St. George, struggling to define herself not through marriage but in her own terms, suggests that perhaps they were not needed. In discussing Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, later critics, such as Blake Nevius and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, additionally fault the novels for their loose, uncontrolled structure.<sup>2</sup> Although most readers concur that the protagonist, Vance Weston, never makes a satisfactory artistic or personal statement, few credit his problem to his gender.

Wharton's adoption of a male persona complicates her

examination of the issues that she explored in Ethan Frome: the nature of artistic vision and its relationship to the "self." A male mask served two purposes: it legitimized a narrative that she saw as traditionally belonging to the other sex, and it allowed her to maintain the distance she felt so necessary between subject and author. Deploring what she considered the current trend in fiction writing, the barely disguised autobiographical novel, she never wanted to be heard "shrilling" her tale. For that reason, an early story, "The Fullness of Life," was not included among her collected stories, for as Lewis suggests, her description of a mismatched pair was embarrassingly true to life.<sup>3</sup>

In her early stories, such as "Mrs. Manstey's View" or "The Pelican" she did use female artists, but covertly:<sup>4</sup> for example, Wharton writes that "[p]erhaps at heart Mrs. Manstey was an artist; at all events she was sensible of many changes of color unnoticed by the average eye" (5). The women artists she did create are often treated less sympathetically than Mrs. Manstey and reflect her need to see herself as more akin to either male writers or to extraordinary women writers such as Emily Brontë or George Eliot.<sup>5</sup> In "The Pelican," for instance, the silly and rather pathetic Mrs. Amyot draws lecture audiences more for their charitable contribution to her son's education than for the content of her talks.<sup>6</sup> Continuing to speak long after her son has reached a prosperous maturity, Mrs. Amyot's ceaseless vacuities are a projection of her author's anxiety about

writing after she has nothing more to say.

The sexual unattractiveness of her women writers in stories, such as "The Temperate Zone" or The Touchstone (1900), expose again Wharton's ambivalence about the wedding of her gender and her profession.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Aubyn, the one woman of genius she creates, misses being loved "by just such a hair-breadth deflection from the line of beauty as had determined the curve" of her lips (11), and the novella in which she figures focuses on Glennard, the more-than-ordinary man who could not imagine her mouth's individual charm. The psychological, social, and historical reasons for Wharton's ambivalence toward herself as a woman writer have already been discussed, but this story in particular shows what she called "the feminine me" opposed to (what I would call) "the writing me." Only through the legacy of her letters does Glennard come close to loving the dead author. How he would cope with the reality of her is not even open to debate--he could not.

Despite her gifts, Margaret Aubyn's role fits the pattern established in "Friends" (also written in 1900) and later developed in The Reef, for she becomes the means of unbandaging Mrs. Glennard's eyes. After reading the writer's love letters to her husband, Glennard's wife sees him as wanting. Their estrangement leads to his moral development and to a more realistic and honest renewal of their marriage. As Glennard's wife explains to him: "Don't you see that you've never been what she thought you, and that now, so



wonderfully, she's made you into the man she loved?" (82). Although Margaret Aubyn's own life and work become the means of rehabilitation, the touchstone, for the Glennarda' marriage, her greatest work of art ironically is a weak man.

Unlike The Touchstone, Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive do not directly concern relations between women, but they do illustrate how Wharton was defining and attempting to reconcile "woman" and "author" at the end of her career. They also provide a useful context for analyzing a new type of Wharton heroine, Nan St. George of The Buccaneers, a non-self-sacrificing grown-up woman. In Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, Wharton did not chose to write Margaret Aubyn's story. Insteaed she decided to tell Vance Weston's, a writer born in America's heartland and named for his birthplace, Advance, Misasouri. In his case, name is destiny, for his narrative is a series of geographic, literary, and personal "advances," and as in Ethen Frome, within his tale lies "a buried fable" of the "aelf's" relationship to "self."

Vance's quest for a unique voice and its appropriate literary form begins when he discovers that he and his grandfather share the same lover, Flossa Delaney. Leaving his hometown of Euphoria, Illinois, he goes East to recuperate with relatives in Paul's Landing, New York. There for the first time he sees a house almost a century old, which transforms his perspective of the world "from a movie 'close-up' to a many-vistaed universe" and awakens his need for

stability, traditions, and commitment." "The Willows'" library further expands his vistas, and in it he reads his first Coleridge and meets his first mentor, Héloïse (Halo) Spear."

When Vance's venture into the New York literary world ends in failure, he returns home. Three years later, his exile from New York is ended by Halo's husband, Lewis Tarrant, a rich dilettante and the new editor of a literary journal, The Hour. On this trip East, Vance finds artistic recognition and love; his little cousin Laura Lou Tracy has been transformed from a "sulky flapper" (HRB 204) into a "Greek priestess" (HRB 205). The two marry but are mismatched emotionally and intellectually: "She was as much of a luxury as an exotic bird or flower" (HRB 250). Their romantic adventure ends when poverty forces them to live with Laura Lou's mother in Paul's Landing.

There for a second time, Vance discovers Halo and the Willows. The house, "so impregnated with memories, so thick with tokens of the past" (HRB 200) becomes the setting of his first novel, and its original owner, who looks like George Eliot, becomes his subject: who was the woman who dreamed of dancing and "ended in the library" (HRB 132)? Collaborating with Halo, Vance calls Emily Lorburn back to life and writes a best-selling historical novel. After his wife dies and her husband asks for a divorce, the two sail for Europe. Their ensuing relationship has all the stresses of marriage without its bond, and by the time Vance meets Floss Delaney again, he

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is ready for a change. He and Halo separate, and the time apart prepares them for their reunion at the end of The Gods Arrive.

In superficial and obvious ways, Weston is Wharton's alter-ego and his story is hers; for example, he sees his first novel much as Wharton grew to see The Valley of Decision (1902)--"an emanation"--and like her never writes another historical novel.<sup>10</sup> He shares her love of the pure sound of words, and they sing to him as they do to her "like birds in an enchanted forest;"<sup>11</sup> he values the same speech she learned in her parents' house, "good English words, rich and expressive, with hardly a concession to the local vernacular, or the passing epidemics of slang" (HRB 15); and for both author and character, writing is a means of self-discovery and self-healing, a way of dispelling "the awful sense of loneliness" (HRB 30).<sup>12</sup>

His similarities with Wharton, though, are only ideological; as Vance becomes an increasingly successful novelist, for example, his tours of the literary salons of New York, Paris, and London allow her to parody pet peeves, such as the Bloomsbury group, the 'slice-of-life' writers (HRB 194), the "me" novelist, James Joyce, and the Pulitzer (Pulsaifer) Prize.<sup>13</sup> As a result, we never see him "in the round," and Geoffrey Walton aptly notes that Vance "does not strike one as a personality or an artist of great distinction."<sup>14</sup> Vance's theoretical function obscures the more interesting story of his artistic development, and too

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often he seems a part of the scene his author is parodying. Wolff observes that Vance sounds as if he is expressing his author's anger at being considered "old-fashioned" (393), and in a similar vein, Lewis writes that there is no missing a certain defensiveness of tone and hurt at being critically underrated or disregarded (492).

As these observations suggest, the main problem with the novels is tone. Sarah Orne Jewett pinpointed the same weakness in Willa Cather's short story "On the Gull's Road" (1908); it needed a female narrator.<sup>13</sup> If "Vance" were "Vanessa," the link between the artist's work and life would be more convincing.<sup>14</sup> Wharton, though, saw the story of a great artist as only possible for "a man of genius," and in fact she originally toyed with that subtitle. The similarities between Vance and his author barely mask her awareness of his failings and only obscure the narrative. It is not without at least unconscious intent that Vance seems to be a parody of a male writer who--to quote Walton--has little "distinction."

Further complicating the novelist's relation to her material is the part of her that saw and liked herself as the "self-made man" or as a woman with a masculine mind. Wharton, for example, wrote to Robert Grant: "I conceive my subjects like a man--that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women--& then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental effects that women have

always excelled in, the episodal characterisation, I mean."<sup>17</sup> The quotation shows her ambivalence, even though she writes in French Ways and Their Meaning of men's "larger view of the world" and their "closer contact with reality," all attributes that she considered important for the creation of lasting literature.<sup>18</sup> Defining her own intelligence as a masculine trait inclines Wharton to identify with her character, Vance Weston; however, she also finds him incomplete without Halo Spear, whose name especially incorporates both male and female sexual images. The faults of Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive illustrate that the voice of authorship is not universal or genderless.

Wharton herself wants to feminize him. His realization that "the fellows that write those [superficial] books are all Motherless!" (HRB 336) does not at first extend to himself, but the narrative reveals his awakening to this fact and remedying it with his reunion with Halo, who is pregnant with their child. The novels' dominant spiritual image comes from Faust, "the mysterious Mothers, moving in subterranean depths among the primal forms of life" (HRB 336), and is meant to be read as a rejection of God, our father, and his son. The Mothers are also the source of creative power, and Vance needs to feel "the arms of Life, the ancient mother, reaching out to him, winding about him, crushing him fast again to her great careless bosom" (HRB 31), if he is to feel "the artisan's full command of his implements."<sup>19</sup>

The image is repeated at the novel's end when he and Halo embrace. Their elemental connection is like an invisible umbilical cord that links mother and child but also leaves what he calls "the god in him" free to walk around (HRB 6-7). This resolution closely parallels Nancy Chodorow's and Carol Gilligan's models for female development: a "soul" must be both independent and connected, isolated and in community.<sup>20</sup> A marriage of "selves," must preserve the "irreducible core of selfness," "the hidden cave" in which one hoards his or her secrets" (HRB 272), for that inviolate private space is vital for the development of a self that can function in a relationship without being subsumed. Vance values "the true artist's faculty of self-isolation,"<sup>21</sup> and this shows a change in Wharton's thinking from her first short story, "The Fullness of Life," in which the soul sitting in the self's innermost room mournfully awaits a footstep that never comes.<sup>22</sup>

Halo goes through a similar transformation. Her "altruism" in the service of "genius" masks an abdication of responsibility to herself, and it transforms her from a self-confident, independent woman into a self-doubting recluse. The desire to be like the air her lover breathes (GA 31) as well as the lath upon which he shapes his fictions is destructive for them both; for example, Halo no longer cares "to make her life comely for its own sake; she thought of it only in relation to Vance" (GA 104), and nothing matters to her "except that she should go on serving and inspiring this

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child of genius whom a whim of the gods had entrusted to her . . . " (GA 105). Carol Werahoven rightly notes that she has to regain her own selfhood.<sup>22</sup> Only by separating from Vance can Halo recover a sense of her lost identity and find the woman who was herself. At first she spends the days tending her garden at Oubli, and later she creates a home for herself and her expected baby at the Willows. While the garden metaphor ties her to nature's cycles by foreshadowing her pregnancy and participation in the "endless function" (GA 311), it also underlies her own need to "tend" her "self," "to be Halo Spear again--that's all" (GA 368). In actuality, Halo's altruism has been a form of selfishness, prompted by her desire to be Vance's guide, his sounding board, his muse, and it resembles the ruinous altruism that Mary Wilkin's Amelia Lemkin practiced in the service of hearth and home.<sup>23</sup>

If Wharton had told her own story there would have been no male equivalent of Halo. Although she discussed her work with Walter Berry, she envied the British author Mrs. Humphrey Ward for being surrounded by a supportive and appreciative family. Wharton's unrelenting treatment of Halo in part results from her lifelong dislike of seeing wasted self-sacrifice, but it also results from her contempt for women who feed and perpetuate the myth of "the man of genius," a man not bound by conventions or morality. A similar path was denied to any but the most socially radical women writer, since her life was defined by conventional definitions of femininity. Vance's return to Halo and hearth

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show that Wharton saw the necessity of these ties for the regulation, maintenance, and continuance of life.

As symbols of maleness and femaleness, Vance and Halo are what Emerson called "half-gods."<sup>25</sup> By his third return to the Willows, Vance has learned the truth of his grandmother's last words, "'Maybe we haven't made enough of pain--been too afraid of it" (GA 409). He is now prepared to accept the feminine in himself. His willingness also reflects his author's wish to make herself whole, to wed the male and female in herself, for abstractly Vance and Halo represent the two parts of their creator's nature: the intellectual "male" half, who wrote fictions, and the nurturing female half, who tended gardens. Lewis gives examples of those two halves when he recounts that Wharton was much amused by the masculine form of the salutation "Cher ami" "and willing to admit its propriety."<sup>26</sup> At the same time, he observes that Wharton was a "great woman" and her strength as an artist was her "distinctively feminine sensibility" (23). In 1929, the "self" that wrote novels and the "self" that created gardens dramatically merged. During the winter the gardens at St. Claire were devastated by cold weather and winds. The destruction equally devastated the author, for as her close friend Margaret Chanler writes in Autumn in the Valley, they were "a symbol of the real Edith."<sup>27</sup> She immediately initiated their rebuilding and replanting while working on Hudson River Bracketed at a desk set up in the Pavillon Colombe Garden in St. Brice-sous-Foret

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(Lewis 490). This merger of writer and gardener finds its fictional equivalent in the union of Vance, who as a writer tends and culls "the secret garden" of his imagination, and Halo, who nurses her seedlings at Oubli.

The last image in The Gods Arrive is of Halo, pregnant and standing before the light with her arms lifted "in the ancient attitude of prayer" (GA 439). Vance's arms encircle her and promise that their reunion will be fruitful both personally and artistically. Their embrace is a recognition and acceptance of the equal importance and interdependence of masculinity and femininity. The self-embrace it marks is also necessary for the creation of "Literature."

Originally these books were to be called just that, "Literature," and the Vance and Halo characters were named Dick and Rose--again gender rich names. Both were writers, although Dick was "the man of genius" in the novel's subtitle. As Nancy R. Leach writes, Wharton "planned to consider the personal problems in the life of a creative artist."<sup>24</sup> Her characters, however, also illustrate her own dilemma as a woman writer forced to choose between a critically legitimized male tradition and a more emotive, "sentimental" female one. Wharton's notations clearly align Rose's writing with the latter: she "has the hyper-sensitivity, the over-exquisitiveness of perception, the too-prompt 'emoting' which are apt to be found with a certain kind of distinguished talent" (Leach 347). In contrast, Dick has "the cool command of all his aesthetic reactions which

belongs to his genius. She spends in feeling (aesthetically and emotionally) what he finds full outlet for in expression" (Leach 347).

Rose resembles Margaret Aubyn in the sense that she ultimately creates Dick, for when he dies unexpectedly, she collaborates with a friend to write his biography. The form of her art creates a wider audience for his, and ironically she has the final word on his "genius." In this way, the two are interdependent. Although Wharton clearly aligned herself with Dick's tradition, the ending reveals a move toward approximation, and perhaps--since Dick dies in several outlines of the story--more. His death could be read psychologically as an expression of anger at the tradition which he represents and symbolically as the triumph and endurance of Rose's.

The way Wharton attempts to reconcile these two traditions is reminiscent of another short story by Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The Poetess."<sup>22</sup> In Freeman's story, the poetess, Betsey, writes obituary verse and with it "ministers" to her community until the minister, himself a published poet, deprecates her work. When Betsey hears that her work is inferior, she burns it all and wastes away, a martyr to art. On her deathbed, Betsey asks the minister to write her own obituary poem, and by doing so, to continue her--a woman's--literary tradition. In this manner, the minister's genre (the kind magazines print) is subverted. Wharton is not as radical as Freeman, but her projected

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ending to "Literature" suggests that she was contemplating similar issues.

One symbol may be as good as another, to paraphrase Vance (HRB 449), but the image of the Mothers has particular importance. Elizabeth Ammons sees it as a retrogressive and conservative reaction to the changing world after World War I, but it is also a powerful statement about the source of all life and creativity.<sup>40</sup> It shows Wharton acknowledging all those women who made an art of "hem-stitching" and "pumpkin pie making" and mothering, and Marie Theresa Logue argues that it locates the source of creativity in "the domestic ideal."<sup>41</sup> Wharton describes Vance's writing as she would her own in A Backward Glance:<sup>42</sup> "his book was a secret garden into which he shut himself away from her (Halo) as he might have done into a clandestine love-affair" (GA 339). It is his effort to bring a human soul to life, to give birth (GA 172). By coupling Vance's and Halo's activities Wharton is recalling Grandma Scrimser's belief that "man is always creating God; that wherever a great thought is born, or a noble act performed, God is created. That is the real Eucharist, the real remaking of Divinity. If you knew God, you knew that: you knew you had in your soul the power to make Him . . ." (HRB 455). In the past, Wharton did not so nearly equate those activities with the making of literature, and the change reflects her impulse to reconcile and more clearly align herself with her own gender.<sup>43</sup> It also shows her elevating--rather than suppressing or denying--what she

described in A Backward Glance as "the feminine me in the little girl's vague soul" (2).

An original reviewer of Hudson River Bracketed, Mary Ross of the Herald-Tribune, called it Edith Wharton's most "generous" book, but her adjective seems more appropriate in this context to the sequel (Lewis 490). The "seed of a new vitality" (GA 429) that Halo carries is a wish for a future in which there can be a true and equal marriage among the many "selves" that form an individual's composite identity; it is a wish that disparate "selves" can "become a nucleus, their contradictory cravings" meeting "in a common purpose," so that "their being together and belonging to each other" can acquire "a natural meaning" (GA 323). At the end of the novel, Vance's repetition of St. Augustine's words, "I am the Food of the full-grown. Become a man and thou shalt feed on Me" (GA 418), emphasizes that the vision is for the mature, the "full-grown," the grown-up.<sup>34</sup> The novel's last image, written by a woman who was for so long motherless and mother-smothered, who was the mother of books and not children, is a measure of the distance that its "full-grown" author had achieved from her own past.

Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive show Wharton intellectually offering a solution to her lifelong concerns: Can there be an alliance between the "male" and "female" parts of our identity? Can marriage be "the scaffolding," "the armour" (GA 270), that supports and protects us? Her next novel, The Buccaneers, though unfinished, promises, as

Gaillard Lapsley notes, to have been among her best, and it gives a qualified answer: hope lies in the creation of a "grown-up" women.<sup>25</sup> Nan St. George, who possesses a respect for the past combined with an ingenuous honesty, becomes that woman, but she could not have done so alone. The support and mentorship of other women begin the process of her becoming "grown-up," and the experience of marriage completes it.

Nan is only one of a charming group of Americans, whose backgrounds have been found wanting by the Mrs. Parmora of old New York. Under the tutelage of an undaunted and androgynously named English governess, Miss Testvalley, they leave the new world to take the old by storm, and not a one dies of the British equivalent of Roman fever. Miss Testvalley's unanglicized name is Testavaglia; she is a cousin of the Rosettis and herself an invader. Her charges' naturalness and spontaneity win her interest, but above all the girls' loyalty and generosity to each other win her affection and allegiance. Wharton's final vision, as Carol Wershoven notes, is one of female alliance and cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

In the author's working synopsis of the novel, she describes Laura Testvalley as an "adventress, but a great-souled one." At first glance, Laura hardly fits the picture of an "adventress": she is thirty-nine, small and brown, and economically responsible for elderly relatives. Her one "worldly" adventure was a brief and easily eradicated attachment to Lord Richard, the brother of the Brightlingsea girls whom she was employed to "finish." Miss Testvalley's

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real adventures are intrinsic and take place within the walls of her "great-soul." She is reminiscent of the governess in another unfinished Wharton story, "The Finishing Governess," whose exterior belies her interior richness.<sup>27</sup> Laura's sympathy for and support of her American girls, Virginia and Nan St. George and Lizzy and Mabel Elmsworth, as they besiege England, show Wharton's own valuation of the merits of her native land and belie the criticisms that resulted from her expatriation,<sup>28</sup> for as Walton observes, she endorses the "American values of sincerity, honesty, and free-speaking, despite any incidental brahness or predatorineas, over aristocratic corruption and sophistication" (198). Laura Testvalley possesses all the traits of a "grown-up" woman and as such is a fit mentor for her American charges. Her character is also another illustration of Wharton's increasing interest in the concept of "motherhood" in her later novels, such as The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), The Mother's Recompense (1925), Twilight Sleep (1927), and The Children (1928).

The girls themselves are reminiscent of that great Wharton invader, Undine Spragg, whose advance from Apex City to New York to the St. Foubourg leaves, like Attila the Hun's, a wake of wounded civilizations. But unlike Undine, these girls want the approval and embrace of their adopted country. "Divinely dull" Virginia St George is the most similar to Undine in the sense that she is a lovely but blank screen onto which others can project their fantasies.

Too often she has to trust "the length of her eyelashes and the lustre of her lips" to plead for her (146). Her sister, Nan, is different and the true daughter of Laura Testvalley.

Although Nan is, as everyone tells her, still a child, unformed and unfinished, she and her governess share a mature love of poetry, especially the sensual verse of Dante Rossetti, as well as an equal disregard for frivolity and convention. History speaks to them, sounding "like the long murmur of the past breaking on the shores of a sleeping world" (134). Nan wants to understand England's soul and see "houses that are so ancient and so lovely that the people who live there have them in their bones" (163). As her girlhood friend Conchita Cloason, now Lady Dick, says, she is "unfashionable among the unfashionable" (244), who spend their time playing practical jokes and flirting. Even when Nan, "beset with vague dreams and ambitions, in which a desire to better the world alternated with a longing for solitude and poetry" (245), has been transformed into the Duchess of Tintagel, her young heart seeks a returning echo from and a haven with her old governess. Valuing taste, reverence, continuity, and intellectual honesty, Nan is Wharton's answer to the "new woman."

In contrast, her sister and the Elmsworth girls have come to England in search of romance. They are aided by Miss March, who many years ago won and subsequently lost the heart of Lord Brightlingsea (after the wedding gown had been ordered). She has since made a career of discreetly

introducing rich Americans to British society, but her history makes her feel "an affinity with this new band of marauders, social aliens though they were . . . come out to look over the ground, and do their own capturing" (103). Launching them gives her an opportunity to validate and assert her own identity. She is weary of smiling and nodding when her usurper and friend, Lady Brightlingsea (pronounced "Brittlesey"), insists that the Virginia reel is a dance the wild Indians taught to the Americans (279) and "of hearing her compatriots discussed and having to explain them" (281). She has so modestly melted into the background that people forget her nationality and, by extension, forget her identity. By championing and adopting the cause of these transatlantic daughters, she regains a sense of her own worth and shows that the benefits of female solidarity are cross-generational.<sup>29</sup> Wharton permits Miss March a triumphant, but ladylike laugh, at the English aristocracy, whose financial and emotional compromises make their naive American friends appear "noble," while perhaps permitting herself another at her updated version of Louisa May Alcott's little women, the Marches.

Miss March's decision to back the girls is a repetition of the girls' decision to stick together. That decision is vital, for their loyalty to each other and lack of jealousy net success. It allows them to make the marriages that will complete their educations. Their behavior, clearly condoned by all, is also applauded by Wharton. She, like Miss



Testvalley and Jacky March, obviously likes this spontaneous band and approves their philosophy of female partisanship. Even Conchita, unhappy in her marriage, feels "not an ounce of jealousy," for their opportunities as she explains:

"We've each got our own line . . . and if we only back each other up we'll beat all the other women hands down . . . It's too soon yet to know what Nan St. George and Mab will contribute; but they'll probably develop a line of their own . . . If we stick to the rules of the game, and don't play any low-down tricks on each other . . . we'll have all London in our pocket next year." (158)

Conchita's line of reasoning sounds opportunistic and reminiscent of Undine Spragg and Indiana Frusk's alliance, but the girls themselves are not; for example, when Conchita's engagement to the younger son of British nobility secures her the sole invitation to an exclusive assembly, Virginia generously rearranges Conchita's rose-gerland in a more becoming way. Miss Testvalley observes, "had there been any malice in Virginia she might have spoilt her friend's dress instead of improving it" (74). Rather, the friends "circle gaily" around her, "applauding, criticizing, twitching as critically at her ruffles and ribbons as though

these were to form a part of their own adornment" (72), and when the older girls do attend the assembly under the pretext of being Lord Richard's sisters, the narrator notes that "each of the three girls was set off by the charms of the others. They were so complimentary in their graces, each seemed to have been so especially created by Providence, and adorned by coiffeur and dressmaker, to make part of that matchless trio, that their entrance was a sight long remembered" (84). Wharton's meaning seems straightforward: women should not, in Lily Bart's words, "go back" on each other.

In the novel's most dramatic scene, Lizzy Elmsworth shows the power of this maxim. Her dark beauty and "active wit" and Virginia St. George's "profile" have almost equally captivated Lord Seadown, and as Hector Robinson observes, "[h]e needed the combined stimulus of both to rouse his slow imagination" (193). At any moment the balance could tip in favor of one friend or the other. Mabel Elmsworth sees that "those two inseparable friends were gradually becoming estranged" and enlists Robinson's help. As she explains to him, "what I say is it's time he chose between them, if he's ever going to. It's very hard on Lizzy, and it's not fair that he should make two friends quarrel. After all, we're alone in a strange country, and I daresay our ways are not like yours, and may lead you to make mistakes about us" (195). The already strained atmosphere is intensified when Seadown's recent lover, Lady Churt, arrives intending to

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assert her hold over him. In the scene that ensues Lady Churt insults Virginia, prompting her friend (and supposed rival) to fling herself into the fray:

"Virginia! What are you waiting for?  
Don't you see that Lord Seadown has  
no right to speak till you do? Why  
don't you tell him at once that he has  
your permission to announce your  
engagement?" (207)

Her impassioned words catalyze Seadown, who acknowledges the engagement and takes possession of Virginia's hand, while "with her other hand" his betrothed draws her ally close (208). Lizzy's spirit wins Hector Robinson's admiration ("Gad, she looks like an avenging goddess--I can almost hear the arrow whizzing past! What a party-leader she'd make") and saves her from being thrown away on Lord Seadown, a "poor nonentity" (208). Instead she marries Hector, making the most happy and egalitarian of all the girls' marriages.

After the glorious victories of courtship, marriage seems anticlimatic, and the girls, who together "arm-in-arm" were "like a branch hung with blossoms" separately wither (34). Wharton's vision of female support and friendship is superseded by the seeming necessity of marriage, which constricts horizons, limits endless possibilities, and locks husband and wife in separate cells.

The friends now communicate like prisoners, tapping out coded messages, as when Conchita's request to Nan for 500 pounds reveals her love of a man other than Lord Richard.

Unlike Lord and Lady Dick's marriage, Lizzy's promises to be the most successful, because it is a partnership; Hector relies on her judgment, and they share the same politically and socially ambitious goals. Lizzy resembles "[t]he Frenchwoman [who] rules French life, and she rules it under a triple crown, as a business woman, as a mother, and above all as an artist" (French Ways 111). Nan's fate after her marriage to England's greatest catch, the Duke of Tintagel, is more like the American women Wharton describes in French Ways and Their Meaning; they had more freedom of movement and expression when single. Nan's marriage is a failure for precisely the opposite reasons that Lizzy's is a success. Tintagel chooses her for "her childish innocence, her indifference to money and honours" (227). He denies her any active part in the management of his estate and wants "to shield her from every contact with life" (227). Continuing to mature after her marriage, however, Nan turns out to be precisely what Miss Testvalley suspected, "a woman who didn't want to be shielded" (227). Ushant would be happier tinkering with clocks, but his birthright demands that he marry. Not responding to the voices of tradition, which are embodied in his first name, he does indeed marry his American, only to find that his mother was right, "women are not quite as simple as clocks" (245).

The Dowager's insight does not mean that she feels any particular sympathy for the new Duchess. The women are natural adversaries, since the Dowager wants her daughter-in-law to conform like a "soldier" and produce heirs, and Nan feels that she is being asked to cut the cloak of her identity to fit a different-sized model. Finding it difficult to order her life by traditions in which she sees no meaning, she feels alienated from herself:

To begin with, what had caused Annabel St. George to turn into Annabel Tintagel? That was the central problem! Yet how could she solve it, when she could no longer question that elusive Annabel St. George, who was still so near to her, yet so remote and unapproachable as a plaintive ghost? Yes--a ghost. That was it. Annabel St. George was dead, and Annabel Tintagel did not know how to question the dead, and would therefore never be able to find out why and how that mysterious change had come about . . . . (241-242)

The Dowager Duchess must have had to make a similar

transformation, but she had the example of centuries of "inherited obligations" (266) "precedents, institutions and traditions to sustain her" (246) and now feels little fellow sympathy for Annabel--except in one crucial and related area--and that sympathy shows Wharton's indictment of marriage as an institution that denies women the right to self-determination and development. Wedlock makes all women sisters; it is the great leveler: no matter how different women are in background or temperament marriage makes them master the same agonizing and humiliating lessons.

After suffering a miscarriage, for example, Nan refuses to have sex with Ushant; she has already told him, "I'd rather be dead than see a child of mine taught to grow up as--as you have!" (255). Intimidated he respects her wishes; however, after leaving an envelope containing 500 pounds on her dressing-table for a "private charity," he expects her as a-matter-of-course to accept his attentions. Seeing the exchange of money for sex within marriage as commonplace, Ushant is thrown off balance when he goes to seek Annabel's "gratitude," and is informed, that she hadn't understood he was driving a bargain with her (328). The Dowager hears her son's story with conflicted emotion. One part of her listens as a mother, overwhelmed by her son's generosity and horrified at his treatment from a mere "chit" of a girl. The other part of her responds as a woman: "The Duchess's hard little eyes filled with sudden tears. Her mind was torn between wrath at her daughter-in-law's incredible exactions,

and the thought of what such generosity on her own husband's part might have meant to her, with those eight girls to provide for" (327). The woman in her, simultaneously resentful and envious, thinks that this was "one of the strangest hours of her life, and not the least strange part of it was the light it reflected back on her own past, and on the weary nights when she had not dared to lock her door . . ." (329). Time and time again "the memory of her own past thrust[s] itself between her and her wrath against her daughter-in-law" (329, and on this ground, mother and daughter-in-law meet.

On this ground all the women in the novel meet, including Nan and her own mother, Mrs. St. George. Nan's husband and Mrs. St. George's husband, whether separated by the Atlantic Ocean, history, background, or sensibility, are similar in their notions about the relation between money and sex: "Mrs. St. George did not own many jewels, but it suddenly occurred to her that each one marked the date of a similar episode. Either a woman, or a business deal-- something she had to be indulgent about" (32). Mrs. St. George, though, is still attracted to her husband. She sees him reflected in other women's eyes and is proud of the figure he makes, but she knows that "he was a costly possession, but (unlike the diamonds, she suspected) he had been paid for--oh how dearly!--and she had a right to wear him with her head high" (33). If Mr. St. George was making this statement about Mrs. St. George, it would be more

typical of Wharton, for all too often women in her fiction are like Lily Bart, "a moment's ornament," or like Nan, "a rare piece" for a husband's collection (227).<sup>40</sup> It is significant that Wharton has a woman voice thoughts which she commonly attributes to the male perspective, for it shows her more strongly and blatantly making the point that she made in The Age of Innocence: both sexes are subject to exploitation, victimization, and prostitution when a marriage is not cemented with truth.<sup>41</sup>

The St. George and Elmsworth girls owe their success to a recognition of their importance to each other, but the marriages they make, with the exception of Lizzy's, seem small recompense. In this respect, the Marables, the Seadowns, and the Tintagels are indeed true heirs of their parents. Sadly the girls' great adventure is confined to the marriage market and ends just when they achieve their goal. As matrons, their adventures are too likely to resemble Conchita Marable's and this aspect of The Buccaneers makes it seem as bleak as The House of Mirth. Virginia and Conchita have made Undine Spragg's mistake of defining themselves in relationship to their husband's status, and Nan, by falling in love with the romantic ruins of Tintagel and its ancient association with King Arthur, follows Newland Archer's example of falling in love with Countess Olenska, as Gary Lindberg suggests, because he assumes that she is as different and exotic as her unconventional room.<sup>42</sup>

Both patterns, repeated time and time again in Wharton's



fiction, have disastrous consequences for women and sometimes for the men they marry, such as Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country or John Amherst in The Fruit of the Tree, and illustrate Wharton's decidedly pessimistic view of marriage. She shows us no way out of this dilemma: women must marry or they make do with dinginess like Gerty Ferrish in The House of Mirth or live on lonely and often poor like Miss Testvalley, having stood for something. The Fruit of the Tree (1907) is interesting in the context of The Buccaneers, since it articulates Wharton's belief that a good relationship is built on like thinking and on a true and equal meeting of the minds. In it she explores the difficulty of sustaining that kind of union even when two people are of united minds and purpose. Unfortunately there is always the chance of misreading either one's self or another, as the case of Justine Brent and John Amherst illustrates.

The two meet over the hospital bed of one of John's employees, who has been badly maimed in a mill accident. Nurse and supervisor agree that in certain cases euthanasia is indeed a mercy. When they next meet, John has married Bessy Westmore, Justine's schoolgirl friend and the mill owner's widow. After several years, the Amhersts, incompatible intellectually and morally, decide to separate. Justine prolongs a visit to Bessy in an attempt to help the couple resolve their fundamental differences. She is as compassionate a listener as Sara Norton, and her role is a

variation on the pattern established in "Friends." When John is absent, Bessy suffers a crippling injury from a riding accident and dies. With Justine's help he plans to humanize the working and living conditions of the employees. They eventually marry and their dual partnership seems perfect until Justine confesses to having given Bessy an overdose of morphine. Wharton makes it very clear that the mercy-killing was not self-serving, but the revelation appalls John, who then begins to glorify the image of his dead wife. John and Justine part, and though they are reunited like Vance and Halo at the novel's conclusion, their new relationship is cemented with silence about Bessy's true nature and actual behavior. The independent and self-supporting woman of the book's beginning has been transformed into "an angel in the house," and the only person who benefits is Bessy's daughter, Cicely. In a reversal of Gilbert and Gubar's reading of "Snow White," in which the good mother dies and is resurrected as the bad step-mother,<sup>23</sup> Cicely has both her less-than-perfect mother's memory and her much-loved step-mother's presence.

Wharton does not believe in fairy tale endings and that belief has won her a place in American letters; however, it also makes her seem too narrowly bound by her own experience. Marriage to Teddy Wharton had taught her the truth of the joke she recorded in a 1913 notebook:

"Did you know that John and Susan

committed suicide on Tuesday?"

"What? No?--How?"

"They got married.""

That message is more subtly repeated over her decades-long career; marriage is at best a compromise that severely suppresses or limits the self. Because it can never fulfill one's expectations, life has meaning, as it does for the Dowager Duchess of Tintagel, through personal denial and duty. People are cogs of varying sizes and importance in a machine that braids strands of civilization. As Blake Nevius insightfully observes, Wharton was a classicist "whose whole program, in her life as well as in her art, was the subjection of thought and feeling to some kind of formal control" (246). She believed that the "soul sits alone," and from its isolation it derives its power. The only control of which one can be confident is self-control, and as Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive detail, at best one can hope to accept one's "self."

The Buccaneers partially breaks this pattern, since its projected ending grants Nan a chance at happiness, where she can perhaps once again talk face to face with herself and tear down "the walls which had built themselves up about the new Duchess" (262); but that chance can only at first exist outside of marriage, and unfortunately, her lover's name, Guy Thwarte, does not sound altogether promising. In addition, as outlined in the synopsis, the happy ending is purchased at

the expense of her beloved Miss Testvalley, whose help to the lovers prevents her from finding a haven with Guy's father, Sir Helmsley Thwarte, at Honourlove. As Wolff notes, the projected ending seems "hardly credible" (n441) because Nan would not be likely to harm the one person with whom she felt most herself. It does, however, repeat the pattern of the stronger, more independent, and less conventional woman making a sacrifice for friend, child, mother, or sister. By conjuring images of pathfinders and trailblazers, Laura Testvalley's name also suggests that like her governess Nan might learn to live the life of an independent woman, and if The Buccaneers had ever been completed, we might now have a better idea of how Ellen Olenska spent those twenty years.

If we accept--as most critics do--that Nan and Guy are meant to achieve the one happy marriage in all of Wharton's fiction, then they owe their success to Nan's refusal to be self-sacrificing. That decision leads to her becoming "grown-up." In French Ways and Their Meaning, Wharton defined "grown-up" as being involved with "the business of living." Nan is initiated into "the business of living" through her bad marriage, and in this way she resembles the nineteenth-century heroine, whose first unsatisfactory husband dies, leaving her free to marry to marry a more suitable mate. Nan's flight from her marriage could have provided an alternative ending; for example, Conchita's South American relatives might have offered her shelter and occupation, but the final solution--whether resulting from

death or divorce--is another marriage. In this way, the ending of The Buccaneers parallels "Souls Belated." Wharton knew how an American woman could be "grown-up," leaving a marriage could achieve that, but then she did not "realistically" know what to do with her. Although Wharton herself was able to approximate her roles as woman and artist and to maintain strong same-sex friendships, she saw herself as an exception, and as a result, her artist-heroines are women, such as Lily Bart, Anna Leath, Sophy Viner, Ellen Olenska, and Nan St. George, who fashion their own identities by slaying the dragons of convention.

Very seldom do men and women in Wharton's fiction find "the right word" to say to each other or see the "beyondness" of things from the same angle of vision (137), and for this reason, women's relationships with other women take on added meaning. Wharton's work can be seen as voicing this belief with increasing volume and resonance and crescendoing with The Buccaneers. Looking at The House of Mirth (1905), The Fruit of the Tree (1907), The Reef (1912), The Custom of the Country (1913), The Age of Innocence (1920), and The Mother's Recompense (1925) in chronological order, there is in general a more fully and overtly articulated examination of the benefits and the limitations of relationships between women. In The House of Mirth, women's relationships are often fragile and cannot easily survive environmental pressures. In contrast, The Fruit of the Tree shows that two very different women can trust the strength of a bond forged in

childhood. In The Reef, Anna and Sophy help each other achieve expanded perceptions about themselves and their experience, and their new definitions of "self" challenge society's norms for women. Unfortunately, their relationship seems to benefit Anna more, and though we may hope that Sophy achieves a better, independent life, the novel's ambiguous ending leaves room for doubt. The Custom of the Country exposes the dangers a corrupt system has for both sexes. While there is something positive about Undine's refusing to be victimized, the means she uses to gain power are deplorable. The end results of her relationships with other women are unsatisfactory and lacking because she herself is lacking, and her blindness and banality make her a threat to the civilization that produced her. Ellen Olenska and May Welland, however, are touchstones for each other's lives, and in The Mother's Recompense, two women, bound by the most difficult of all female ties, grant each other the freedom to be themselves. Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive are Wharton's vision of a whole "self" born of that freedom, one that embraces the many and seemingly disparate layers of personality. As in The Buccaneers, women's friendships can give an added richness and sense of safety to life, but the "soul"--if it is to experience "the fullness of life"--must learn self-sufficiency. Women's partnerships are not an alternative to male-female relationships, but Wharton's vision of the world makes us ask why not.

In all these novels, the importance of women's

relationships with each other is subtly woven into the textured fabric of the novels' themes. It seems particularly poignant that Wharton would overtly state this theme in her final novel, The Buccaneers, for those last years also brought the deaths of close women friends, and in particular, her housekeeper, Gross. The Buccaneers does not summarize or restate Wharton's previous work, but it does grow from its fertile soil. Wharton was the opposite of her bewildered heroine, Nan Tintagel, "isolated in her new world, no longer able to reach back to her past, and not having yet learned how to communicate with the present" (262). In her later years, she was drawn more and more to the young and made friendships with them, the most significant one being her relationship with Royall and Elisina Tyler's son, William. Her reaching out to youth reflected her hope "to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and tomorrow, to lose, in the ardour of new experiment, the least that may be of the long rich heritage of human experience" (Lewis 169). The Buccaneers promised to fulfill this wish.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Elmer Davis, "History of an Artist," The Saturday Review of Literature, IX, no. 11 (1 Oct. 1932): 145.

<sup>2</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953) 226, 235; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977) 392. All subsequent references to these texts will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>See R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (NY: Fromm International Pub. Co., 1975) 86. Lewis quotes from a letter to Burlingame at Scribner's in which Wharton wrote that "The Fullness of Life" is "one long shriek." All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup>Edith Wharton, "Mrs. Manstey's View," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 3-11. All subsequent references will be noted parenthetically. For a reading of the story as a self-portrait, see Wolff 65-67. The Collected Short Stories also contains "The Pelican," 88-103.

<sup>5</sup>In her autobiography, A Backward Glance (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), Wharton makes the comparison between her treatment of the New England setting of Ethan Frome and Emily Brontë's Yorkshire (294). In speaking of

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other women writers, Wharton often sounds like her beloved George Eliot in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists."

"Another woman artist is the writer in "Copy," who wants to effect a bargain with a former and now famous lover to prevent their letters to each other from being posthumously published. As in The Touchstone, the emphasis is on "woman" and not "writer." The quality and integrity of an artist's work was the subject of many of Wharton's short stories, such as "The Verdict," "The Pottholer," "That Good May Come," "The Recovery," "The Portrait," "The Muse's Tragedy," "Full Circle," and "The Daunt Diana," but in these stories the artist figures are male. See Edith Wharton, The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

Edith Wharton, The Touchstone (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900) in Madame de Treymes and Others: Four Novelettes (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 11. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

Edith Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1929) 95. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>See Nevius 223. He notes that the Willow's library is modeled after the library of Wharton's father, George Frederick Jones. Wharton describes her father's library in A Backward Glance 65-72.

<sup>3</sup>See Lewis 493 and Nevius 224. Wharton gives her opinion of her first novel in A Backward Glance: "'The Valley

of Decision' was not, in my sense of the term, a novel at all, but only a romantic chronicle . . . and I doubted whether I should ever have enough constructive power to achieve anything beyond isolated character studies or the stringing together of picturesque episodes" (205).

<sup>11</sup>Edith Wharton, "Life and I," Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 8.

<sup>12</sup>For a fuller analysis of the relationship between Wharton's writing and emotional and physical health, see Wolff 75-91 esp. In A Backward Glance Wharton describes herself as she does Vance. See pages 48-51, 70 esp. The two also get the same type of questions about the "true" identities of their characters (211). Also see Lewis 76.

<sup>13</sup>For an excellent discussion of the similarities between Weston and Wharton, see Margaret B. McDowell, "Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive," Edith Wharton ed. Harold Bloom (NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 53-56 esp. McDowell notes that Wharton would have disliked the stream-of-consciousness technique, because its association with the Naturalist movement and its underlying determinism reduces free will. Also see Wolff who speculates that a novel such as Ulysses threatened Wharton because its technique, which breaks down the barriers between life and fiction, leads "back to the practices that distorted her own first work" (395). Wharton's need for personal and professional control would have made the technique unsuitable.

<sup>14</sup>Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970; revised 1982) 170.

<sup>15</sup>See Sharon O'Brien, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987) 336.

<sup>16</sup>See Wolff, A Feast of Words. She states that Wharton "fails to explain why Vance Weston wants so desperately to write; she fails as well to demonstrate a convincing link between his life and his work" (349). Also see Nevius who states that in The Gods Arrive it is impossible to define Wharton's attitude toward Weston. Only in the final scene is the theme of "individual responsibility" emphasized to give a retrospective semblance of unity to the work as a whole (231).

<sup>17</sup>Letter from Edith Wharton to Robert Grant, Nov. 19, 1907, as quoted in The Letters of Edith Wharton, ed. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988) 124.

<sup>18</sup>Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1919) 119. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>19</sup>Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, 209. The full quotation reads: "It was not until I wrote "Ethan Frome" that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements."

<sup>20</sup>See Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Women, Culture, and Society ed. Michelle  
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Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980) and Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

"Edith Wharton, The Gods Arrive (NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1932; rpt. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960) 282. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

"Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life," The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton ed. R. W. B. Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) 12-20. Wharton makes the analogy between a house and a woman's nature:

I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned; no one knows the way to them; no one knows wether they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holy, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.

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This image is similar to the "sanctuary" image in The Age of Innocence and to the "cave" imagery in The Custom of the Country. Archer learns to cherish the privacy of his haven, and in this way his thinking is closer to Vance's than Ralph's.

<sup>22</sup>Carol Wershoven, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1982) 143.

<sup>23</sup>Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin," Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman ed. Barbara Solomon (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1979) 466-484.

<sup>24</sup>The title of The Gods Arrive is taken from Emerson's poem "Give All to Love" (1846). The last two lines read: "When half-gods go, / The gods arrive."

<sup>25</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, "A Writer of Short Stories," Edith Wharton ed. Harold Bloom (NY: Chelsea House Publishing, 1986) 23. It was originally published as the "Introduction" to The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton edited by Lewis (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968) xxi.

<sup>26</sup>Margaret Chanler, Autumn in the Valley (Boston: Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1936) 114-115. Lewis describes the gardens as a projection of herself (487).

<sup>27</sup>Nancy R. Leach, "Edith Wharton's Unfinished Novel," American Literary Realism 25 iii (1953) 347. The manuscript  
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of "Literature" is in the Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The Poetess," The Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, 374-387.

<sup>11</sup>See Elizabeth Ammons, Edith Wharton's Argument With America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980) 160, 191-196 esp.

<sup>12</sup>In a letter to Sara Norton, Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Wharton wrote:

I have so much insipient art & poetry  
& fiction brought to me, which might  
so much better have been hem-stitching  
or pumpkin-pie or double-entry-book-  
keeping, that I suppose I have grown  
rather callous. Sat., 1901

In A Backward Glance, however, Wharton could equate domestic and literary arts when speaking of her family's cooks: "Ah, what artists they were!" (58-59). See Marie Theresa Logue, "Edith Wharton and the Domestic Ideal," DAI 44 (1984): 3685A-3686A. In the facsimile, printed by University Microfilms International, see pages 51-65 and 383-388 esp.

<sup>13</sup>The chapter specifically on her writing in A Backward Glance is titled, "The Secret Garden" (197-212). In it

Wharton says, "I shall try to depict the growth and unfolding of the plants in my secret garden, from seed to the shrub-top--for I have no intention of magnifying my vegetation into trees!" (198).

→For alternative readings, see Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Study (1972; Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, revised 1982). He finds it noteworthy that "Halo has the last word and that Vance is a supplicant as well as a child" (182), but he also finds it confusing, since one is left with "considerable uncertainty as to how seriously to take it all and how clear Edith Wharton herself was about the issues raised" (182). Also see Ammons who argues that Halo is symbolic of Wharton's belief in "inherent female superiority" (195).

→Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 110. The words also echo the minister's at Charity Royall's mother's funeral: "yet in my flesh shall I see God" (186).

→Galliard Lapsley, "A Note on The Buccaneers," The Buccaneers (NY: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938) 360. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

→Carol Wershoven, "Edith Wharton's Final Vision: The Buccaneers," American Literary Realism 15 (1982): 209-220.

→The manuscript is in the Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. The governess in this story had an illegitimate child.

→See Lewis 165-167, 174-176, 446. Wharton was  
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particularly faulted for losing touch with American idiom.

<sup>10</sup>See Margaret B. McDowell, Edith Wharton (NY: Twayne Pub. Co., 1976) 138. She calls Laura the link between the older conservative generation in America and England and the younger, more liberal girls.

<sup>11</sup>"A Moment's Ornament" was the working title of The House of Mirth, and in The Gods Arrive a would-be critic Chris Churley uses the phrase to describe himself (248). Another title for The House of Mirth was "The Year of the Rose" (Lewis 155).

<sup>12</sup>In a less satisfying way, the scene suggests that Wharton might have been having a self-mocking laugh at herself, felt a need for retaliation or some residual bitterness, in remembering some of the less savory details of her relationship with Morton Fullerton. See Lewis 263-264 esp. and Wolff 195-198 esp. about her involvement in the purchase of blackmail letters for Fullerton.

<sup>13</sup>Gary H. Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975) 103.

<sup>14</sup>See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Madwomen in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 37.

<sup>15</sup>Notebook of 1913 in the Wharton Archives, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.



## Conclusion

Wharton and Her Contemporaries, Cather, Austin, and Glasgow

"Do you wonder that we novelists find such an  
inexhaustible field in women?"

"Writing a War Story"

Runner Sisters (1901) is Edith Wharton's version of the story so often used by women writers and so central to feminist critical theory: the Demeter-Persephone myth. Her telling is bleak: the fall into a post-Freudian world brings death. The sisters are Ann Eliza and Evelina, and they live a life of comfortable if circumscribed domesticity until their world is invaded by the ominous presence of a potential suitor, Mr. Rany. Mr. Rany first proposes to the elder sister, Ann Eliza, but her refusal persuades him to honor the younger. Ann Eliza's altruism is Evelina's curse, for Mr. Rany is a drug addict, who steals their money, beats his wife, and deserts her when she is giving birth. After the death of her child, Evelina returns to her sister to die; however, her conversion to Catholicism assures that the sisters' estrangement, which began with Evelina's marriage, will continue beyond this life. Ann Eliza watches her sister's slow death from tuberculosis and feels that "[o]nce more she found herself shut out of Evelina's heart, an exile from her closest affections."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Rany's intrusion has

destroyed the Bunner Sisters' world just as effectively as Pluto's destroyed the "female world of love and ritual" that Demeter and her daughter inhabited, for Ann Eliza dies "a stranger in her [sister's] arms" (308).

Eleven years later Wharton revised this story by transforming it into a verse play called "Pomegranate Seed." It restates the point she made in Bunner Sisters while illuminating the social and literary context in which she and her female contemporaries worked. Writing after the gender crisis at the turn-of-the-century, Wharton saw no alternative but to return a willing Persephone to Hades. Before Persephone can make that choice, however, she must again visit her mother, and their reunion is crucial for her development: not until she both battles and accepts Demeter can she don a unique (but related) mantle of identity.

Wharton's Demeter defines herself only in relation to her daughter. When Hecate, for example, arrives with the news that Persephone lives, "yet never sees the sun," Demeter responds, "Blind am I in her blindness."<sup>4</sup> Seeing her immortal grief as greater than "the cry that mortal mothers make" when they lose a child, for "happier they, that make an end at last" (286), she transforms the entire earth into a grave for Persephone, "[t]ill nothing marked the place where she had stood / But her dropped flowers--a garland on her grave" (285). Persephone's abandoned garland could also grace the grave of her mother's old "self," since Demeter's new identity is determined by her "undaughtered" condition:

the world weeps as she destroys her artistry and its canvas. Her ruthlessly Olympian gesture causes all creation to share and suffer the magnificent magnitude of her own mourning.

As the protectress of the social order and marriage, Demeter should want to promote--and not prevent--her daughter's participation in "the business of living," but instead she resembles Wharton's own mother in her attempts to deny Persephone that knowledge. Persephone is not her mother's daughter in the sense that she feels and tries to ease the suffering souls, now dead, who still know "the lust of some old anguish" (289). Her experience of the other side, her consciousness of life's complete cycle, has resulted in her "giving suck to a grief" (286) that her mother is incapable of knowing. The two are separated as surely as the Victorians were from their post-war young. The Persephone who is momentarily restored to her mother can never be the same young woman who walked among the almonds. Her rent veil is the price of initiation, and this time it both separates her from and makes her superior to her parent; as in The Mother's Recompense, daughter and mother change positions. It also aligns her with all of Wharton's heroines.

The verse play ends with mother and daughter forever divided, forever attuned to different voices. Demeter hears "the secret whisper of the wheat" and Persephone, the voices of her dead (291). The possessive pronoun shows that Persephone has claimed the dead and their eternally living

sorrows for her own, and in this egocentric way she is perhaps most her mother's daughter. Demeter may appear less sympathetic because the sounds which whisper in her ears are inanimate. However, as in all Wharton novels, the two women are halves of one whole, forming all of nature; and as a reader of Pater, the author would have been aware that they were considered a "dual goddess" and worshipped as one.<sup>4</sup> They resemble the cross-generational pairing of Sophy Viner and Anna Leath in The Reef or of Miss March and the American girls in The Buccaneers.

Pluto does not figure as a character in "The Pomegranate Seed," but it is to him also that Persephone returns. His physical absence is even more glaring than Frederick Jones's from his daughter's autobiography, but his sexual presence cannot be ignored, for Persephone's sojourn with him has made her "grown-up." In her case, rape has been the equivalent of Nan St. George's bad marriage.

The myth's resolution illustrates the dilemma of women writing on the cusp that divided a pre- and post-Freudian world. Sarah Orne Jewett would have had no difficulty reuniting sisters or mother and daughter who would have then started home, gathering herbs along the way in anticipation of a shared pot of tea. Mary Wilkins might have had them set up housekeeping again, only to find that they were now incompatible and would be much happier tending separate gardens. Wharton, however, did not see herself as having these choices. If Persephone returned home, she was a

failure like Evelina or lacking in the way that Charlotte Loveil is in The Old Maid, and if she chose to live with another woman, she was "degenerate." Wharton knew that Persephone must return to her husband, and considering her own view of marriage, his place of residence is not surprising. Without a husband, she could be an object of pity and condescension or a Riviera drifter, but through his agency a woman had her best chance of leaving the Montessori infant school and graduating into "the business of living." Wharton accepted this social reality and it determined her plots.

As Ellen Wienska tells Newland Archer, there is no country that is not bounded by social restrictions, and that belief perhaps most differentiates Wharton from her contemporaries, Cather (1873-1947), Austin (1868-1932), and Glasgow (1873-1941). In different ways, each learned--to quote Wharton--that "the creative mind thrives on a reduced diet." All had complex relationships with their mothers and felt ambivalent about marriage. Glasgow could never bring herself to marry; Austin left hers. But even though these women experienced professional and personal difficulties similar to Wharton's, they were able to create characters who saw alternatives, who did find or create the other country that Newland Archer could only imagine.

Willa Cather voiced a fear of all these writers when she begged Elizabeth Sargeant to tell her whether "she might have committed the unforgivable female literary sin of

overwriting" or being too emotional in O, Pioneers!." As a lesbian writer, Willa Cather in particular felt it necessary to adopt a male persona either to mask her own identity or to "universalize" her experience. Like Wharton she made a point of separating herself from other women writers. The two would have sympathized with Paula Becker's question to Clara Westhoff in the Adrienne Rich poem: "Which of us, Clara, hasn't had to take that leap / out beyond our being women / to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?"<sup>6</sup>

Cather's version of the Demeter-Persephone myth in O, Pioneers! ends even more violently than Wharton's. Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata may resemble that mother and daughter as they work cozily together side by side in the story's winter section, but Marie's sexual fall insures her death and the death of her lover. Sharon O'Brien sees Cather's work and life becoming less marked by issues of gender once she resolved the culturally imposed contradictions between femininity and creativity (5) and argues that in O, Pioneers! (1913) and The Song of the Lark (1915) she was able to make an "alliance between womanhood and creativity that Cather's infatuation with male values had obscured for so many years" (448). Although O'Brien's reading may convince the critic, it does not satisfy the reader who feels a curious tension between author and subject when reading My Antonia (1918), A Lost Lady (1923), or even O, Pioneers!. What exactly is Cather's relation to her narrator, Jim Burden, or to female characters, such as

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Antonia, toothless and aged before her time; Marie, passionate and murdered, or Marion Forrester, sexually exploited and exploitive and ultimately triumphant?

Cather's difficulties with tone are comparable to Wharton's in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, but unlike Wharton, she was able to tell the story of a female artist from her point of view. Nevertheless, that point of view is similar to Vance Weston's, for in The Song of the Lark Thea Kronberg discovers what he calls "The Mothers," the connection between womanhood and creativity. For Thea the connection is even more direct, since the art of operatic singing is dependent upon her body. Although Wharton and Cather agree about the power of femininity, they differ about its inherited restrictions and obligations. As the characterization of Lena in My Antonia illustrates, Cather is less accepting of the inescapable measure of the double standard. The relationship between Carl and Alexandra in U. Pioneers! shows that she is also less bound by traditional views on courtship, marriage, and female roles. Underlying her fiction is a belief in the individual's ability to transcend the grasp of time and place; for example, in A Lost Lady, Marion Forrester refuses to comply with the narrator's conventional definitions of "woman;" Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor's House sets himself adrift from the moorings of home, family, and culture; and in Death Comes to the Archbishop, Bishop Latour's spiritual flights are not solely grounded in the dogma of his church. Cather associates the

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desert with something "soit and wild and free, something that . . . softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!"<sup>7</sup> Wharton envisions no similar space; at best the soul accepts its single cell and--to quote Emily Dickinson-- "selects her own society" (1862).

Like Cather, Mary Austin created what Gaston Bachelard called more "felicitous spaces."<sup>8</sup> Her relation to the land and her openness to non-European cultural traditions in part explain the greater range of alternatives she envisioned for her heroines; for example, in the story, "The Man Who was Loved by Women," she successfully--and humorously--weaves all the colored strands that Wharton saw as clashing, egalitarian marriage, female community, and individual empowerment. These alternatives, however, are often incompatible with "eastern" values and the dominant culture. Stories such as "Frustrate" and "The Portrait" show Austin encountering the same hurdles as Wharton, for the female artist figures in them are easily recognizable as Margaret Aubyn's sisters.

Melody Graulich describes Austin as a "writer, ecologist, feminist, philosopher, poet, and folklorist" and observes that by rejecting repressive religions, anti-intellectualism, and rigid gender roles, she sought new patterns for organizing her life.<sup>9</sup> Austin's overt feminism and politicisim, which distinguishes her from Wharton and Cather, contributed to her conscious efforts to develop a



tradition that incorporated folk traditions, Native American culture, and something that Mary Hallock Foote described as "pure women" (Graulich 26).

Austin shared with Wharton and Cather an admiration for Henry James, and in 1920, she wrote a novel, 26 Jayne Street, that is set in his original territory, the upperclass world of old New York. Its heroine, Neith Schuyler, has spent the best part of her life traveling around Europe with her invalid father. After his death, she returns to an America still tottering on the brink of its entry into "the great war" and becomes engaged to a leading political radical, Adam Freer. Neith assumes that he has "the ability to act on the intrinsic merits of a situation, independently of its emotions,"<sup>10</sup> but she is mistaken. In his relationships with women, Adam is autocratic, chauvinistic, and conventional, and Neith soon learns that her happiness is at the expense of another woman's. Rose Matlock, Adam's companion, lover, political collaborator, his wife in all but name, objects when he discards her, and Neith agrees--the breaking of a contract should be negotiated. Neith has only respect and admiration for Rose, and the novel ends with her dissolving her engagement. In The Reef and The Age of Innocence Wharton approaches this conclusion, and in two key ways her thinking resembles Austin's: between men and women there is no democracy; and women must begin to take responsibility for saying "no." The consequences of acting on the latter, however, are more severe in a Wharton novel as the fate of

Lily Bart or any of her exiled heroines illustrates. Wharton sees society as essentially fixed, whereas, Austin envisions its evolution. Although the change is not without pain for Austin, its advantages are more clearcut. In A Women of Genius (1912), for example, Austin's Olivia Lattimore learns the same lesson that Lily Bart (1905) and later Susan Lenox (1917) learned: "respectability" inhibits female development. The knowledge costs her the love of her life, but it does not deny her the friendship and comfort of a companionate marriage. It is questionable whether either Anna Leath or May Archer even experience this quiet joy.

Ellen Glasgow shared Austin's feminism and Wharton's vision. Her ironic analysis of southern morals and manners and her scathing studies of the destructive double standard inherent in the the cult of southern womanhood align her with Wharton, her northern sister. Margaret Fleming of "The Difference" is a character very familiar to Wharton readers. The serenity of her twenty year marriage is destroyed when she learns of her husband's affair with a young artist. Margaret tests the depth of her love and finds the strength to step aside only to discover that her sacrifice is neither needed nor desired. Resembling Austin's Neith Schuyler, she is--as her husband tells her--disappointed and angry that he is not in love with his mistress. The tear in her veil reveals a commonplace and vulgar world.

Like Wharton, Glasgow was accused of creating weak men and treating them harshly, but unlike her, she was able to

create a strong, self-willed, and "iron-veined" woman in Sarren Ground (1925). After being seduced and abandoned, Dorinda Oakley dedicates her life to reclaiming the soil and finds, as did Alexandra Bergson and Olivia Lattimore, some solace in a companionate marriage. She finally triumphs and is revenged, but--like Newland Archer--misses "the flower of life." Glasgow could have been describing her fiction as a whole when she wrote to Van Wyck Brooks that the two overlapping themes of The Sheltered Life were "we cannot put up a shelter against life and we kill what we love too much."<sup>14</sup> Wharton would certainly agree. These two women had similar ideas about their art, for as Glasgow wrote to Allen Tate: "I am not writing of Southern nature, but of human nature. By the Sheltered Life, I meant the whole civilization man has built to protect himself from reality . . . I was not concerned with the code of Virginia, but with the conventions of the world we call civilized . . . I was dealing with the fate of a civilized mind in a world where even the civilizations we make are uncivilized" (124). In Glasgow's fiction--as in Wharton's--the individual does not escape, redefine, or recreate the existing world; rather he or she struggles within the confines and the context of "civilization." What most distinguishes these "authors of manners" is Glasgow's emphasis on psychological truth and Wharton's emphasis on social realism, a point illustrated by the titles of their respective autobiographies, The Woman Within and A Backward Glance.

In The Women Within Glasgow wrote: "for sensitive mind would always remain an exile on earth, and regarding life itself I had perserved no illusions."<sup>14</sup> Her contemporaries could also make that claim, for in their own ways, Wharton, Cather, Austin, and Glasgow had to remove "the veil of literature" that Wharton describes as hanging between George Eliot's eyes and Life.<sup>15</sup> Each had to confront and mold to their own purposes, as did Eliot, "the familiar marionettes of fiction" (249). Once that veil was removed, it revealed an era of overwhelming historical, economic, and sociological changes; for example, during their lifetimes these women witnessed their country's shift from an agrarian to an industrial based economy; they saw their nation's population migrate from country to city; they saw the face of America develop Irish, slavic, semitic, and multi-racial features; they saw the intercontinental railroad and the first airplane; they saw their homes acquire refrigeration, electricity, and a telephone; they saw the rise of millionaires and labor unions; they saw the continued struggle for suffrage, racial equality, and economic parity. All born before a decade had marked the end of the Civil War, they lived through the Spanish-American and First World Wars.

Austin's A Woman of Genius, Glasgow's The Descendant, and Cather's The Professor's House are responses to these upheavals as is the work of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Henry Adams, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. As a social historian and a novelist of

manners, Wharton's work in particular chronicles cultural transitions as they clash with, thwart, and re-direct individual aspirations. She was equally aware of the poverty of the past and its grandeur worth preserving. In this regard, her work resembles that of her female contemporaries.

Wharton perhaps most differs from the women writers mentioned in her unresolved conflict about marriage's necessity and its impossibility. Her heroines are denied the solace of a helpmate's support and sympathy. Although clearly able to see the sources of the problems she analyzed, she had greater difficulty in envisioning a viable alternative, such as Cather and Austin's companionate marriage or Glasgow's "strength that enables one to stand alone."<sup>14</sup> Rather, her skill lies in the quality of her analysis, the questions it poses, and the reasoning it undermines. Wharton in particular was personally and artistically tied to the two-women-one-man plot, which in her mind could only be resolved by an either-or choice.

In her fiction, male and female worlds seldom intersect, but women strain to bridge the gulf. When they succeed, they experience a double loss: they are still left awaiting the footstep that never comes, and they lose the person with whom they are in truth most intimate, another woman. Although Wharton looks at the two-women-one-man plot from the perspectives of competition and cooperation, the result is the same. In "Roman Fever," for example, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are vital to each other's definitions of "self." Both

have defined their lives through their girlhood rivalry for Mrs. Ansley's husband, and though Mrs. Ansley obviously won the man, Mrs. Slade had his child. Mrs. Ansley envies her friend that brilliant and beautiful daughter without knowing her parentage. The best friends secretly feel sorry for each other, but that sympathy is only a disguised form of competitiveness. In this way, their identities are collaborative and interdependent. When Mrs. Slade reveals the truth, both women lose the relationship that has been the foundation of their separate worlds. Although Wharton treats her characters ironically, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been more important to each other's sense of well-being than any of her married couples.

From the other perspective, The Reef and The Age of Innocence show pairs of women who are more intimate with each other than they were or will ever be with their mates. Unlike her contemporaries, Wharton does not allow her heroines to have a husband and a best friend. The Buccaneers comes closest to achieving this goal, but that too appears to be at the friend's expense, for Wharton never lost sight of the conflicting and often antithetical demands of love and friendship. She believed that all human ties were subject to the society in which they were formed, and any new tie resigned an old. Nevertheless, her work shows a persistent effort to make all relations between men and women and women and women more honest and more inclusive; it shows a valiant questioning and a fearless appraisal of the forces that

inhibit this happening; and it shows her efforts to more closely approximate the poles in her own life that were characterized by her relationship with her mother and her friendship with Sara Norton. Its strength comes from what Herbert Marcuse defines as "the hidden categorical imperative of art," the impetus to make the fictitious or the ideal real.<sup>25</sup>

By exposing the false simplicity of female stereotypes, by portraying the complexity and individuality of her heroines in an equally complicated world, by presenting a model of female cooperation, which runs like an underground railroad throughout her work, Wharton was akin to Cather, Austin, and Glasgow. They might have sympathized with the friend who after her obituary appeared in The Times wrote: "The excellent obituary notices in The Times of August 14 [1937] rightly mentioned the many distinguished men who were proud to be called Edith Wharton's friends. But at least one undistinguished woman, slightly younger than Edith, would like to bear testimony to her generous, sympathetic, and understanding kindness to herself and to many others of the same sex and calibre."

In "A Little Girl's New York," the author wrote: "It is such bits of vanished life that I should like to gather up now, & make into a little memorial like the boxes adorned with exotic shells that sailors used to fabricate in the long leisure between voyages. That the shells will be very small, & the box when made a mere joke of a thing, (unless one puts

one's ear to the shells--& how many will?) is what I should like to forestall my critics by mentioning that I have already foreseen--" (356). Wharton was wrong. The shells she gathered more than whisper in an eager ear; they still house an ocean's roar; they still invite us to savor their sweet content.



Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, "Sunner Sisters," in Madame de Treymes and Others: Four Novelettes (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 307. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>Edith Wharton, "Pomegranate Seed," Scribner's Magazine 51, no.3 (March 1912): 284. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Pater, "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," Fortnightly Review (January and February, 1876).

<sup>4</sup>Edith Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," Harper's Magazine 176 (March 1938): 357. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup>Sharon O'Brien, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987) 446.

<sup>6</sup>Adrienne Rich, "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," The Dream of a Common Language (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978) 43.

<sup>7</sup>Willa Cather, Death Comes to the Archbishop (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927; rpt. Vintage, 1973) 276.

<sup>8</sup>Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup>Melody Graulich, "Introduction," Western Trails: A Collection of Short Stories by Mary Austin (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) 4. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Austin, 26 Jayne Street (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920) 303.

<sup>15</sup>Ellen Glasgow, Letters of Ellen Glasgow ed. Blair Rouse (NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958) 262. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>16</sup>Ellen Glasgow, The Woman Within (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954) 271.

<sup>17</sup>Edith Wharton, Review of Leslie Stephens, George Eliot, Bookman XV (May 1902): 249.

<sup>18</sup>Ellen Glasgow, "The Difference," The Shadow Third and Other Stories (NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1923) 236.

<sup>19</sup>Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics, translated and revised by Eric S. Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 57.

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