

READING EDITH WHARTON'S *TWILIGHT SLEEP* AS A PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN THE JAZZ AGE

KIYOMI SASAME

INTRODUCTION

“[L]ook at her list—just for this morning!” (*Twilight* 9), says the secretary and hands over a tablet on which the following schedule is inscribed:

7.30 Mental uplift. 7.45 Breakfast. 8. Psycho-analysis. 8.15 See cook. 8.30 Silent Meditation. 8.45 Facial massage. 9. Man with Persian miniatures. 9.15 Correspondence. 9.30 Manicure. 9.45 Eurythmic exercises. 10. Hair waved. 10.15 Sit for bust. 10.30 Receive Mother’s Day deputation. 11. Dancing lesson. 11.30 Birth control committee at Mrs.____. (9–10)

This is the timetable of Pauline Manford, who is the protagonist of Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*, a satirical novel of the Jazz Age. When the novel opens, Wharton introduces not Pauline herself but her busy schedule first and lets us imagine what type of woman she is. She must be a wealthy middle-aged woman who is socially active and is intent on maintaining physical and mental health. The life of this woman who receives “Mother’s Day deputation” and attends “Birth control committee” must be contradictory. From the opening page Wharton starts to criticize the “killing New York life” (10) of the 1920s at full throttle.

This novel was a best-seller when it was first published in 1927.

Critics were curious about how Wharton, who had long resided in Europe, described her native country but had differing views on the work itself. Edmund Wilson reviewed that “the New York of *Twilight Sleep* . . . has nothing of solidity, the poetic reality, of the New York of her earlier novels” but termed it “a most entertaining novel and a distinguished piece of social criticism” (434). While appreciating Wharton’s “superb wit,” Percy Hutchinson criticized that “there is a little too much psychology and not quite enough flesh and bone” (433).

Shortly thereafter this novel got out of print and has long been neglected until quite recently. Jean C. Griffith explains that it “has consistently suffered from a lack of critical scrutiny because, perhaps, when it was paired with better-known novels like *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, or *The Custom of the Country*, it appears rather anomalous—Madame Wharton, novelist of elite drawing rooms from New York to Paris, does the Jazz Age” (74). Even the two biographers of Wharton are not favorable toward this work. R. W. B. Lewis calls this novel Wharton’s “most overplotted” (474) work. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, who also criticizes this for being “chaotically plotted,” denounces that “[e]ven worse than the plot . . . is the sloppy management of the social criticism” (376). Dale M. Bauer, who highly values *Twilight Sleep*, interprets such criticism as follows: “One reason *Twilight Sleep* has been dismissed as chaotic and anarchic is that it does so much ‘cultural work,’ to borrow Jane Tompkins’s phrase in *Sensational Designs*, and some of it is difficult to recover” (96). Bauer also defends this work by saying that “*Twilight Sleep* is chaotic, but no less brilliant for being so. The chaos Wharton represents in the novel is not one of plot but of the culture—and of women’s place within it” (105).

Probably “the management of social criticism,” whether it is sloppy or not, and “so much ‘cultural work’” which some critics consider to be the defects of this novel are the very factors that draw the reader’s attention to this novel. Since it was reprinted in 1997, “critics have found the novel interesting for that social criticism of 1920s New York” (Haytock 190). For example, Bauer’s discussion makes our eyes open to reproductive politics Wharton presents in

Twilight Sleep. In *American Literary Realism Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige 1880–1995* Phillip Barrish devotes one chapter to the discussion of this novel. Griffith argues racial issues through some characters' relationships with jazz culture. Reading this as a modernism text, Jennifer Haytock delves in Wharton's treatment of marriage and divorce. Hermione Lee, the author of Wharton's most recent biography, shows us how "all the ingredients of *Twilight Sleep* have a basis in fact" (633).

Although almost all the recent critics judge that this novel is not among Wharton's strongest ones, they agree that this should not be overlooked to understand Wharton's role as a writer in the literary modernism. As Haytock complains that "[w]omen's experiences were not openly regarded as interesting and pressing by the authors and critics of the 1920s who initially defined the scope of modernism" (2), Wharton, whose main concern was writing about women's lives, was often excluded in the discussion of literary modernism. Here I will concentrate on three major female characters—Pauline Manford, Nona Manford and Lita Wyant—and consider how Wharton observes American culture in the Jazz Age, from which she distanced herself, and represents it in *Twilight Sleep* through these female characters.

NEW WOMAN VS. FLAPPER

Since this novel is not so well-known as Wharton's earlier works, a brief introduction of the plot of this "overplotted" or "chaotic" story may be helpful. The central figure, Pauline Manford is now married to Dexter Manford, a lawyer who successfully arranged her divorce from her first husband, Arthur Wyant. Pauline has a son, Jim, from the first marriage and a daughter, Nona, from the second. Jim and his wife Lita have just had a baby boy but they are already confronted with the crisis of divorce. Or at least, Lita is already bored with her husband. Nineteen-year-old Nona is in love with Stanly Heuston, whose rigid wife will not consent to get divorced. Dexter is disgusted with busy social life Pauline forces him to lead and is infatuated with his stepson's wife, Lita. Pauline, who has been devoted to various kinds of

social activities, considers herself to fulfill her responsibilities not only in the Manfords but also the Wyants but actually is blind to the crises in both families. The novel reaches its climax with an incident that Arthur, who is aware of Lita's infidelity, rushes into her bedroom at the Manford's villa with a gun and mistakenly shoots and wounds Nona, not Lita's lover, Dexter. This incident is covered up by everyone including the butler. As Bauer summarizes, "Family order is preserved, symbolic incest repressed, and everyone evades the scene and retreats" (97).

In the opening chapter of Wharton's most widely-read and highly valued New York story *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which depicts New York City of the 1870s, there is "already talk of the erection . . . of a new Opera House" but conservatives cherish the sociable old Academy "for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the 'new people' whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to" (7). In *Twilight Sleep* old New York is represented by the powerless and alcoholic Arthur Wyant, Pauline's first husband. To the young Pauline, whose "progenitors had mined in Pennsylvania and made bicycles at Exploit, and now gave their names to one of the most popular automobiles in the United States" (15), her father once said, "Better just regard him as a piece of jewellery: I guess we can afford it" (25). When the novel opens, however, this "jewellery" has already faded and been discarded by its possessor, Pauline. As Griffith points out that "[t]he very space of old New York in this novel shows no trace of its past glory" (80), the Wyant home is described as "a faded derelict habitation" located "in a street past which fashion and business had long since flowed" (39) and is contrasted with "the splendour of [Manford's] house" (62), which has "the resounding vestibule, the big hall with its marble staircase ascending to all the light and warmth and luxury which skill could devise, money buy" (61). The transition of power from the New York aristocrat to the new rich has been completed. So there cannot be tension between them any more.

Here the most striking contrast can be seen between the life of a New Woman, Pauline Manford, and that of a flapper, Lita Wyant.

Interestingly enough, the former and the latter whose life styles are totally different are equally the target of the author's attack. Both of them in a sense epitomize American culture of that age which Wharton detested.

Wharton derides almost everything about Pauline, her belief in American modern technology, her devotion to the occult and spiritual healing, her dependence on the power of money as we have already seen from the satirical description of her engagement book. Particularly, the author, ridicules Pauline's and her generation's social awareness:

Whatever the question dealt with, these ladies always seemed to be the same, and always advocated with equal zeal Birth Control and unlimited maternity, free love or the return to the traditions of the American home; neither they nor Mrs. Manford seemed aware that there was anything contradictory in these doctrines. (11)

As above-mentioned, some critics agree that the plot of this novel chaotic, but the life of Pauline is far more chaotic and full of contradictions. For Pauline, “[t]o be Chairman of the Mothers’ Day Association, and a speaker at the Birth Control banquet” (99) are not inconsistent at all even though her daughter Nona chuckles it. For Pauline nothing seems to be inconsistent. She is proud of her plan to invite the Chief Rabbi, the Bishop of New York, the Cardinal, and even the scandalous oriental healer, Mahatma to the same dinner. She believes that it is to show American independence and freedom and that she is trying to reform “the discordant world” (66).

Wharton sarcastically expresses Americans’ optimism through Pauline, who is confident that America has “an immediate answer for everything” (191):

I sometimes think you[Nona]’d be happier if you interested yourself a little more in other people . . . in all the big humanitarian movements that make one so proud to be an American. Don’t

you think it's glorious to belong to the only country where everybody is absolutely free . . . ? (190)

Pauline is described as a woman who has almost everything that American money can buy or at least as a woman who believes so. She respects the dubious Mahatma simply because his eurythmic exercises “had reduced her hips after everything else had failed” (23). However, when she finds out Mahatma’s scandal may disgrace her family, she easily switches her mentor to Alvah Loft, an Inspirational Healer, who can relieve her frustrations: “Frustrations! Pauline was fascinated by the word” (119). Pauline always loves easy solutions. Alva Loft replaces Mahatma because the former “simply took out your frustrations as if they’d been adenoids” (120). Still her devotion to Alva Loft does not last long. Beginning to suspect that “Alvah Loft’s doctrine might be only for beginners” (270), she soon comes to be captivated by the new Russian Initiate, Sacha Goblino when she hears that she can be rejuvenated by just sitting and listening to him. This time, the word rejuvenation instead of frustrations bewitches her: “Rejuvenation! The word dashed itself like cool spray against Pauline’s strained nerves and parched complexion” (271).

In 1920s New York there must have been quite a few people who were like Pauline. Lee remarks that “[t]he gurus in *Twilight Sleep* are . . . startlingly true to life” (634). According to Lee, the teachings of gurus or healers who advocated optimism, eternal youth, rejuvenation or avoidance of pain attracted American people in the mid-1920s, especially “wealthy New York ladies” (634). In *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* Ann Douglas discusses Freud’s strong influence on 1920s America: “As powerful arrivistes, Freud and America, more specifically New York, shared in its most acute form the adrenaline rush that was modernism.” (148). In this sense Pauline is a typical modernist Wharton despises. Douglas also points out that American people in the 1920s belong to the generation which was “the first in American history to make, buy, and fit into ready-made, exact-sized (rather than ‘stock-sized’) clothing” (53). So it is impor-

tant for Pauline to equip “weighing machines” in the bathroom which looks like “a biological laboratory” (23) and to reduce the size of her hips.

As Pauline’s energy is admired by her husbands, Arthur and Dexter, and her daughter, she is an efficient woman in a sense. Wharton, however, bitterly describes Pauline’s shallowness. Although Pauline’s speech at the Mothers’ Day committee is applauded, she is “never very sure of syntax” (155).

. . . when she had to compose a speech, though words never failed her, the mysterious relations between them sometimes did. Wealth and extensive social activities were obviously incompatible with a complete mastery of grammar, and secretaries were made for such emergencies. (155)

Pointing up Pauline’s inability to understand “the mysterious relations” between words and her lack of “a complete mastery of grammar,” Wharton seems to express her contempt for American materialism, which, she thinks, implies lack of intelligence.

Wharton also draws the reader’s attention to the absurdity of Pauline’s effort to maintain her health and her fake philanthropy through Dexter’s eyes. Dexter compares his wife, who “never walked upstairs, and then had to do gymnastics, and have osteopathy, and call Hindu sages, to prevent her muscles getting atrophied” (70), and his mother:

He had a vision of his mother, out on the Minnesota farm . . . saw her sowing, digging potatoes, feeding chickens; saw her kneading, baking, cooking, washing, mending, catching and harnessing the half-broken colt to drive twelve miles in the snow for the doctor, one day when all the men were away, and his little sister had been so badly scalded. . . . Wasn’t that perhaps the kind of life Manford himself had been meant for? . . . Using his brains, muscles, the whole of him, body and soul, to do *real* things, bring about *real*

results in the world, instead of all this *artificial* activity, this spinning around faster and faster in the void, and having to be continually rested and doctored to make up for exertions that led to *nothing, nothing, nothing*. (70–1, italics mine)

Dexter realizes that the restless life he is leading with Pauline is not *real*. Still he is involved with his wife's social activities and avoids facing reality. Even though his ideal woman is his mother, a hard worker in Minnesota, the woman who attracts him is Lita, the least hard working person in this novel. He thinks that Lita is completely indifferent to duties and philanthropy he most hates and finally has an illicit affair with her.

Young people like Lita “who had grown up since the Great War, whose energies were more spasmodic and less definitely, and who, above all, wanted a more personal outlet for them” (12) are contrasted with Pauline's generation in many respects. They are seeking pleasure in dancing and night life in the Jazz Age New York while Pauline's generation, according to Dexter, “dressed up their selfish cravings in the same worldly altruism” (162). Wharton emphasizes the differences between these two generations by displaying their lifestyles in detail. She often refers to Pauline's glancing at her watch whereas she underscores Lita's unpunctuality through Dexter's observation of her house:

A house without fixed hours, engagements, obligations . . . where none of the clocks went, and nobody was late, because there was no particular time for anything to happen. Absurd, of course, maddeningly unpractical—but how restful after a crowded day! And what a miracle to have achieved, in the tight pattern New York's tasks and pleasures—in the very place which seemed doomed to collapse and vanish if ever its clocks should stop! (104, ellipsis Wharton's)

No matter how restful Lita's house looks to Dexter, Wharton exposes

its sloppiness as well as Pauline's extremely hygienic house. When Pauline visits her daughter-in-law, in the nursery "her sharp eye detected many small negligence under the artistic surface: soiled towels lying about, a half-empty glass of milk with a drowned fly in it, dead and decaying flower in the aesthetic flower-pots" (191–2).

Focusing on the major female characters' relationships with their bodies in this novel, Deborah J. Zak aptly characterizes the difference between Pauline and Lita as follows: "Pauline feels compelled to work *on* her body, using all of the latest tools, while Lita works *with* her body to accomplish something quite different: manipulating men, dancing, and receiving a movie contract based solely on a photograph" (119). Bauer introduces Wharton's notebook for this novel in which she writes that "Lita is—jazz" (98). Lita is indeed the product of the Jazz Age. However, in *Lita* the reader does not feel the fervor and excitement of that age. Certainly, Wharton repeatedly portrays her as a woman who desires to express herself through her body. One of her dance partners says, "She and I each have our own line of self-expression" (75). Looking at Lita's portrait, Pauline admits that "Lita had the gift of posing—the lines she fell into always had unconscious eloquence" (176). Lita insists that she wants a divorce from Jim because the life with him "prevents her expressing her personality" (128).

In narrating the story, Wharton uses three different points of view—Pauline's, Dexter's and Nona's. She does not give Lita a voice to express herself. Does this mean that Lita expresses herself through her body or she has no self to express? Zak argues that "[Lita's] dance is a public expression of women's independence and of new ideas about expressing oneself with the body" (125). However, Wharton's unsympathetic portrayal of Lita makes us feel that Lita has nothing inside to express. Although Lita is a splendid dancer, most of the time she is "listless," "indolent" (17), "half-drifting" (33), and "silent and sleepy" (262). Nona observes Lita on the lounge "in the immemorial attitude of sleeping beauty" (240). She even gives birth to a baby in sleep because Pauline arranges "the most perfect 'Twilight Sleep' establish-

ment in the country” (18) for her. So Lita could “[drift] into motherhood as lightly and unperceivingly as if the wax doll which suddenly appeared in the cradle at her bedside had been brought there” (18).

Wharton’s choice of the title seems to be adequate because *Twilight Sleep* is a story about evasion as is often pointed out. Here “twilight sleep” not only refers to anesthesia which was used mainly in childbirth in the 1920s but also alludes to the characters’ evasion of painful reality. Lita is the only one in the novel who experiences the twilight sleep method, but other characters, particularly Pauline, are in twilight sleep in the sense of avoiding any kind of pain. Barrish explains: “The phrase ‘twilight sleep’ literally denotes a compound popular among upper-class women of the 1920s for anesthetizing the pain of childbirth. Wharton’s novel expands ‘twilight sleep’’s meaning to refer to whatever helps one to evade encountering a disturbing reality” (107).

Bauer introduces “the twilight sleep furor” and “the eugenics debate which ensued in 1914 and 1915” (92). She argues that “the central issue of twilight sleep was one of women’s power since it was a method by which women could gain some say over the birthing process” (92). At the same time she contends that the twilight sleep method which was supposed to offer women fearless and painless childbirth was actually available only to upper-class women even in the 1920s. In consequence, Bauer argues, citing Judith Walzer Leavitt’s words, twilight sleep was thought to help “a ‘better race’” (92) to have more babies. Bauer asks an important question: “Was twilight sleep a feminist answer to the fears of childbirth, and thus a way to women’s power, or was it a conservative gesture for advancing the cause of positive eugenics? or both?” (95)

No doubt Pauline, who is frightened by “direct contact with physical or moral suffering—especially physical” (260), advocates the twilight sleep method: “Of course there ought be no Pain . . . nothing but Beauty . . . It ought to be one of the loveliest, most poetic things in the world to have a baby” (18, ellipses Wharton’s). Wharton never fails to add that Pauline says so in a voice “which made loveliness and

poetry sound like the attributes of an advanced industrialism, and babies something to be turned out in series like Fords" (18). From the treatment of "twilight sleep" in this novel, it is obvious that Wharton is opposed to this modern technology as a sign of materialism and a way of escaping reality.

It arouses our interest to see how Wharton from old New York attacks both a New Woman and a flapper. Although Pauline and Lita form a striking contrast on the surface, both are in "twilight sleep." As Nona observes, Pauline has been "buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words" (261). Lita, a sleeping beauty, never tries to open her eyes to reality. Such characteristic of these women's is what Wharton most disdains.

Wharton's harsh criticism of these women also reveals her biased views on new America. Recently critics are beginning to point out Wharton's racial prejudice. As Griffith says that "jazz was associated with a cultural amalgamation particular to New York" (78), Wharton's hostile attitude toward the Jazz Age suggests her fear of the invasion of non-white races. Wharton makes Arthur call Pauline's Oriental healer, Mahatma, "the nigger chap" (44), and he is described as "the thick-lipped oily Mahatma" (272). Non-whiteness of the characters whom Lita is associated with in the nightclub is also exaggerated. For example, Miss Jossie Keiler, the octoroon pianist has "pudgy feet," "sausage arms" (78) and "bolster legs" (79).

In this sense, Wharton is still a "novelist of elite drawing rooms," even though she "does the Jazz Age." Wharton's "so much 'culture work'" not only represents her criticism of American culture of the Jazz Age but also reveals her racial prejudice.

NONA, THE MARTYR

While almost all the characters of this novel, whether men or women, are in twilight sleep, Nona is the only one who is awake and faces reality. Nona, who belongs to the same generation as Lita, is another flapper who frequents the nightclubs and enjoys dancing and drinking. However, Arthur Wyant appropriately comments on her:

“How very old-fashioned! You *are* old-fashioned . . . in spite of the jazz” (46). “Old-fashioned in spite of the jazz” is probably the very element what Wharton expects in the young generation of her native country. In this novel only Nona can appreciate the past glory of old New York and misses it. Pauline makes it a rule to visit her ex-husband out of sense of duty, but to her he is only the vestige of the past as he is called “Exhibit A” like an exhibit in the museum. To Nona, who affectionately calls him “Exhibit,” “he would always be the Arthur Wyant of the race-meeting group in the yellowing photograph on his mantelpiece” (41). Looking at people in the old photograph of the early eighties, Nona feels “a pang of regret that she had not been born in those spacious days of dog-carts, victorias, leisurely tennis and afternoon calls” (42).

Being old-fashioned does not merely mean missing old days. While her parents are involved with meaningless social activities and avoiding any sufferings and Lita is dancing or sleeping, Nona feels “oppressed by responsibilities and anxieties” (45). In the opening chapter of this book, Nona admires her mother’s “altruistic energy” (12). However, the reader soon finds out that Nona not Pauline is altruistic and cares about others.

After all, somebody in every family had to remember now and then that such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not yet been banished from the earth; and with all those bright-complexioned white-haired mothers mailed in massage and optimism, and behaving as if they had never heard of anything but the Good and the Beautiful, perhaps their children had to serve as *vicarious sacrifices*. (45, italics mine)

No wonder the author calls Nona “bewildered little Iphigenia” (45). Iphigenia in Greek Mythology is “the daughter of Agamemnon, who was obliged to offer her as a sacrifice to Artemis when the Greek fleet was becalmed on its way to the Trojan War. However, Artemis saved her life and took her to Tauris in the Crimea, where she became a

priestess until rescued by her brother Orestes” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*).

Nona plays the most important role as a vicarious sacrifice in the climactic scene in which Arthur tries to shoot Lita’s lover, Dexter and mistakenly wounds Nona. The author does not disclose what has really happened in Lita’s bedroom. She only tells us how everyone makes up a story that a burglar shot and ran away. The reader just speculates about the accident as follows: Having been suspicious about Lita’s illicit affair and trying to revenge his betrayed son, Arthur sneaks into her bedroom at Manford’s villa and finds her with Dexter. Arthur fires two shots and one of them hits and wounds Nona, who may have sensed impending danger and rushed in the room. It is ironic that a new burglar-alarm system Pauline has set does not prevent a crime committed by a family member. It is Nona who prevents a tragedy. Zak, who has discussed that Pauline works on her body and that Lita works with her body, remarks that Nona uses her body to save the family (127). Just like Iphigenia, Nona sacrifices herself for her father. Whether she is ultimately rescued like Iphigenia or not will be discussed later.

Wharton’s conservatism can be seen in her treatment of divorce in this novel. Wharton herself was a divorcee and knew how marriage could become oppressive for women. In the 1920s divorce was not a taboo any more in New York as Nona says to her mother, “Think of your big dinners! Doesn’t Maisie always have to make out a list of previous marriages as long as a crossword puzzle, to prevent your calling people by the wrong names?” (30). Nevertheless, Wharton is critical of the characters who have got divorced without pain like Pauline and who desire an easy divorce like Lita. Pauline pities Arthur’s relative in Italy, “a country where there’s no divorce” (21). Wharton ironically portrays that Pauline, who has “recovered youth and elasticity” (27) by getting divorced from Arthur, tries to prevent Lita from divorcing Jim. She becomes indignant to hear Lita “speak of husband and home as if it were a matter of course to discard them like last year’s fashions!” (195).

In this novel Nona is one of the few people who take marriage as a serious institution. She is in love with a married man, Stanley Heuston, but she refuses to have an affair with him. Stanley is a typical Wharton man who understands a woman he loves but cannot take action with her. Unable to endure a loveless marriage, Stanley decides to “go off with” Cleo Merrick, who has been “after him,” because she does not have “a rag of reputation to lose” (179). For Nona, who has been witnessing other people’s unhappy marriage or hasty decision of divorce, both marriage and divorce are not easy solution. Such attitude of hers may reflect the author’s view. Haytock’s following argument is quite persuasive: “Wharton’s social critique in the novel reveals her belief that divorce should be difficult out of respect for the institution that it dissolves and the individual pain that it causes” (145).

At the end of the story, the injured Nona is lying in bed. Other members of the Wyant and the Manford families have already been away on a journey or setting out soon, leaving Nona alone. Wharton bitterly writes: “when rich people’s nerves are out of gear the pleasant remedy of travel is the first prescribed” (306). Even after the horrible incident, none of them except Nona try to face reality. Nona is “envious of the others who could escape by flight—by perpetual evasion. Not that she really wanted to be one of them; . . . at least in the body. Spiritual escape was what she craved, but by what means, and whither?” (306). Nobody gives her an answer. Nobody comes and rescues her. Her parents come to see her one by one before they go on a trip to Japan, Ceylon, India and Egypt. When her father comes to her bedside, the reader naturally expects that he is going to say something crucial. He says, “I want to be with you alone for a minute like this. I wanted to say—,” but in this intense situation Nona just interrupts him, “Don’t. There’s nothing to say” (312). Here again Nona is the one who cares about the other. Her mother offers an easy solution as usual. She tells Nona that marriage will make her daughter happy like other people. To this, Nona answers: “Marry! I’d a thousand times rather go into a convent” (315), and this novel ends

with her following words: “Oh, but I mean a convent where nobody believes in anything” (315).

This ending is ambiguous. Nona’s wish to go into a convent can be her refusal of an easy solution and suggest a forward movement. Or does this show that Nona cannot find a place to live in this society and does it indicate a retreat? Since other characters will not change their attitudes and continue to be in “twilight sleep,” Nona probably stays and keeps on playing the role of Iphigenia without anyone to rescue her. But why does she say “a convent where nobody believes in anything”? Maybe she rejects optimism that people easily believe in anything, even something fake.

Among the characters in this novel it is obvious that the youngest Nona is closest to the author. Most critics agree that Wharton is most sympathetic toward Nona. Zak argues that Wharton “champions Nona, the young woman who knows how to take advantage of all her modern culture has to offer but still values stability of Old New York” (129). Barrish, who focuses mainly on Nona in his discussion of this novel, states that “*Twilight Sleep* distinguishes the flapper Nona Manford as uniquely able to grasp [the] horrific real” (13). He even sees a parallel between Nona in bed in the last scene and Wharton, who did her writing in bed:

Contrary to the Victorian, as well as male modernist, a cliché of the bed-ridden female, neuresthenetic and unproductive, for Edith Wharton intellectual achievement and a woman lying in bed were not antagonistic terms. *Twilight Sleep*’s final scene of Nona in bed hints that the latter’s prostration before the real may be yielding her a distinct cognitive and emotional power, as well as the possibility for artistic creativity. (124)

Bauer may raise an objection to this. She underscores “Nona’s lack of personality” and “her blankness” (104). Certainly None is rather subdued for a flapper. As Bauer insists, Nona, “the martyr of the novel,” is “the ‘mother’ who cannot be other” (104). In the middle of

the novel, Wharton describes Nona as follows: “She thought: ‘I feel like the oldest person in the world, and yet with the longest life ahead of me . . .’ and shiver of loneliness ran over her” (238, ellipsis Wharton’s). Looking at her native country in the Jazz Age from Europe, Wharton must have felt “like the oldest person in the world.”

WORKS CITED

- Barrish, Phillip. *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880–1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Bauer, Dale M. *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.
- Douglas, Ann. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1995.
- Griffith, Jean C. “‘Lita is-Jazz’: The Harlem Renaissance, Cabaret culture, and Racial Amalgamation in Edith Wharton’s *Twilight Sleep*.” *Studies in the Novel* 38.1 (2006): 74–94.
- Haytock, Jennifer. *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Hutchinson, Percy. “Mrs. Wharton tilts at ‘Society.’” Reprinted in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, Ed. James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.431–434.
- “Iphigenia” *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 2nd ed. 2003.
- Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: a Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. London: Penguin, 1966.
- . *Twilight Sleep*. New York: Scribner, 1997.
- Wilson, Edmund. “*Twilight Sleep*.” Reprinted in *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, 434–435.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Zak, Deborah J. “Building the Female Body: Modern Technology and Techniques at Work in *Twilight Sleep*.” *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*. Ed. Gary Totten. Tuscaloosa: The University Alabama Press, 2007. 111–134.