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Edith Wharton: Vision and Perception in Her Short Stories

By

Jill Frank Sneider

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Edith Wharton: Vision and Perception in Her Short Stories

### Introduction

I have been intrigued by Edith Wharton ever since I read several of her novels while studying for the American Literature Major Field Examination, and I knew then that if I wrote a dissertation, it would pertain to her work. Her subject matter enchanted me as I read about a conflicted lawyer bound by the traditions of New York society in the late nineteenth century, the downfall of a single woman trying to climb the social ladder to security, a lonely man trapped in both the frozen landscape of New England and a cold and emotionless marriage, and a ruthless social-climbing American woman and her marriages in America and France in the first decade of the twentieth century. I had found a new favorite author to savor. Wharton's accessible style and choice of just the right word, her incisive wit and fascinating characters, and her sense of situation and narrative enveloped me, and I have been perpetually captivated. One might think that her writing would be dated by now, old-fashioned and unappealing to the modern reader, but in my view, Edith Wharton's work stands the test of time and has considerable relevance in today's world as it did in her own.

Although Wharton is best known for her many novels, her short stories also provide a rich and meaningful addition to our understanding of this brilliant American writer. During her seventy-five year lifespan, Wharton wrote non-fiction, novellas, poetry, and even a few plays as well. Her eighty-six short stories, written throughout her

life, have received much less critical attention than her novels, and even the best tales are usually less well-known than her novels. Some of these stories, though they may be of interest to understanding the full range of her work, are not worthy of serious discussion. Others, however, represent Wharton's broad interests, remarkable talents, and exceptional insights, and they deserve exploration.

A brief summary of her life will be helpful here. Born in 1862 to Lucretia and George Jones, moderately affluent, upper-class New Yorkers, Wharton began making up stories as a child, but her first short story was not published until she was twenty-nine, and her first volume of short stories appeared in 1899 when she was thirty-seven. In Wharton's family, as in others of her class and time, a young woman was expected to make her debut, find a suitable husband, and take her place in society. Educated at home, Wharton was encouraged to read the classics, history, plays and poetry, and she learned languages from extensive foreign travel, but she never received parental encouragement in her impulse to write stories or longer fiction; nevertheless, she wrote stories, poems, and plays throughout her childhood and even completed a novella, *Fast and Loose*, at age fifteen. When she married Edward "Teddy" Wharton at age twenty-three, after a broken engagement and later, an ambiguous, possibly romantic relationship with Walter Berry that did not lead to a commitment, Edith Wharton continued the pattern of life set by her mother, late father and others of her class. Settling into a home, traveling, socializing and establishing a cordial but passionless marriage, Wharton continued her writing, but it represented a fraction of her time, competing with her other obligations and a series of health issues that surfaced after her marriage. Anita Brookner, in an introduction to a

collection of Wharton's short stories, explains the context in which she wrote: "Indeed the world in which she grew up saw her literary activity as a sort of aberration or solecism, and only one of her numerous relations ever read her books" (vii).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton's 1934 autobiography, she describes her joy when Edward Burlingame at Charles Scribner's Sons agreed to publish a collection of her stories, a few of which had previously appeared in magazines. With Ogden Codman she had published a book on American design, *The Decoration of Houses*, in 1897, but her volume for Scribner's would be her first book of fiction. R. W. B. Lewis, in his seminal biography of Edith Wharton, explains her tentative awareness that her life might be changing when Scribner's first suggested the project: "It marked the beginning of a precarious sense of herself, less as a social matron who experimented cautiously with short stories from time to time than as, just possibly, a developing writer of fiction" (70-71). Lewis contends that this opportunity presented exciting possibilities for Wharton but also brought anxiety: "Burlingame's invitation had the effect upon Edith of asking her to commit herself at last to a career of writing . . . What, at the age of thirty-two, was her fundamental role in life: wife, social hostess, observer of foreign parts—or, drawing on all of these, a writer of fiction?" (75-76).

It took five years before *The Greater Inclination* was published in 1899, years when Wharton suffered anxieties and periods of depression, when her confidence in her work waned, and when the stories she submitted were not good enough for inclusion. During this time she was also distracted by travel, family obligations and improving her



newly-purchased summer estate in Newport. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls her response when the book was finally released:

But I must return to *The Greater Inclination* and to my discovery of that soul of mine which the publication of my first volume called to life. At last I had groped my way through to my vocation, and thereafter I never questioned that story-telling was my job, although I doubted whether I should be able to cross the chasm which separated the *nouvelle* [short fiction] from the novel. Meanwhile I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship (119).

From that time forward, Edith Wharton wrote and published regularly. She and her husband, Teddy, divided their time between traveling abroad and various residences in the United States. She did not like Newport and built a country home, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts where she read widely, entertained constantly, and wrote prolifically. Wharton spent each morning at the task regardless of whatever else her day included and generally followed this pattern throughout her life. She still had bouts of depression and nervous exhaustion which many biographers have attributed to her unhappy marriage. Her husband also had periods of ill health, ironically suffering from nerves and exhaustion just when his wife was feeling well. As Lewis notes: “No one yet suspected that it might be the pressure of a life everywhere and altogether dominated by an affluent and brilliantly successful wife of strong personality that was a least one source of Teddy’s instability” (123). The marriage gradually deteriorated. Edith Wharton began to associate more frequently with other writers and intellectuals, spending as much time as possible with friends who stimulated her literary and cultural interests. Beginning in 1907, she lived at least part of the year in Paris, and in 1911 she left the United States

permanently, visiting only occasionally. After a passionately satisfying but emotionally frustrating affair with Morton Fullerton, and after learning of Teddy's numerous infidelities and of his embezzlements from her trusts, Edith divorced Teddy Wharton in 1913.

Wharton lived in England and France during World War I, actively raising money for civilian refugees and wounded soldiers and organizing housing, hospitals, and medical care for them, as well as schools for the children. Though she spent most of her later life in France, she always felt herself to be an American woman and American author, returning "home" sporadically over the years but never staying long. Lewis maintains: "She remained quintessentially American in her way of conducting herself—and never more so than when she was virulently criticizing certain aspects of America as against its superior manifestations. In later years, those manifestations appeared to her as phenomena of a world long vanished . . ." (406). Wharton received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921 for her retrospective masterpiece of old New York, *The Age of Innocence* and in 1923 she received an honorary degree from Yale University, Doctor of Letters; in both cases she was the first woman to achieve the honor. Wharton died at her home in France in 1937.

These facts about Edith Wharton's life cannot begin to capture the woman or the author, but they do provide a necessary context because many of Wharton's stories, novellas, and novels are influenced by her background and experience. Her most important novels contain parallels to her life, as do many of her short stories. Wharton wrote about society in New York City, New England, Chicago, France, Morocco, and

other parts of the United States and the world. She explored the changing role of women as the country moved from the Victorian years to the turn of the century and beyond to post World War I. She wrote of artists and writers, of husbands and wives, of wartime and peace, of parents and children, of friends and enemies. She chronicled the rich and occasionally, the poor, the successful and the failures. In all of these, Wharton focused on individuals in relation to others and their surroundings, showing a profound interest in human nature and the human response to adjustments in perception and vision: how characters and their relationships change when new perceptions and insights alter the way they see each other and themselves.

Frequently satiric, always precise, Wharton's prose is elegant and detailed, remarkable for its piercing wit, deep insights, and passionate respect for the English language. Often complex in everything from sentence structure to its treatment of social dynamics, her work remains remarkably accessible. Throughout her years of writing, some pieces were less successful than others, whether in ideas, content, style, or sales, and there were periods when she was out of favor or considered a minor American writer. Though Helen Killoran, in *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, states: "Edith Wharton may be the greatest American author of the early twentieth century," she notes that both her contemporary and later critics often thought she was overly influenced by Henry James, too traditional in her outlook, and out of touch with American culture because of her years living abroad (xi). Overall, however, many of her novels and stories sold exceptionally well, and her considerable earnings enabled her to enjoy her lavish lifestyle. Numerous stories appeared first in magazines, and her novels were often

serialized before publication as books. *The House of Mirth*, her first major novel, published in 1905, sold 140,000 copies and made Wharton a best-selling author. After Wharton's death in 1937, her popularity decreased until the late 1960s when the feminist movement took an interest in her work. In addition, Wharton's papers, primarily at Yale University, were made available, and in the 1970s, biographies of her life by R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff attracted new attention to her writings (White xii). The latest biography, by Hermione Lee in 2007, is evidence of Wharton's continuing relevance.

As previously mentioned, Wharton is well-known for her novels, particularly *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence* and *Old New York*. Her short stories, though less familiar to most readers, provide important insights into her work and span her entire career. Some remain uncollected, but eleven different short story collections were published between 1899 and 1936. Wharton's first and last works were short stories, and she felt comfortable writing in this genre. In a letter to Robert Grant, a novelist friend, Wharton expresses her belief that she is a stronger story-teller than a novelist:

The fact is that I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is—I conceive my subjects like a man—that is, rather more architectonically and 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 episodic characterisation, I mean. The worse of it is that this fault is congenital, & not the result of an ambition to do big things. As soon as I look at a subject from the novel-angle I see it in relation to a larger whole, in all its remotest connotations; & I can't help trying to take them in, at the cost of the smaller realism that I arrive at, I think, better in my short stories. This is the reason why I have always obscurely felt that I didn't know how to write a novel. I feel it more clearly after each attempt, because it is in

such sharp contrast to the sense of authority with which I take hold of a short story (R. W. B. Lewis, N. Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* 124).

This 1907 letter, written two years after the publication of *The House of Mirth* and a month after *The Fruit of the Tree* appeared, demonstrates Wharton's inclination to link female writers to short stories and male writers to novels. She suggests here that writing a novel is similar to constructing a house, seeing the undertaking in architectural terms, while the short story focuses on smaller, subordinate details. Wharton does not explain why she associates the architectural, structural challenges of a novel with men while consigning the "smaller realism" in the stories to women. Though Wharton says she thinks of her subjects for novels in larger terms, as a man would, but then writes as a woman, the distinction, if valid, did not prove to be the handicap she imagined it to be in 1907. Still, Wharton continued to be concerned about the implications of male and female authorship. Throughout her life, she felt anxious about being taken seriously as a woman writer, yet at the same time, she worried that she might be considered too masculine in her approach and be labeled unfeminine. These topics will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Wharton's anxieties about her ability to write novels eased with practice, but this took time. In *A Backward Glance*, she writes: "It was not until I wrote *Ethan Frome* [1911] that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements . . . From that day until now I have always felt that I had my material fairly well in hand . . . (209).

Wharton's short stories vary in quality. *The Greater Inclination*, her first collection, includes some of her best work as well as a few that are less successful, and this pattern repeats itself in each collection that was published; an exception, *Here and*

*Beyond*, was published in 1926, but the collection contains no stories considered to be noteworthy by critics. One cannot, therefore, conclude that her stories were better during one period of her life or another. Given the superb caliber of so many of her tales, one might wonder why she is not better known for them. Barbara White, in a rare book about Wharton's short stories, contends that Wharton broke no new ground in these pieces and other critics, such as Lewis and Hermione Lee, agree: "Wharton lived at the wrong time. She came too late to pioneer in the form and too early to participate in the formal experiments of the 1920s. As we will see, Wharton's theory of the story was quite traditional" (White xi). White notes that Wharton followed in the footsteps of Flaubert and Maupassant and would have had difficulty with modern styles. "In practice Wharton was a transitional figure, just as she was as a novelist, bridging the Victorian and the modern eras" (xi). Even though her novels were the subject of renewed interest in the late 1960s, the short stories were mostly ignored. Today, this area of Wharton's work remains largely unexplored.

Though Edith Wharton did not lead the way toward new frontiers in her short stories, she wrote about the development of the genre, the differences between short stories and novels, and the elements of a successful story. In 1925 her book, *The Writing of Fiction*, was published; the book contains five essays on fiction, and her second chapter is titled "Telling a Short Story." Fortunately she is more entertaining as a short story writer than she is an essayist writing about them, as the piece is generally dry; nevertheless, Wharton's views on short story writing are pertinent here. Though it becomes clear as one reads her stories that she did not always adhere to her own rules and

principles, still her opinions provide background for understanding her work in this genre. It is also worth noting that this book was written when Wharton was over sixty. By then, most of her important novels and six of her eleven short story collections had already been published, so this essay is not a blueprint for Wharton to follow, but rather, a formulation of general standards she believed to be significant. Wharton discusses the distinctions between writing a short story in contrast to writing a novel. Novels, she argues, require “first the gradual unfolding of the inner life of its characters, and secondly, the need of producing in the reader’s mind the sense of the lapse of time.” Short stories, on the other hand, demand “compactness and instantaneity” (33-34). Wharton asserts that the effect of these two elements of the story “is attained mainly by the observance of two ‘unities’—the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes” (34).

Wharton clarifies that time, the first “unity,” means that the period of time that elapses during the story must be short enough that a change in the characters would not have time to occur. The other “unity,” vision, which is more complicated, means telling the story from one person’s viewpoint. Wharton credits Henry James as the first to state this principle and gives it weight as she asks: “Who saw this thing I am going to tell about? By whom do I mean that it shall be reported?” (35). She and James refer to this person as a narrator and also as a reflector. Wharton further insists:

. . . never let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally within his register. It should be the storyteller’s first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building site, or decide upon the orientation of one’s house, and when this is done,

to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and, above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter (36).

Thus the narrator should not be able to reveal anything he could not understand or be aware of in the story. It is important to remember that, as the stories are discussed in Chapters One, Two, and Three, Wharton herself did not always follow these criteria. Many of her stories take place over a long period of time, and the characters undergo significant changes; furthermore, though most of her tales are told from one point of view, a number of them are told by more than one narrator. In fact, Barbara White argues persuasively: “Although in nearly all of her stories she adhered to the principle that the episode be seen through only one pair of eyes, the exceptions are revealing: fully half of her very best stories admit other points of view” (4).

In addition to Wharton’s two “unities,” she also discusses what comprises a good short story. Wharton believes that while character is the main focus of the novel, “situation” is the important center of a short story. Although White notes that Wharton does not precisely define her term “situation,” White concludes: “She clearly intends it to include but not be restricted to plot. She sees plot in any rigid sense . . . as an outdated convention . . . but her own practice . . . shows that she considered stories where the situation consists principally of action to be acceptable versions of the short story” (6). White argues persuasively that Wharton’s stories relying too heavily on plot are not considered particularly successful and often become absurd farces or melodramas. “In general, Wharton sought a story ‘situation’ that would include, in addition to plot, a significant subject or theme and the consciousness of the character from whose viewpoint



the events are seen.” (6). In Wharton’s best stories, therefore, situation goes beyond the plot to include the perceptions of her characters about a compelling circumstance.

Because “situation” is so important, the form, or presentation, of the story plays a major role in its success. Beginnings are particularly critical to attract the reader’s attention. To illustrate this point, in the most interesting and often quoted part of her essay, Wharton relates an anecdote that Benvenuto Cellini, the Italian artist and sculptor, included in his autobiography. He writes that when he was a child, sitting at the fireplace with his father, they saw a salamander illuminated in the fire. Cellini’s father immediately boxed his son’s ears so he would always remember what he saw. Wharton is saying that if the short story begins with something spectacular, the reader will be immediately engaged. She also stresses that the writer must then follow with something significant, or there would be no point to the initial emphasis: “It is useless to box your reader’s ear unless you have a salamander to show him. If the heart of your little blaze is not animated by a living, moving *something*, no shouting and shaking will fix the anecdote in your reader’s memory. The salamander stands for that fundamental significance that made the story worth telling” (40). Furthermore, because the tale is limited in length, the selection of details is vitally important; each one must fit with the others. Though the story “situation” may be her first concern, Wharton also chooses characters and themes that facilitate the storyline. She credits the Russian and French writers with giving the short story depth and significance by probing intensely: “Instead of a loose web spread over the surface of life they have made it, at its best, a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience” (29).

As Wharton discusses the differences in subjects appropriate for novels or short stories, in “Telling a Short Story,” she makes another important distinction. At first, she contends that events that she labels “moral dramas” are an integral part of the fictional characters and need the spacious landscape of a novel to develop and be understood by readers. Then, however, she qualifies her statement and immediately describes an exception:

There are cases, indeed, when the short story may make use of the moral drama at its culmination. If the incident dealt with be one which a single retrospective flash sufficiently lights up, it is qualified for use as a short story; but if the subject be so complex, and its successive phases so interesting, as to justify elaboration, the lapse of time must necessarily be suggested, and the novel-form becomes appropriate” (34).

This modification enables the short story writer to create “moral drama” as long as it is not too complex or the lapse of time too long. Wharton does not specify exactly what she means by the term “moral drama,” but it seems likely that she wants to allow the situation in the short story to generate enough internal conflict that the character or characters change in some crucial way. Her term “retrospective flash” suggests that one may gain fresh insight into an incident or event and find a new perspective, a moment when a character becomes conscious of a truth previously unrealized. The “retrospective flash,” a significant situation, and the consciousness of the narrator or reflector, join to create the “moral drama” in the story.

As I read Wharton’s short stories and began to categorize them in some meaningful way for this dissertation, I realized that perception and vision play a major role in most of her tales. For Wharton, seeing is central topic. In story after story, how a character views a situation affects what will happen and what choices will be made.

Often, but not always, the unfolding of the narrative will produce a change in the way the character sees and understands the circumstances. This new perceptive insight may lead to a change in behavior or direction, but sometimes no adjustment occurs; still, the altered consciousness of the person becomes *the* critical part of the story. Perhaps this is what Wharton means by “moral drama:” as the character experiences a “single retrospective flash,” a moment of discernment and clarity of vision brief enough and intense enough to fit the time limits of the short story, his own awareness undergoes a fundamental transformation. Her finest stories begin with a situation but go beyond that to achieve depth and significance. R. W. B. Lewis, in his introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, points out that in some of the less notable stories, working out a situation and solving a moral dilemma does occur, but argues that in her best stories:

. . . it is rather that the situation itself is gradually revealed in all its complexity and finality. What we know at the end, in these ‘crucial instances,’ is not so much how some problem got resolved, but the full nature, usually the insurmountable nature, of the problem itself. It is then that Mrs. Wharton’s stories gain the stature she attributed to the finest stories everywhere . . . they become ‘a shaft driven straight into the heart of experience.’ It is then too that they comprise what she felt all so rightly any work of fiction should seek to comprise: a judgment on life, an appraisal of its limits, an assessment of the options—if options there be—that life has to offer. The immediate human situation has, in short, become a paradigm of the human condition” (viii-ix).

Wharton’s emphasis on perception can be found throughout her writing career. Though her numerous stories are varied and defy convenient generalizations, she usually sets her characters within a social framework, creates a situation, and follows their path to a new perspective, a growing self-awareness. In some stories, however, there is an absence of that kind of understanding, although that factor alone does not determine

whether a story succeeds; certain tales are effective even when there is no change in the perceptions of the characters. Wharton's characters confronting the expectations of the society in which they live usually find their choices are limited. As Candace Waid asserts in her introduction to a short story collection: "Set in worlds which provocatively offer illusions of freedom and change, these stories show characters subdued to the demands of convention, framed once again in the warp of an unbending social fabric" (12).

Using a variety of themes and topics, Wharton looks at a subject from many different angles. Rarely settling on one answer or viewpoint for a particular issue or situation, she prefers to leave a problem unresolved, often presenting different perspectives. Some of her characters struggle to find connections and an intimacy that will bind them to other people. Some are looking for significance in life, for a meaning or a purpose to prove their value. A few find answers, but many do not. In story after story, seeing themselves and their situation more clearly constitutes the only change that occurs and the only resolution to their situation, but for Edith Wharton, dispelling illusions or distorted views can be the main focus of the story. There may be no other options available as she details the loneliness and isolation that result from their newfound awareness. In fact, she has been criticized for her pessimism and her generally unhappy endings, where her characters become disillusioned and despairing. For many of them, however, the awareness they gain and the insight that comes from those new perceptions give them an unaccustomed strength and determination, an inner confidence and serenity that may be visible only to the reader. In Wharton's stories, major changes are rare but small realizations carry enormous weight.

In this dissertation, I explore Wharton's use of perception and vision in three main subjects of her short stories: marriage and divorce, artists and writers, and social and personal values. Clearly these topics engaged Wharton because of her own experiences and concerns, and her stories reflect personal fascinations and anxieties. In Chapters One and Three, the chapters on marriage and divorce, and social and personal values, I have concentrated on some of what I consider to be Wharton's well-written stories. Though many of her lesser tales might be used to illustrate a point, I prefer to focus on her best pieces, not only because they have been the most worthwhile to analyze and discuss, but also because there are so many stories from which to choose. In Chapter Two, focusing on art and literature, I include several stories that are less well-written because Wharton's work in this area generally falls short of the others, though there are a few exceptions; nevertheless, the topic is of critical importance to understanding her work and must be included. I have organized the stories into these three chapters because it makes sense to group them in this way for purposes of discussion; however, many similarities exist from one grouping to the other, and numerous stories could be considered in more than one category.

In Chapter One, I closely examine a number of Wharton's short stories that relate to marriage and divorce. Some critics contend that Wharton's stories reflect a belief that marriage is ultimately the only suitable or acceptable relationship for society in general, and as a practical means of support for a woman in particular. Allen Stein, in *After the Vows Were Spoken*, notes that although Wharton believes one is unlikely to find perfect happiness in marriage, as revealed in her stories, she does see some compensations: "a

stabilizing and solacing routine in a shifting moral world, moral growth through committing oneself to another's well-being, and a sense of social responsibility through learning to see oneself as a significant part of a functioning society" (259). Others, like Barbara White, claim the stories show that, although she does not condone divorce, she does not consistently oppose it either (79-80). I argue that Wharton does not resolve this question in her stories but instead, leaves the subject open to interpretation. In most of them, Wharton appears to be championing marriage as a stabilizing influence in society, regardless of the degree of love or happiness achieved. ("The Fullness of Life," "The Pretext," "The Letters," "The Lamp of Psyche," "Joy in the House," "The Other Two," "The Day of the Funeral," and "Permanent Wave" among others) In other stories, however, she seems to advocate divorce, even an affair outside of marriage, as the appropriate response, though there are fewer of these. ("The Long Run," "Kerfol," and "The Quicksand" among others) Some stories reflect both points of view within the same story. ("Souls Belated," "The Reckoning," "Autres Temps . . .," and "The Long Run," among others) Wharton's views on the limited options available to women, the tensions in her unhappy marriage, her own affair and its shortcomings, and her concerns about her divorce point the way to many stories in this section. Wharton remained ambivalent about the marriage issue in spite of her own divorce. In all of the stories, vision and perception play an important role as her main characters come to terms with their situations.

In Chapter Two, I discuss a wide selection of stories that center on artists and writers, though in general, most of these stories are inferior to her others. They do offer important insights into Wharton's anxieties about her own work, her career as a writer

and her role as a female writer, as well as her concerns about artistic standards and how they are judged and maintained. Because there are so many stories in this chapter, I have organized them in two sections: art and vocation and artistic standards. Wharton's apprehensions about her work, her need for privacy versus her hope for public approval, and her desire for connection to others through her writing can be seen in many of the art and vocation stories. Similarly, her interest in artistic criteria and the moral dilemmas these measures create for artists and writers is reflected in the artistic standards section. Like Chapter One, characters in these stories search for significance in their lives and relationships so that their work will have a lasting effect and their lives will be meaningful. Vision and perception play a principal role in this chapter as the artists and writers grapple with seeing their work clearly, seeing others clearly, and seeing themselves clearly. Illusions are sometimes replaced by hard-won truths, but this does not always occur. When perceptions change, some of the characters view their work, other characters, and themselves differently, but again, this is not always true and some of them do not achieve this kind of understanding. I maintain that Wharton values the change in awareness even if the results produce alienation from others or disillusionment with one's own talents and work.

Chapter Three, *Social and Personal Values*, examines how characters' individual needs and desires often conflict with demands of the society in which they live. Though almost all of her stories can be viewed in the context of society and its expectations and could be placed here, including some of those discussed in the other chapters, these stories in particular reflect Wharton's interest in people and their relationships, what

happens when their values and society's values differ, and how her characters accommodate themselves to the social world. Wharton's satire runs throughout these pieces, a fine line between humor and personal tragedy. As in Chapters One and Two, these characters try to define what makes life worthwhile, what gives it meaning. In these stories too, Wharton often focuses on women and the challenges they face with the few choices available to them. I contend, once again, that with clearer perceptions, her characters can make better decisions, or, at least, more informed ones. In some cases, simply understanding a situation clearly is considered a victory, though many in this chapter never attain this precise vision.



## Chapter One: Marriage and Divorce

Edith Wharton was more interested in and consumed by questions about marriage and divorce than any other issue. Throughout her lifetime, her personal journal, letters, novels, novellas and short stories reflect her preoccupation. Part of the explanation for this preoccupation can be found in details of her own life; part lies with her unhappy recognition that marriage was the only financial option for a woman without money of her own; and finally, conventionally, Wharton saw marriage as the cornerstone of social order.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there was little attention given to marriage as a topic in America's literature although many English writers such as Dickens, Thackeray and Eliot had been concerned with this issue for quite awhile. Allen Stein, in his book *After the Vows Were Spoken*, looks at five American authors to see how they handled marriage: William Dean Howells, Henry James, Kate Chopin, Robert Herrick and Edith Wharton. Stein notes that until this period, after about 1870, the majority of American writers were not interested in society or its institutions: "Institutions mattered far less to these writers, society itself mattered far less to them for the most part, than individuals, the universe, and those abstractions that might help define the relationship between the two" (7).

Stein credits several factors for the attention to marriage at the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of literary realism brought a new emphasis on social relationships while the developing independence of women brought new questions about

marriage as an institution. After the Civil War, as industrialization and urbanization increased, more writers became interested in social relationships and the way individuals related to social institutions. As divorce became more common, authors began to examine marriage more closely. These five writers were not the only American authors to scrutinize the marriage relationship. Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Howe, Harold Frederic and Edward Bellamy, to mention a few, also focused on the topic.

Stein finds this interest a natural outgrowth of the interest in realism:

Perhaps the most crucial factor turning American writers of fiction in the latter part of the century to close scrutiny of marriage was . . . the fact that if one were committed to examining social relations and examining them particularly, as the realists usually did, with an eye to ascertaining and promulgating patterns of social behavior conducive to humane dealings among people and the generating of a more humane social situation at large, one might find oneself almost of necessity turning to a close look at marriage. As a social relation more intimate and intense than most, and demanding more of those in it than most, marriage is not only an eminently suitable subject but even the most logical place to begin for such writers as the realists, who hoped to reveal ranges of behavior among people in close conjunction with one another in fiction that their readers might find both compelling and educative. (7-8)

For Edith Wharton, the subject of marriage was more than a means of studying social behavior; she had an intense personal interest in the topic as well. In fact, she wrote about marriage and related issues more than any other topic. Her short stories, novels, and novellas consider marriage from every viewpoint. In these stories, she scrutinizes the individual in an intensely personal relationship, while her stories that focus on social values involve the character in primarily impersonal relationships. R. W. B. Lewis, in his introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, claims she was probably the first American writer to view marriage as such an important topic and to make it so

central to her work (ix). In his effort to categorize Wharton's stories, Lewis labels the largest group—24 stories—"The Marriage Question." Furthermore, Lewis notes that this grouping could have been even larger, as some of the stories in other categories such as "Ghosts" and "Art and Human Nature" could have been shifted into the marriage group (xxvi). Lewis' list illustrates the extent of Wharton's interest in this topic and her awareness of its literary potential. She looked at courtship, adultery, divorce, illegitimacy, and the role of children, as well as the intricacies of the marital relationship itself. ". . . the whole domain of the marriage question was the domain in which Edith Wharton sought the truth of human experience; it was where she tested the limits of human freedom and found the terms to define human mystery" (x).

Why was Edith Wharton so consumed by the various issues surrounding marriage? Clearly events in her life created a great part of this interest. Many of the stories included in Lewis' marriage category were written in the period surrounding her own marriage problems and her divorce in 1913. Echoes of her own crises and concerns can be seen in many of these stories.

As noted in the introduction, Edith Jones' wedding to Edward "Teddy" Wharton in 1885 occurred when she was twenty-three years old after two previous unsuccessful relationships. Thirteen years older than she, Teddy Wharton was an attractive family friend with a socially acceptable background and education and, therefore, a suitable match. At her age, she was anxious to marry. Even if she were not in love with him, which she seems to have believed she was at the time of her marriage, what else could she do? Women of her class, of any class, were expected to marry and settle into the life

of a wife and mother. Her impulse to write did not seem to offer a viable alternative; friends, family, even Wharton herself, all believed it to be a pleasant hobby, something to do when she was not busy with household or social duties. In 1934, remembering this earlier time in her life, Wharton writes in *A Backward Glance* that she accepted this verdict: “I had never ceased to be a great reader, but had almost forgotten my literary dreams. I could not believe that a girl like myself could ever write anything worth reading, and my friends would certainly have agreed with me. No one in our set had any intellectual interests. . . .” (88). Edith Wharton evidently accepted a lack of sexual passion and fulfillment in her life as well; from every report, her marriage was mostly platonic (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 53). Hermione Lee, in her biography, *Edith Wharton*, describes Wharton’s marriage as probably sexless and convincingly notes Wharton’s “frequent illness and depression in the years following her marriage, their [hers and Teddy’s] separate rooms, their childlessness, their growing estrangement and, in her writing, her interest in the subject of sexual privation and wretched marriages” (77).

Gradually, after a few years of travel and society, Wharton inherited a large sum of money from a distant cousin and settled into her own home. In these circumstances, Wharton began to develop more intellectual associations and to concentrate on her writing again. After a few poems were published, she submitted her first short story, “Mrs. Manstey’s View,” to *Scribner’s* in 1890 and it was accepted for publication. Despite these new associations, she was working primarily in isolation in her home, without the benefit of support from other writers and did not think of herself as a writer. Looking at some of her early stories, we can see that she was already working out

particular problems and questions from her life through her work. Certainly not every story or novel, or every detail in any of them, can or should be considered in this light. Often she looked at an issue from varying points of view and a reader would need to examine several stories on a given topic to see the full range; nevertheless, one has a strong sense that her life was frequently reflected in her work, particularly as her marriage grew increasingly problematic.

In “The Fullness of Life,” written in 1891, Edith Wharton portrays a nameless dead woman who confides in the Spirit of Life she meets in the next world about her earthly marriage. She had been fond of her husband, but had never known with him the “fullness of life.” The pleasures she knew-- flowers, literature, nature-- all came outside of her marriage. In this story, Wharton uses one of her best-known images to depict her character’s sexual and emotional relationship with her husband:

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 members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; 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 (I: 14).<sup>1</sup>

Her husband never got past the sitting room and was perfectly content to stay there. Though the Spirit offers the woman the opportunity to spend eternity with a “kindred soul,” her sense of duty to her husband and the habits of a lifetime prevent her from accepting the chance for joy. Although years later Wharton dismissed this tale and

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation all page references in Wharton’s stories refer to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, Vol. I, II, R. W. B. Lewis, editor.

some others as being “excesses of youth . . . written at the top of my voice” and “one long shriek,” clearly she was examining her own unfulfilling marriage and its accompanying duties (R. W. B. Lewis, N. Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton* 36).

Though this is an early example, and Wharton’s skills as a writer became more sophisticated and varied, it is difficult to find an example of happiness and fulfillment within the marital relationship in her work. Stories and novels alike depict marriage in a negative way. Spouses are bored, disillusioned, disappointed, disenchanted, frustrated, indifferent, angry, supercilious, distrustful, irritating, tedious, intolerant, and so forth. Some pieces are treated lightly with wit, irony and delightful sarcasm, like “The Mission of Jane,” where the Mr. and Mrs. Lethbury, after years of years of growing apart in a childless marriage, adopt a baby girl. After the usual trials of parenthood, the Lethburys come together at the end when Jane is finally married: “Jane had fulfilled her mission after all: she had drawn them together at last” (I: 379). Others are serious and tragic like *Ethan Frome* where marriage becomes a prison and a kind of living death, portrayed through spare prose and images of a cold and frozen landscape. In almost every case, emotional connections are scarce, as characters experience loneliness and disillusionment within the marital relationship.

Edith Wharton’s affair with Morton Fullerton from 1908 to 1910, after years of financial, psychological and emotional problems with her husband, for the first time brought her sexual satisfaction, but her divorce from Edward Wharton in 1913 was a source of anguish and conflict. The decision to divorce Teddy was reached after years of soul-searching and apprehension about whether she should remain in an unsatisfactory

marriage or risk the inevitable problems a divorce would bring. Wharton feared the consequences of either course. Both of these events are reflected in her work as she explores alternatives to marriage, both adultery and divorce, from a variety of points of view.

Her attitude toward adultery and divorce has been the subject of much speculation. In an important work in 1953, Blake Nevius asserts that Wharton remained opposed to divorce in spite of her own choice. He believes that in her writing, she marries her characters, then asks: "What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals who . . . apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty? This question occupies the center of Edith Wharton's moral consciousness as it reveals itself in her fiction. There is no doubt in her mind regarding the prior assumption that a sense of individual responsibility is the only basis of social order and development" (110). Others, like Barbara White, do not believe she was opposed to divorce, but rather that Wharton was convinced that the context of a particular situation should weigh heavily in the decision (80).

If one studies her short stories on these topics, it seems more likely that she never arrives at a final conclusion or answers the dilemma. Rather, she analyzes possibilities through the thoughts, dialogues and lives of her characters and continues in her stories and novels to raise questions and examine the consequences of the choices made. A close reading of "Souls Belated," one of Wharton's best early stories, illustrates her struggle with the issue of marriage and divorce, duty and fulfillment.

“Souls Belated,” written in 1898 and collected in 1899 in Wharton’s first volume of short stories, *The Greater Inclination*, is one of her earliest explorations of the marriage issue. The story represents a prime example of disillusionment with love, evident even at this early date. Taking place in Italy during two summer months, “Souls Belated” closely examines the dynamics of a relationship occurring outside of marriage and scrutinizes in minute detail the consequences of this union. This story can provide clues to later ones such as “The Reckoning,” “Autres Temps . . .,” “The Long Run,” “The Day of the Funeral,” “Joy in the House,” and “Permanent Wave,” and also to numerous novellas and full-length novels as well.

Divided into five separate sections, this well-written story begins not with joy but with discomfort. In Part I Lydia Tillotson, whose point of view controls most of the narrative, is traveling on a train from Bologna to a resort on an Italian lake with her lover, Ralph Gannett. She has left her husband and run off to Europe, but from the beginning, we realize that at this moment she does not want to be alone with Gannett, does not want that kind of intimacy. Keenly intuitive and analytic, Lydia realizes that he feels the same way, and both are somewhat awkward in each other’s presence. She has learned to distinguish one kind of silence from another, because their life together allows ample time for conversation anytime they desire it. She knows the difference between having nothing particular to say and being reluctant to discuss a topic. Only after this analysis does the reader learn that her divorce papers arrived just that morning, and though she was expecting her husband to take this action, nevertheless, the change in her status has



thrust Lydia and Ralph's relationship into a different category. She is no longer a married woman.

As she rides along, Lydia muses and frets over her situation and in doing so, informs the reader of her history. When she thinks of her marriage, she uses terms of business and commodities, a language Wharton later uses in *The House of Mirth*, "The Last Asset," and "The Other Two," to signal the way she believes women are regarded and treated. Lydia recalls that she did not leave her husband until she met Gannett, did not realize that her marriage was ". . . so poor and incomplete a business. If she had never, from the first, regarded her marriage as a full canceling of her claims upon life, she had at least, for a number of years, accepted it as a provisional compensation,--she had made it 'do' " (I: 106). Wharton's details of the Tillotsons' rigid and tedious routine draw on her personal knowledge of the homogenous world of New York wealth and power. Lydia recalls the opulent Fifth Avenue mansion and the rigid attitudes and schedules of the Tillotsons who lived there; she found them complacent about their lives and choices, insistent about the need to conform to standards set by others, and unwilling to consider a challenging idea. In escaping from the boredom of this society, Lydia at first felt joyously free, but now that her decree has been granted, she suddenly believes her freedom limited. Will Gannett and others feel that she is now his responsibility? Will he want to marry her out of a sense of duty? Wharton uses a commercial vocabulary to convey Lydia's concerns: "She had put herself in a position where Gannett 'owed' her something; where, as a gentleman, he was bound to 'stand the damage.' The idea of accepting such compensation had never crossed her mind" (I: 107).

Putting herself in Gannett's debt is not the only reason Lydia is reluctant to consider marriage; she is loath to return to the very conventions from which she recently escaped. To her, the institution of marriage is not sacred, and it seems hypocritical and embarrassing to marry Gannett. Besides, she most fears that he will not be honest with her, will perhaps propose when he does not really want to marry her: "What she dreaded was the necessity of having to explain herself; of having to combat his arguments; of calculating, in spite of herself, the exact measure of insistence with which he pressed them. She knew not whether she most shrank from his insisting too much or too little" (I: 107). Idealistically, Lydia wants their relationship to remain free of dependence; she does not want to act wifely or to plan a future together, but rather, to live in an eternal present.

Gannett, on the other hand, has no such illusions. When the conversation starts and Lydia voices her preference for the status quo, he protests: "But we can't travel forever, can we?" (I: 08). He mentions that, as a writer, he needs to settle for awhile and suggests a villa where they can live quietly after marrying. Lydia tries to explain to him why she resists marrying, though she discusses only her feelings of hypocrisy, not her concerns about his obligation. "You judge things too theoretically," Ralph tells her. "Life is made up of compromises" (I: 110). As they debate, Lydia championing the rights of the individual over the family and Ralph arguing for love and compromise, Wharton presents two sides of a moral dilemma. Blake Nevius says that Gannett speaks for Edith Wharton when he insists on the conventionality of marriage (18). This may be true to some extent, but Lydia also voices that side of Wharton that wanted to escape the traditional bounds of

society. Though Lydia agrees to settle somewhere for awhile so Gannett can write, she refuses to discuss marriage again; however Part I ends with her relief that he argued for it so strongly. Lydia may not want to marry him now, but she does want reassurance that Ralph would eagerly choose marriage and does not feel obligated to propose.

The next two sections are much briefer than the first. In Part II, the couple registers at a hotel catering to English and American travelers. After they pretend to be married for the sake of convention, Lydia surprises Gannett when she convinces him to remain there awhile so he can write; though she had agreed to settle somewhere, he did not think this hotel would suit her for longer than a night. She brushes aside his concern that she will be uncomfortable with the gossipy society matrons because she feels guilty that he has not been writing. Wharton deftly paints the society at the Hotel Bellosguardo, which represents a microcosm of the larger social world. Through Lydia's eyes, the reader sees Miss Pinsent's fawning adoration of Lady Susan Condit, the arbiter of all matters of taste, fashion, and propriety. Miss Pinsent explains to Lydia: " 'It's so important, my dear, forming as we do a little family, that there should be someone to give *the tone*; and no one could do it better than Lady Susan—an earl's daughter and a person of such determination' " (I: 113). Evidently, Lady Susan approves of them, but not of another newcomer, a Mrs. Linton who is too flashy, bold and nouveau riche to suit. In this brief section, Lydia is being reminded of all she thought she had escaped because the society she left is still with her now at the hotel.

In Part III, Lady Susan shuns the Lintons, and everyone else does the same. Though the flamboyant couple ignores the slight, Lydia and the reader receive a clear

picture of what could have happened to her had judgment gone against Lydia and Ralph. One afternoon, however, Mrs. Linton pulls Lydia aside and confides that she is really a Mrs. Cope living with Lord Travenna until her divorce is granted. Nervous that his family will persuade him not to marry her when she is free, she asks Lydia for help. After Lydia refuses, Mrs. Cope threatens Lydia with exposure, saying: “ ‘Why you little fool, the first day I laid eyes on you I saw that you and I were both in the same box—that’s the reason I spoke to you’ ” (I: 118).

As Part IV begins, Lydia spends several hours thinking about her situation, realizing that she has been avoiding Gannett and her usual introspection for quite awhile. After she relates to Gannett what has happened, he tells her Mrs. Cope’s divorce papers arrived that afternoon, the couple departed shortly thereafter, and Lady Condit knows nothing. Lydia, hating her own deception, suggests they tell everyone the truth anyway and is surprised when Gannett agrees. She did not realize he felt the same way about the lie. Both also admit reluctantly that they have enjoyed their stay. Lydia confesses with self-loathing:

“Oh, do you see the full derision of it? These people—the very prototypes of the of the bores you took me away from, with the same fenced-in view of life, the same keep-off-the-grass morality, the same little cautious virtues and the same little frightened vices—well, I’ve clung to them, I’ve delighted in them, I’ve done my best to please them. I’ve toadied Lady Susan, I’ve gossiped with Miss Pinsent, I’ve pretended to be shocked with Mrs. Ainger. Respectability! It was the one thing in life that I was sure I didn’t care about, and it’s grown so precious to me that I’ve stolen it because I couldn’t get it any other way” (I: 122).

Full of scorn for herself and for Gannett, she accuses them both of succumbing to the desires and habits of the conventional social world. Wharton could be speaking for herself when Lydia cynically cries:

“Do you know, I begin to see what marriage is for. It’s to keep people away from each other. Sometimes I think that two people who love each other can be saved from madness only by the things that come between them—children, duties, visits, bores, relations—the things that protect married people from each other. We’ve been too close together—that has been our sin. We’ve seen the nakedness of each other’s souls” (I: 123).

Gannett tries to persuade Lydia to marry him at once, believing it is the only solution for them, but she still refuses, saying they would have to pretend to people that they had always been married, and those people would have to pretend to believe them. Lydia says the only answer is for her to leave him, but he protests: “If you love me you can’t leave me” (I: 124). This crucial section closes with these opposing choices.

Wharton now shifts the point of view from Lydia to Gannett in Part V. Though she has stated in “Telling a Short Story,” in her book, *The Writing of Fiction*, that one narrator is preferred to preserve unity in a story, Part V demonstrates Wharton ignoring her own advice. (34). Barbara White argues effectively that she does this here to create more sympathy for Lydia’s character than she might have achieved had she continued to control the point of view (59). The section begins in the early morning as Gannett is awakened by the sound of Lydia moving around her room. He reflects on Lydia’s situation and almost seems to have Edith Wharton in mind when he notes: “Her seeming intellectual independence had blinded him for a time to the feminine cast of her mind” (I: 125). With sorrow he understands that she is right about how impossible their life has become, “and its worst penalty was that it had made any other life impossible for them”

(I: 125). In despair he realizes they are tied together now even if love abates; however, standing at the window, he is startled to see Lydia leave the building, approach the steamboat landing and buy a ticket for the boat due to arrive in five minutes.

Though he has time to stop her, Gannett stays at the window because he recognizes that he must let Lydia leave him if that is her choice. The reader sees Lydia through Gannett's eyes as he watches her and feels not only his tension and sadness but also her confusion and conflict. The boat whistle blows, Lydia rises, but does not move. Finally, after the other passengers have boarded and call to her, she walks halfway up the gangplank, but then turns and leaves the boat. The story ends as "Lydia, with slow steps, was walking toward the garden . . ." while Gannett sits down with a schedule, "and mechanically, without knowing what he did, he began looking out the trains to Paris . . ." (Wharton's ellipsis) (I: 126).

This poignant scene is one of Wharton's most effective endings. She implies the eventual marriage of Lydia and Ralph, but it will be a marriage of convenience, convention and compromise. Lydia capitulates, not because she wants to marry Ralph, but because she has no other realistic option; where else can she go? She believes that they cannot continue their deceptive life, and Gannett has agreed, so they must change their arrangement. Ralph begins to make the appropriate preparations, but his movements are methodical, mechanical and joyless. The initial sense of freedom and possibility between them has gradually changed as both characters understand that reality has limited the choices open to them if they wish to end the deception. What once was love and perhaps a real connection has given way to obligation, conformity, and emotional

distance. It is important to note that nowhere in the story does Wharton portray love between Lydia and Ralph, though they do express love for one another. The reader may assume they loved each when Lydia left Tillotson, but those scenes were not written here, and we can only surmise what their relationship may have been. It is also possible that Lydia wanted an excuse to escape her marriage to Tillotson. “Souls Belated” explores what happens to love and intimacy when society, duty and reality prevail. Lydia and Ralph will marry and return to the very world from which Lydia escaped, but their bond is already weaker for the recognition that they must do this.

Both characters feel this inevitability. In addition to the abundant dialogue between the lovers as they examine their positions, Lydia is so brilliantly analytical as she dissects their situation at each moment in the first four parts that, when we see her through Gannett’s eyes in Part V, we can imagine what she is thinking and feeling. In this same section, Gannett’s awareness of the impossibility of their situation, coupled with his perfunctory movements on the last page, provide insight into his thoughts as well. The changes these characters experience are not sweeping, but rather they are subtle and a matter of degree. Their perceptions are altered, not only about each other, but also about themselves. Lydia, in particular, must revise her view of herself and her relationship with Gannett. Wharton does not explain these changes; we must infer them. Lev Raphael calls “Souls Belated” a “desolate story” because they are to marry, but what of love and Ralph’s writing? “After ‘having seen the nakedness of each other’s souls’ (123), they must settle for—ironically—the distance that marriage can provide” (220). In this story, clearer perceptions do not lead to greater intimacy, but rather, Lydia and Ralph have

become emotionally detached from each other. Gannett needs others and their stimulation to write; therefore, they must remain in society.

Blake Nevius summarizes the importance of this story to a study of Wharton's works: "No other early story marks out so precisely the ground on which the moral question in Edith Wharton's novels will be debated. Lydia Tillotson's decision sets the precedent for her fictional successors, for all those rebellious women . . . who sooner or later heed the voice of respectability, bow to the conventions, accept the compromise" (19). As Nevius notes, many of Wharton's characters, particularly women, remain in their marriages. Like Lydia, they are aware of the limitations of their situations but find no solutions outside of marriage. A woman can change her opinion about her husband, as Delia does in "Lamp of Psyche," but, except for the perception and knowledge gained, she will continue on as before. Margaret McDowell, writing in 1991 about Wharton's stories, notes that women in the early 1900s had little power or opportunity to change their lives: "Only painful disillusionment and resigned acceptance result from enlightenment. . ." (82). Furthermore, their husbands are oblivious to their new opinions. Nevertheless, in many of these situations, strength and determination follow the new perceptions. Illusions may give way to disillusionment, but Wharton often gives these women something in return. As Barbara White, in her discussion of Wharton's marriage stories, asserts: "Their loss of illusions and adjustment to reality will presumably lead to personal growth" (79). "The Pretext," written in 1908, is just the kind of story White discusses here; a detailed examination of it will illustrate this point.



In “The Pretext” perception takes on an even greater significance than it has in “Souls Belated.” How the characters see and whether their observations can be trusted become important issues. In fact, the perceptions of the main character are so changing and open to interpretation that readers and critics differ widely on what is actually taking place in the story as well as what meaning these events have. Interestingly, as we will see, some critics see the possibility of differing views while others do not even recognize that ambiguity exists. Perception, then, goes beyond Wharton’s story and spills over into critical views as well.

The plot is not particularly complicated. Prim, proper, middle-aged Margaret Ransom and her husband, a small town college lawyer, have befriended a young Englishman, Guy Dawnish, during his stay in Wentworth as he trains to become an electrical engineer. Until now, Margaret has been content with her traditional, stable, conventional New England life and her methodical, colorless husband. As the tale opens and Dawnish prepares to return to England, Margaret realizes he might be interested in her romantically. Though he has visited almost daily, she has felt protected from anyone’s judgment, not only because his family has been appreciative of her kindness, but also because of her age. Properly, nervously, she thwarts any declaration from him, but basks secretly in this admiration after he leaves. As time goes by, she doubts his interest, but when she learns inadvertently that Guy has broken his engagement to a childhood sweetheart because he has “formed an unfortunate attachment,” this confirmation of his feelings changes her drab inner life (I: 647). Though she decides they will never acknowledge this sentiment, Margaret is transformed and finds each day a joy.

While her exterior life remains the same, she feels a new happiness, a fresh interest in all of her activities for her home and her community.

Two months later, Guy's aunt abruptly appears in Margaret's parlor, looking for Mrs. Ransom, the woman with whom Guy has impulsively fallen in love. When Margaret finally convinces her visitor that there is no other Mrs. Ransom, no young daughter-in-law, that *she* is the Mrs. Ransom in question, Lady Caroline Duckett quickly concludes that Margaret has been "a pretext," an excuse for Guy to call off his engagement.

Margaret accepts this verdict, assuming Dawnish is shielding someone else or simply trying to extricate himself from the match. The transformation reverses itself, and Mrs. Ransom returns to her staid and restricted life; however, the damage has been done because she cannot revert to the person she was at the beginning of the story. Now she sees herself and her life through a different prism, sees it for what it has always been.

Despair replaces not only the happiness she felt when she believed Dawnish loved her but also the contentment she knew before he came to Wentworth.

The significant action in "The Pretext" lies not in the plot but in the perceptions of Margaret Ransom, the reflector<sup>2</sup>. The entire story, told from Margaret's perspective, centers on sight and illusion, on impression and reality. In fact, Wharton's portrayal of Guy Dawnish is so carefully obscure that the reader can never be sure what he feels for Margaret; we simply cannot tell whether he loves her or not. The important point here is not what he actually feels, but how everyone else judges the situation and how it changes Mrs. Ransom throughout the story. After examining how Wharton has constructed this

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<sup>2</sup>Wharton's term, borrowed from Henry James, for the character from whose point of view the story is told in the third person.

ambiguous situation, it will be possible to understand why a reader can interpret “The Pretext” in different ways. Many critics discuss the tale as if there is only one possible conclusion: Margaret is a pretext and no more;<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, one or two give credence to the idea that Guy may really love her.<sup>4</sup> Quite probably this confusion is exactly what Wharton intended when she wrote the story. If the significance is perception, and Margaret becomes a reflection what she perceives, then what may or may not be true hardly matters. What counts is what *she* sees, or thinks she sees, and what *she* feels.

Two important scenes frame “The Pretext;” in each, Margaret Ransom sits at her mirror and studies her reflection. Wharton establishes the issues of seeing and being seen, of appearance and reality, of illusions and objectivity at the beginning of the tale and underlines them at the end. Margaret’s looking glass is no frivolous object meant to flatter. Instead “the cramped eagle-topped mirror above her plain prim dressing table” literally reflects the strict New England atmosphere of Wentworth (I: 632).

In the opening scene, after Dawnish’s almost daily visit, Margaret looks objectively at her face, “a face which had grown middle-aged while it waited for the joys of youth” I: (632). Because of her conversation with Guy, she feels momentarily young and girlish, but notices her thinning hair, veined forehead, thin and strained mouth with pale lips, eyes with lines at the corner, shrunken throat. “She was as flat as the pattern of the wallpaper—and so was her life” (I: 633). Looking even more closely at Wharton’s diction, we see her precise use of words like “cramped,” “thin,” “shrunken,” “flat” to

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<sup>3</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, Lev Raphael, Allen Stein, Shari Benstock, Hermione Lee

<sup>4</sup> Barbara White

accentuate the diminished and compacted world in which Margaret lives—the same imagery of shrunken space Wharton uses in “Autres Temps . . .” (which will be discussed in Chapter Three). Margaret fluffs her hair, and smiles in the mirror, but remembers her upbringing and draws back. She must “collect herself,” must keep her emotions from being “widely scattered,” must return them to “neatly sorted and easily accessible bundles on the high shelves of a perfectly ordered moral consciousness” (1: 633). What she sees in the mirror and what she sees in life are the same.

In the scene that follows, Wharton introduces Ransom whom she also characterizes by what he sees or does not see. He looks at his wife with a “shortsighted unobservant glance” (1: 635), and does not realize that she is upset. Chiding her for not planning to attend his speech to the Wentworth faculty that evening and brushing her excuses aside, he urges her to invite Dawnish as an escort because he is sure Guy will want to hear him speak in public. When she finally agrees, he compares her still ruffled hair to the Brant girl, a “New Yorky” flirt frowned upon by Wentworth society. This scene is critical because it marks a change in the way Margaret Ransom perceives her husband. Until now she has been proud of his standing in the community and of being understood by him. At this moment though, she wonders, as he exhorts her to attend the speech and bring Guy: “Was it possible that Ransom was fatuous?” (1: 635). The unkind comparison to the Brant girl makes him seem “obtuse” as she newly observes him: “thick and yet juiceless, in his dry legal middle age” (1: 636).

What precisely has happened between Margaret and Guy to stimulate her reactions? We learn that Dawnish has shared some photographs of his life in England and

left them with her. The pictures reveal rather mundane scenes: his uncle's home in Wiltshire, a tennis court and a river on the property where Guy is boating with a girl, his rooms at Oxford, and a cousin's studio in London. Margaret, however, idealizes the settings and finds in these pictures a reflection of a life vastly different from her own. Her mind summons exaggerated phrases to describe this life: "so rich, so romantic, so packed . . . with poetic allusion" (1: 638). To her, England represents "that brilliant pinnacled past, that many-faceted existence in which the brightest episodes of the whole body of English fiction seemed collectively reflected" (1: 638). In addition to the pictures, Margaret infers from Guy's conversation (though Wharton artfully leaves this ambiguous) that he is reluctant to leave Wentworth when he proclaims: "I was a bit lonely here at first—but *now!* It will be jolly, of course, to see them all again—but there are some things one doesn't easily give up . . ." (Wharton's ellipsis) (I: 639). She presumes that he might prefer her company to all the splendors in the photographs.

Now, though her inclination is to back away, Margaret summons Dawnish as Ransom requests and attends the speeches. Before Ransom's turn, however, Margaret is overcome with the heat of the room, the scrutiny of the others in the audience, and her excitement at sitting with Guy, so he escorts her out of the gallery and down to the river. Wharton carefully constructs this conversation as well. When Guy tries to tell Margaret something important about how he feels, she fears his declaration of love and asks him not to explain anything to her. Full of ellipses, broken sentences, fragments, dashes and the like, the dialogue is clearly ambiguous. The reader can certainly understand why Margaret believes Guy is in love with her. In rereading this section after the issue of a

pretext is raised at the end, one can believe that Margaret is misreading Guy's intentions; however, it seems just as likely that she is interpreting him correctly. For precisely this reason it seems probable that Wharton intended this confusion as she certainly knows how to be specific when she chooses. She may have planned to leave the answer vague because she wants to examine and underline Margaret's perceptions and feelings, not whether Guy really loves her or not. Margaret expresses this assumption herself:

“Don't you see,” she hurried on, “don't you *feel* how much safer it is—yes, I'm willing to put it so! —how much safer to leave everything undisturbed . . . just as . . . as it has grown of itself . . . without trying to say: ‘It's this or that’ . . . ? It's what we each choose to call it to ourselves, after all, isn't it? Don't let us try to find a name that . . . that we should both agree upon . . . we probably shouldn't succeed” (1: 643).

Mrs. Ransom is asking Dawnish not to spell out his thoughts too clearly because she really does not want the answer. They return to the college, and the section ends with Margaret again *seeing* her husband differently: “and she never afterward forgot the look of his back—heavy, round-shouldered, yet a little pompous—in a badly-fitting overcoat that stood out at the neck and hid his collar. She had never before noticed how he dressed” (1: 644). A few days later when Guy visits the Ransoms for a final farewell, Wharton's choice of descriptive words broadens Margaret's new scrutiny of her husband: his books are “shabby,” his hair “grayish stubble,” his forehead “sallow.” In opposition to this impression, Dawnish's pallor is “refined.” Though ill at ease, he laughs and is “somehow more mature, more obscurely in command of himself” (1: 645).

Later, Margaret has a few regrets that she did not allow herself the secret thrill of hearing Guy's declaration, but most of the time she is content to have behaved as she feels was proper. She can still relive their time together and remember: “What had

happened was as much outside the sphere of her marriage as some transaction in a star. It had simply given her a secret life of incommunicable joys, as if all the wasted springs of her youth had been stored in some hidden pool, and she could return there now to bathe in them” (1: 645-646). As time passes and Dawnish’s letters are carefully neutral, Margaret assumes that, while sincere at the time, Guy’s feelings may have been impulsive and fleeting. Then almost a year after his return to England, she receives a letter from a Wentworth friend vacationing in Europe. Her friend mentions that she heard Dawnish’s family was in an uproar since he had broken off an understanding with his childhood heiress sweetheart because he has “formed an unfortunate attachment” (1: 647). The family believes it must have happened in Wentworth because he visited nowhere else.

This news creates a crucial moment in “The Pretext” because now Margaret can believe that Guy’s feelings were not transient and that she is indeed loved by him. Wharton delineates this awareness by again focusing on how Margaret sees: “Margaret folded the letter and looked out across the river. It was not the same river, but a mystic current shot with moonlight” (1: 647). She imagines writing to Guy but ultimately decides to do nothing. He has never mentioned any of this to her, and she wants to respect his silence and his sensitivity to her wishes. Still, Margaret’s perceptions of herself and her life have been transformed because she believes in Guy’s love for her: “Her life, thenceforward, was bathed in a tranquil beauty” (1: 649). She finds routines and tasks that once seemed annoying or dull newly worthwhile, and she exerts energy

researching English architecture for the Higher Thought Club, Wharton's satirical name for the current intellectual pursuits of the ladies of Wentworth.

When Guy's aunt, Lady Caroline Duckett abruptly appears in the Ransom parlor looking for Mrs. Ransom, she repeatedly asks for Margaret's daughter-in-law as she announces that the family will not allow Guy to break his engagement. Though Margaret tries to explain who she is, Lady Caroline waves her aside, saying that even though Guy insists his attachment is one-sided, the daughter-in-law could persuade him to come to his senses. Finally Margaret breaks into her diatribe and makes herself known as *the* Mrs. Ransom in question. Though Dawnish's aunt sputters and questions, she finally collapses into her seat, tellingly repeating "I simply don't see" over and over. Recovering quickly, Lady Caroline jumps immediately to the conclusion that Guy must love someone else and is using Margaret as a pretext to shield this woman. She refuses to understand why Margaret cannot tell her the woman's name and leaves angrily.

The final scene in "The Pretext" parallels the first as Margaret drags herself upstairs to her mirror, and the themes of vision and perception, of appearances and reality come full circle. She has accepted Lady Caroline Duckett's pronouncement that Guy has used her to shield someone else or simply to escape a difficult situation. One must question why she so readily concurs with this verdict and is so willing to relinquish her new estimation of herself and her worth. Perhaps Lady Caroline's dogged insistence created doubts in Margaret; perhaps Margaret's new-found confidence is not strong enough to quiet the questions that were raised; perhaps unconsciously Margaret is using Lady Caroline's judgment as a pretext of her own, so that she can retreat to the protected,



less emotionally stimulating world where she felt safe in her dull life; perhaps all Margaret wanted from Guy's admiration was simply to feel pretty, confident, and important, but the possibility of his love becomes too complicated and intense. Whatever the reason, the alteration in Margaret is evident as this awareness replaces the recent happiness she has known. "She felt no anger—only an unspeakable sadness, a sadness which she knew would never be appeased" (1: 654). She studies herself in the mirror, noting "there was no trace of youth left in her face—she saw it now as other had doubtless always seen it" (1: 654). Now Margaret thinks she sees objectively: "she wished to clear her eyes of all illusions" (1: 654.) She senses this sadness, this despair, not just about her appearance, but about her life as well.

Looking out the window, Margaret imagines her husband returning and all the drab emptiness ahead for her, with no connection between them other than their monotonous life and obligations: "From where she sat she could look down the empty elm-shaded street, up which, at this hour every day, she was sure to see her husband's figure advancing. She would see it presently—she would see it for many years to come. She had an aching vision of the length of the years that stretched before her" (1: 654). Her thoughts place further weight on the importance of seeing. The familiar routines that have so recently become joyful will forever be tedious, and her new interests will become obligations to be met. The story ends as Margaret picks up her architecture book, once fascinating and now hopelessly dull. Unfortunately however, Margaret cannot even return to the woman she was at the beginning of the tale. Before she believed herself loved by Guy, she had been satisfied with her life and unaware of what she might be missing.

Though Wharton portrays Wentworth condescendingly, she also describes Margaret's gratification and pride in the community, her routines and habits. While she may not have experienced passion or joy, at least she had been content. Though no one else will notice, subtly now, Margaret has changed. She suffers despair at the conclusion because her perspective has shifted, and she sees herself and her life with new eyes.

Oddly, this marvelous story has received remarkably little critical attention, and the notice it has received centers primarily on its connections to Henry James and Morton Fullerton. R. W. B. Lewis notes in his biography that Edith Wharton based "The Pretext" on an idea James suggested to her, but Lewis also finds a correlation between the plot of the story and Wharton's relationship with Fullerton (193). Perhaps because of this possible biographical link between the story and her life, and because of Wharton's difficult relationship with Fullerton, literary critics are apt to assume that Margaret is a pretext and that Dawnish is similar to Fullerton. Lewis states this interpretation of Margaret's situation as though it is fact: "She is the more saddened and embittered to learn that the visitor had pursued her only as a pretext for lingering in the neighborhood while wooing and winning the hand of another woman" (194). He does not even consider the possibility that Lady Caroline Duckett could be wrong and that Margaret is assenting to the wrong conclusion; Lewis accepts the pretext premise without question. It is interesting and relevant to note that James' idea for "The Pretext" was based on a true story that he shared with Edith Wharton. Shari Benstock, in her biography of Wharton, *No Gifts from Chance*, relates that an English friend of James had fallen in love with a professor's wife when he was at Harvard and subsequently broke his engagement to his

English fiancée. James encouraged Wharton to write a story based on this anecdote (187). Knowing the facts from James' story, one must wonder why it has been so difficult for critics and readers to believe that Dawnish actually loves Margaret, though Benstock believes "The Pretext" reverses the facts of James' story.

Lewis and Benstock are not the only literary critics to take this stance. Lev Raphael also assumes that Margaret is a pretext for another love. In his book, *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame*, Raphael includes his discussion of this story in a chapter about how the family environment can create shame for its members. He sees Margaret in these terms and focuses on her shame and embarrassment as she first believes she is loved and then believes she is not. " 'The Pretext' is the painful story," he writes, "of a married middle-aged woman who mistakenly comes to think that the attractive Englishman visiting her college town has fallen in love with her" (123). He argues convincingly that the oppressive, restrictive atmosphere of Wentworth, coupled with a dull, predictable marriage, create a sort of prison for her, and contends that Margaret's expectations and reactions largely stem from her stifling environment. Raphael warns: "Margaret Ransom is headed for a terrible disillusionment," and sympathizes with her embarrassment after the aunt's visit: "What a humiliation" (126). He does not, however, consider the real possibility that Lady Caroline may be an unreliable observer and judge, despite her previously mentioned confusion; nor does he question Margaret's own ability to assess the situation, though in the story Wharton emphasizes that neither woman sees the situation clearly.

Like Raphael, Allen Stein sees no ambiguity in Wharton's story, and mentions it only briefly in half a paragraph. He discusses "The Pretext" in terms of marriage and entrapment, a common Wharton theme, and claims Wharton shows the dangers of trying to escape from this trap by fantasizing about others. In a rather unsympathetic treatment of Margaret, Stein considers her initial conclusions about Guy to be fantasy, and then completely mischaracterizes the important scene at the river: "Convinced that he cares for her, she makes him an impassioned speech in which she at once avows her love for him and renounces it dramatically as something that cannot be" (225).

Not all critics accept Lady Caroline Duckett and Margaret's viewpoint. Unlike most, Barbara White devotes a great deal of attention to this story and concludes that Guy Dawnish *does* in fact love Margaret Ransom and is not using her as a pretext or as an excuse to break his engagement: "Guy's actions would make perfect sense, however, if he were not lying and truly did love Margaret Ransom. The only real objection is the first principle of the English relative, that young men do not fall in love with older, ordinary-looking women" (21). White makes a compelling argument as she analyzes how far-fetched the idea of a pretext is, asserting that Guy would not lie about his friend in this way, nor would he need this kind of pretense when other simpler methods would be available to him. She further notes that Guy's aunt is an unreliable judge of the situation who repeats, " 'I simply don't see' " more than once (I: 652-3). White's interpretation gains even more credence as she notes that Margaret herself sees no better than her husband or Guy's aunt and is too willing to accept Lady Caroline's conclusions. Her perceptions change throughout the story based on what she thinks she is seeing. White

suggests that Margaret chooses to return to her cautious, conventional, former self, arguing: “She does not go wrong by being illusioned in the conventional way of opening herself to the possibility of being fooled; instead, she closes herself off from the possibility of being loved” (22). While it would be convenient to generalize that male critics accept the pretext assumption and female ones do not, this is not the case. Both Wharton biographers Shari Benstock and Hermione Lee, also do not consider the possibility that Dawnish loves Margaret (Benstock 187, Lee 332).

Why, then, does White believe this story has been misread? “It is . . . ironic that this tale of illusion should be one of Wharton’s most misinterpreted stories. One wonders why no one has questioned Margaret’s point of view, especially when Wharton pays so much attention . . . to the vagaries of perception” (23). White goes on to blame the alleged misinterpretation on sexist attitudes about older women and on the structure of the story itself with its devices of a letter from a friend and the sudden visit from Lady Caroline Duckett. This critic also thinks that part of the problem stems from a difficulty she notes in other Wharton stories: “Many Wharton stories begin well, only to gradually lose momentum and peter out at the end or be overcome by the complexities of the plot” (23). She concludes her discussion of “The Pretext” by calling it “flawed” because of these problems; however, White believes that this work “does belong among her better stories and is more interesting than has previously been thought” (24).

Each reader can debate whether Guy Dawnish uses Margaret Ransom as a pretext or whether he actually loves her; however, this question misses the most important point. Wharton’s interest in “The Pretext” clearly centers on Margaret Ransom, not Dawnish.

She tells the story from Margaret's point of view from beginning to end, so that we never know what others think or intend except through the filter of Margaret's perceptions. Guy's feelings are delicately ambiguous. Some would argue this facilitates the surprise ending and Guy's use of Margaret as a pretext, but it is also possible that Wharton creates this ambiguity deliberately to allow Margaret's perceptions the proper weight. What matters is how *she* sees, what *she* thinks Guy means; it is not really important whether he loves her or not. Wharton is interested in exploring how Margaret reacts to feeling loved and then used, not what Guy actually intends when he tries to talk to her; however, the reader does not know whether Margaret Ransom has ever seen the situation clearly, either when she thinks Guy loves her or when she believes that he does not. The story examines how she changes throughout the narrative, how she reflects these two perceptions: the joy she discovers at the beginning versus the despair she feels at the end. Instead of viewing the story as "flawed" or "gimmicky" as White suggests, we can see it as masterful and well-written (23). It seems quite probable that Wharton intended to leave Guy's actions and motives ambiguous in order to keep the emphasis where she wants it: on Margaret Ransom's varying perceptions and changing reality.

Edith Wharton uses primarily serious and somber tones in "The Pretext" and "Souls Belated." Although the moods are certainly not as bleak or devastating as those in *The House of Mirth* or *Ethan Frome*, the light, witty irony and social sarcasm of "The Mission of Jane" or "The Other Two" are replaced by more austere presentations. It is not useful simply to align events in Wharton's life with her work and conclude that when her personal problems were most pressing, her stories echoed this tension. That would be

expedient but inaccurate; however, her interest in various topics that we find in her work often do relate to what is occurring over a period of time in her life.

In the summer of 1910, the affair with Morton Fullerton was coming to an end as he became more involved with his cousin Katharine. Furthermore, Walter Berry, a lifelong friend and possible lover, became Wharton's houseguest in Paris and her interest in Fullerton waned. That summer, she wrote "The Letters," a short story that R. W. B. Lewis states is taken from incidents in both Wharton's and Fullerton's lives (*Edith Wharton* 286.) Evidently Vincent Deering represents Fullerton, and Lewis says Wharton was obviously reassessing his character as she became disenchanted with his behavior. The character Lizzie sometimes reflects Wharton herself and other times, Katharine Fullerton, who wrote letters to Fullerton that Lewis assumes he shared with Edith Wharton (287). Shari Benstock, in her biography of Wharton, disagrees about this last point, noting: "Not only is there no evidence to support this claim, but it also seems entirely out of character, both for Fullerton and for Edith. Leading multiple lives, he kept multiple secrets . . . If she had read Katharine's letters . . . she would have formed quite a different view of her—and of Fullerton" (212). Whether or not Wharton actually saw the letters or even knew of their existence, the story itself sheds light on how she draws upon her own life in her work.

Wharton returns again to the subject of marriage and divorce in "The Letters." While it contains common Wharton themes of disappointment and disillusionment with love and marriage, "The Letters" is more upbeat and hopeful than many others. Though it follows the illusion-perception-disillusion-new perception pattern we find in many of the

shorter works, this one ends more positively. Lizzie may be disillusioned about her husband, but she also realizes that she is happy in her life and in most aspects of her marriage; her realizations do not destroy her happiness.

Lizzie West, an impoverished young American governess in Paris, falls in love with her pupil's father, Vincent Deering, a painter of questionable talent and little wealth, who is married to an invalid. Naive and awkward, Lizzie idolizes Deering and his talent, seeing him and their love in a romanticized and sentimental way. When his wife dies and he must leave for America to settle her small estate, Deering encourages Lizzie to love him and to write him often. Lizzie receives a letter from the train, the boat and upon his arrival in New York, but though she writes frequently to him, she hears no more from Deering. Like Wharton herself with Fullerton, Lizzie is almost paralyzed by doubts, for she fears that worldlier women are pursuing him and that he may have forgotten her. Nevertheless, she continues to write until the silence convinces her that, while he may have loved her once, he has moved on to other experiences. She writes one last letter, taking a light tone for the sake of her pride and releasing him from any obligation to her.

Deftly, Wharton moves the action ahead two years as the narrator places Lizzie at a luncheon table on the Champs Elysees. Lizzie is now "Miss West," having inherited part of a cousin's estate. Well-dressed and confident, she entertains visiting American relatives and Jackson Penn, a potential fiancé. The past returns, however, when Penn notices Deering, an acquaintance from the boat to Paris, watching the group from another table. A few days later, Deering calls on Lizzie and convinces her that, though he kept her letters with him at all times, he did not answer because he wanted to spare her. When



he found there was no money in his wife's estate and that he had few prospects for earning more, he hoped she would hate him, forget him; however, when he saw her again, he could stay away no longer. Though skeptical at first, Lizzie falls again under the spell of love she feels for him.

In the last section, Wharton again moves the story ahead three more years, setting the scene in the Deering's home on the second birthday of their son. Lizzie is a happy wife and mother, busy taking care of her family and her home. She still worships Deering, even though she finally realizes that he is not as ambitious, dedicated or talented a painter as she thought he would be. As she has throughout the story, Lizzie always finds ways to rationalize Deering to herself so she can continue to adore him. She cheerfully dismisses his flaws or faults as irresponsibility or disorganization, traits she finds she can accept. In fact, Lizzie herself has become a sort of artist, constructing and creating in her own mind the marriage she needs to have. On the morning of the birthday, Lizzie, with the help of her friend Andora Macy, is unpacking two trunks that have arrived from America for her husband. His former landlady had retained his possessions in lieu of rent, but Lizzie had cheerfully paid the debt. Now her baby plays with some of the contents as they are unpacked and in the process, she and Andora discover all ten of the letters she wrote Deering, all ten unopened. Feeling betrayed and deceived, at first Lizzie assumes he married her for her money and imagines leaving her home with the baby and Andora or making Deering leave instead. Neither scenario satisfies her, and Lizzie realizes that, though her husband may not be what she once thought he was, nevertheless, she loves him and the life they have together. She will say or do nothing to change that.

In examining this story closely, we see that while “The Letters” follows certain familiar Wharton patterns, it does contain differences as well. Why does this story end so differently from those previously mentioned and why is that significant? Like “Souls Belated” and “The Pretext,” perception and seeing play key roles. Lizzie’s perceptions of herself and Vincent Deering change dramatically as the story progresses. It is also important, however, to note that while Lizzie’s perceptions change and her illusions are replaced by facts and awareness, she makes a distinctly conscious decision about Deering and her marriage: in spite of what she has learned about him during the three years of their marriage, she still wants her life with him. Disillusionment in this story does not produce despair, but rather a more mature and knowing consciousness, a unique sort of happiness. It is useful to examine how Wharton portrays Lizzie’s evolving self.

“The Letters” is told from Lizzie’s point of view in the third person. Wharton’s narrator intrudes little into this story but does, especially at the beginning, fashion the reader’s attitude about the characters with a kindly, if slightly condescending tone. At twenty-five, Lizzie’s naïve and romantic outlook is clear at once. Her climb up the hill to the Deering home becomes “like a dream flight up a heavenly stairway” after she falls in love with Vincent Deering (II: 177). She is a “poor soul” when she shyly must ask him for her salary (II: 178). Lizzie’s inexperience and innocence extend to her ability to judge his work as well. Deering has had some success as an artist, but Lizzie overestimates both his ability and his appetite for concentrated work. As the story opens, she wishes to discuss some concerns about Juliet, but is reluctant to “bring them to the notice of a spirit engaged with higher things” (II: 178). Though she is aware that the notoriety from his

earlier success has not continued, still Lizzie judges his work as “remarkable” and believes “the tide of publicity had somehow set the other way, and left him stranded in a noble isolation” (II: 180).

Lizzie’s hero-worshipping eyes elevate Deering and at the same time diminish her own abilities, showing the limits of her own sight. The narrator refers to her as “the little stranded compatriot doomed to earn a precarious living so far from her native shore” (II: 180). Her thoughts go beyond even the range of naivety and become hyperbole:

The intervening months, as she looked back at them, were merged in a vast golden haze, through which here and there rose the outline of a shining island. The haze was the general enveloping sense of his love, and the shining islands were the days they spent together. . . Mr. Deering knew how to express with unmatched clearness the thoughts that trembled in her mind: to talk with him was to soar up into the azure on the outspread wings of his intelligence, and look down, dizzily, yet clearly, on all the wonders and glories of the world. (II: 180)

Wharton’s narrator pegs Lizzie’s perceptions through this language. When his wife dies and Deering prepares to leave for America, Lizzie continues to romanticize the time they spend together before he leaves. Her assumptions about his feelings and intentions are far-reaching and lacking in explicit commitment. When he, recently widowed, chooses to dine quietly and privately with her, she assumes he must love her “because a man of his stamp is presumed to abstain from light adventures. If, then, he wished so much to be quietly and gravely with her, it could be only for reasons she did not call by name, but of which she felt the sacred tremor in her heart” (II: 184). He would be above trifling with her because she ascribes a noble quality to his behavior. Lizzie even attributes to the waiter sensitivity to their situation, noting that he must realize they are not requesting

privacy “for the familiar motive” (II: 184). Lizzie’s clichéd view of Deering presumably stems from her youth and inexperience with older men, her need to find an intimate connection with someone to combat the loneliness she feels so far from home, and her yearning to see herself as beloved by a talented and insightful man.

This is not to suggest that Deering has not encouraged Lizzie or that he is not romantically interested in her. In fact he has promoted Lizzie’s infatuation. He kisses her and tells her that his daughter needs her, that she brightens his home and provides a serious balance to his wife’s frivolity. He meets her in galleries and museums on her free days, dazzling her with his knowledge, kissing her occasionally or touching her hand. At their farewell dinner in the privacy of an upstairs room, Deering holds her and kisses her at length, asking her to write to him frequently. He writes to her a few times after he leaves and tells her that he loves her. The reader has no reason to assume that he is insincere or false, though we have no reason to assume otherwise, either. At the same time, it is obvious that Lizzie jumps to conclusions and assumes too much. Her sentimental perceptions allow her to excuse any of Deering’s behavior that does not support her fantasies:

She was sure now that Deering loved her, and if he had seized the occasion of their farewell to give her some definitely worded sign of his feeling—if, more plainly, he had asked her to marry him—his doing so would have seemed less a proof of his sincerity than of his suspecting in her the need of such a warrant. That he had abstained seemed to show that he trusted her as she trusted him, and that they were one most of all in this complete security of understanding. (II: 185)

Wharton has carefully laid the foundation for Lizzie’s later pain and eventual disillusion in these early characterizations of her hero-worship, her romanticized admiration, and her

illusions about his enduring intentions. For these reasons, even before Deering leaves for America, the reader is suspicious of Deering's commitment.

After Vincent Deering is gone, Lizzie continues to live at the same modest pension. She befriends Andora Macy, another young American woman who hopes eventually to teach French at a girls' school in Georgia. Lizzie feels sorry for Andora and a few of the other boarders because she cannot imagine that they will ever know the kind of love she has found. Andora, who "yearned to be admired, and feared to be insulted," ardently admires Lizzie and involves herself in Lizzie's affairs with dramatic gusto (II: 187). Actually, Andora is an exaggerated version of Lizzie herself in her sentimental interpretations and gushing pronouncements. In fact Lizzie has previously ignored Andora because she represents the bleak future Lizzie has feared, but now, in the early weeks of Deering's absence, Lizzie enjoys her new status as a woman cherished by a man and feels superior to the other less fortunate, unattached boarders. Newly important, she basks in Andora's solicitous hovering as she waits for letters from abroad. " 'I thought you'd like me to put this in your own hand,' Andora whispered significantly, pressing a letter upon Lizzie. 'I couldn't *bear* to see it lying on the table with the others' " (II: 187). Later, there are two more letters and then no more. Lizzie analyzes and dissects each possible motive for his silence and writes repeatedly to Deering, begging for news but hears nothing. Finally, concluding that his attentions were genuine but fleeting, and blaming herself for exaggerating her importance to him, Lizzie carefully crafts a short farewell letter without reproaches or accusations in which she relieves him of any responsibility he might feel toward her. Self-conscious and self-effacing, Lizzie still

idealizes him. Ironically, she struggles so diligently to understand Deering and to convey just the right breezy tone in her final letter. Ultimately, though the reader is unaware until the end that Lizzie's letters remain unread, upon reflection, these efforts seem particularly useless.

In Sections V and VI, Wharton shifts the balance of power from Deering to Lizzie, though Lizzie still does not see him clearly and, as always with Wharton, how her characters see is what counts. Her new wealth and status as a marriageable young woman bring her fashionable clothes and self-confidence. While she enjoys her newfound leisure and the money to treat Andora, Lizzie has not yet filled the void in her personal life. Therefore, though she has thought about marrying Jackson Penn, she does not love him, and it is relatively easy for her to convince herself that Deering's reasons for his silence are true. Now the supplicant, he pleads his case for forgiveness and reaffirms his love for her, much like Morris Townsend in "The Heiress," Ruth and Augustus Goetz's work based on Henry James' *Washington Square*. Unlike Catherine Sloper, however, Lizzie pities Deering's failure to succeed as an artist, and as she listens to his story, the early anger and skepticism are replaced by affection. Since Wharton has not yet revealed that Lizzie's letters were never opened by Deering, when he tells her that they were always with him and contained "beautiful, wonderful things in them," hers is a plausible response (II: 195). This sets the stage for the final section and Lizzie's discovery of the truth about Deering.

Even before discovery of the unopened letters, Lizzie has recognized and accepted some flaws in her husband's character. Some are minor and easy to excuse.

Deering is disorganized and somewhat irresponsible about his activities, but Lizzie enjoys ordering the household and his personal effects. More important, he has not developed as an artist in the ways she thought he would after their marriage. After three years together, with a studio of his own in their Neuilly house and freedom from financial concerns, Vincent Deering is still dabbling and unproductive. Nevertheless, though we may wonder why, Lizzie, happy in her married life, pays little attention to his faults. Again, Wharton may well be describing herself with Fullerton. Wife and mother of a two-year old son, Lizzie regards Deering merely as lazy. Though she has provided him with an income, he has never taken advantage of her fortune or spent extravagantly. Unlike Morris Townsend, Deering is not really interested in wealth.

After Andora discovers the unopened letters, she suggests to Lizzie preposterous and random explanations, from Deering's landlady keeping them from him to a conspiracy against him. In the face of Lizzie's steely calm, Andora effusively tells Lizzie she knows just how she feels and begs her: "If only you'd give way, my darling! . . . Remember, love, you're not alone!" (II: 201). At Lizzie's request, Andora leaves, taking the child, while Lizzie begins the painful, necessary process of looking at her husband without illusions as she tries to determine what to do about her marriage. The jumbled room and rubbish from the trunk become a metaphor for her life:

She looked about the disordered room, which offered a dreary image of the havoc of her life. An hour or two ago, everything about her had been so exquisitely ordered, without and within: her thoughts and her emotions had all been outspread before her like jewels laid away symmetrically in a collector's cabinet. Now they had been tossed down helter-skelter among the rubbish there on the floor, and had themselves turned to rubbish like the rest. Yes, there lay her life at her feet, among all that tarnished trash (II: 201).

Lizzie's subsequent feelings and reactions show her maturation from the naïve and idealistic young girl at the beginning of the story to a more perceptive and realistic wife whose illusions about her husband have been replaced by a clearer vision of him and of their relationship. It is here, in the last few pages of the story, that Wharton illustrates this change. Lizzie realizes at once that Deering had simply been too busy to read her letters when they arrived and had later forgotten their existence. During all this time she believed that she has influenced him in some special way, that he has valued what she has written to him, and that her letters which "meant so much" to him created a unique bond between them (II: 202). Once, she would have been crushed to discover this indifference to her letters, but as she has grown to understand Deering better, this is no longer true. "She could have forgiven him now for having forgotten her; but she could never forgive him for having deceived her . . . At that moment it seemed to her that everything he had ever done and been was a lie" (II: 202, 203). The deception matters most to her, but what should she do now? Possible alternatives rush through her mind.

At first, Lizzie believes Deering wanted her for her money, and she imagines herself leaving, fleeing the house with her baby while he dabbles away in his studio. Then almost immediately she rejects that idea. After all, since the house is hers, Deering should be the one to leave, an important assertion in this progression of impulses. In a state of confusion, Lizzie vacillates between remembering how happy she has been and wanting never to see Deering again. Lizzie tells herself that, if their marriage were depicted in a novel, once he deceived her, Deering would have continued to lie, and they could not have been happy together in a life based on deception; however, she is also sure



that he has not deceived her since his return and believes that they have had three wonderful years together. On the other hand, humiliated by her discovery and devastated at the thought of his returning to her for money, she ironically castigates herself for naiveté. She wants to erase the discovery of the letters, to have the life she lived before the trunks arrived, but that is now impossible.

Out of this confusion and turmoil, Lizzie's thoughts crystallize and the reader sees the emergence of a woman who has been forced to accept certain truths about her life. Stripped of the illusions she sustained before her marriage, Lizzie rejects Andora Macy's sentimental sympathy in favor of a realistic determination to remain with Vincent Deering; she really has no other viable option. She will not show him the letters or accuse him of marrying her for her inheritance because Lizzie realizes that even now, she loves the life she has with her husband. Yes, she is disillusioned; her new perceptions do not flatter him or his motives. In this story, however, disillusionment does not produce despair or bitterness because Lizzie deliberately chooses a different outcome:

As her husband advanced up the path she had a sudden vision of their three years together. Those years were her whole life; everything before them had been colorless and unconscious, like the blind life of the plant before it reaches the surface of the soil. 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. She understood now that she had gradually adjusted herself to the new image of her husband as he was, as he would always be. He was not the hero of her dreams, but he was the man she loved, and who had loved her. For she saw now, in this last wide flash of pity and initiation, that, as a comely marble may be made out of worthless scraps of mortar, glass, and pebbles, so out of mean mixed substances may be fashioned a love that will bear the stress of life. (II: 206).

While the reader will still have doubts, Lizzie chooses to believe, or at least to act as though she believes that regardless of why he married her, Deering now loves her. With this conviction, she moves beyond the romantic theatrics of Andora Macy. She sees more clearly and still can love Deering and accept his love. Perhaps, because of Lizzie's new insights and convictions, a genuine intimacy between her and Deering can now develop. In "The Letters" Edith Wharton rejects not only the idealistic, melodramatic, and sentimental emotionalism of Andora Macy, but also the disillusioned, despairing, and hopeless resignation of Lydia Tillotson or Margaret Ransom. Her stories represent a wide range of possibilities and attitudes rather than a single viewpoint.

Many critics, when discussing "The Letters," point out the connection to Wharton's own life and her affair with Morton Fullerton. R. W. B. Lewis notes: "Deering, indeed, is almost to a detail an ironic though tempered portrait of Morton Fullerton" and that Wharton mined her own journal and poems in Lizzie's reactions to Deering (*Edith Wharton* 287). Furthermore, Lewis links Deering's treatment of Lizzie when he stops writing to her from American to Fullerton's treatment of his cousin Katherine, with whom he also had a relationship. Lewis points out that by 1910, though Wharton still loved Fullerton in many ways, their affair was over.

Like Lewis, in *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes the similarities between the story and Wharton's life, and asserts that "The Letters" is written too directly from personal experience because Wharton empathizes too strongly with Katherine's plight: "Wharton has not confused fiction with life, but she has attempted to draw fiction rather too directly and simply out of real-world experience"

(196). Calling the story “this little tale . . . slender, even melodramatic,” Wolff devotes several pages to the work, but her comments are primarily plot summarization and she does not explain why she places such little value on this story (196).

Margaret McDowell notes that as Lizzie eventually overlooks Deering’s ignoring her letters and his failure as an artist, Edith Wharton also had much to overlook with Fullerton. She also connects Fullerton with other works of this time, including the short story, “The Choice” and the novel, *The Reef* (Edith Wharton 12). McDowell notes that Wharton gained lasting insights from her love affair which also influenced *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Summer*, *The Old Maid*, *The Children*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, and *Twilight Sleep* (13).

Of further significance, “The Letters” illustrates Wharton’s increasing skills as a short story writer. Evelyn Fracasso, in *Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Consciousness*, compares it to the earlier “Lamp of Psyche” (1895) and argues persuasively that, though Wharton explores similar topics in both stories, her skills in “The Letters” are more developed and her use of imagery and handling of time through flashbacks more sophisticated (17). Both women deal with illusions and disappointment. “Like Delia Corbett, who was left to pick up the pieces of broken crystal when the illusion of her admirable husband is shattered, Lizzie is left to pick up her letters. . . now that her vision of love has been similarly destroyed” (19). Fracasso explores the imprisonment theme throughout her book, examining various ways in which Wharton uses this kind of imagery, and she concludes that both Delia and Lizzie “choose to remain imprisoned in their marriages, realizing that their love ‘had undergone a modification which the years

were not to efface' (I: 57)" (20). Though Fracasso's arguments about the imprisoned consciousness are illuminating, it is critical to recognize the relevant change in these characters at the end of these stories. Both women view their husbands differently; both replace their earlier illusions with a new, clearer vision. This vision, however, rather than imprisoning them, in some ways, actually frees them instead. Choosing to remain in their marriages, but with a clearer perspective and understanding of what this choice means, represents a kind of personal and emotional freedom, one that Edith Wharton values. Wharton does not examine Delia's thoughts or feelings with the same depth of analysis she brings to Lizzie, and we can view "The Letters" as a much more skillfully written work; nevertheless, in both of these stories, like "Souls Belated," "The Pretext," and like Edith Wharton herself, these women gain strength and perception from their despair or disillusionment.

Although Wharton eventually decided she had to divorce her husband, she continued for a long time to wrestle with the issue from a moral, financial and social point of view in her work. Not only was divorce a major concern in her own life, it was also becoming more common in American life as well. As Lewis points out, it is understandable that Edith Wharton chose this topic over and over again:

She caught at the subject during the period when divorce was changing from the scandalous to the acceptable and even the commonplace; and it is just the shifting, uncertain *status* of the act on which Mrs. Wharton so knowingly concentrated. In her treatment, it was not so much the grounds for divorce that interested her (though she could be both amusing and bitter on this score), and much less the technicalities involved. It was the process by which an individual might be forced to confront the fact itself—especially in its psychological and social consequences—as something irreversible and yet sometimes wickedly paradoxical (Collected Short Stories, xiii).

Usually, her characters choose marriage and there is no divorce, but not always. When there is a divorce, the consequences are not always positive.

“Autres Temps . . .,” first published in 1911 in the magazine, *Century*, poignantly captures Wharton’s own fears and confusion about the havoc her divorce would create even as she was seriously considering separation from Teddy Wharton (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 333). Mrs. Lidcote, who left New York years earlier after divorcing her husband, returns to offer moral support to her recently divorced daughter, Leila. Mrs. Lidcote soon learns, through various incidents and conversational clues, that times have changed; not only is Leila not a social exile, she is succeeding brilliantly with her contemporaries and the same group that shunned her mother. In “Autres Temps . . .” Wharton considers the way society can ostracize and marginalize those who do not follow the rules. Like Lydia in “Souls Belated,” Mrs. Lidcote has broken those rules, and even though Leila and her friends do not face this judgment, she herself will still be snubbed and ignored. It is not difficult to imagine Edith Wharton wondering about her own future as she plots Mrs. Lidcote’s. (This story will be explored in detail in Chapter Three.)

Years before, in “The Reckoning,” a short story that Wharton wrote in 1902 arguing against divorce, Julia Westall, the reflector, has divorced her husband in order to marry again, justifying her decision on a belief in the new morality of “personal independence” and the “immorality of marriage” (I: 424, 421). The new morality means that one stayed married only as long as either wanted to continue the relationship, while “the new adultery was unfaithfulness to self” (I: 427). Unfortunately, after ten years of

marriage to Clement Westall, Julie rethinks her position when she discovers that Westall wants to divorce her for the same reasons. She now understands how her first husband, John Arment, must have felt when she left. The tone is wry, light and perfectly pitched as Wharton brilliantly characterizes the various people. The Van Siderens, acquaintances of the Westalls, “subsisted, socially, on the fact that they had a studio,” where the unusual is encouraged, like “the painter who depicted purple grass and a green sky. The Van Sideren set were tired of the conventional color scheme in art and conduct” (I: 420, 421). The Westalls themselves, who were not wealthy at the time of their marriage, “would probably always have to live quietly and go out to dinner in cabs,” a mode of travel considered *déclassé* by those who had their own cars and drivers (I: 426). Julia, herself, “had once said, in ironical defense of her first marriage, that it had at least preserved her from the necessity of sitting next to him at dinner,” referring to the practice of separating spouses at dinner parties (I: 426).

After Westall declares his intentions to divorce her, Julia becomes the victim of her own ideas. The tone as she recalls her first difficult marriage is not wry and satiric as in other parts of the story. Julia remembers the pain she felt as the wife of a shrewd and selfish man. Evelyn Fracasso, in discussing marriage and entrapment, points out that Julia felt like a prisoner in that marriage and cites a passage from the story (30):

Her husband’s personality seemed to be closing gradually in on her, obscuring the sky and cutting off the air, till she felt herself shut up among the decaying bodies of her starved hopes. A sense of having been decoyed by some world-old conspiracy into this bondage of body and soul filled her with despair. If marriage was the slow lifelong acquittal of a debt contracted in ignorance, then marriage was a crime against human nature. She, for one, would have no share in maintaining the pretense of which she had been a victim: the pretense that a man and a woman,

forced into the narrowest of personal relations, must remain there till the end (1:27).

Nonetheless, with a new clarity, Julia now feels she may have been wrong, especially when she remembers leaving without trying to explain to Arment why she tired of him, an explanation Westall has not given to her. Impulsively she goes to see Arment, and they share a momentary but true intimacy as she reveals her new insights: “Their eyes met in a sudden shock of comprehension: a veil seemed to be lifted between them” (I: 436). The story ends as she apologizes to him: “Now I know—now I know” (I: 437). Through her new vision and perception, she may now understand that escape is not the answer; she certainly regrets how she treated Arment. Still, the final sentence seals her lonely fate: “She found herself outside in the darkness” (I: 437).

In “The Other Two,” one of Wharton’s most well-known and best-written stories, the main character does not divorce anyone, but does lose all the joy he had found in his new wife because he finds he cannot reconcile himself to her previous marriages. Waythorn weds the twice-divorced Alice and, initially, is pleased with her and with himself for his ability to ignore her former husbands. Gradually, though, as he often encounters the two men in various circumstances involving Alice, he finds his bride less charming and fresh, too adaptable and flexible around his predecessors. In an often-quoted moment, Waythorn considers why he is now disturbed by these traits:

Her pliancy was beginning to sicken him. . . With sudden vividness Waythorn saw how the instinct had developed. She was “as easy as an old shoe”—a shoe that too many feet had worn. Her elasticity was the result of tension in too many different directions. Alice Haskett—Alice Varick—Alice Waythorn—she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides (I: 393).

It has been suggested that Waythorn is an anagram for Wharton-y, and no doubt many of his opinions are reflections of hers (White 18). Waythorn's view, however, is also limited and subtly challenged by the author. As she does in *The House of Mirth* and "The Last Asset," Wharton uses monetary images and metaphors throughout the story. A stockbroker by profession, Waythorn views Alice as a possession: "With grim irony Waythorn compared himself to a member of a syndicate. He held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were his partners in the business" (I: 393). As he tries to adjust to having her former husbands often in their home "he even began to reckon up the advantages which accrued from it, to ask himself if it were not better to own a third of a wife who knew how to make a man happy than a whole one who had lacked opportunity to acquire the art" (I: 394). For her part, Alice plays her role with good grace; however, occasionally the reader catches a glimpse of a worried frown, a wavering lip, or a blushing cheek, betraying a momentary nervousness and concern that Waythorn be pleased or appeased. Waythorn adapts, but loses his pleasure in Alice and is thus often undercut by Wharton, who brilliantly satirizes New York social customs as she explores certain issues of remarriage.

Unlike most of Edith Wharton's short stories about marriage, in "The Long Run," the main characters realize that they should have divorced and married each other, but the insight comes too late to sustain the bond between them. Written in 1912, when her own marriage was nearing its end, and as Teddy Wharton's infidelities, extravagances and mental problems increased, this short story portrays yet another side of the "The Marriage Question." Again here, contrary to her discussion in "Telling a Short



Story,” Wharton employs two points of view. She sets this story within a framing narrative as a narrator relates a series of events told to him by Halston Merrick, an old friend from Harvard. The device is effective because in the first part of the story, the narrator can provide the reader with a view of Merrick we would not get any other way as he compares the Merrick he knew to the man he meets now. Merrick had been “a vivid and promising figure . . . handsome, careless and free, he had wandered and tasted and compared” (II: 301). Now, “there was something fundamental the matter with Merrick, something dreadful, unforeseen, unaccountable: Merrick had grown conventional and dull” (II: 303). In addition, the structure enables Merrick in the second part to tell his story directly in a more powerful illumination of his character than a third person narration could provide. We already know from his framing narrative he has changed, and his own words add a new subtlety to Wharton’s story as it reveals both directly and indirectly the nature and causes of that change.

Halston Merrick and Paulina Trant, acquaintances for years, are thrown together at a party, and as Halston tells the narrator, they see each other in a new light and fall deeply in love. Paulina is married to a dull, pompous, wealthy man while Merrick has postponed his desire to write after he assumes control of his late father’s iron foundry. The two see each other as often as possible but do not rush into an adulterous relationship; however when Paulina’s husband must take a series of long trips for his health, they determine that something must be decided. Halston is surprised one evening when, close to their departure, Paulina arrives at his home late at night and offers to stay with him, not for the night as he had hoped, but forever. Merrick protests her plan, using

all the traditional arguments of duty and society, but Paulina counters every one of them with reasons why they must ignore convention and social stigmas and begin their life together. He wants to dissect exactly what living together would do to each of them in minute detail, but she offers another way: “No: there’s one other way, and that is, *not* to do it! To abstain and refrain; and then see what we become, or what we don’t become, in the long run . . .” (II: 319). Merrick wants her, but fearing society’s judgment and believing he is protecting both of them, he blurts out: “If only you hadn’t come to me here!” (II: 321). Paulina leaves his home and joins her husband while Merrick settles into his industrial job and conformity.

Two years later, when Trant is killed in an accident, Merrick calls on Paulina with the intent of proposing; however, he cannot do it. “But there, between us, was the memory of the gesture I hadn’t made, forever parodying the one I was attempting! There wasn’t a word I could think of that hadn’t an echo in it of words of hers I had been deaf to; there wasn’t an appeal I could make that didn’t mock the appeal I had rejected” (II: 323). Eventually Paulina marries another man with a red face and little charm. She and Halston, still unmarried, have both led dull, conforming lives, in the long run, with none of the special vividness and zest they found when they were in love years before, and furthermore, tragically, they know it. R. W. B. compares the end of “The Long Run” to the end of *Ethan Frome*:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Other comparisons come to mind as well. In Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle,” John Marcher wastes his own life, and May Bartram’s as well, because he is afraid to take a risk. Like John Marcher or Lambert Strether in James’ *The Ambassadors*, Halston Merrick is capable of great soul-searching and analytical probing, but for these men, restraint and denial are easier than taking steps to achieve what they want. And like Prufrock in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Halston Merrick chooses the safe path

What becomes of Halston and Paulina, as they retreat into the conventional, is in its well-cushioned manner not much less dreadful than what becomes of Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver. (One notes in passing that more often than not Edith Wharton's destroyed characters survive to take full measure of their destruction.) . . . This superb and gruesome story [The Long Run] adds to the impression that for Edith Wharton, if the individual is offered any real choice in life, it is usually a choice between modes of defeat (Collected Short Stories, xii).

In this story, Edith Wharton is creating circumstances when divorce would have been the right choice. In an important passage, Paulina's arguments sound like Wharton's own voice, and she is careful not to generalize about all marriages: " 'Remember, I'm not attempting to lay down any general rule,' she insisted; 'I'm not theorizing about Man and Woman, I'm talking about you and me. How do I know what's best for the woman in the next house?' " (II: 317). Wharton even appears to be thinking of Teddy Wharton and "The Fullness of Life" when Paulina tells Halston: "The woman in the next house may have all sorts of reasons—honest reasons—for staying there. There may be someone there who needs her badly; for whom the light would go out if she went" (II: 318). In this way, Wharton can condone divorce in particular situations but still maintain that, for a stable society, or even stable individual lives, marriage is a better choice.

Edith Wharton addresses the issues of marriage and divorce in many other short stories; she also explores these topics in novellas and novels. In all of these, no final answer emerges. As noted in the Introduction, many of her works argue for the stability of marriage and its place in the structure of society. Others, however, though fewer in

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and misses the joy. Though T.S. Eliot's poem was written several years after Edith Wharton wrote "The Long Run," one particular image occurs in both. Prufrock compares the evening to "a patient etherized upon a table (Norton 508). Halston Merrick tells the narrator, when discussing his reasoned arguments to Paulina: "So I invited her to the dissecting table . . ." (II: 319). In both of these works, the table connotes a clinical approach, an analytical stance rather than an emotional or passionate one.

number, favor divorce or a relationship outside of marriage. Some, such as “Souls Belated” or “The Reckoning” show both attitudes within the same story, making it difficult to generalize or speak of her work as a consistent view. Barbara White argues persuasively that Wharton’s work is not as unified as some critics, such as Allen Stein and Blake Nevius, believe:

For Wharton, morality is contextual—everything depends on the particular situation . . . The coexistence of two opposing views in the same Wharton story registers something more than the author’s own ambivalence, such as her uncertainty about divorce. The presence of two views often signals the necessity of weighing alternatives (81).

White makes another critical point about Wharton’s short stories. She asserts that two ideas do, in fact, remain consistent in all of her stories and that these can be found in “The Other Two:”

. . . that the woman is an object of exchange in marriage, and divorce is not the answer to the marriage problem . . . Wharton does not criticize divorce because she is conservative or has “faith in matrimony” (Stein, 276) but because it fails to provide a solution to use of women as exchange objects. The divorced woman remains a commodity whether she remarries or not. If she does not remarry, she loses her worth and is relegated to life as a discarded object on the fringes of society, like Lydia of “Souls Belated” or Mrs. Lidgate [sic—name is Lidcote] of “Autres Temps . . .” (note the similarity of the characters’ names). If she does remarry again, she just gets stretched like Alice Haskell/Varick/Waythorn, until she wears out. This is not the same as saying . . . that a person should never get divorced, or that Wharton is “against divorce,” but merely that divorce does not solve the marriage problem (81).

In addition to these concerns about marriage and divorce, Edith Wharton also considers the role of disillusion and despair and how perceptions affect her characters. In so many of her short stories, her main characters begin their marriages or relationships with certain illusions about their lives or their lovers only to be disappointed;

expectations go unmet. Nevertheless, the perceptions gained give them a certain kind of strength and determination that Wharton and the reader can admire. Usually the awareness becomes the turning point of the story, and the defeat the character experiences becomes a sort of personal victory. Sometimes quite subtly, occasionally more explicitly, when one of her characters attains clarity of vision, he or she achieves the kind of victory Edith Wharton values.

## Chapter Two: Artists and Writers

Although Edith Wharton was particularly interested in the issues surrounding marriage and divorce, a thorough examination of her short stories reveals that she also devoted much of her attention to the topics of art and the artist, as well as literature and the writer. Wharton's underlying concerns in these areas are more related than one might suspect. In the marriage stories, Wharton's characters search for intimacy and an emotional connection that will affirm the individuality and self-worth that makes their lives meaningful; the way they see and are seen by others often determine the degree of their successes or failures. In her stories about artists and writers, the fundamental themes are remarkably similar. As we will see in this chapter, the stories involve artists and writers, but the characters' anxieties about their talents, their relationships and connections to other people, and the value of their lives reflect Wharton's continuing exploration of self-worth and social judgment, as does her constant emphasis on vision and perception to illuminate character development and maturation. As noted in the Introduction, much of Wharton's interest in these issues stems from similar concerns in her own life, as a woman and as a writer.

In R. W. B. Lewis' categories of Wharton's stories, "The Marriage Question," encompasses twenty-four stories, more than any other; nevertheless, stories relating to artists and writers account for almost as many, particularly if we consider the overlap that often occurs. Lewis does not use the term "artists and writers" in his classifications; instead he includes these stories under the headings of "Art and Human Nature" and

“Culture and Comedy.” Further he notes that the listings are “somewhat arbitrary. . . . A certain shifting about could easily be justified” (*The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, xxvi). Lewis does not list every Wharton short story in his categories, and many of the unspecified tales relate to the current topic. The point here is not to obtain a precise count of Wharton’s art and literature stories but to be aware of how numerous these stories are. Most were written in the earlier years of Wharton’s career, before 1908, and though she returned to this topic later in novels, she gradually stopped emphasizing it so strongly in her short stories.

Before discussing these pieces, what is meant by “artists and writers” requires some clarification. Virtually every reader has noted that the works are only tangentially about art or literature and are primarily about the characters and their lives as they relate to art or literature; art itself remains in the background. Lewis, in this same introduction, mentions a few that he admires, then comments:

These are the best of the many stories that touch upon the cultural scene. Among the others, little need be said about the stories of art and artists, since, as Blake Nevius has observed, they are not really about the artistic life as such, or the drama of the imaginative struggle, but about the human foibles and limitations and disappointments looked at, in these instances, within an artistic context (xxi).

Similarly, Candace Waid, in her introduction to *The Muse’s Tragedy and Other Stories*, notes their nature: “Her early fiction, like all of her work, is dominated by a concern with what Lewis has called ‘the marriage question.’ However almost equally important is her concern with the experience of the artist. These stories, set at the crossroads of art and life, tell of honesty and betrayal, romantic delusion and integrity. Many of the best stories

fall into both of these categories.” (13). In other words, these stories are about artists, rather than art. Thus, this chapter examines artists and writers, and sometimes others in their lives, in relation to their work and the creative process. For this purpose, the terms art and literature, artist and writer are virtually interchangeable.

Another characteristic worth examining concerns the quality of the stories in this group. While some of them reveal Wharton’s skillful wit and character development, most are not as well-written as the best of the tales previously discussed. Though critics usually agree that many of Wharton’s marriage stories are among her best works, these do not earn the same wide-spread distinction. For example, Barbara White comments: “Probably the most solid generalization that can be made about Wharton’s short stories is that the artist stories are her least successful” (36). Blake Nevius, writing in 1953, takes a stronger and far more critical stance:

. . . Mrs. Wharton was not at her best in exploring the human situation behind the work of art. Even in *Hudson River Bracketed*, and its sequel *The Gods Arrive*, her most ambitious attempt to illuminate the writer’s special problems and frustrations, her view of the artistic life remained an enchanted one, essentially the romanticized version of an outsider. None of her artists bears the stamp of authenticity. With the exception of Vance Weston, they are self-consciously devoted to an ideal of Art which exists mainly in the pages of sentimental fiction (20-21).

Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Lev Raphael, in his 1991 *Edith Wharton’s Prisoners of Shame*, admires Wharton’s daily writing habits and her skill portraying artists and writers and emphatically denounces “. . . Nevius’ sneering (and rather sexist) comment that ‘Wharton’s art had to take place among the gardening, entertaining, and traveling that crowded her schedule.’ ” (189). Raphael’s argument turns personal as he defends Wharton’s skills:



As a widely-published writer of fiction and non-fiction, with many friends and acquaintances who are writers and editors, I have found Wharton's fiction about artists and writers striking and authentic. She deftly examines cases of artistic failure; the burden of telling the truth in one's art; the conflict between creating for oneself and for a public; the weaknesses of the reading and viewing public; the impact of publicity on a writer and the unexpected problems of success; and individuals caught in painful and demanding relationships with writers. These are all issues that have great currency . . . (190).

Perhaps some of these differences can be accounted for by the almost forty-year gap between Nevius and Raphael and the different social contexts in which each critic reads her work. In any case, as one reads the art and literature stories as a grouping, there is ample support for both viewpoints, probably because the quality varies so widely.

While critics question the overall excellence of the artist and writer stories, they are, nevertheless, worthy of study. In this group, as in the marriage group, we find examples of disillusionment and despair and the critical importance of individual and social perception and vision throughout the works, issues illuminated in the context of art and literature. Furthermore, these stories shed light on Wharton's own anxieties about her writing and her life as a writer. As we have noted in the Introduction and in the chapter on marriage and divorce, Edith Wharton faced familial and social pressures to conform to certain expectations; writing was not one of them. Simply finding a way to write, to think of herself as a writer, and to convince others to give her serious consideration were difficult tasks. Her anxieties about these matters are reflected in many of these tales.

Edith Wharton was particularly interested in distancing herself from the sentimental female writers of the period. As White points out, she satirizes sentimentalists like Grace Greenwood and Fanny Fern in "April Showers" but oddly has

little regard for better female writers, such as Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sara Orne Jewett (29, 32). In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton discusses *Ethan Frome* and her desire to write realistically: “For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict 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 Sara Orne Jewett” (293). She did not wish to be identified with these woman writers or other local colorists. Though Wharton worried that she would not be taken seriously as a writer because she was a woman, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, notes that Wharton was also concerned that if she wrote professionally, she would be considered unfeminine. She needed to write for her emotional health but still worried about the appropriateness of the vocation (97-102). Particularly in the years that she wrote most of the art and literature stories, she had not yet resolved these issues. Penelope Vita-Finzi, in *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, notes that in these stories only two women are serious and successful professional writers and four others are treated “facetiously” (100). No women are painters.

Another issue Wharton returns to again and again in her stories about art and literature involves artistic standards. In almost every story, some judgments must be made about the quality of an artist’s or writer’s work; sometimes the artist himself is the judge but often spouses, friends or the audiences render their own verdicts. In these stories, Wharton explores the nature of artistic standards, how judgments are made, and by whom. Can one even separate these judgments from his feelings for the author or

painter? In these stories, particularly, perception and vision play a major role because these evaluations are especially dependent on seeing clearly. As we read these stories, it appears that Wharton herself decides these standards. Barbara White finds this problematic and argues convincingly: “When art provides more than a backdrop, the main issue in the story is usually good art versus bad art. . . . The problem with these stories is that if one does not accept Wharton’s view of good art versus bad art, that the difference is obvious and anyone with a brain can instantly detect it, they are much too simple. Even if one does share her view, the stories remain didactic . . .” (37). As we look at a variety of artists and writers stories in detail, these diverse issues will become clearer. Because there are so many to consider, it is helpful to group these tales in some way. The first stories discussed reflect Wharton’s anxieties about art, especially literary art, as a vocation for herself and others as well; she explores the artist or writer’s private persona and the public’s influence, and how his disillusionment about his work or reputation and his changing perceptions affect his vision. The second group of stories relates to artistic standards and good art versus bad, the moral dilemmas these standards create for artists and writers and how they affect those around them, and again, how perception and vision are changed by these issues.

### Art and Vocation

Edith Wharton wrote “The Muse’s Tragedy” in June, 1898, following a period of depression and anxiety. As noted earlier, one of her major concerns during this time was

her credibility as a writer since she had yet to prove herself to her publisher or, more importantly, build her own artistic self-confidence. Though she had written her first short story eight years earlier and a few more before 1898, R. W. B. Lewis notes in his biography: “The beginning of Edith Wharton’s sustained literary career can accordingly be dated with some precision as the stretch of months between March and July of 1898” (81). Published in 1899 in *The Greater Inclination*, “The Muse’s Tragedy” is the first story in this first volume of Wharton’s short stories. More than one explanation has been proposed for the meaning of the title, *The Greater Inclination*. Lewis states that Wharton herself chose it and that it “referred to a loftier as against a meaner moral propensity” (87). Candace Waid, on the other hand, suggests “Wharton may be said to have named the parting of the ways in her own life, her inclination to pursue a life of letters” (Introduction, *The Muse’s Tragedy and Other Stories* 11). Both reasons for the choice seem possible and appropriate. Like many of her early stories, this one concerns writers and their work but also the interpersonal issues that Wharton always explores.

One of her better early efforts, “The Muse’s Tragedy,” examines the relationship between a poet and his muse. The story is hard to summarize because the relationships of the characters and the background of the plot are confusing and difficult to keep in mind as one reads the tale. Written primarily from the point of view of Lewis Danyers, a young writer who, as a college student, became a devotee of the late poet, Vincent Rendle, the tale also scrutinizes the public beliefs versus the private truths of artistic celebrities. As the story begins, Danyers still idealizes Rendle and especially his sonnets featuring “Silvia,” later revealed in Rendle’s book, *Life and Letters*, to be Mrs. A. (Mary Anerton).

Danyers' worship then expands to include Mrs. Anerton as well, "the woman who had inspired not only such divine verse but such playful, tender, incomparable prose" (I: 68). Danyers' friend, Mrs. Memorall, tells him that she knows Mary Anerton and provides him with the details of the poet's relationship to her. Evidently Mrs. Anerton, an American widow who spent most of her life in Europe, had been married to a man who took pride in his wife's role in Rendle's work and did not probe deeply into their personal relationship. Although her husband died several years before Rendle, Mary and the poet never married, but his love for her was memorialized in his work. Mrs. Memorall, whose name signals the importance of commemorating the past, sends Mrs. Anerton Danyers' newly published volume of essays, including one on Rendle. Danyers later reads the brief acknowledging note from Mary to her friend.

Several months later, Danyers travels to Europe; while spending some time at an Italian resort, he is approached by a woman he has already noticed but not met. She is Mary Anerton, who saw his name on the hotel guest list and remembered the Rendle essay. Though obviously older than he, Danyers finds her attractive, possibly because he believes her to be Silvia, Rendle's beloved: "Here was a woman who had been much bored and keenly interested . . . Danyers noticed that the hair rolled back from her forehead was turning gray, but her figure was straight and slender, and she had the invaluable gift of a girlish back" (I: 70). During the month they stay at Hotel Villa d'Este, Mary and Lewis spend a great deal of time together, primarily talking of Rendle and their common admiration for him:

Her attitude toward the great man's memory struck Danyers as perfect. She neither proclaimed nor disavowed her identity. She was frankly Silvia

to those who knew and cared; but there was no trace of the Egeria [a mythical female adviser] in her pose. She spoke often of Rendle's books, but seldom of himself; there was no posthumous conjugality, no use of the possessive tense, in her abounding reminiscences. Of the master's intellectual life, of his habits of thought and work, she never wearied of talking (I: 72).

Danyers admires her mind and understands the debt Rendle owes her: "In a certain sense, Silvia had, herself, created *Sonnets to Silvia*" (I: 72). Surprised to find that this woman he so admires, that the world credits with inspiring great poetry, is now often bored and lonely, Danyers eventually speaks to her of himself and his literary ambitions, and she encourages him to write a book about Rendle, offering her help. They agree to meet in Venice in six weeks to discuss the book.

The last section of the story is told from Mary Anerton's point of view in a letter to Lewis Danyers, mailed after their time together in Venice. Evidently the pair spent a month together, had an affair, and her letter serves as an explanation of why she cannot accept his proposal of marriage. Though Danyers feared Mary could not love him because of Rendle's consuming love for her, she explains that he is wrong: "It is because Vincent Rendle didn't love me that there is no hope for you. I never had what I wanted, and never, never, never will I stoop to wanting anything else" (I: 73). Mary then explains the complicated relationship between the poet and his muse. Creatively, they were completely united: "From the first, the intellectual sympathy between us was almost complete; my mind must have been to him (I fancy) like some perfectly tuned instrument on which he was never tired of playing" (I: 74). For fifteen years, she worked with him, providing criticism, understanding, and her help. He spent much of his time with Mary and her husband, and though she fell in love with Rendle and the world believed she was

Silvia, he never returned the feeling. Apparently she gloried in that assumption, almost believing what others thought was true because she wanted it to be. Rendle never made love to her, never seemed to notice what others were thinking, never even indicated that he realized her love for him.

Mrs. Anerton's letter goes on to explain the letters to her in Rendle's posthumous book, *Life and Letters*. It seems that there were small gaps here and there, much praised by critics who believed they marked places where the editor of the book tastefully avoided writings that were too specific and too personal. Mary now admits that she prepared the letters for publications and inserted asterisks to hint that parts were left out. She writes: "You understand? The asterisks were a sham—there was nothing to leave out" (I: 75). She details the suffering she endured over those years, "the days when I hugged the delusion that he must love me, since everyone thought he did; the long periods of numbness, when I didn't seem to care whether he loved me or not," but also the joy of his friendship and their collaboration (I: 75). At first, after his death when much was written about him, she gloried in all the attention she received from the critics and reviewers of his book; everyone believed her to be Silvia. Then, even that pleasure faded and she was alone. "Alone—quite alone; for he had never really been with me. The intellectual union counted for nothing now. It had been soul to soul, but never hand in hand, and there were no little things to remember him by" (I: 77).

At this point, Mary reaches the crux of the matter. Dismissing her marriage and explaining that she never had any real "experiences," she tells Danyers she never loved anyone but Rendle, but had been tortured by questions of why Rendle had not loved her,

had not found her attractive as a woman. “Why had he never loved me? Why had I been so much to him, and no more? Was I so ugly, so essentially unlovable, that though a man might cherish me as his mind’s comrade, he could not care for me as a woman?” (I: 77). At first she feared Danyers might love her only because of Rendle, but actually, in Venice they never talked about the book or Rendle at all, and then she knew that he loved her for herself alone. Asking his forgiveness for using him “to find out what some other man thought of me,” Mary reminds him that he is young and will recover quickly (I: 78). In the final sentence of her letter and of the story, though she has found the answer to her question and knows she can be loved, she admits that she will suffer much more than he: “. . . the experiment will hurt no one but myself. And it will hurt me horribly . . . because it has shown me, for the first time, all that I have missed . . .” (I: 78).

“The Muse’s Tragedy” explores several of Edith Wharton’s concerns about writing and the life of a dedicated writer. In her introduction to a collection of Wharton’s stories, many concerning art and literature, Candace Waid claims: “These stories reveal Wharton’s anxiety that devoting herself to art like Mrs. Ambrose Dale in ‘Copy,’ Mrs. Anerton of ‘The Muse’s Tragedy,’ or even the pathetic intellectual flirt, Mrs. Amyot in ‘The Pelican,’ may lead to a life of isolation and loneliness” (17). The other two stories will be discussed later in this chapter. In this story, Mary Anerton becomes a muse to both men, the poet Rendle and the writer Danyers. She inspires Rendle intellectually even if he does not love her, does not intend her to be Silvia. In Danyers’ case, she urges him to be a writer: “She encouraged Danyers to speak of himself; to confide his ambitions to her; she asked him the questions which are the wise woman’s substitute for advice. ‘You



must write,' she said, administering the most exquisite flattery that human lips could give" (I: 72). Even though the writing of the proposed book on Rendle does not appear likely, it is possible that Danyers will find other literary topics and interests.

In addition to muse, Anerton is, in a sense, an artist in her own right. First, she augments the public fiction that she is Silvia by allowing people to think that she is; she accepts invitations extended only because Rendle will be there as well, permitting the fawning and ingratiation society showers on her. Second, Mary actually recreates the letters she copied for the editor of Rendle's book; by inserting the asterisks where there had been none, she writes her own fiction. Third, and perhaps most important, Mary Anerton creates fiction for herself, a private as opposed to a public fiction. She convinces herself, at various times, that Rendle does indeed love her, and she wants to believe this fiction of her own making: "You can't imagine the excuses a woman will invent for a man's not telling her that he loves her—pitiable arguments that she would see through at a glance if any other woman used them. But all the while, deep down, I knew he had never cared" (I: 75). Lev Raphael, in *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame*, pushes her creation of fiction to an extreme when he characterizes Mary Anerton's life as deceitful: ". . . her own life was in many ways dishonest, built on a public assumption that was untrue and a private hope that was vain" (218).

Disillusionment and despair cause Mrs. Anerton to doubt herself as a woman and lead her to the affair with Danyers. Though the affair reassures her that she is desirable, she now fully understands what she has missed, with only herself to blame. Mary sacrificed her life in order to be near Vincent Rendle and assist him in his writing.

Settling for a tepid marriage and a husband who did not ask questions, she spent her years pretending, hoping, but never receiving the love she wanted. The month with Danyers finally leads to her new perceptions and understanding because she has learned what it means to be loved and has articulated at last the truth about Rendle and the effect on her own life. In Mary Anerton's eyes, that is the real tragedy: her discovery and acknowledgment of the wasted years, not her unrequited love. The tragedy is cleverly disclosed to the reader through Wharton's use of Mary's letter and the sudden switch to her point of view. Only Mary could reveal her state of mind, her perceptions, and her emotional turmoil. Danyers' reactions would have no particular relevance to the story, so Wharton uses a letter rather than a dialogue, focusing almost exclusively on Mary.

One must question, however, whether Mary Anerton's conclusions echo Edith Wharton's judgment of the situation. Mary finds the years with Rendle wasted because her love was not returned physically or emotionally. Still, the bond that existed between the poet and his muse can be found in his poems and the beauty he created. Mary Anerton and Vincent Rendle shared a vital connection and intimacy through art; both passionately loved the creation. Does Wharton also consider Anerton's life a waste? We can only speculate. Wharton continued to explore the value of a life dedicated to art or writing throughout her lifetime, particularly in the artist and writers stories, because the issue caused her concern as well. Wharton herself shared a deep and lasting relationship with Walter Berry whom she knew for forty-four years. Berry advised her on literature and her writing as well as her personal life, but their relationship probably did not include a love affair. After his death, most of their letters were destroyed by Wharton herself so it is

difficult to be sure, but the point is that they achieved an intense and intimate friendship that was primarily intellectual. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes about him:

I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I have found in Walter Berry . . . that understanding lasted as long as my friend lived; and no words can say, because such things are unsayable, how the influence of his thought, his character, his deepest personality, were interwoven with mine . . . I had never known any one so instantly and unerringly moved by all that was finest in literature. His praise of great work was like a trumpet-call. I never heard it without discovering new beauties in the work he praised; he was one of those commentators who unsealed one's eyes . . . I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him. He found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and he fed them until our last hour together (115-116, 117, 119).

While it is possible, then, that Mary Anerton is speaking for Edith Wharton when she labels those years a waste and a tragedy, Wharton may well have been exploring one way of perceiving the bond between the artist and his muse.

Lev Raphael characterizes "The Muse's Tragedy" as bleak and identifies another tragedy of the story:

What is most intriguing, however, is the sense of waste and cruelty in this story—Mrs. Anerton made Rendle's life comfortable, but lost all sense of herself and her self-respect. Yet when she befriended Danyers and made him fall in love with her, she became as unloving and cruel in her own way as Rendle was to her. She re-enacts this governing scene of being unloved by actually taking the other role, and indeed reversing roles, turning Danyers into herself (218-219).

This seems unduly harsh. Mary writes Danyers that she did not plan to have an affair with him, that she was drawn to him and liked him from the beginning (I: 77). Yes, she wanted to know that she was desirable and capable of being loved, but her actions, though self-serving, do not seem as premeditated or cruel as Raphael suggests. At the

same time, the reader may question Danyers' motives as well. Perhaps his affection for Mary Anerton stems in part from his reverence for Rendle and his desire to possess what he believes Rendle discovered with her.

In addition to understanding the tragedies in the story, it is also important to note that perception and vision play a large role in Wharton's work as early as 1898 when "The Muse's Tragedy" was written. The reader sees Mary Anerton from two different points of view, as Wharton again deviates from her one viewpoint rule: Lewis Danyers' in the first two sections and her own in the final one. Danyers idealizes Mary, imagining what she is like from reading Rendle's poetry about Silvia and in Venice when he proposes to her. In fact, Hildegard Hoeller, in her discussion of this story in *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*, claims that Danyers never gives the reader a clear view of Mrs. Anerton: "Above all, "The Muse's Tragedy" is about the delusions of a literary critic" (55). We learn from Mary's letter that Danyers' perceptions were flawed, first about her relationship with Rendle and later about her feelings during their affair. In an article for the *Edith Wharton Review*, Laura Saltz contends that the real woman is never quite as satisfying to him as his visions of her, that he never really sees her: "In regarding Mary as animated poetry rather than a human being, Danyers always misconstrues her. . ." (17).

In fact, Wharton does omit Danyers' view of their time together once he and Mary become lovers; his story ends with their plans to meet in Venice. When Mrs. Anerton takes over the story, she reveals her own truth, as Saltz points out: "With this shift in point of view, the story revises and corrects Danyers' false perception of Mary,

converting her from idol and work of art back to human being” (18). Saltz considers her less a muse and more a collaborator. Carrying this idea almost to an extreme, she considers yet another tragedy of the story the fact that Mary’s authorship is never acknowledged. It is important to realize that both narrators see themselves and each other from their own perspectives because those are the points of view Wharton chooses. If Wharton had chosen to portray Vincent Rendle’s view, we might have discovered still more “truths,” and further ways of seeing. In this early story, Wharton is experimenting with different points of view and the effects they have on her stories.

Most critics agree that “The Angel at the Grave,” written in 1900, is also one of Wharton’s best earlier stories. The story appears in 1901 in her second collection, *Crucial Instances*. All seven stories focus on the past and, unlike this one, most are not considered as successful as those in her first collection. Like “The Muse’s Tragedy,” “The Angel at the Grave” concerns literature and anxieties about whether and how to spend one’s life in its pursuit. Wharton also revisits the issue of the public persona of a writer and the influence this has on those around him.

The story takes place in New England in the Anson House, home of the late Orestes Anson, a philosopher friend of Emerson, widely published and well-known in transcendental circles.<sup>6</sup> His three daughters are not intellectual, but granddaughter Paulina is not only brilliant but also the only one in the family who can actually understand and appreciate his work. Gradually she becomes the authority on Anson and is sought after by

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<sup>6</sup> American Transcendentalism, a nineteenth century literary, religious, and social movement, was based on the belief that knowledge and reason come from intuition, and are not limited to empirical observation. One learns of the natural world through his senses, but the spiritual world is more important than the physical world. Emerson stressed individuality and self-reliance as a way for man to find truth within himself).

historians for consultations, documents and interpretations. A young man visiting from New York, Hewlett Winsloe, falls in love with Paulina. Not interested in learning about her ancestor or in Paulina's role in preserving his legacy, he wants to marry her and take her back to New York, but she refuses: "She would have found it easy to cope with a deliberate disregard of her grandfather's rights; but young Winsloe's unconsciousness of that shadowy claim was as much a natural function as the falling of leaves on a grave" (I: 249). Perhaps she does not love him enough, but her loyalty to family demands and her desire to preserve her grandfather's memory and work take precedence.

Paulina begins writing a book on the life of her grandfather, a task she once avoided but now embraces. Her work consumes her: "Her one refuge from skepticism was a blind faith in the magnitude and the endurance of the idea to which she had sacrificed her life, and with a passionate instinct of self-preservation she labored to fortify her position" (I: 249). At age forty, when Paulina finishes the biography, she takes it to Orestes Anson's publisher in Boston and learns there that, after all this time, Anson's theories are obsolete, and the world is no longer interested in him. The publisher presents a cynical view of literary audiences, no doubt Wharton's, when he tells her:

They haven't waited. . . No—they've gone off; taken another train. Literature's like a big railway-station now, you know; there's a train starting every minute. People are not going to hang around the waiting-room. If they can't get to a place when they want to they go somewhere else. . . He's a name still, of course. People don't exactly want to be caught not knowing who he is; but they don't want to spend two dollars finding out, when they can look him up for nothing in any biographical dictionary (I: 250, 251).

Devastated, Paulina admits to herself that few visitors come to Anson House anymore. Trying to decide what to do now with her life, at first she thinks of traveling, perhaps to

Europe or Boston, but then decides that leaving the House would be a betrayal of her grandfather and of her own hard work over all these years. Paulina decides instead to try to understand why her grandfather's philosophies are no longer important.

First Paulina rereads *Works of Orestes Anson* and then all the other writers and critics of his time, trying to learn why others have flourished while he declined. She must discover the secret of their successes and his failure. Gradually she has her answer: his transcendental doctrines were now passé; his contemporaries survived because they were well-known personages in their own right. Suddenly, for the first time, Paulina believes that both lives have been wasted, her grandfather's and her own:

She sat in the library, among the carefully-tended books and portraits; and it seemed to her that she had been walled alive into a tomb hung with the effigies of dead ideas. She felt a desperate longing to escape into the outer air, where people toiled and loved, and living sympathies went hand in hand. It was the sense of wasted labor that oppressed her; of two lives consumed in that ruthless process that uses generations of effort to build a single cell. There was a dreary parallel between her grandfather's fruitless toil and her own unprofitable sacrifice. Each in turn had kept vigil by a corpse (I: 253).

Years later, Paulina, now called Miss Anson, is still in the House, spending her time upstairs and avoiding the books and research below; her only interests are her neighbors' lives. The bell rings, and a young writer, George Corby, asks for her help. He has discovered an old letter of Anson's describing an important scientific study he made before he turned to philosophy. The study involves the missing link between vertebrates and non-vertebrates, and evidently Anson was far ahead of his time exploring this evolutionary link. The account of this study can be found in a pamphlet Anson wrote. Corby wants the pamphlet for an article he plans to publish which will reestablish her

grandfather as a great man and a leader of the field, and he wants her to help him go through all the papers, letters, journals, etc. Miss Anson unearths the pamphlet, but warns Corby not to make the same mistake she has made, telling him: “It ruined my life! . . . I gave up everything to keep *him* alive. I sacrificed myself—others—I nursed his glory in my bosom and it died—and left me—left me here alone” (I: 257). Corby then persuades her that her love kept Anson’s memory alive because she preserved all of his work and papers, that she will help him, and together they will restore Anson’s greatness. She sees him out as they both look forward to beginning their work.

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is the role that Anson House plays; Wharton’s first paragraph introduces the House which in effect becomes a main character as she describes its feelings and influence: “The House, however, faced its public with indifference. For sixty years it had written itself with a capital letter, had self-consciously squared itself in the eye of an admiring nation” (I: 245). Though the House itself is actually an artifact, throughout “The Angel at the Grave,” the House is personified and treated as a figure who can affect Paulina Anson. In a sense, it assumes the role of an artist as it shapes and composes Paulina’s life. At first, when she comes there as a young girl, Paulina loves the House. The atmosphere is “full of floating nourishment . . . its aspect impressive” (I: 247). Others may find it stark and cold, but to her eyes, it is pleasing. The first time she feels pressured by the House occurs immediately after she refuses Winsloe’s proposal in favor of preserving her grandfather’s memory, when she is aware of “an emanation from the walls of the House, from the bare desk, the faded portraits, the dozen yellowing tomes that no hand but hers ever lifted



from the shelf. After that the House possessed her. As if conscious of its victory, it imposed a conqueror's claims" (I: 249). Later, images of the tomb, of being walled alive and of death are more frequent. How she perceives the House and what it means to her shift throughout the story and determine its influence over her. At the end, however, when Corby promises to return the next day to begin working on the new project, Miss Anson looks out the window to watch him leave with renewed hope; she looks to the future again, her life validated after all. Though she will remain in Anson House, it no longer seems a prison or tomb.

Like "The Muse's Tragedy," "The Angel at the Grave" provides further insight into Edith Wharton's anxieties about committing one's life to art. Most of the critical discussions center on Paulina's life choices and how the past and present are treated in the story because Wharton, at thirty-eight, had not yet resolved this issue for herself. R. W. B. Lewis points out that at this time in her life, Wharton was still struggling to find the appropriate balance between her personal life and her work. Travel and social obligations placed demands on her time; she was still ordering her priorities. Lewis takes exception to the happy ending of the story as do several other critics. Finding it "unexpected and not quite persuasive," he believes the ending argues for a coherence, a resolution between past and present that Wharton hoped for but had not yet achieved in her own life (99).

Barbara White concurs that Wharton is working through some of her personal anxieties in "Angel at the Grave," but asserts that she goes beyond these concerns. White convincingly links the happy ending to the transcendental references in the story, not

simply to Wharton's uncertainties, thus broadening its dimensions considerably. She notes that Wharton embeds many of Emerson's essay titles within this story: "Fate," "Nature," "Compensation," and certainly Orestes Anson is meant to recall Emerson's friend, Orestes Brownson (52-53). Other transcendental terms are used throughout: "necessity," "destiny," "predestination" (53). Though "nature had denied them [Anson's daughters] the gift of making the most of their opportunities. . . Fate seemed to have taken a direct share in fitting Paulina for her part. . . a granddaughter who was at once felt to be what Mrs. Anson called a 'compensation' " (I: 246, 247 ). White maintains that fate and destiny play the largest roles at the end, claiming it is fate that Paulina saves the important pamphlet and her vision of her life. If so, White continues, then it is not merely a happy ending but her destiny as Wharton carries the transcendental metaphor through to its logical conclusion: "Fate finally allows Paulina to hold her grandfather and the House of Anson. Although it is true that she will be transmitting a patriarchal tradition (the pendulum has simply swung from transcendentalism to Darwinism), she is not really silenced" (55). Though some may contend that Paulina's identity is too submerged in her grandfather and his work, and that her life is still a waste because she returns to his cause as well as to Anson House, White argues that this is not the case. She assumes Paulina's book on Anson's life will now be published:

The event that changes the House into a tomb is not the loss of her beau but the *rejection of her manuscript*. Only when Paulina is denied communication with the world through being published, and secondarily through showing the House to visitors, does she begin to feel walled in. Thus the restoration of communication at the end of the story immediately lifts the walls, and the promise that she can resume her work makes Paulina feel that she has not wasted her life (55).

It is important to note, however, that there is no certainty in the story that Paulina's book will actually be printed. Emily Orlando, in *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*, finds White's interpretation to be more optimistic than she thinks Wharton intended. Because Paulina's work is obsolete, Orlando argues there is no guarantee that "Paulina will find an audience for her work, which celebrates Orestes Anson in his outmoded identity as a philosopher, not a scientist" (150). Orlando contends that George Corby will make Anson into a scientist because of the missing link, but that Paulina gives up control of the House and her ancestor's legacy when she gives Corby the pamphlet (150).

Though transcendentalism plays a role in the story, Wharton combines it with science by the end. Some critics say Wharton rejects transcendentalism in favor of science, including Reiner Kornetta (*Edith Wharton Review*, XIV: 23). Renewed interest in Orestes Anson's old pamphlet shows a progression in the academic community from transcendentalism to Darwinism and science. The fish he discusses is an evolutionary link which will now provide scholarly excitement and new paths of exploration. Wharton echoes this link as Paulina's role unfolds because she is the link from her grandfather's earlier work to the future. Corby tells her: "Don't you see that it's your love that has kept him alive? If you abandoned your post for an instant—let things pass into other hands—if your wonderful tenderness hadn't perpetually kept guard—this might have been—must have been—irretrievably lost" (I: 257). Cecelia Tichi, however, in an article in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, asserts that Wharton is not choosing one over the other, that she is interested in exploring both men's influence, Emerson and Darwin, and that she continues this interest in several of her novels:

“. . . In addition, evidence suggests that we need to pay closer attention to the utilization of binaries in another of Wharton’s favorite authors, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The apparently incongruous literary-scientific provenance of Emerson-Darwin was, in fact, established in a 1901 Wharton story, “The Angel at the Grave,” in which a prolific but minor transcendentalist writer of the early nineteenth century is cited as a ‘friend of Emerson’ and a Darwinist as well” (92).

This interpretation is consistent with Wharton’s pattern of exploring various facets of an issue in different stories and novels.

The question of whether Paulina’s life is wasted does not appear to be easily answered. In the story, her own perception of her life and her identity are utterly tied to her grandfather’s reputation and changes accordingly. How the reader perceives her is a separate issue. On the one hand, as noted above, Paulina will have a new interest in life and feels redeemed for all her efforts. On the other hand, she has lived her much of her life alone, often isolated and unloved. As the link between Orestes Anson and George Corby, she will not be the one to create a permanent difference in scientific knowledge, though if her book is ever published, her voice will be heard. The title of the story provides a clue to the issue of waste. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her introduction to *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, says: “Angels at a grave are generally pieces of sculpture, graceful and unchanging figures in stone; and it is, perhaps, to this fate that Paulina is eventually brought” (xi). Edith Wharton uses this term once again in her 1911 story, “Autres Temps. . . .” Mrs. Lidcote, commenting on the fact that attitudes about divorce have changed for the better, tells her friend: “It’s as if an angel had gone about lifting gravestones, and the buried people walked again, and the living didn’t shrink from them” (II: 264). In that case, the angel is active, remaking the past, not frozen in time, tending

the past. We cannot be certain which type of angel Edith Wharton had in mind for Paulina Anson because at times Paulina's life seems to encompass both the dynamic and the caretaker angel; how we interpret Paulina's life and future determines the answer. Perhaps, at least in this story, Wharton suggests that leaving something behind for future generations gives life meaning and redeems it from waste.

Written as a dialogue, another story from *Crucial Instances*, "Copy," looks like a play script on the page; probably Wharton was experimenting with a different presentation. The dramatic structure without a narrator draws the reader into an immediacy and an intimacy that seems fresh and important. We are there; the action unfolds as we watch, a captivating device. Once again, the subject matter concerns a female novelist, and subordinately, a male poet, but unlike Mary Anerton in "The Muse's Tragedy" and Paulina Anson in "The Angel at the Grave," and many other literary art stories, this tale focuses on successful writers, rather than those who struggle to be known or female sentimentalists for whom Wharton had contempt. In 1900 Wharton is still concerned with issues of vocation, but in "Copy" the issues result from the popularity and notoriety successful artists face and how this affects their lives. In her biography, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the anxiety Wharton felt about her life as a writer, particularly regarding the early artist stories and her 1900 novella, *The Touchstone*, where a struggling writer sells love letters written to him by a well-known, deceased author:

This portrait [*The Touchstone*] must have touched upon one of Wharton's deepest fears at the beginning of her career. Certainly she was very brilliant, she was talented (and beginning to be celebrated for being so), and she was desolately lonely. Margaret Aubyn's failure, like the failure

of other women in the early stories who yearn to do something with their lives, suggests Wharton's concern about her own future. She longed for a passionate life, and she was terrified that the very burst of creative activity that had lifted her out of depression might also have put her beyond the reach of emotional fulfillment. "The Pelican," "The Copy," [sic] and *The Touchstone* each gives different voice to the suspicion that a final commitment to the life of making and doing might lead to irretrievable isolation (101).

Wharton sets the stage from the beginning. Helen Dale, a forty year old widow, is talking to her secretary, and from their conversation we learn that Mrs. Dale is besieged by requests for autographs. Even though she is dismissed for the evening, Hilda is reluctant to leave and confesses that she makes notes of her feelings for the diary she keeps about her work with the famous novelist. Worshiping the artist she serves, this naïve young woman is similar to Claudia Day in "The Recovery," which will be discussed later in this chapter. While they are discussing various business matters concerning several of Mrs. Dale's novels, requests for interviews and photographs, a servant appears with the calling card of Paul Ventnor, a famous poet.

When Ventnor enters the room, it becomes clear that he and Mrs. Dale knew each other twenty years ago and have not seen each other since. After some introductory chitchat about each other's fame, the conversation becomes more personal and they talk of earlier days. Helen Dale, referring to the past as a time when "we were real people," she tells Ventnor: "I died years ago. What you see before you is a figment of the reporter's brain—a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs, with ink in its veins. A keen sense of copyright is *my* nearest approach to an emotion" (I: 278). He reminds her that they are public property now. Eventually we learn from their dialogue that the two were once in love and wrote many letters to each other that both have kept.

Again like *The Touchstone*, Mrs. Dale comments on the present commercial value of their old letters and tells Ventnor that she keeps his locked in a cabinet. Ventnor replies that he has brought her letters with him, implausibly mentioning that he always carries them in case they should fall into the wrong hands, and pulls a packet out of his pocket.

Mrs. Dale soon brings out Ventnor's letters to her and they read each other's back and forth in turn, sparking some pleasant memories of events that are mentioned and sentiments expressed. Gradually, though trying to sound casual and unconcerned, Ventnor asks for his letters back. At first Helen Dale is insulted and angry:

Ah, I paid dearly enough for the right to keep them, and I mean to! (*She turns to him passionately.*) Have you ever asked yourself how I paid for it? With what months and years of solitude, what indifference to flattery, what resistance to affection?—Oh, don't smile because I said affection and not love. Affection's a warm cloak in cold weather; and I *have* been cold; and I shall keep on growing colder! Don't talk to me about living in the hearts of my readers! We both know what kind of domicile that is. Why, before long I shall become a classic! Bound in sets and kept on the top book-shelf—brr, doesn't that sound freezing? I foresee the day when I shall be as lonely as an Etruscan museum!" (I: 283).

After this diatribe on the lonely life of a writer, Mrs. Dale demands her own letters back as well. They verbally spar a bit, and both finally admit that they want the letters for their memoirs. Paul accuses Helen of acting when she became so upset, and she admits that she was posturing when she began: "I'm a novelist. I can keep up that sort of thing for five hundred pages!" (I: 284). The line blurs between creating fiction and expressing real emotion, while the dialogue format reinforces the idea of play-acting, rather than genuine feelings. The connection between the two and the intimacy they once may have shared resides only in their letters. Now, however, she believes the sentiments

became true as she spoke them. She tells him the letters remind of her earlier times: “---how fresh they seem, and how they take me back to the time when we lived instead of writing about life!” implying that the connection and intimacy the two shared waned because they became successful artists (I: 285). Gaily, impulsively, they agree to burn all of the letters so that they can keep their past to themselves.

One of the most interesting facets of “Copy” involves the title itself, as Wharton plays with various meanings of the word throughout the story. One meaning is text that is written for publication; both Helen Dale and Paul Ventnor write copy of a sort. Or, one might have a copy, a volume, of Ventnor’s poems or Mrs. Dale’s novels. Hilda, the adoring secretary, wants to copy her employer and be a famous writer one day. Mrs. Dale, rereading an old letter, tells Ventnor that “the best phrase in it . . . is simply plagiarized, word for word, from this!” as she uses a synonym, “plagiarized” for “copied” (I: 281). These are some of the simpler, more direct meanings of “copy” in this story; however, if we look deeper, we see a subtler meaning of the word explored. Throughout the story, Helen Dale decries that life is not as genuine as it used to be, that her identity has been lost in her public persona. In the quotation above about dying years ago, about existing in a reporter’s brain, she is seeing herself as a version of her former self, a copy, not the actual woman she remembers. Perceiving Ventnor in a similar way as they discuss the letters, she tells him: “Oh, I don’t dispute their authenticity—it’s yours I deny! . . . You voluntarily ceased to be the man who wrote me those letters—you’ve admitted as much” (I: 283). He too is a copy. Is either of them “real” in life or only in the persona the letters provide?



Though “Copy” is written with a light tone for the most part, Wharton is examining the issue of the private identity of a successful writer. Publication can bring fame and fortune, but Wharton is questioning whether it also means ceding part of one’s essential self to others. Lev Raphael notes: “The story seems a cautionary tale warning against the loss of self to one’s public, especially through the embarrassing, revealing private papers, which Ventnor and Mrs. Dale agree to burn here. They thus deprive their publics—and ironically themselves—of ‘copy’ ” (213). Wharton clearly demonstrates Helen’s firm grasp of the commercial realities of her life. On the first page, Hilda reminds her that a recent autograph sold for fifty dollars; when Helen talks to her secretary about the diary she keeps about life with the famous novelist, she tells her: “You’ll make a fortune out of that diary, Hilda—” and Hilda replies that four publishers are already interested (I: 277). The whole discussion of the letters and their ownership, of what could happen to them and what they should do with them, centers on their monetary value, either in the hands of an unscrupulous person or in their own memoirs. Underlying the financial significance, however, issues of personal privacy and authenticity are ever-present. We see Wharton’s fascination with this topic in *The Touchstone* and other early artist stories as well.

Edith Wharton wrote “April Showers” in 1893 but it was rejected by Scribner’s. The story appeared in a magazine in 1900 but was never included in one of her collected volumes of short stories. One of her less successful efforts, (it has been mostly ignored by critics) however, the tale illuminates Wharton’s anxieties about writing and her attitude about the female sentimentalists of her time, as previously noted. Seventeen year-old

Theodora Dace fancies herself a writer and submits her emotionally intense novel to the *Home Circle*, a magazine specializing in women's fiction, including the works of Kathleen Kyd, author of *Fashion and Passion* and *Rhona's Revolt*. Miraculously, the magazine accepts her book with her pen name "Gladys Glyn," and for two months she joyously awaits publication and revels in the celebrity she has achieved in her small Boston suburb. When the first installment appears, her title, "April Showers" is there, but the work itself has been written by Kathleen Kyd. Theodora learns that somehow the magazine received both novels, with the exact same title, on the same day and the notices sent out were mixed up, a ridiculous and improbable coincidence. Devastated, she returns from the publisher's office to find her father waiting for her at the train station. He tells her of a similar rejection experience in his life when he wrote a novel after finishing college. The novel was not accepted for publication, and he remembers how upset he had been walking home with the notice. Father and daughter, who have never been close, bond for the first time.

In spite of the absurd, preposterous plot, "April Showers" helps us better understand Wharton's own writing. Her treatment of Theodora's joy when she receives the letter from *Home Circle* probably echoes her own elation at selling her first story, "Mrs. Manstey's View" in 1890:

Theodora found herself in the wood beyond the schoolhouse. She was kneeling on the ground, brushing aside the dead leaves and pressing her lips to the little bursting green things that pushed up eager tips through last year's decay. It was spring—spring! Everything was crowding toward the light and in her own heart hundreds of germinating hopes had burst into sudden leaf. She wondered if the thrust of those little green fingers hurt the surface of the earth as her springing rapture hurt—yes, actually hurt!—her hot, constricted breast! She looked up

through interlacing boughs at a tender, opaque blue sky full of the coming of a milky moon. She seemed enveloped in an atmosphere of loving comprehension. The brown earth throbbed with her joy, the treetops trembled with it (I: 193).

Though the passage is overly dramatic and the springtime metaphor a familiar one, nevertheless, Wharton captures the sentiment we imagine a young girl would feel when she learns her manuscript has been accepted.

The final few paragraphs where Theodora and her father finally share common emotions are also well-written. In fact, Lev Raphael praises Wharton's light touch in "April Showers," referring to it as "this delightful and tenderly mocking story" (193). He overlooks the absurd plot and focuses on the father-daughter scene:

For her, at least, the shame of having failed so publicly is healed by hearing about her father's past disappointment, and experiencing his present kindness. It is a rare moment in Wharton's fiction as a whole, but not quite so uncommon in her writing about artists and writers, where there is at least some chance for shame to be healed. Failure does not automatically or ineluctably lead to isolation . . . (194).

In addition to exploring the feelings of a young writer, Wharton also satirizes the popular writing of the female sentimentalists, as noted earlier in this chapter. Although she greatly admired Jane Austen and George Eliot, she always distanced herself from these American women and even the more talented local colorists like Sara Orne Jewett. Barbara White points out that in "April Showers" the alliterated names of the writers suggest the pseudonyms of nineteenth-century writers like Grace Greenwood and Fanny Fern (32). Theodora's uncle, whose main passion is modern plumbing, is a neighbor of Kathleen Kyd's. He emphasizes her ordinary and unremarkable life when he contemptuously tells Theodora about the author: her real name is Frances G. Wollop; her

husband is a dentist, and she worked as a saleswoman in a store before her first story was accepted. Speaking for Wharton, Uncle James tells the family and particularly Theodora: “Well, I hope *this* household doesn’t contribute to her support. I don’t believe in feeding youngsters on sentimental trash; it’s like sewer gas—doesn’t smell bad, and infects the system without your knowing it.” (I: 190). Later, when the family believes Theodora’s novel has been accepted, he suggests she write her next romance about sanitation. “That was a subject that would interest everybody, and do a lot more good than the sentimental trash most women wrote” (I: 194). The satire is light and playfully mocking, but Wharton makes her point, linking the trash he thinks women are writing to the actual trash collected by the city.

In an early satire on the nineteenth century female sentimentalists, “The Pelican” represents a far more successful effort than “April Showers.” Appearing in *The Greater Inclination*, “The Pelican” combines a light touch with Wharton’s trenchant wit. Reviewers liked the story when it appeared, and it has been popular ever since. A male narrator provides an ironic and occasionally condescending tone, creating an appropriate distance from the central character, Mrs. Amyot, a young widow who becomes a public lecturer to support her baby son, Lancelot. Pretty, flirtatious Mrs. Amyot, who considers herself an authority on art and literature, has no particular qualifications for researching and giving lectures other than financial necessity, but her first audiences enjoy the popular subjects she chooses: Greek art, English poets, German philosophers and the like. The women also enjoy thinking of themselves as avid students of these important topics. Each subject receives a brief and shallow exploration, but Mrs. Amyot believes herself to

be an intellectual, as do the ladies who attend. Charmingly, she always makes it clear that, though she is nervous, modest and quite shy, “she has to do it for the baby.” After a few years, her lectures are sellouts as women enjoy attending her talks and helping her support and educate her young son. The narrator dismisses them as:

the throng of well-dressed and absent minded ladies who rustled in late, dropped their muffs, and pocketbooks, and undisguisedly lost themselves in the study of each other’s apparel. They received Mrs. Amyot with warmth, but she evidently represented a social obligation like going to church, rather than any more personal interest; in fact I suspect that every one of the ladies would have remained away, had they been sure that none of the others were coming (I: 93).

Eventually, however, the public tires of Mrs. Amyot as other women enter the field and the audiences become more demanding. Lancelot now at Harvard, she ventures west to find new audiences in Omaha and Leadville, always telling her listeners that she is working to pay for her son’s education. Ten years go by, and the narrator is recuperating from a cough at a southern hotel when he is approached by an acquaintance who asks him to buy a ticket for the evening lecture, though quickly telling him:

You needn’t go, you know; we’re none of us going; most of us have been through it already at Aiken and at Saint Augustine and at Palm Beach. . . . some of us are going to send our maids, just to fill up the room. . . . One has to take tickets, you know, because she is a widow and does it for her son—to pay for his education (I: 97).

Shocked to learn Mrs. Amyot is still lecturing, the narrator encounters thirty year-old Lancelot who has been self-supporting for years and has no idea that his mother still uses him as a reason for her work. Though her son is angry and accuses her of fraud and deception, the narrator realizes that Mrs. Amyot, though she now spends her money on her son and his family, must continue her work to keep occupied and useful. She needs

the audience more than the money. Helping Lancelot has just been an excuse, however, Mrs. Amyot never allows herself to perceive the reasons for her continued pretense of lecturing to help her son.

The title, “The Pelican,” is a marvelous and ironic touch. An old legend says that when no other food is available, a pelican tears her breast and feeds her children with her blood. The bird has become a symbol of self-sacrifice, mother-love, and charity (*The World Book Encyclopedia*, 15: 206). Wharton is employing a powerful and disturbing image: the self-sacrificing, martyred artist suffering agonizing pain in order to provide sustenance for her child. When the reader places this image next to Wharton’s depiction of a vain, frivolous woman who uses her child as an excuse for attracting audiences in order to feel important, we can see a biting satire not fully evident in the story itself.

Like Mrs. Amyot, who worries about decreasing popularity and attendance at her lectures, in “Full Circle,” a writer’s anxiety about his reputation gradually increases until his fear of being ignored takes over his whole life. Wharton’s tale concerns Geoffrey Betton, a successful writer, and his apprehensions about his public persona, like Helen Dale and Paul Ventnor in “Copy.” Betton’s first book, published two years before the story begins, was so successful that he had been inundated with letters from readers, lecture requests, appearances before a variety of groups, and solicitations of every sort. Pompous, vain, and self-important, Betton now contemplates the publication of his second book, pretends to dread all the commotion it will bring, and employs Duncan Vyse to handle the expected barrage of attention. Vyse wrote a book years ago which Betton admired and had planned to submit to a publisher friend. Somehow Betton kept

putting it off, possibly because he was jealous of Vyse's talent, and never made the contact. Now feeling guilty at his old friend's impoverished state because the book was never published, he implores Vyse to handle all the upcoming correspondence, tactlessly asking: "Have you any idea of the deluge of stuff that people write to a successful novelist?" (II: 78).

An elaborate deception follows. For a few weeks, letters pour in, and Betton postures as usual, protests the torrent, and hardly reads them before Vyse answers them. After a few days, however, he admits to himself that he wants to read them after all: "It was really a pleasure to read them, now that he was relieved of the burden of replying; his new relation to his correspondents had the glow of a love affair unchilled by the contingency of marriage" (II: 80). Eventually though, sooner than expected, the letters taper off and slow to a trickle, and now Betton worries that Vyse will think him unpopular. Still feeling guilty over his previous neglect, Betton cannot bring himself to dismiss Vyse—he is literally caught in a vice. His attention is occupied completely by what he imagines Vyse to be thinking and feeling. Secretly, to keep Vyse from learning the truth, Betton writes letters to himself, while at the same time, in desperate need of his salary and fearing he will be dismissed, Vyse also starts writing letters to keep the correspondence flowing. Eventually, the whole deception comes out, and the two men confront each other. Betton presses Vyse to admit to writing the letters because he sympathizes with his employer and his need for admiration. When Vyse rejects that reason, Betton speculates that he wrote them as a cruel trick since Betton failed to submit his manuscript years ago, but Vyse denies that excuse as well. Finally, the story ends as

Vyse admits that he only wrote the letters to keep his job and the salary he desperately needs. The conclusion is rather unsatisfactory since Wharton does not resolve the situation, and the reader never learns what happens to either character after Vyse's revelation.

For the reader, the main interest in "Full Circle" lies in Wharton's fascinating exploration of one successful writer's psyche. Once again, the writer's connection to others lies primarily in letters, rather than any true intimacy. By 1909 when the story was written, Edith Wharton's place as a popular writer was clearly established. Whether or not she actually experienced the same emotions, she was certainly in a position to detail Betton's varied responses, without his hyperbole. His identity depends on how he is seen by others, first the public and later Vyse. The early joy of receiving praise from absolute strangers eventually turns to weariness with the burden of being a public figure:

And then his success began to submerge him: he gasped under the thickening shower of letters. His admirers were really unappeasable. And they wanted him to do such ridiculous things—to give lectures, to head movements, to be tendered receptions, to speak at banquets, to address mothers, to plead for orphans, to go up in balloons, to lead the struggle for sterilized milk. They wanted his photograph for literary supplements, his autograph for charity bazaars, his name on committees, literary education, and social; above all, they wanted his opinion on everything: on Christianity, Buddhism, tight lacing, the drug habit, democratic government, female suffrage and love" (II: 74).

Even more intensely than the weight of oppressive demands, Wharton brings to life the anxiety the writer must feel as he waits for the reception of his work, particularly if the first book is a popular success. She masterfully details Betton's monitoring of the daily mail count, his obsessive concern that Vyse might read an unflattering letter, his joy when praised and his disappointment when his second book turns out to be much less



popular than the first. Like other stories in this section, “Full Circle” examines these anxieties, the tension between a writer’s private identity and public persona, and how his perceptions influence his work. In this story, Wharton also explores the delusional dimension of being an artist, especially one with an audience. Wharton’s reactions to her own commercial success were diverse. Hermione Lee notes in her discussion of Wharton’s attitude toward the increasing business and marketing emphasis in selling books: “For some literary writers, this increasingly commercialised marketplace provoked a fearful resistance or disdainfully elitist withdrawal. But Edith Wharton’s reaction was tougher and more complicated. Like many writers of her generation, she had mixed feelings about her own exposure” (172).

In “Expiation” (1903) Wharton satirizes writing and literary taste in a lightly comic way. Paula Fetherel writes a book to point out society’s failings and weaknesses, calling her novel *Fast and Loose*, the exact title Wharton gave her own first novella, written when she was fifteen years old. Wharton also pokes fun at her adolescent work in “April Showers” when Theodora Dace uses the last line in *Fast and Loose* as the last line in her own book. In this story, Paula is completely confident that her book will be a bestseller, but thinks it is scandalous and fears the reviews. In fact, her novel is quite tame and the sales lackluster. Later, at her cousin’s suggestion, Paula bribes her uncle, a hypocritical and self-important Bishop, with funds for a chancel window, to denounce her book as immoral. At this point, because of the denunciation, the book becomes the wildly popular bestseller Paula hoped for. Wharton’s satire on the reading public and publishers

emerges when Paula's cousin, Mrs. Clinch, tries to persuade her that people do not actually read books anymore:

Nobody does that now; the reviewer was the first to set the example, and the public was only too thankful to follow it. At first people read the reviews; now they read only the publishers' extracts from them. Even these are rapidly being replaced by paragraphs borrowed from the vocabulary of commerce. I often have to look twice before I am sure if I am reading a department store advertisement or the announcement of a new batch of literature. The publishers will soon be having their "fall and spring openings" and their "special importations for Horse Show Week." But the Bishop is right, of course—nothing helps a book like a rousing attack on its morals; and as the publishers can't exactly proclaim the impropriety of their own wares, the task has to be left to the press or the pulpit (I: 450).

Paula's disappointment with the initial reception of her book leads to a more perceptive, yet obviously cynical twist on marketing a novel. Though "Expiation" is not one of Wharton's best efforts, the story, along with other female artist tales, clarifies Wharton's views on these issues. Again we see her concern with commercial success versus artistic achievement; she wanted both for herself but often had disdain for public taste. In *A Backward Glance*, she writes about her feelings on popular judgment:

It is discouraging to know that the books into the making of which so much of one's soul has entered will be snatched at by readers curious only to discover which of the heroes and heroines of the "society column" are to be found in it. But I made up my mind long ago that it is foolish and illogical to resent so puerile a form of criticism. If one has sought the publicity of print, and sold one's wares in the open market, one has sold to the purchasers the right to think what they choose about one's books; and the novelist's best safeguard is to put out of his mind the quality of the praise or blame bestowed on him by reviewers and readers, and to write only for that dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast (212).

"In Trust," a little noted tale written in 1906, focuses not on artists themselves but on those who support art. Paul Ambrose inherits family wealth and wants to use his

money to endow an Academy of Arts, an extravagant and grandiose project that would bring artistic treasures to the masses. Ambitiously and pretentiously, he proclaims: “I want to bring the poor starving wretches back to their lost inheritance, to the divine past they’ve thrown away—I want to make ‘em hate ugliness so that they’ll smash nearly everything in sight” (I: 616). Lacking any talent himself, Ambrose intends to compensate by bringing art to others. He studies great art abroad, enlists trustees and architects, but consistently delays actually beginning the project. The narrator, an unnamed friend of Ambrose’s from school, and another friend, Ned Halidon, decide that Ambrose’s innate stinginess prevents him from executing the plans, though he continues to discuss it through the years.

When Ambrose dies at an early age, he leaves his money to his wife who eventually marries Halidon; both earnestly commit themselves to making Paul’s Academy a reality. The disillusioned narrator observes them over many years and notes their extravagant lifestyle: lavish trips, fine clothes, imported champagne and cigars and luxurious homes for entertaining, even as they are asserting that their plans to create the Academy are delayed by a lack of funds. Eventually Halidon realizes that though he lives on Ambrose’s money, he will never carry out his friend’s wishes. Overcome with guilt, he accepts a job in an unhealthy climate and soon dies. Before he leaves, however, he tells the narrator that he believes his son will one day carry out the plans.

The narrator in “In Trust” not only describes the events but also serves as a judge of what is taking place. Through his eyes the reader sees the tension between exposing the ridiculous and pompous plan and examining the corrupting influence money can

have. We should not, however, conclude that the narrator's voice is necessarily Wharton's. Like other narrators of other stories, he has a point of view and cannot be entirely objective. Paul Ambrose could neither execute his plan nor give it up. Instead he talks of leaving his money "in trust" for Halidon to use for the project. Though Ambrose's money goes to his wife with no conditions attached, both she and Halidon are unable to abandon the idea and feel obligated to continue discussing the Academy, even if they can never bring themselves to fund it. Wharton's title is ironic as she plays with different meanings of trust. The narrator and Halidon initially trust their friend to carry out his plans. Though Ambrose never actually puts the money "in trust" legally for his project, he trusts his wife to handle it after his death, but she imitates him by talking about the plan, not acting on it. The narrator then trusts Halidon to finish the project. Thus "In Trust" means not only the money left in a trust fund but also the faith and reliance friends and family might place in each other. Wharton mocks the pretentious Academy of Art and those who deceive themselves about building it.

### Artistic Standards

The final story in Wharton's first collection, *The Greater Inclination*, "The Portrait," presents an artist's moral dilemma about the integrity of his work. In this early story, written in 1898, Wharton also explores the nature of artistic truthfulness and whether the artist has a responsibility to be honest in his work. The first narrator, an unnamed writer, begins the story at a Sunday afternoon party where guests are discussing

portraits by the famous artist, George Lillo, who has returned to New York after twelve years for an exhibit of his work. Our first understanding of the situation comes from the narrator's description of the guests' conversations and their comments about Lillo. They all believe him to be a genius but differ in their views of why Lillo's portraits are so magnificent.

One guest, condescendingly called Little Cumberton, a popular but uninspired artist himself, notes Lillo's talent, but tells the others Lillo only sees the defects in people and exaggerates those points, rather than paint the sitter in a romanticized style. Praising romanticism in art, he criticizes Lillo: "He has been denied the gift—so precious to an artist—of perceiving the ideal" (I: 173). Another guest, referred to as "the pretty woman" five or six times but also significantly without a name, complains that she would never sit for Lillo because "he makes people look so horrid" (I: 173). The hostess, Mrs. Mellish interrupts and argues with her guests that Lillo is great precisely because he paints what he sees in his subjects. Praising his use of realism, she notes that his portraits are true reflections of his sitters: "He's no more to blame than a mirror. Your other painters do the surface—he does the depth; they paint the ripples on the pond, he drags the bottom" (I: 174). After giving several examples of Lillo's portraits that she feels are great art because he reveals the true subjects, she warns them: "My advice is, don't let George Lillo paint you if you don't want to be found out—or to find yourself out" (I: 174).

The talk soon turns to Alonzo Vard, a former political crime boss who committed suicide on the first day of Lillo's exhibition. Lillo's portrait of Vard, painted years ago when Vard was powerful but never shown until now, is surprisingly mediocre. Critics,

artists and the general public all find the painting disappointingly bland, with none of the exaggerated traits and scandalous overtones they expected from Lillo. No one understands why. At that moment, George Lillo arrives at Mrs. Mellish's home and overhears the comments. After a time, he leaves with the narrator and they begin to discuss Vard's portrait and why it is deemed a failure. After dinner together, Lillo takes over narrating the story as he relates the background of the portrait and his complex association with Alonzo Vard.

Twelve years earlier, Lillo relates, he met Vard and his daughter at a dinner party and knew immediately that Vard, a corrupt and vulgar man, would be the perfect subject for him, a way for him to leave obscurity and become famous: "I had the feeling—do you writer-fellows have it too?—that there was something tremendous in me if it could only be got out; and I felt Vard was the Moses to strike the rock" (I; 177-178). Vard, in spite of his unsavory reputation, was nevertheless invited to everyone's dinners, even as, in an effective turn of phrase, "irreproachable citizens were forming ineffectual leagues" to defeat him. After making contact with Vard's daughter so that she might persuade her father to sit for a portrait, Lillo recognized that she adored her father, that she did not realize how corrupt he was. The painter explains to the narrator that somehow he could not bring himself to reveal on his canvas the crudeness and dishonesty he saw in Vard's face. When Miss Vard was not at his studio with her father, Lillo told himself he must paint Vard as he saw him, but when his daughter accompanied him, he found himself incapable of doing so. Delay followed delay and while Lillo stalled, Vard's latest scandal appeared in the papers.

Eventually, Vard was acquitted in a fixed trial, and a few weeks after the verdict, Miss Vard came to Lillo's studio and urged him to finish the portrait. Looking into her eyes, Lillo realized that her illusions were gone, that she now saw her father clearly. Still, because of his affection for her, Lillo tells the writer he painted Vard's portrait with none of his usual insight or telltale attributes, with none of the unique qualities he was able to convey in his other portraits, thus concealing his subject's true nature: "Too late, you say? Yes—for her; but not for me or for the public. If she could be made to feel, for a day longer, for an hour even, that her miserable secret *was* a secret—why, she'd made it seem worthwhile to me to chuck my own ambitions for that. . . . (I: 185). Lillo concludes the tale by telling the narrator that Miss Vard died a year ago, "thank God." Presumably, he means that he is relieved that she died before Vard's suicide, before the mediocre portrait was exhibited with all the others painted in his usual realistic style. In the story, Wharton does not probe the link between Vard's suicide and the opening of the exhibit, both occurring on the same day. The reader must assume there is a connection between the two, but we are left to speculate: was Vard reacting to the mediocrity he saw reflected in the portrait, or was there some other reason? We must also question why Lillo exhibits the inferior portrait at all, why he places the likeness he painted to save Miss Vard pain before a larger audience after her death. The story does not answer this question either; perhaps it is a plot device.

Unfortunately the plot of "The Portrait" seems occasionally confusing; the sequence of events has to be pieced together as the story jumps around in time, blurring the chronology of when the portrait was painted, when exhibited, or when the Vards died

in relation to these events. Some confusion is caused by a lack of clarity and consistency, stemming from the narration in present time, by two different narrators, telling of events taking place at different times in the past. For example, Barbara White, in her discussion of the story, says: "It really strains credulity to have the daughter die when she finally discovers the truth about her father's corrupt business practices," linking this story to other early stories of disillusioned women, such as "The Lamp of Psyche" and "The Valley of Childish Things," and noting these latter women were not killed by their enlightenment (39). Contradicting White's conclusion and illustrating the perplexing chronology, in the story Lillo tells the narrator that he knows Miss Vard understood her father's corruption before he finished the painting twelve years earlier; at the end of the story Lillo says she died "last year," indicating the two events were not connected but were, in fact, eleven years apart. In addition, White suggests that Wharton implausibly links Miss Vard's death to her distress over her father's crimes, a conclusion that seems far-fetched and unsupported by the story.

In spite of this difficulty, this convoluted and often criticized work is, nevertheless, useful to a consideration of the larger themes of perception and vision. "The Portrait" raises important issues that Edith Wharton was trying to resolve at this time and that she returned to again and again in her work. The question of artistic integrity is a central theme in these stories as well as this one. Contrasting Little Cumberton, who paints his subjects in an idealized way with George Lillo, who exposes the characters of his subjects, effectively prods the reader to consider what truth or honesty means in a generalized artistic context and in the particularized category of portraiture in this tale.



The genre of portraiture, so prevalent in Wharton's time and including artists such as John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase, occurs frequently in her artist stories. "The Verdict," "The Potboiler," "The Moving Finger," "The Temperate Zone," and others feature portrait painters and how they portray their subjects.

We are also encouraged to examine Lillo's deliberate withholding of his vision to spare Miss Vard. In his discussion of the story, Lev Raphael asks: "What happens when a writer's or artist's revelation or insight is about someone else? Must he publish or paint what he sees? What are the risks, and is hurting another less important than being true to one's craft? Or are other considerations more important?" (206). Raphael may have been asking rhetorical questions as he does not attempt to answer them, but he points out that these are issues Wharton raises in this story. Wharton does not definitively answer them either; rather, she explores the subject in "The Portrait" and in other tales about writers and artists as well. Artistic truthfulness also involves the connection between artist and subject and between artist and audience, and what happens to this connection when art is not honest. For Wharton, truth in art is a moral issue, and the artist makes moral choices in what he paints or writes.

Barry Maine, in *Edith Wharton Review*, describes an interesting correlation between "The Muse's Tragedy" and "The Portrait," contending that this last story in the collection is a companion story to the first one in *The Greater Inclination*. "The Muses' Tragedy" concerns "the travails of the subject of art (specifically, a woman immortalized in a sonnet sequence,)" and "The Portrait" is about "the travails of the artist over how to portray his subject. Together the stories serve as fitting book ends to the collection" (7).

Maine also points out that both stories feature women disillusioned with men they love; Mary Anerton is disappointed in the poet Rendle and Miss Vard in her father. Both stories relate to the ethical questions of artistic integrity Wharton raises: “. . . the moral necessity of pursuing the ‘greater’ (as opposed to the lesser, meaner, easier or more self-serving) inclination, which turns out in the end, appropriately enough, to be the artist’s responsibility as well” (7-8). In “The Muse’s Tragedy,” Mary Anerton pursues “the greater inclination” when she tells Danyers the truth about her relationship with Rendle and the changes she made in his posthumous letters and also when she rejects Danyers’ proposal of marriage. Maine suggests here that Lillo chooses the higher moral ground when he subordinates the quality of his work to spare Miss Vard:

The artist’s superior powers of perception are never called into question in the story. The issue for this artist is not what he sees or what he knows, but what to paint of it. The artist realizes with apprehension, guilt, and even some horror, the power of representations to reveal, to wound, to be the final word. Rather than paint a *success de scandale* by giving the public what it wanted, he sacrificed ambition for a “greater inclination,” the inclination to spare the daughter as much pain as possible while still revealing the mediocre truth (11).

One has to question, however, whether Maine’s conclusion is what Wharton intended. Lillo believed it to be “the greater inclination,” but we cannot say that Wharton endorses his choice. It can also be argued that the more honest choice, “the greater inclination,” would have been to paint Vard as Lillo saw him, with his penetrating perception, thus remaining true to his own talent and vision. It is also important to remember that we can only hypothesize about what Wharton meant by her collection’s title, *The Greater Inclination*, and, as noted earlier in this chapter, there are different interpretations.

In the early stages of her own career as a writer, Wharton herself struggled with what might be revealed in her work about her marriage and New York society, what truths to expose and which ones to disguise; her concerns are reflected in these stories. In *The Greater Inclination*, over the objections of her editor, she insisted on substituting “The Portrait” for two more personal stories, “The Fullness of Life” and “The Lamp of Psyche” because Wharton thought they revealed too much (Lewis 86-87).

In addition to the nature of artistic honesty, “The Portrait” also raises questions about vision and perception, as do so many other works of Edith Wharton. In fact, the entire story centers on vision and perception because the issue of artistic truth may be a subjective truth. Who is to say what is true in art? The artist? The subject? The public? Edith Wharton? In “The Portrait” characters often see people differently from one another or not at all. Cumberton accuses Lillo of not “perceiving the ideal,” while Wharton clearly mocks Cumberton as the “fashionable purveyor of rose-water pastels” (I: 173). Mrs. Mellish defends Lillo, saying: “It’s not because he sees only one aspect of his sitters, it’s because he selects the real, the typical one, as instinctively as a detective collars a pick-pocket in a crowd. If there’s nothing to paint—no real person—he paints nothing.” (I: 174; her comment underlines the exception Lillo makes with Vard’s portrait. Miss Vard’s vision is complex; at first, she worships her father and tells Lillo how glad she is that he sees Vard the same way she does, which we know is incorrect. Actually, Lillo is somewhat ashamed of taking advantage of her “delusion” to gain the sitting because they perceive Vard so differently. By the end, however, when Miss Vard comes to his studio to urge him to complete the portrait, Lillo tells the narrator she has seen her

father clearly: “She looked at me then for the first time; looked too soon, poor child; for in the spreading light of reassurance that made her eyes like a rainy dawn, I saw, with terrible distinctness, the rout of her disbanded hopes. I knew that she knew . . .”

(Wharton’s ellipsis) (I: 185). The narrator recalls his own shaky perceptions of Miss Vard when asked by Lillo if he knew her: “Why of course, I’d known her: a silent handsome girl, showy yet ineffective, whom I had seen without seeing the winter society had capitulated to Vard” (I: 180).

George Lillo, the artist whose genius depends on seeing his subjects’ characters as well as their faces, dwells constantly on seeing and perception. When he first begins his part of the story, he tells the narrator: “Well, I’ll tell you. It’s a queer story, and most people wouldn’t see anything in it” (I: 177). Lillo works hard to understand Vard, trying to see him: “. . . at first sight he was immense; but as I studied him he began to lessen under my scrutiny. His depth was a false perspective painted on a wall” (I: 180). Lillo finds that Miss Vard provides a sharp contrast to her father. Though she tries to bring out the good qualities she sees in Vard, somehow her presence makes him even more distasteful: “She made him appear at his best, but she cheapened that best by her proximity. For the man was vulgar to the core; vulgar in spite of his force and magnitude; thin, hollow, spectacular . . .” (I: 180). Lillo tries to describe Miss Vard’s appealing qualities to the narrator, noting that he can paint better than he can explain, but implores: “Do I make you see her?” (I: 181). During the investigation of the scandal that brings Vard down, Lillo speculates that Vard thinks he will escape prosecution because he acts coolly confident; yet Lillo believes this attitude stems, not from Vard’s own strength, but

from his contempt for those who censure him. Lillo again uses metaphors of vision when he comments: “Success is an inverted telescope through which one’s enemies are apt to look too small and too remote” (I: 182). After the trial, when Miss Vard returns to his studio after several weeks, the painter finds that: “She had—what shall I say?—a veiled manner; as though she had dropped a fine gauze between us” (I: 184). The “veiled manner” and the “gauze” Wharton employs here suggest that Miss Vard is pushing Lillo away, establishing a distance between them to keep her feelings private, but it is also true that the veil will prevent her from seeing Lillo at the same time.

Seeing clearly, arriving at a judgment about what one sees, and then painting or writing about that truth becomes a way of establishing a connection, an intimacy between the artist or writer and his audience, a way for the reader or the observer to understand and know the artist as well as the subject. “The Portrait” raises questions about artistic truth, but inevitably, since it is about seeing and perception, there will always be a point of view, and it cannot be objective. As Lillo tells the narrator: “After all, the point of view is what gives distinction to either vice or virtue: a morality with ground-glass windows is no duller than a narrow cynicism” (I: 180). Edith Wharton has demonstrated in many of her works that finding a way to see clearly can help characters find strength and that through this strength, they become more complete. For her, truth and vision seem always linked.

“The Recovery,” the second story in *Crucial Instances*, is usually classified by R. W. B. Lewis, Barbara White, and other critics as a piece about art and artists, but this tale could also be placed with the marriage stories as well. Told from the point of view of

the reflector, Claudia Day Keniston, wife of an artist, the third-person narration illustrates Claudia's evolving awareness and disillusionment and Edith Wharton's judgments about art, those who view it and those who create it. Wharton opens the story in Hillbridge, a small, provincial university town also used in "Xingu" and "The Pelican" where the artist Keniston has painted, been discovered and promoted. People come from all over to see his work in the setting of Hillbridge since everyone insists his work must be viewed in that context to be fully understood. After reading about the artist in a magazine, Claudia Day, a young woman with "an innate passion for all that was thus distinguished and exceptional," visits Keniston's studio, hoping to gain an understanding of the famous artist in his own surroundings (I: 260). Claudia learns he is poor because, though his work commands high prices, he is anxious not to pander to the masses and thus works extremely slowly. Tongue-tied and worshipful, painfully aware of her own ignorance, Claudia meets the famous Keniston, and assumes his reticence stems from her inadequacy and naive eagerness to engage him.

In the next section, ten years have passed, and Claudia has become Keniston's wife. Mrs. Davant, a wealthy young woman who reminds Claudia of herself when she first visited Keniston's studio, tells Claudia how thrilled she is that his work will soon be exhibited in Paris. In fact, Mrs. Davant insists that the Kenistons themselves go to Europe so that he can see the work of other artists and attend the exhibition, and she offers to advance the money in return for four large panels to be painted at some later date.

Claudia Keniston has matured in ten years, and Wharton describes the changes in her with a deft hand. She still believes in her husband because "to believe in him, with an

increasing abandonment and tenacity, had become one of the necessary laws of being; but she did not believe in his admirers” (I: 262). Claudia now distrusts their standards, particularly the ones in Hillbridge, though not their sincerity. Furthermore, she has grown increasingly puzzled by Keniston’s own uncritical satisfaction with his work; a true artist should believe in his potential and talent in her view but should always strive for the next challenge, for a further vision. Disillusioned by his easy acceptance of everyone’s praise, “Claudia’s ardor gradually spent itself against the dense surface of her husband’s complacency. . . . In the first recoil from her disillusionment she even allowed herself to perceive that, if he worked slowly, it was not because he mistrusted his powers of expression, but because he had really so little to express” (I: 263). Yet Claudia, whatever she feels about her husband’s self-satisfaction, never doubts his artistic genius or talent: “Thank God, there was no doubt about the pictures! She was what she had always dreamed of being—the wife of a great artist” (I: 264). Claudia’s own identity and her desire to pursue a life of value depend on Keniston actually having the talent she believes he has (or once believed he has). If Claudia questions that ability, she would have to question her own choices and her role in his life; she needs to believe in her husband. Though she is reluctant to accept Mrs. Davant’s money, Keniston is anxious to agree to her offer and go to Europe so he can see the Great Masters’ works. He tells his wife that he wants to measure himself against “the big fellows over there” and for a brief moment, Claudia wonders if he really does feel somewhat unsure about his talent (I: 265).

In Part III the Kenistons, on their way to Paris, visit the National Gallery in London, and in this context Claudia’s doubts about her husband’s work begin to take

shape. As they walk through the various galleries and study the paintings, she watches the artist carefully, trying to gauge his reaction to the pictures because, though he observes them carefully and talks of the techniques used, he never generalizes about what he thinks: “He seemed to have a sort of provincial dread of showing himself too much impressed” (I: 266). Claudia herself is overwhelmed by what she sees, but quickly rationalizes that she does not really understand all the subtleties and complexities, and carefully avoids comparing Keniston’s work with the artists before her. Once in Paris, Keniston delays visiting the exhibition of his work; instead he and his wife occupy themselves with the Louvre and sight-seeing. Reluctant to face the question of his own talent, Keniston is now distancing himself, and Claudia as well, from seeing his paintings in this new context. Ultimately Mrs. Davant, promoting Keniston and his work as firmly as ever, insists that he come to the gallery to meet local artists and others who attend the exhibition, and after some protest, Keniston accepts her invitation to a tea at the gallery the next afternoon.

In Part IV, Claudia and Keniston spend the morning separately. As Claudia walks alone through the streets, she sees the true artistry of Paris and cannot help questioning her husband’s creations: “To Claudia the significance of the whole vast revelation was centered in the light it shed on one tiny spot of consciousness—the value of her husband’s work. There are moments when to the groping soul the world’s accumulated experiences are but stepping-stones across a private difficulty” (I: 269-270). Impulsively, she visits the gallery where Keniston’s exhibition is taking place and recognizes that the familiar, once-loved paintings are without merit. Finding this attitude intolerable, Claudia



tells herself that she is not qualified to judge. Trying to convince herself, she realizes the only other person in the room is her husband. Now her concern turns from her own verdict to Keniston's: "Instantly the live point of consciousness was shifted, and she became aware that the quality of the pictures no longer mattered. It was what *he* thought of them that counted: her life hung on that" (I: 271). Like George Lillo and Vard's daughter, the perception of the art becomes the ultimate concern, as Claudia's focus has moved from the value of the art itself to Keniston's own assessment of it. At stake for her is his sense of self, his belief that his life has not been wasted.

In the last section, Claudia returns to the hotel alone where Keniston plans to join her later. Though she thought she wanted him to face the truth about his work, now she can only worry about his reaction as she prepares herself for the emotional turmoil he must feel. When Keniston does arrive hours later, he is bright and exuberant, telling his wife he has spent the afternoon at the Louvre learning the difference between the Masters' works and his own. Keniston now realizes that his paintings are inferior, but he tells Claudia that he is young enough to begin again, to learn how to create the paintings he now wants to paint. When she questions how they will repay Mrs. Davant's advance, the story ends with his answer that they will stay in Paris until he learns how to paint the panels she has commissioned; he will recover.

As noted previously, while "The Recovery" usually falls into the category of artist tales, it could also be placed with the stories concerning marriage, and once again vision plays a major role. Claudia's early adoration of her husband and his talent eventually gives way to doubt and finally to recognition of his limitations, but in a sense, she has

also underestimated his resilience, endurance, and ability to recover. Her understanding of Keniston at each stage depends on her own vision and perception, and how the world sees the artist. Throughout the story, Wharton emphasizes words about seeing and knowing. In fact, the first sentence contains the important question running through the entire piece: “To the visiting stranger Hillbridge’s first question was, ‘Have you seen Keniston’s things?’ ” (I: 259). The crux of the story is how Keniston’s paintings are seen by his followers, other artists, his wife and ultimately himself. In the early part of the story, townspeople believe that seeing his works actually depends on viewing them in Hillbridge; one woman claims not to have recognized his work exhibited in New York: “‘It simply didn’t want to be seen in such surroundings; it was hiding itself under an incognito,’ she declared” (I: 259). Hillbridge citizens admire Keniston because he is one of them, because visitors came to Hillbridge to “know” his work. Claudia herself has distorted vision as she accepts the views of everyone else. The narrator’s voice, probably Wharton’s, makes it clear that Hillbridge is an insular, provincial town, and the unsophisticated people who live there cannot possibly understand or recognize true art. Wharton undercuts their small-town boosterism and their insistence that one must come to Hillbridge to comprehend Keniston’s work by sending the Kenistons to Europe and, particularly, to Paris. When Keniston’s work is exhibited there, he and Claudia finally understand the difference between “seeing” his paintings in Hillbridge and judging them by Hillbridge’s criteria and viewing them in relation to European standards of art and beauty. Wharton’s preferences for the traditions of the past, both in art and in culture, underlie their conclusions.

When the Kenistons go to Europe, how they see the works in the National Gallery and the Louvre determines the outcome of the story. Just being there sharpens their perceptions, and Claudia realizes her husband is more attentive than she thought: “He surprised her by an acuteness of observation that she had sometimes inwardly accused him of lacking. He seemed to have seen everything, to have examined, felt, compared, with nerves as finely adjusted as her own; but he said nothing of the pictures” (I: 266). Claudia’s final realization about Keniston’s work comes because she actually sees the paintings in the context of the beauty of Paris and masterpieces of other artists: “All about her were evidences of an artistic sensibility pervading every form of life like the nervous structure of the huge frame—a sensibility so delicate, alert and universal that it seemed to leave no room for obtuseness or error” (I: 269). We do not see Keniston’s own moment of truth because it occurs outside the narration, but he tells his wife how his own vision has changed. From what might have been only disillusionment and disappointment, Keniston has found a new vision for his art and a new enthusiasm for the project ahead.

Wharton’s ending seems too facile; certain questions come immediately to mind concerning Keniston’s ability to change his style and technique as well as the depth of his actual talent. Still, Wharton is quite convincing in articulating Claudia’s emerging perception of her husband and the transformation that takes place in Keniston’s own view of his work. Wharton’s point resides in these changes, not whether Keniston can actually succeed because, in addition to artistic standards and judgments, she is writing about the process of self-awareness in this story. When Claudia sees his work clearly and accepts

the inevitable conclusion of inferiority, she finally knows her husband; when Keniston acknowledges his own limitation, and perhaps, his own potential, he finally knows himself.

Most critics cite “The Recovery” as an example of a well-written early story about art but differ widely about the details. Blake Nevius finds it the best story in *Crucial Instances*, though he does not like the volume itself (22). He justifiably admires Wharton’s exploration of Hillbridge’s provincial standards of taste: “Even if the theme were not implicit in so much of Edith Wharton’s subsequent work, it clamors for recognition in “The Recovery,” noting that Wharton herself believed that true artists and writers needed European influences to flourish (23). We have seen Wharton’s expertise in this type of satire in “The Pretext” and “The Pelican” as she skewers small-town pretensions of intellect and discrimination. In “The Recovery,” Wharton places small-town American taste against European sophistication and refinement. Keniston’s work succeeds in the context of Hillbridge because the galleries of Europe and the paintings of the Old Masters are an ocean away, and Hillbridge’s provincial residents cannot make the comparison. As Nevius notes, Wharton drew inspiration from her travels and years of living abroad and, like Henry James, found Europe and England culturally superior.

The problematic ending has also attracted critical attention. Though Nevius commends Keniston’s determination to start over again, Evelyn Fracasso presents a more reasoned and persuasive argument against Keniston’s easy optimism. Calling this a “hasty transformation,” she uses it as an example of one of Wharton’s better early stories that still lacks some of the more sophisticated techniques she developed later: “. . . she

does not penetrate his inner consciousness to expose the anguish this uncommunicative artist must have experienced after his visits to these famous art museums. The reader is informed only of his decision to remain in Paris in order to forsake his “exquisite obtuseness” (1: 274). Wharton’s exploration of Claudia’s thoughts is more skillful as we see Claudia’s disillusionment about Keniston’s early complacency and her awareness of the differences between the European masterpieces and her husband’s work. Claudia’s eventual understanding of her husband and his painting reflects Wharton’s emphasis on Claudia’s gradual change. Still, disappointingly, Wharton never shows the reader how Claudia reacts to Keniston’s decision to stay in Europe; she questions how they will repay the debt to Mrs. Davant, but does not comment on her husband’s conclusions.

Penelope Vita-Finzi in *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, on the other hand, applauds Wharton’s concentration on Claudia as a means for understanding Keniston, rather than also portraying his consciousness as Evelyn Fracasso suggests she might have done. Moreover, Vita-Finzi compellingly connects Wharton’s focus on Claudia with the issue of artistic standards, contending that “The Recovery” asserts the importance of applying an absolute criterion to art rather than listening to the flattery of a public with superficial vision (113). In this case, the artist’s “standard of quality . . . can only be recognized by measuring himself against the standards of the past” (113). Keniston eventually recognizes this and finds the courage to begin again. In fact, Lev Raphael’s discussion of this tale quotes Vita-Finzi’s comments on Keniston’s ability to make this transition: “Keniston demonstrates that he is a true artist by recognizing an absolute standard and that his work does not measure up to that standard, and by his eagerness to

learn and see his way forward to a new vision” (Raphael 197, Vita-Finzi 116). Claudia’s role is crucial: “Edith Wharton employs the consciousness of an intelligent woman close to the artist . . . to discover the artist’s deficiencies and development and, through her own change from provincial to woman of taste, to add counterpoint” (Vita-Finzi 113). It seems reasonable to conclude that Wharton could have written this story either way, focusing more on Keniston’s thoughts than she has, or relying completely on Claudia’s consciousness. Still, Vita-Finzi’s convincing discussion of Claudia’s role in shedding light on Keniston’s artistic shortcomings and his subsequent need to apply a standard of quality adds an important dimension to the issue and may explain why Wharton wrote as she did.

Again, Wharton’s own standards about art echo throughout the story, as does her belief in Europe and Paris in particular as the center of those values. Vita-Finzi notes the presence of the author’s voice in “The Recovery,” particularly in the Hillbridge sections where she satirizes American culture and ignorance of the past as seen in Europe’s traditions (113). Comparing this story to “The Pretext” and Hillbridge to Wentworth, she points out Wharton’s contempt for their lack of sophistication: “. . . the danger of provincialism is that it circumscribes and limits judgement through complacency or lack of opportunity . . . for the artist to stay within this enclosed world would be to stifle his art for lack of freedom, stimulation, experience and knowledge of the art of the past” (116).

In “The Verdict” the artist, Jack Gisburn, gives up painting, in contrast to Keniston in “The Recovery.” In fact, it makes sense to consider the two stories together

when discussing Edith Wharton's depictions of art and artists. Both artists are popular and well-known yet both actually possess little talent. Each man eventually comes to recognize his limitations, yet each goes in a completely different direction after this painful discovery. Keniston, as we have seen, shakes off whatever disappointment we can only assume he feels and determines to learn from the masters and become the painter he once thought he was. Gisburn, on the other hand, retires completely and permanently from painting and the world of art. "The Verdict" begins with this information, and as the story proceeds, the plot turns on why he made this decision.

Though only eight pages long, "The Verdict" has two first-person narrators. The first, known simply as Mr. Rickham, tells the reader he is not surprised that Jack Gisburn, "rather a cheap genius" has stopped painting and moved with his new wealthy wife to the Riviera (I: 655). Rickham, in a series of judgmental statements with slanted information, makes it clear that Gisburn's work is second-rate. The reader might question Rickham's reliability as a narrator, but his judgment is later confirmed by Gisburn himself, when he tells his part of the story. Admired by women, including Mrs. Gideon Thwing, and a reviewer Wharton diminishes by calling him "little Claude Nutley," Gisburn is not respected by other artists, according to Rickham; nevertheless, of course, his work has increased in value since his retirement. Three years later, while spending some time on the Riviera, Rickham becomes curious about the reasons Gisburn gave up his work and decides to visit the artist and find out why he no longer paints. Wharton bitingly satirizes the life of the idle rich in this story as Rickham notes: "I have mentioned that Mrs. Gisburn was rich; and it was immediately perceptible that her husband was extracting

from this circumstance a delicate but substantial satisfaction. It is, as a rule, the people who scorn money who get the most out of it; and Jack's elegant disdain of his wife's big balance enabled him, with an appearance of perfect good breeding, to transmute it into objects of art and luxury" (I: 656). When the subject of Gisburn's retirement comes up, his wife comments that he does not have to paint anymore, and she prefers him to enjoy himself. Rickham does not believe this is the reason for Gisburn's retirement, nor does he understand why none of Gisburn's painting is displayed in the villa. Only Mrs. Gisburn's portrait is there, hidden in her boudoir because, though she wants to display the painting prominently, her husband will not allow it anywhere visitors might see it. Mrs. Gisburn agrees to show the portrait to Rickham while her husband is on the terrace. Rickham observes Gisburn's usual characteristics, and though it pleases Mrs. Gisburn, Rickham knows it is no better than his earlier work.

Gisburn offers to show Rickham the rest of the villa, and again we find Wharton's satire which makes it clear that these luxuries have nothing to do with art:

He showed it to me with a kind of naive suburban pride: the bathrooms, the speaking tubes, the dress closets, the trouser presses—all the complex simplifications of the millionaire's domestic economy. And whenever my wonder paid the expected tribute he said, throwing out his chest a little: Yes, I really don't see how people manage to live without that." (I: 658).

Wharton, through Rickham's narration, disdains the Gisburns, who are among the nouveau riche, wealthy Americans living abroad that she satirizes throughout her work. They fill their homes with artistic treasures because they can afford to do so and believe others expect it of them and will admire their taste as well as their wealth. When the two men visit the former artist's surprisingly tasteful and unpretentious private quarters,



however, Gisburn picks up the narrative, explaining to Rickham how he managed to own the small sketch of a donkey hanging above the mantelpiece. The sketch had been done by the highly talented but less popular and now deceased artist, Stroud. They both acknowledge Stroud's superior abilities; evidently he was so good that he was a poverty-stricken failure, another of Wharton's commentaries on public taste.

Mrs. Stroud, on the death of her husband, wanted him painted by a fashionable painter. Deftly Wharton derides Mrs. Stroud's taste as Gisburn tells Rickham how Mrs. Stroud feels about her husband's work: "She believed in him, gloried in him—or thought she did. But she couldn't bear not to have all the drawing rooms with her. She couldn't bear the fact that, on varnishing days, one could always get near enough to see his pictures" (I: 660).<sup>7</sup> Gisburn recounts that when Stroud died, his wife summoned him to paint the artist as he lay in their modest home. Alone with the artist and ready to start the portrait, Gisburn began to feel that somehow Stroud was alive, watching him, amused by him, and worse, judging him and his ability. Seeing his own work for the first time through the great artist's eyes, Gisburn realized he was not the painter he has pretended to be, that his talent was a lie. Looking at the wall momentarily, Gisburn saw the simple but powerful sketch of the donkey hanging there: "I saw that when Stroud laid in the first stroke he knew just what the end would be. He had possessed his subject, absorbed it, recreated it. When had I done that with any of my things? They hadn't been born of me—I had just adopted them. . . ." (I: 661-662). Gisburn recognized Stroud's complete connection to his subject, a total knowledge of the donkey he painted, a relationship he

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<sup>7</sup> Varnishing days were sponsored by London's Royal Academy of Arts, and were used by artists to put finishing touches on their work before the major exhibition opens to the public.

had never achieved. He felt that Stroud with his dead eyes could see right through him, not sneering, just questioning whether or not he knew what he was doing. Of course Gisburn did not: “If I could have painted that face, with that question on it, I should have done a great thing. The next greatest thing was to see that I couldn’t—and that grace was given to me. But, oh, at that minute, Rickham, was there anything on earth I wouldn’t have given to have Stroud alive before me, and to hear him say: ‘It’s not too late—I’ll show you how?’” (I: 662). Gisburn wants to find what Keniston finally discovers: motivation to paint.

Of course Stroud could not help him, and Gisburn now tells Rickham that he realized that even if the painter had lived, it would still have been too late. He knows, regretfully, that he wasted his life with an inferior talent and a taste for the idle rich and would not have become a great painter even if he had been able to study with Stroud. Gisburn concludes the narrative by explaining that, when he simply told Mrs. Stroud he was too moved to paint her husband, she was so touched by his emotion that she gave him the donkey sketch in appreciation. He recommended another up-and-coming painter, Grindle, to the widow who was happy to hire him. Wharton leaves no room for doubt about her view of fashionable painters when Gisburn tells Rickham that even though he is no longer an artist, “the irony of it is that I *am* still painting—since Grindle’s doing it for me! The Strouds stand alone, and happen once—but there’s no exterminating our kind of art” (I: 662). Popular taste allows mediocre artists to flourish while the Strouds remain obscure and rare.

“The Verdict,” included in Edith Wharton’s 1908 collection, *The Hermit and the*

*Wild Woman*, is not generally regarded as one of her more important short stories. Lev Raphael calls it “brittle” and “amusing” but spends most of the two paragraphs he devotes to the story retelling the plot (197). In his biography of Edith Wharton, R. W. B. Lewis considers the tale “not among her best” but adds useful background information by noting that the plot is based on an acquaintance of hers. Evidently Ralph Curtis, Wharton’s friend from Newport and Boston, dabbled at painting for many years but abandoned the effort after he realized he lacked real talent. Curtis’ wife, a rich widow who lived on the Riviera, apparently did not like the unflattering comparison to Mrs. Gisburn (193).

Not everyone finds “The Verdict” disappointing and the issues explored make the story relevant to a discussion of artistic standards and moral dilemmas about art. Though thoroughly disillusioned with his own work, Gisburn’s perceptions about his lack of talent eventually enable him to become a stronger man in regard to his work. In giving up painting, he is honoring a standard he cannot achieve; nevertheless, one must question the choices he makes after this decision because the superficial pursuit of material possessions and social status does not lead to a more meaningful existence. Gisburn no longer sells inferior art, but his life still seems empty and squandered. His newfound perception and self-awareness do not extend beyond his lack of talent.

Evelyn Fracasso pairs the story with the earlier tale, “The Recovery,” and regards it as more sophisticated and skillful. She argues that the flashback technique and the first-person double narration, as well as Wharton’s extensive use of irony and satire, are evidence of a more experienced writer. Fracasso also points out the effective contrast

between the luxury of the Riviera villa and the simplicity of the Gisburn's private quarters (84). She concludes: "Unquestionably, in the later tale, Wharton has portrayed a more mature artist, one with a more realistic view of his artistic talent. That is not to say that his quitting his showy painting has cured him of the desire to paint. On the contrary, it has only brought him to a sharper understanding of his limitations as an artist" (88). Fracasso effectively makes this distinction between Gisburn and Keniston. Keniston, as previously discussed, cheerfully and optimistically sets out at the end of "The Recovery" to make himself into a talented painter. By studying past Masters, he is confident of his ability to improve himself. Gisburn, on the other hand, is more realistic about his abilities. Because he now knows he lacks that special gift, he would rather not paint at all. Ironically, Gisburn's intense connection to Stroud on that day and the intimacy he felt they shared for a few moments bring him to this self-awareness and cause him to join his wife's social pursuits instead. Wharton's portrayal of Gisburn is the more convincing of the two, though both stories show her conviction for judging art by an absolute standard: the "great masters" rather than popular taste.

Another important contrast concerns the techniques of Gisburn and Stroud.

Gisburn's facile and ingratiating methods are described by Rickham as he looks at the artist's portrait of his wife:

. . . all the characteristic qualities came out—all the hesitations disguised as audacities, the tricks of prestidigitation by which, with such consummate skill, he managed to divert attention from the real business of the picture to some pretty irrelevance of detail. . . The picture was one of Jack's "strongest," as his admirers would have put it—it represented, on his part, a swelling of muscles, a congesting of veins, a balancing, straddling and straining, that reminded one of the circus clown's ironic efforts to lift a feather. It met, in short, at every point the demand of a

lovely woman to be painted “strongly” because she was tired of being painted “sweetly”—and yet not to lose an atom of the sweetness (I: 658).

Stroud, on the other hand, paints with honest strength and simplicity, as Rickham exclaims when he sees the sketch of the donkey on the wall of Gisburn’s room: “What a wonder! Made with a dozen lines—but on everlasting foundations” (I: 659). The subject matter of the sketch, “an old tired donkey standing in the rain under a wall,” echoes this simplicity and genuineness (I: 659). In this story, like so many others, we can see Wharton’s fascination with how someone sees others and himself.

Edith Wharton once again examines some of the moral dilemmas facing artists in a strange and unpleasant story, “The Potboiler,” that she wrote in 1904 and included in *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* published in 1908. Ned Stanwell, a talented but undiscovered and impoverished painter, must decide whether to help Kate and Caspar Arran by turning out popular, more lucrative works. Caspar Arran, referred to as “the little sculptor,” once again illustrating Wharton’s condescending use of “little,” is often ill and always in need of funds. His sister Kate has come to nurse her brother and to encourage his high moral principles regarding his work. Arran strongly believes in the sanctity of art and bores his neighbors with high-minded rhetoric. Arran bemoans the limitations of his illness and popular taste to Stanwell:

Look at my hand shake; I can’t do a thing! Well, luckily nobody wants me to—posterity may suffer, but the present generation isn’t worrying. The present generation wants to be carved in sugar candy, or painted in maple syrup. It doesn’t want to be told the truth about itself or about anything in the universe. The prophets have always lived in a garret, my dear fellow—only the ravens don’t always find out their address (I: 670).

Stanwell listens to Arran and answers him with a question that reveals the title's meaning and foreshadows his moral dilemma: "Why can't a man do two kinds of work—one to please himself and the other to boil the pot?" (I: 671).

Ned Stanwell follows this course, taking the advice of Mr. Shepson, a Jewish art dealer, who encourages him to imitate the popular, best-selling portraitist, Mungold. Stanwell, in love with Kate Arran, turns out fashionable portraits and earns money to help Caspar anonymously. The irony of the story occurs at the end when Kate tells Ned that she plans to marry Mungold because he has remained true to his shallow talent while Ned has sold out:

"You've sold your talent and you know it: that's the dreadful part. You did it deliberately. . . Mr. Mungold paints as well as he can. He has no idea that his pictures are—less good than they might be. . . so he can't be accused of doing what he does for money—of sacrificing anything better. It was you who made me understand that, when Caspar used to make fun of him" (I: 683).

Stanwell argues with Kate and tries to persuade her that he was justified because of the money, but Kate remains firm, announcing: "There's no occasion which can justify an artist's sacrificing his convictions . . . I can take money earned in good faith—I can let Caspar live on it. I can marry Mr. Mungold because, though his pictures are bad, he does not prostitute his art" (I: 684).

While the issues examined in "The Potboiler" are pertinent to any discussion of Wharton's stories about art, the story itself is overly long, somewhat preachy, and often offensive as Wharton's anti-Semitism is revealed through the character, Shepson. The dilemma between popular art versus personal integrity is again explored, but the voices of the characters seem ponderous rather than witty, and the unsatisfactory ending does not

actually resolve anything. As Lev Raphael points out, Kate marries Mungold for money and is therefore no better than Stanwell. Furthermore, the nature of Stanwell's talents is unclear; as Raphael asks:

An interesting question left open at the end is the nature of Stanwell's talent—if he truly has a gift of imitation, then perhaps he hasn't abandoned his standards so shamefully? Once again in this story, we see the opposition between the struggling artist and the successful one, whose talent is shallow, and the shame of having one's work go unrecognized and unappreciated (209).

While Evelyn Fracasso admires Wharton's dialogue, calling it "skillful" and Shepson's Jewish dialect, saying it gives the story "humorous and tragic significance," (75)

Wharton's portrayal seems heavy-handed and even anti-Semitic. Certainly it is difficult to read. The following is an example as Shepson discusses art and originality with

Stanwell:

"Shoost exactly," said Shepson with unexpected acuteness. "That's vat dey all want—something different from vat all deir friends have got, but shoost like it all de same. Dat's de public all over! Mrs. Millington don't want a Mungold because everybody's got a Mungold, but she wants a picture that's in the same sdyle, because dat's de sdyle, and she's afraid of any oder!" (I: 667).

Barbara White persuasively uses the story as a prime example of Wharton's anti-Semitism: "The depiction of Jews makes some stories almost unreadable; in the early 'The Potboiler,' for instance, the Jewish Mr. Shepson has 'the squat figure of a middle-aged man in an expensive fur coat, who looked as if his face secreted the oil which he used on his hair' (I: 664)" (90). White claims that Wharton was blatantly anti-Semitic, as does Hermione Lee in her biography, like many contemporary authors, including Cather, Hemingway and Fitzgerald (White 90, Lee 612-613). Although this attitude was common

among the upper class during that time, modern readers more readily recognize it as jarring and distasteful.

Determining where Edith Wharton's voice is in "The Potboiler" presents somewhat of a challenge. Certainly she does not side with Caspar Arran whose high-minded principles provide scant cover for his lack of talent. Shepson is mocked and made into a caricature. Kate's muddled thinking and defensive rationalizations will bring her little happiness. Stanwell's heart is broken, but he begins to recover his integrity by no longer accepting imitative commissions. Presumably, he will return to developing his own style and talent and probably this is where Wharton's moral compass points. Geoffrey Walton, in *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation*, believes Wharton is exploring the theme of "artistic conscience." "One infers that the mere fashionable artist who paints as well as he is able does not deserve censure and that, though one may prostitute oneself for the sake of art, art is sacred. It is a clear moral and aesthetic judgment" (106). Nevertheless, though the artist who caters to popular and fashionable taste may not have the moral dilemma a more talented artist has, Wharton clearly dislikes that kind of art and is merciless about it. The question still centers on who decides; if art is sacred, who judges its merit and value?

Another Wharton story, "The Moving Finger," also concerns artists and writers who must resolve issues of artistic standards. Published in *Crucial Instances* in 1901, the piece details how the artist, Claydon, twice ages the original portrait of a client's wife, at the client's insistence, after her premature death. Though reluctant to honor this request, Claydon is compelled by his undisclosed love for the subject to do so. Evidently



he imagined that Mrs. Grancy wanted him to do this so she could grow old with her husband and that she even forecast his impending death. After Ralph Grancy's death, the portrait returns to Claydon who restores it to its original condition and tells the narrator: "Well—that was what she wanted and I did it—I kept them together to the last! . . . But now she belongs to me" (I: 313). Claydon believes that the bond between husband and wife survived death because the artist revised her portrait and Grancy was able to imagine that she was actually there with him. Claydon also asserts that his own emotional attachment to Mrs. Grancy has been strengthened by his final alteration because he has reclaimed his original conception of her. The title, "The Moving Finger," from "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," gives Claydon's decisions an aura of being preordained, as though he has no real choice: "The Moving Finger writes; and having writ / Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit / Shall lure it back to cancel half a line, / Nor all your Tears wash out a word of it" (*Norton Anthology of Poetry* 334). His moral dilemma resolved by destiny, there is a sense of fatalism throughout the tale. Once again, this story also concerns vision and perception. Claydon actually comes to see the portrait he painted as a living version of Mrs. Grancy; how her husband and the artist imagine her is tangibly captured on the canvas. The narrator relates: "We used to accuse Claydon of visiting Mrs. Grancy in order to see her portrait. He answered this by declaring that the portrait *was* Mrs. Grancy; and there were moments when the statement seemed unanswerable" (I: 303).

The stories examined in this chapter look at a variety of views on art and literature, and they also illuminate Wharton's anxieties about her writing and her

concerns about artistic standards. Other stories that involve artists and writers include “The Rembrandt,” “The Quicksand,” “Joy in the House,” “The Daunt Diana,” “The Legend,” “The Temperate Zone,” “The Bolted Door,” and some previously discussed stories such as “Souls Belated,” and “The Letters.” In *A Backward Glance*, in a chapter which Wharton devotes to her writing, she modestly protests that she does not expect her work to endure, but the reader can see that she hopes for that result, perhaps as a way to ensure that her life’s efforts will be significant and worthwhile:

I have hesitated for some time before beginning this chapter, since any attempt to analyze work of one’s own doing seems to imply that one regards it as likely to be of lasting interest, and I wish at once to repudiate such an assumption. Every artist works, like Gobelin weavers, on the wrong side of the tapestry, and if now and then he comes around to the right side, and catches what seems to be a happy glow of color, or a firm sweep of design, he must instantly retreat again, if encouraged yet still uncertain; and once the work is done, and he hopes to contemplate it dispassionately, the result of his toil too often presses on his tired eyes with the nightmare weight of a cinema “close-up” (197)

Though the artist’s creative connection is to his work, art for Wharton is never an isolated issue because the artist lives in society, and as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Wharton’s stories focus on artists and writers, not specifically on art itself. As Penelope Vita-Finzi observes:

Edith Wharton’s artist is firmly tethered in the real world where money, love, manners, houses, clothes, food, or lack of them, impinge on his inner world as well as being the material from which he creates. All her central characters whether artists or not experience difficulty in reconciling the ideal with the real world; the choices lie between convention or freedom, responsibility or egoism, society or individual will, fashion or taste. The artist with his special sensibility and intensity of personal vision has particular problems in harmonizing the outer and inner worlds and in balancing their sometimes conflicting claims. He cannot escape the demands of society and individuals and he needs to apply to his life as much as his art the principles of order, harmony, continuity, taste and

tradition if he is to function as an artist and a social being (101).

In so many of these stories, whether they concern vocational issues or artistic standards, perception and vision play a crucial role. In fact, the artist stories lend themselves to a discussion of vision more directly than others do because art and vision are inseparable. As in the marriage stories, many characters begin with certain illusions about themselves or their talent. As we have seen, some gain an awareness about themselves that leads to a new vision, a new strength. Characters such as Mary Anerton (“The Muse’s Tragedy,”) Paulina Anson (“The Angel at the Grave,”) George Lillo (“The Portrait,”) and Keniston and his wife, Claudia (“The Recovery,”) as they perceive and then confront their limitations as well as their assets, become wiser and more insightful about the extent of their talent or the talent of those they admire and about themselves as well. On the other hand, Ned Halidon (“In Trust,”) Alonzo Vard (“The Portrait,”) and Ned Stanwell (“The Potboiler”) see their failings but lack the courage or the will to overcome their weakness. Jack Gisburn (“The Verdict”) can be placed in both of these categories, because although he gives up painting when he realizes he has no talent, he continues to squander his time with the idle rich on the Riviera. Not all of the stories in this chapter illustrate this kind of self-awareness. Mrs. Amyot (“The Pelican,”) Geoffrey Betton (“Full Circle,”) and Caspar Arran (“The Potboiler”) never see their actions clearly and remain unchanged. In these stories, Wharton explores a variety of writers and artists and how they react to the anxiety of their vocation and the quality of their art.

### Chapter Three: Social and Personal Values

Though this chapter will focus on Edith Wharton's short stories that relate to social and personal values, once again this designation is somewhat arbitrary. Classifying these tales into one category or another facilitates examination and analysis but is not intended to suggest that Wharton herself segregated her work in this way. We have seen in Chapter Two that artists and writers live and work in a social context, and therefore, could be discussed in these terms, even as all of the stories discussed in Chapter One can be seen as social explorations as well as stories about marriage and divorce. For example, although "The Last Asset" will be discussed in this chapter, Candace Waid includes this short story in her discussion of the marriage-divorce group but also says: ". . . they might best be described as tragedies of mores. Set in worlds which provocatively offer illusions of freedom and change, these stories show characters subdued to the demands of convention, framed once again in the warp of unbending social fabric" (Introduction, *The Muse's Tragedy* 14). Almost any one of her stories or novels can be seen through this lens; however, certain tales particularly shed light on Wharton's continuing interest in the social world and how society's values and an individual's personal values intersect and conflict. The novels *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Mother's Recompense*, and *The Reef* also demonstrate Wharton's long-term, extensive fascination with the subject. This chapter will focus on some of her stories that illustrate characters' changing perceptions about themselves, their values, and their place in society. The term "social values" in this

chapter refers to the ideals and customs that a particular group recognizes, respects, and appreciates, while “individual values” reflects a particular character’s own moral code or belief. Although there are exceptions, in Wharton’s stories the social group of interest usually consists of upper class, sophisticated people. The standards and morals of this society often conflict with an individual’s own ideals and needs, and this conflict may become the crux of a short story or novel. These general definitions will become clearer and more specific as we look at various tales in this section.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her introduction to *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, discusses Wharton’s concentration on the clash between the individual’s and society’s values: “Much of Wharton’s satire proceeds by demonstrating the ways in which a corrupt social system will inevitably distort character and curtail the possibility for happiness. Indeed, perhaps the universal characteristic in all of Wharton’s work is a profound concern with the ever-changing relationship between individual liberty and social context” (x).

For Edith Wharton, this conflict often centered on women. Wolff notes that women of this era were not involved in areas of real power, such as medicine, law, or business and were even barred from the New York Stock Exchange. “Precisely because they had very little real power in the fast-paced world of high finance or international government, women were often the most brutally wounded casualties of duplicity, brutality, and greed in the society as a whole” (xii). Many appear to be victims of that society, such as Mrs. Lidcote in “Autres Temps . . .” or Lydia Tillotson in “Souls Belated.” Even if these women are casualties of the system who become disillusioned

with their fate, the most interesting and successful ones generally find some kind of perspective on their situations, and this vision usually gives them an emotional strength they might not otherwise achieve. This topic has been discussed previously in Chapters One and Two and applies in this chapter as well. These stories explore characters looking for their place in the world, for connections to others, when their own values are quite different from the demands of their society. Some of the stories discussed here are humorous and light-hearted, while others take a more serious approach as Wharton explores the social world and the individuals who must adapt to it. In his book *Edith Wharton*, Louis Auchincloss comments on her expertise in writing about this milieu:

The reason Mrs. Wharton succeeded where so many others have failed is that in addition to her gifts as an artist she had a firm grasp of what “society,” in the smaller sense of the word, was actually made up of. She understood that it was arbitrary, capricious, and inconsistent; she was aware that it did not hesitate to abolish its standards while most loudly proclaiming them. She knew when money could open doors and when it would be merely sneered at. She knew that compromises could be counted on, but that they were rarely made while still considered compromises. She knew her men and women of property, recently or anciently acquired, how they decorated their houses and where they spent their summers. She realized that the social game was without rules, and this realization made her one of the few novelists before Proust who could describe it with any profundity (42-43).

“Mrs. Manstey’s View,” Edith Wharton’s first published short story in 1891, provides an early example of her interest in social and personal values and the tension between them. A lonely widow’s desire to remain in her small boardinghouse room collides with the plans of the homeowner next door. Mrs. Manstey sustains herself by sitting at her window and observing the world outside, but Mrs. Black intends to build an addition to her boardinghouse that will obstruct Mrs. Manstey’s view. Mrs. Black, as her

name implies, represents society's negative impact on individual freedom, a topic, as Wolff has noted, that Wharton explores repeatedly in her stories and her novels. Mrs. Manstey's daughter lives in California, and her few friends in New York rarely visit. Despite her lonely state, however, she remains an optimist and occupies herself by observing nature's changing seasons and the minutiae of her neighbors' lives as she sits at her window. Sometimes she knits or reads as she sits there, but her primary activity has become watching the world outside. This is her life.

When by chance Mrs. Manstey learns of Mrs. Black's plans, she desperately tries to think of other options. Too old to move, she begs Mrs. Black not to proceed with the extension, even offering her one thousand dollars from her small savings, but Mrs. Black starts construction work the next morning. That night Mrs. Manstey surreptitiously sets fire to Mrs. Black's home, but firefighters quickly get it under control. Unfortunately, Mrs. Manstey contracts pneumonia in the night's chill and starts to decline. In her last moments, she is carried to the window, sees her view undisturbed and dies at peace. The construction resumes later that day.

"Mrs. Manstey's View" offers Wharton's readers an example of the tension between values as well as a glimpse into Wharton's early efforts to write short stories. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her biography *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, argues effectively that this story, like so many others, is Wharton's effort to express her own feelings about finding her voice (60). Though she takes note of the tale's imperfections, Wolff and Barbara White both comment that Wharton depicts Mrs. Manstey as an artist, who "makes a world" out of what she sees, aware of her

surroundings and sensitive to them (Wolff 61, White 33). In the tale, Wharton explicitly gives her this aptitude:

. . . Perhaps at heart Mrs. Manstey was an artist; at all events she was sensible of many changes of color unnoticed by the average eye and, dear to her as the green of early spring was, the black lattice of branches against a cold sulphur sky at the close of a snowy day. She enjoyed, also, the sunny thaws of March, when patches of earth showed through the snow, like ink spots spreading on a sheet of white blotting paper; and, better still, the haze of boughs, leafless but swollen, which replaced the clear-cut tracery of winter (I: 5).

Mrs. Manstey struggles to make her voice heard, feeling isolated and unable to participate in the world outside; the only real connection she has to life beyond her room is what she observes through her window. When she tries to convince Mrs. Black not to proceed with the addition, her voice is ignored. Wolff relates Mrs. Manstey to Wharton's own life: "It is not a difficult leap to move from this portrait of diminished existence to the life of the woman who had begun to write after so long a silence. Almost of necessity Wharton reveals her own situation, using this early story as a primitive representation of self (. . . in clever disguise)" (61). In this, Wolff contradicts R. W. B. Lewis who gives the piece short shrift, calling it "a nice little tale . . . with no obvious bearing on the life she was actually leading . . . an imaginative escape" (*Edith Wharton* 61). Though Lewis deems the story a mere diversion from Wharton's privileged lifestyle, the parallel Wolff draws between Mrs. Manstey's struggles to keep her view and Wharton's efforts to make her literary voice heard is compelling and relevant, even if the circumstances are different. Wharton herself notes that her life did not change after the story was published, that it "brought me no nearer to other workers in the same field. I continued to live my old life . . . I had as yet no real personality [as a writer] of my own, and was not to



acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published—and that was not until 1899” (*A Backward Glance* 112).

Even in this early first story, published when she was twenty-nine, Edith Wharton explores the issues of perspective and vision as she does in so many others. Mrs. Manstey’s “view” actually has two meanings. One, obviously, refers to the scene outside Mrs. Manstey’s window. In detail, Wharton documents the neighbors’ yards and the various trees in them, the houses and the people who come and go from them. What Mrs. Manstey sees becomes more real to her than the few visitors she has or the news they tell her about their own lives: “Mrs. Manstey’s real friends were the denizens of the yards, the hyacinths, the magnolia, the green parrot, the maid who fed the cats, the doctor who studied late behind his mustard-colored curtains; and the confidant of her tenderer musings was the church spire floating in the sunset” (I: 5). In this sense, Mrs. Manstey’s “view” is what she sees when she looks out of her window. The other meaning of “view” in the title refers to her values, her convictions, her judgments, and her perspectives on what takes place outside. Mrs. Manstey does not like the mustard-colored curtains but approves of the newly painted bricks down the street. She dislikes most of the servants she observes but admires the cook who feeds the cats at night. Of course the most important conviction concerns her need to stop Mrs. Black’s addition. Wharton does not attempt to justify Mrs. Manstey’s reckless behavior, nor does she detail Mrs. Manstey’s actual thoughts about setting the fire. The reader can only assume that from her desperate perspective, she needs to stop the construction the only way she can after Mrs. Black rejected her pleas and her money. We watch her creep outside in the middle of the night

with the matches in her pocket and then learn of the subsequent fire, an act that kills her but enables her literally to die smiling. Mrs. Manstey's personal values have led to her death, but she does not know that she was unsuccessful in her desperate attempt to stop the construction. Both meanings of "view" contribute to the reader's understanding of the story.

"The Last Asset," written in 1904 and collected in Wharton's 1908 short story volume, *The Hermit and the Wild Woman*, also focuses on social values. As is often the case in Wharton stories, in this piece the characters' motivations stem largely from society's expectations. Set in Paris, the story features a group of nouveau riche Americans trying to climb the steep social ladder of European society. Wharton tells the tale from the point of view of her reflector and the story's moral arbiter, Paul Garnett, an American newspaper correspondent stationed primarily in London but occasionally in Paris as well. The piece opens as he chats with another American living abroad. Garnett does not know the old gentleman's name, but they have become casually acquainted as they frequently dine at the same modest restaurant. Unlike others in this story, the older man is humble and unassuming, rigidly following a solitary daily routine that somehow suits his simple tastes. He is not interested in culture or politics but is fascinated by people and their foibles. Garnett senses a depth, "some great moral upheaval which had flung his friend stripped and starving on the desert island of the little restaurant where they met," and the reader knows he will play a role in whatever is to come (I: 592).

Garnett then goes to the Ritz Hotel at the request of Mrs. Newell who is staying there. Garnett met Mrs. Newell a few years earlier when he interviewed her for a column

called “Talks with Smart Americans in London” and has seen her periodically over the years. Mrs. Newell, having separated from her husband many years ago, travels with her daughter, Hermione, and spends her time trying to better her position in the social circles of Europe. She does not have the funds to live the life of the idle rich, but instead she cultivates relationships with those who are willing to finance her travels and expenses. These people are of questionable social status, so they use Mrs. Newell, perched precariously on a somewhat higher rung of the ladder, to better their own positions. Some are Europeans, and others are Americans traveling abroad; however, both groups have a great deal of money but lack the connections and the social acumen to which they aspire and which Mrs. Newell can provide. Mrs. Newell had been eager to do the London interview, while Hermione, on the other hand, stayed passive and inconspicuous, remaining in her mother’s shadow:

With the smartest woman in London as her guide and example she had never developed a taste for dress, and with opportunities for enlightenment from which Garnett’s fancy recoiled she remained simple, unsuspecting and tender, with an inclination to good works and afternoon church, a taste for the society of dull girls, and a clinging fidelity to old governesses and retired nursemaids (I: 595).

Now they are in Paris. and Mrs. Newell has asked him to stop by her suite at the Ritz.

When he arrives, Mrs. Newell tells Garnett that Hermione is engaged to marry a French count from an old and distinguished family. The pair met in Ireland and fell quickly in love, and Mrs. Newell wants to make the most of Hermione’s improved situation. Apparently, the count’s parents insist on the presence of Mr. Newell at the wedding to prove the couple is not divorced, a social taboo for French Catholics. Though he lives in Paris, Mrs. Newell says she cannot invite him because he would refuse her.

Instead, she asks Garnett to find her estranged husband, explain the situation to him, and implore him for their daughter's sake to join the family on the day of the wedding. (Of course the reader quickly realizes that the old gentleman in the restaurant is Mr. Newell, but this does not spoil the story; the interest lies in how this will all come together.) Though at first Garnett intends to refuse Mrs. Newell and play no role in her scheme, he changes his mind. As he watches the young couple together at dinner, Hermione and Comte Louis du Trayas appear to him to be genuinely happy and perfectly suited. Furthermore, he views her marriage as the only possible escape from her mother's influence and questionable friends. Garnett agrees to try to find Mr. Newell and persuade him to come to the wedding.

Garnett eventually realizes that the man in the restaurant is indeed Samuel Newell, and he explains his mission. To his surprise, Newell reluctantly gives his consent to the marriage, but refuses his estranged wife's plea to attend the ceremony. Garnett is forced to tell Mrs. Newell that her husband will not agree to come but has reluctantly consented, at Garnett's request, to take a day to think it over. On his way out of Mrs. Newell's suite, Garnett is stopped by Hermione who begs him to leave her father alone and in peace. She asks Garnett to stop trying to persuade Newell to come to the wedding, confirming again in Garnett's mind that the daughter deserves his help if the mother does not. Garnett then meets again with Samuel Newell and repeats Hermione's request, assuring him that Mrs. Newell knows nothing of their talk. After Newell is satisfied that Hermione's concern for him and his feelings are indeed genuine, and after he confirms that the wedding cannot take place without him, he agrees at last to attend for his

daughter's sake; however, he wishes no contact with his family in the meantime and insists that Garnett alone may deliver him to the ceremony at the correct time and place. When Garnett repeats Mr. Newell's conditions, Hermione accepts them, and Mrs. Newell does not care what the terms are as long as she will achieve her ends.

On the wedding day Garnett calls for Mr. Newell as planned. In a rented dress suit, a social faux pas, Newell appears to Garnett "oddly shrunken and submerged" and the two arrive at the church in the "showy coupe" Mrs. Newell has arranged for them (I: 613). When Hermione appears, there is an awkward pause as father and daughter meet for the first time in many years, but Mrs. Newell pushes Hermione into his arms, and the two embrace briefly. During the ceremony, Garnett has second thoughts about his role in the marriage as he surveys the scene. Mrs. Newell has achieved the brilliant marriage for her daughter that will ensure her own social position. The guests appear to be "actors in the show . . . mere marionettes pulled hither and thither by the hidden wires of her intention. One and all they were there to serve her ends and accomplish her purpose" (I: 615). Has he really helped the mother instead of the daughter after all? Yet when Garnett looks at the young couple and then at Samuel Newell beside his daughter, he hopes that he has done the right thing:

After all, neither Mrs. Newell's schemes nor his own share in them could ever unsanctify Hermione's marriage. It was one more testimony to life's indefatigable renewals, to nature's secret of drawing fragrance from corruption; and as his eyes turned from the girl's illuminated presence to the resigned and stoical figure sunk in the adjoining chair, it occurred to him that he had perhaps worked better than he knew in placing them, if only for a moment, side by side (I: 615).

“The Last Asset” is widely recognized as one of Wharton’s best short stories. Though he only briefly mentions the work, in his 1975 biography, R. W. B. Lewis calls it “indeed one of her finest,” an “expertly contrived account . . .” (140, 233). Thirty-two years later in her Wharton biography, Hermione Lee refers to it as “one coldly brilliant story” (350). For our purposes, the story serves as a prime example of Wharton’s interest in society and its values. In this story and others in this chapter, societal values include having enough money for homes, servants, furniture, art, clothes, jewels, restaurants, opera tickets, entertaining, hotel suites, travel, and the like. These values also involve one’s social status in relation to the aristocracy and the upper class, and the rules that govern whom one may marry, entertain, imitate, associate with, look up to, look down upon, and so on. Precisely where one finds oneself on this social class continuum determines the extent of the aspirations to better one’s position and the degree of condescension shown to those below. Wharton brilliantly and satirically portrays a variety of characters who reflect both Americans and Europeans in early twentieth century Europe; looking more closely at some of these characters will reveal Wharton’s own attitudes and prejudices.

Wharton’s characterization of Mrs. Samuel Newell is probably one of her most successful creations in any of her stories, and we see her through various techniques the author uses. Primarily, the reader learns about Mrs. Newell through Paul Garnett’s eyes. Hurrying over to the Ritz Hotel after being summoned by her, Paul Garnett muses that, though Mrs. Newell cannot afford it, he would hardly expect her to stay anywhere else. “If one came to Paris, where could one go but to Ritz’s?” (I: 593). From the beginning it

is clear that living within one's means is not a value prized by this woman who will happily borrow from others or accept lavish gifts from questionable sources. Garnett remembers Mrs. Newell mentioning that she and her daughter were visiting various wealthy Britons for several months and thus were provided for; Garnett cannot imagine why then she has turned up early in Paris and wonders if her various friends have tired of her:

Mrs. Newell really moved too fast: her position was as perilous as that of an invading army without a base of supplies. She used up everything too quickly—friends, credit, influence, forbearance. It was so easy for her to acquire all these—what a pity she had never learned to keep them! He himself, for instance—the most insignificant of her acquisitions—was beginning to feel like a squeezed sponge at the mere thought of her . . . If she exhausted old supplies she always had new ones to replace them. When one set of people began to find her impossible, another was always beginning to find her indispensable. Yes—but there were limits—there were only so many sets of people, at least in her classification, and when she came to an end of them, what then? (I: 593-594).

Garnett's characterization reflects the irony and satire Wharton uses throughout the story. He does not use harsh terms or a judgmental tone, but the images of an invading army and a squeezed sponge paint a clear picture. His further musings about Mrs. Newell also serve to characterize her social world at this time. If she were looking for a rich Parisian to fund her next venture, September was the wrong month; the wealthy fled the city during this time. Perhaps she was buying clothes? No, she ordered her wardrobe in April and December to be sure she sees only European fashions, not the American ones available before December: "Mrs. Newell's scorn of all things American was somewhat illogically coupled with the determination to use her own Americanism to the utmost as a means of social advance" (I: 594). Like many other Americans living

abroad in the early twentieth century, Mrs. Newell prefers to spend her time with wealthy countrymen and aristocratic Europeans to better her own social standing. Throughout the story, Mrs. Newell's desires remain the superficial ones of material improvement and social status and are an end in themselves.

During the interview in London several years ago, Garnett realized that Mrs. Newell needed the publicity as much as he, the fledgling correspondent, did. She wanted to buff up her image as her name (Newell/renewal) suggests and introduce her daughter as well. Instead of a glimpse of London society, he learned:

. . . of Mrs. Newell's relation to it. She had been candidly charmed by the idea of the interview, and it struck him that she was conscious of the need of being freshened up. Her appearance was brilliantly fresh, with the inveterate freshness of the toilet table; her paint was impenetrable as armor. But her personality was little tarnished: she was in want of social renovation. She had been doing and saying the same things for too long a time (I: 595).

"Fresh" and "renewal" are repeated throughout the story, particularly when contrasts between Mrs. Newell and Hermione are drawn. Garnett is dismayed to find that the mother overshadows her daughter and is anxious to wield an extensive influence over her. In spite of her mother's efforts, Garnett finds Hermione remarkably unspoiled, while Mrs. Newell despairs of turning her daughter into a worldly copy of herself and speaks of Hermione ". . . as if her daughter were a piece of furniture acquired without due reflection, and for which no suitable place could be found" (I: 596). Thus, when Mrs. Newell has the chance to marry her into the aristocratic Trayas family, she seizes every opportunity to ensure the marriage, not out of motherly love for Hermione, but as a means to improve her own condition.



Edith Wharton's perfectly executed depiction of Mrs. Newell includes not only the narrator's observations but also the character's own words and actions as well. She collects people and uses them to her own advantage, and these individuals further illustrate Wharton's satire of social values. The bargains in these cases are not as one-sided as it might seem. Rather, the people Mrs. Newell depend upon for largess, particularly the nouveau riche Americans, use her as well to better their own social status and to gain introductions to those who have climbed above them on the social ladder. They want respectability, particularly if they made their money in a shady way; they want to be accepted by the upper class as one of their own, to be included and invited; most of all, they want to feel successful in the company of those who, in their eyes, have already succeeded in every way that matters. The Woolsey Hubbards from Detroit are funding not only Mrs. Newell's trip to Paris but also have been generous to Hermione: they have provided the large suite at the Ritz, of which Mrs. Newell's rooms are a part; they have also given Hermione an engagement present of diamonds and will furnish the trousseau as well. Mrs. Hubbard's generosity is reciprocated by Mrs. Newell, who advises her benefactress on how to advance in European society. Wharton effectively skewers Kate Hubbard's social insecurities and ambitions:

Mrs. Woolsey Hubbard was an expansive blonde, whose ample but disciplined outline seemed the result of a well-matched struggle between her cook and her corset maker. She talked a great deal of what was appropriate in dress and conduct, and seemed to regard Mrs. Newell as a final arbiter on both points. To do or to wear anything inappropriate would have been extremely mortifying to Mrs. Hubbard, and she was evidently resolved, at the price of eternal vigilance, to prove her familiarity with what she frequently referred to as "the right thing." (I: 602).

Baron Schenkelderff, a close friend of Mrs. Newell's with dubious behavior and a questionable background, appears to have secretly funded the dowry for Hermione. Though her mother tells Garnett that she inherited the money from the sudden death of an aunt in Elmira, Garnett is suspicious. His name makes him appear odd and alien, as do Wharton's various anti-Semitic hints of a Jewish background in money-lending. Schenkelderff is too comfortable in Mrs. Newell's suite, too familiar with the routines of the household, and takes command too easily when the waiter comes to take an order for tea. Suspecting that the two are having an affair, Garnett concludes that the Baron provided the necessary dowry and resolves to extricate Hermione from this situation by facilitating the marriage: "It made Garnett shiver to think of her growing old between her mother and Schenkelderff, or such successors of the Baron's as might probably attend on Mrs. Newell's waning fortunes; for it was clear to him that the Baron marked the first stage in his friend's decline" (I: 603). Wharton suggests that Mrs. Newell will now associate socially and probably sexually with unsavory characters on the fringe of society, even Jews with dubious manners, if they prove useful to her by providing needed funding.

In "The Last Asset" Paul Garnett is also being maneuvered by Mrs. Newell. She uses him to find her estranged husband and then uses her husband to ensure Hermione's wedding plans, which will in turn benefit Mrs. Newell's own standing. Both Garnett and Samuel Newell agree, but only because they want Hermione to escape the clutches of her mother and marry her Count, not for social position but for the love they share.

The skillful characterizations are enhanced by Wharton's clever use of the term "asset" and its various meanings; in this story, assets play a large role. On one level, the term refers to capital, possessions, securities, property, etc. Mrs. Newell needs these material assets, her own or someone else's, in order to compete in the society of Americans and Europeans to which she aspires and to insure Hermione's future as well; assets such as these give the Hubbards and Schenkelderff the leverage they need to attain any status at all in European society. On another level, characters themselves become assets for other characters. Mrs. Newell views her husband as her last chance to secure Hermione's marriage; he is the title's "Last Asset." When Mrs. Newell asks Garnett to find her husband, he is surprised to find that she is not divorced. Once again he realizes how cleverly she maneuvers events and people in her life:

Now he saw how he had underrated his friend's faculty for using up the waste material of life. She had always struck him as the most extravagant of women, yet it turned out that by some miracle of thrift she had for years kept a superfluous husband on the chance that he might someday be useful. The day had come, and Mr. Newell was to be called from obscurity (I: 601).

She also sees Hermione as a possession, an asset, to be used to further her own ambitions. Furthermore, Mrs. Newell and Baron Schenkelderff see each other as assets, perhaps even "last assets" as well. She needs his money, and he needs her connections: "His alliance with Mrs. Newell was doubtless a desperate attempt at rehabilitation, a forlorn hope on both sides, but likely to be an enduring tie because it represented, to both partners, their last chance of escape from social extinction" (81).

Barbara White classifies this tale as a "marriage-for-money" story and considers it one of Wharton's best in this category (77). The language echoes this theme as terms of

money and finance occur throughout the story. Some examples have already been mentioned but there are others as well. Garnett notes that Mrs. Newell uses Hermione in many ways: “She got, of course, what she could out of Hermione, who wrote her notes, ran her errands, saw tiresome people for her, and occupied an intermediate office between that of lady’s maid and secretary; but such small returns on her investment were not what Mrs. Newell had counted on” (I: 596). Paul Garnett, after learning about Hermione’s engagement from Mrs. Newell, sees the issue in terms of finance: “For the marriage, of course, was her invention, a superlative stroke of business in which he was sure the principal parties had all been passive agents in which everyone from the bankrupt and disreputable Fitzarthurs to the rich and immaculate Morningfields, had by some mysterious sleight of hand been made to fit into Mrs. Newell’s designs” (I: 598). At the wedding itself when he looks around at the crowd, Garnett experiences some moments of disillusionment. He regrets facilitating this event and the role he has played in Samuel Newell’s appearance, and again, the terms used are monetary: “One and all they were there to serve her ends and accomplish her purpose . . . and her husband, finally, as the last stake in her game, the last asset on which she could draw to rebuild her fallen fortunes” I: 615). Wharton ends the story with Garnett’s pleasure in the marriage and the momentary pairing of father and daughter despite his disgust with Mrs. Newell.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments on Garnett’s more complex point of view of the situation as he gradually comes to appreciate the love Hermione and the Count have for each other. She believes the story ends with moral uncertainty and questions, like many other Wharton works (Introduction, *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, xix-xx). Has

Garnett's role in expediting the marriage, so crucial to Mrs. Newell, been redeemed by the love of the innocent young lovers? Does the end, rescuing Hermione from her mother's selfish and calculating domination, justify the means, participating in a scheme that rewards Mrs. Newell's ambitions? In this case, Garnett's perceptions of Mrs. Newell and Hermione evolve throughout the story, as does his awareness of his own role. In the end, he sees the marriage from two perspectives. Barbara White also describes these two views as "the double view of experience" she finds typical of Wharton (78). In an interesting aside, both critics, as they discuss the story, write about the Newells as though they are divorced. White refers to Mrs. Newell as "a status-seeking divorcee" and of Samuel Newell as "her ex-husband" (78); Wolff calls the work "yet another story concerning the aftermath of divorce" (xix). These readings ignore the reason Mr. Newell must be found: he must appear with his wife and prove to the Count's parents that they are not divorced, a fact that would make Hermione unacceptable to them. They also miss the implication suggested earlier by Garnett: Mrs. Newell has somehow been holding her husband in reserve, as an asset for the future. Mrs. Newell, confirming the calculating quality of her nature seen throughout the story, is quite clear on this point when Garnett confirms that she is not, in fact, divorced: "Mercy no! Divorce is stupid. They don't like it in Europe. And in this case it would have been the end of Hermy's marriage. They wouldn't think of letting their son marry the child of divorced parents . . . I always think of such things beforehand" (I: 600).

Although "Autres Temps . . ." has been previously mentioned in Chapter One, the story also reflects Edith Wharton's focus on social and personal values. In fact, it would

be impossible and unnecessary to place this brilliant tale exclusively in one category or the other. Like so many of her short stories and novels, “Autres Temps . . .” explores a variety of Wharton’s themes: marriage and divorce, individual and societal values, relationships between parents and children, and it displays Wharton at her absolute best. First published in 1911 when she was living in Paris, and while she was considering her own separation and divorce, the story reveals her anxieties about the social and personal costs of such a decision. Still, as Barbara White points out, the story goes beyond the question of divorce: “But ‘Autres Temps . . .’ makes sense on another level as Wharton successfully connects the personal to the social . . . Although it has been suggested that ‘Autres Temps . . .’ might be outdated now that divorce has become socially acceptable, the subject is not really divorce but the violation of social mores” (75). In another note of praise, R. W. B. Lewis, in his introduction to Wharton’s collected short stories, states that “. . . in few stories are the radical ironies of social change more powerfully handled” (xiv).

As noted in Chapter One, Mrs. Lidcote, who divorced her husband for a another man but is now alone and living in Italy, returns to New York after years of exile to help her daughter, Leila, who herself has just divorced and remarried. Divided into six parts, Wharton places Mrs. Lidcote in Part I on the steamer, ironically named *Utopia*, as it nears the city. Mrs. Lidcote, mired in the past, agonizes over her situation because she believes that Leila will face the same ostracism that she herself had to endure. “When she was alone, it was always the past that occupied her,” and though she has come to terms with her own fate, she is devastated to think her daughter will now suffer similar exclusion (II:

257). When Mrs. Lidcote left her husband, a scandalized New York society shunned her; members of her former group no longer invited or even spoke to her. Her fate for all these years has been defined by this divorce, by the opinions and values held by the upper class during that time. To emphasize this point, Wharton refers to her as “Mrs. Lidcote” throughout the story; she is not given a first name or any other identity of her own, but is defined by her former husband. Along with previous acquaintances, even strangers who hear of her past avoid her. On the ship, Mrs. Lorin Boulger, wife of the ambassador to Italy, notices Mrs. Lidcote and turns away without acknowledging her, but Mrs. Lidcote is accustomed to this treatment and deflects questions from the captain about knowing the ambassadress. Naturally, she assumes Leila will experience the same fate, so she will return to New York to offer moral support to her daughter and stand behind the “poor child” in her hour of need.

Two events occur to make Mrs. Lidcote question this conviction. First, she overhears two young New York women chatting as they return home from Europe. The women chatter about their friends, and Mrs. Lidcote hears her daughter’s first name mentioned several times: “Leila? Oh, Leila’s all right” (II: 259). She wonders if they refer to her daughter, but since they do not use any surnames, an artful reverse of her own situation, she cannot be certain. Still, the women appear to be the sort to know Leila and her friends as Wharton characterizes this social type she knows so well:

They seemed, at any rate, to frequent a group of idle and opulent people who executed the same gestures and revolved on the same pivots as Mrs. Lidcote’s daughter and her friends . . . their talked leaped elliptically from allusion to allusion, their unfinished sentences dangled over bottomless pits of conjecture, and they gave their bewildered hearer the impression not so much of talking only of their intimates, as of being intimate with

everyone alive (II: 259).

If these women are indeed talking about her daughter, and if they accept her as it would appear that they do, then perhaps attitudes are not as rigid as Mrs. Lidcote has feared, though the people who accept them remain as superficial as ever.

Later, Mrs. Lidcote discusses the matter with her old friend, Franklin Ide, who is also aboard the ship. Mr. Ide assumes Leila and her husband are coming in from their place in Lenox to meet Mrs. Lidcote when the ship docks, but Mrs. Lidcote, making her first excuse for Leila, reminds him that Leila will want to avoid seeing all the people there. When he laughs and asks “Who? Leila?” it is clear that he does not share Mrs. Lidcote’s concern and that he knows her daughter better than she does. “I think you’ll find—he paused for a word—that things are different now—altogether easier” (II: 260). Mrs. Lidcote puzzles over the matter and tells Ide that Leila would have told her about the divorce and remarriage sooner than she did, would have wanted her at the wedding, but that she was sparing her mother from anxiety and inconvenience while she was traveling in India and Siam. She frets that Leila’s new marriage will suffer as her own relationship with a new love did after her divorce, but Franklin Ide assures her that the newly-wedded Barkleys are devoted to each other and quite happy. He insists that society has relaxed some of these judgments, though Mrs. Lidcote reminds him that when she has visited Leila over the years, she has noticed no change in how she, Mrs. Lidcote, is treated. She worries that Leila’s former in-laws will reject her daughter and stand against her as the Lidcotes denied her so long ago, but again, Ide dismisses her concern.



Both of these events on the ship establish not only Mrs. Lidcote's point of view about the social taboo of divorce but also the strong possibility that society has changed since she was so harshly judged. At the end of Part I, she receives a telegram from Leila saying that Cousin Susy Suffern will meet her at the dock and that Leila will explain later. Again excusing her daughter, Mrs. Lidcote sees this as confirmation of her fear that Leila cannot face people, but Franklin Ide still does not agree. Wharton hints at what is to come as, leaving the ship, they overhear Mrs. Lorin Boulger calling out a refusal to an invitation because she is visiting friends in Lenox on Sunday.

Part II, a short transitional section between the boat and Lenox, consists primarily of a conversation between Mrs. Lidcote and Franklin Ide when he visits her in the sitting room of her hotel. Mrs. Lidcote relates all that Susy told her about Leila, that Susy assured her that times have indeed changed, and that, according to Susy, "every woman had a right to happiness and that self-expression was the highest duty" (II: 263). Mrs. Lidcote, cautiously optimistic that Ide has been right, still cannot quite believe that the social values and mores of Old New York no longer prevail. As they discuss the upcoming weekend plans, Mrs. Lidcote tells Ide that the confusion about Leila meeting her at the boat was her own fault because she had not cabled her in time, and that in the meantime, Leila had invited old friends for Sunday. Mrs. Lidcote would rather be alone with her daughter but takes this as a good sign, not only for Leila, but for herself as well. Wharton's dialogue in this section is masterful at providing further clues about how welcome Mrs. Lidcote will be when she tells Ide that she is going to see Leila:

“You mean to go, then?”

“Oh, I must. Susy wanted to drag me off to Ridgefield with her over Sunday, and Leila sent me word that of course I might go if I wanted to, and that I was not to think of her, but I know how disappointed she would be. Susy said she was afraid I might be upset at her having people to stay, and that, if I minded, she wouldn’t urge me to come. But if *they* don’t mind, why should I? And of course, if they’re willing to go to Leila it must mean---”

“Of course. I am glad you recognize that” (II: 264-265).

Clearly Susy has been sent to divert Mrs. Lidcote, who assumes Leila wants her to come as much as she wants to go.

The other part of the section concerns the relationship between Mrs. Lidcote and Franklin Ide. Apparently, eight years ago they found themselves at the same Swiss hotel and, as old friends, spent much of their time together. At the end of his trip, Ide suggested to her that he cared for her and would stay if she wished. Though she wanted to accept his offer, Mrs. Lidcote did not want to burden him with her ostracism and suffering. Without ever really explaining, she led him to understand that her daughter was all that mattered now, and they continued their friendship over the years. Now, on the evening of his visit to her hotel, Ide renews his question to Mrs. Lidcote, reminding her that Leila is now happy and independent. “You couldn’t, I understand well enough, have felt free to take such happiness as life with me might give you while she was unhappy, and, as you imagined, with no hope of release. Even then I didn’t feel as you did about it; I understood better the trend of things here. But ten years ago the change hadn’t really come and I had no way of convincing you that it was coming” (II: 266). He urges her to go to her daughter and see for herself, leaving the hope for a possible future together alive.

Mrs. Lidcote's conversation with Susy on the way to Lenox begins Part III, and it becomes obvious to the reader that Leila and her new husband are indeed thriving in an eleven-bedroom home they are planning to enlarge for entertaining. Susy quickly apologizes because Leila cannot give her mother a sitting room until the weekend guests are gone. Mrs. Lidcote also learns that her son-in-law, Wilbour Barkley, hopes to be appointed as the second secretary in Rome so that Leila will be near her mother, and they are actually counting on help from Leila's former husband to ensure the position. As Mrs. Lidcote ponders the changes that have taken place in society, one possibility leaps out at her: perhaps she will be viewed differently as well. She reasons: "If the old processes were changed, her case was changed with them; she, too, was part of the general readjustment, a tiny fragment of the new pattern worked out in bolder, freer harmonies. Since her daughter had no penalty to pay, was not she herself released by the same stroke?" (II: 267). Now she understands what Franklin Ide meant; once she has realized how Leila's life differs from hers, she can begin to see a possible revision for herself as well. For a while, Mrs. Lidcote dares hope that if times have indeed changed, well then, perhaps they have changed for her too. Perhaps she will be accepted and welcomed.

After a luncheon attended by several guests, as she waits for Leila to come to her room, Mrs. Lidcote reflects on the solid affluence of the Barkelys' home. Everything in it suggests permanence and respectable taste, as do the Barkleys themselves. Though she feels briefly resentful that this societal shift did not come sooner, did not save her from the time she wasted in loneliness, her primary concern is enjoying her daughter and her friends for this weekend party. Of course there is always the possibility that her own life

will now be different, but it is too soon to tell. At lunch, Mrs. Lidcote had sensed a cool politeness when she was greeted by guests, but they may have just been overly courteous because of her age. She remembers that one young woman, Charlotte Wynn, seemed quite interested and entertained by talking to her. She waits for Leila to come for a mother-daughter talk as these thoughts run through her head.

Part IV further reveals the situation at the Barkley's home in Lenox, particularly the subtleties and motivations of Leila and her husband. Leila stays with her mother briefly but has to leave to arrange transportation for one of the guests who has been suddenly called away. Mrs. Lidcote reflects on Leila's concern for her mother's wellbeing but finds it overly solicitous. Her daughter continues to fret that her mother should have accepted Cousin Susy's invitation for the weekend instead so that she might have been spared all the fuss of the guests.

Later, Susy comes to her room with a maid carrying a tea tray and quickly persuades Mrs. Lidcote that she should remain in her room instead of joining the others downstairs. Evidently Leila believes her mother might be tired and Miss Suffern insists she will be happier right there:

“You *do* look tired, you know,” she continued, seating herself at the tea table and preparing to dispense its delicacies. “You must go straight back to your sofa and let me wait on you. The excitement has told on you more than you think, and you mustn't fight against it any longer. Just stay quietly up here and let yourself go. You'll have Leila to yourself on Monday.”

Mrs. Lidcote received the teacup which her cousin proffered, but showed no other disposition to obey her injunctions. For a moment she stirred her tea in silence; then she asked: “Is it your idea that I should stay quietly up here till Monday?” (II: 271-272).

Again, Susy deploras the lack of a sitting room, as though this is of utmost importance. She also mentions that the young woman who left was Charlotte Wynn, summoned by her mother who cited a mistake about the dates. The reader realizes, as does Mrs. Lidcote later in the story, that Mrs. Wynn does not want her daughter socializing with Leila's mother. As they discuss the approaching dinner party and Mrs. Lidcote learns that some of her old friends will be attending, she looks forward to renewing their acquaintance. Then Susy discloses that the honored guest is Mrs. Lorin Boulger (the woman who snubbed her on the ship), invited with mutual friends so she can meet the Barkleys and use her influence on their behalf. Mrs. Boulger's acceptance is considered "rather a triumph" because of Leila's divorce and remarriage; however, as Susy declares, "The times have changed!" (II: 272). Mrs. Lidcote asks her if the guests know she is visiting her daughter, but Susy's response is vague. Susy then tries again to persuade Mrs. Lidcote to remain in her room through dinner, but Mrs. Lidcote quickly brushes off the suggestion and excuses herself to dress for the party.

Leila's concerns become quite obvious to the reader here, though there have been clues throughout the story. While she expresses affection for her mother and apparently has had a close relationship with her over the years, Leila finds her an inconvenience at the moment. Mrs. Lidcote has appeared just when she and Wilbour need their social connections to guarantee his new position in Italy. Though Leila's own status seems secure, and Franklin Ide and Susy Suffern believe that times have changed, Leila seems fearful that her mother's arrival could complicate her own plans.

In Part V, before Mrs. Lidcote begins to dress, her daughter appears and both characters enact a charade about the upcoming evening. Leila insists that her mother rest and not exhaust herself by joining the others. When Mrs. Lidcote learns that the guests are in fact aware of her presence, except for Mrs. Boulger, she allows Leila to persuade her that no one will think it odd if she remains in her room. Mrs. Lidcote perfectly understands the situation and puts her daughter's wishes first. Pretending that she indeed would rather stay upstairs, she spares Leila and herself the embarrassment of further explanations. Wharton's brilliant and devastating twist comes as Mrs. Lidcote realizes that it is too late for her.

Mrs. Lidcote decides to sail at once to Florence in the last section of "Autres Temps . . ." and, in spite of Leila's efforts, does not allow her daughter to persuade her to wait until they can all go to Italy together. Though she is delighted that Leila has found happiness and appreciates her daughter's attempts to convince her to stay, nevertheless, Mrs. Lidcote returns to New York alone the night before boarding the ship *Utopia* for its return voyage to Italy. Franklin Ide discovers she is in New York and joins her in her hotel sitting room to discuss their future. Mrs. Lidcote, who hoped not to see him but to write a letter instead, tries to explain the events at the Barkleys' home and her decision to return to Italy. Ide again tries to persuade her that she has imagined the slights and rejection of old friends, that if those women chose to accept Leila's invitation, they must be willing to socialize with her mother as well. We see Wharton's total comprehension of society's values, both when Mrs. Lidcote was young and now as well, in the divorced woman's answer. Mrs. Lidcote tells Ide that she had hoped for exactly the same outcome

but that, although times may have changed for her daughter's generation, this dispensation does not apply to hers:

“We were both mistaken. You say it's preposterous that the women who didn't object to accepting Leila's hospitality should have objected to meeting me under her roof. And so it is; but I begin to understand why. It's simply that society is much too busy to revise its own judgments. Probably no one in the house with me stopped to consider that my case and Leila's were identical. They only remembered that I'd done something which, at the time I did it, was condemned by society. My case had been passed on and classified: I am the woman who has been cut for nearly twenty years. The older people have half-forgotten why, and the younger ones have never really known: it's simply become a tradition to cut me. And traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy” (II: 279).

Ide is still unconvinced and tells Mrs. Lidcote that her nerves and “preconceived theories” are to blame for some of her perceptions. He suggests that they go downstairs to greet Mrs. Wynn, her daughter, Charlotte, and Charlotte's beau who were dining at the hotel. Mrs. Lidcote noticed the Wynns when she arrived at the hotel, but Mrs. Wynn pretended not to see her, and Charlotte simply blushed. Watching Ide's face, she realizes that he does not understand, cannot understand: “Everything he said seemed like a painted gauze let down between herself and the real facts of life; and a sudden desire seized her to tear the gauze into shreds” (II:280). Wharton uses the same distancing device of gauze, preventing an intimate connection, she employs in “The Portrait” in Chapter Two between Miss Vard and the painter, Lillo. Pretending to agree with him, Mrs. Lidcote tells him they should go downstairs and see the Wynns. Then as a final ironic twist in the story, Ide's facial expression changes. He suggests that perhaps he should go down first and make sure they have not gone to bed or somewhere else to dine, that he now remembers they were considering another place for dinner. “I'm sure—I'm

positively sure that you won't find them" (II: 281). Mrs. Lidcote watches him blush and thinks of Leila's visit to her room the night of the dinner party: "She had seen the same blush on another face; and the same impulse of compassion she had then felt made her turn her gaze away again" (II: 281). Even Ide, when actually faced with the situation, retreats from his earlier confidence and follows the safer path. The story ends as a porter comes to find out about her luggage for the next morning.

"Autres Temps . . ." is widely viewed as one of Edith Wharton most successful and brilliantly written stories for several reasons. As noted previously, the piece blends many of Wharton's most common topics, including marriage and divorce, the mother and child relationship, and social and personal values in Wharton's New York. Probably the main reason the tale is so widely appreciated stems from Wharton's skill with images, characterization, and dialogue, but also it illuminates Wharton's personal struggle with the ramifications of separation and divorce. As we read "Autres Temps . . .," we can envision a socially uncertain, fearful, and vulnerable Edith Wharton exploring society's judgments and views that so conflict with her own needs. Hermione Lee declares in her biography: "This magnificent story imagines what it might be like for Wharton if she went back to live in New York"(352).

Wharton uses a striking and recurring image in "Autres Temps . . ." which appears in the first sentence as Mrs. Lidcote watches the ship approach New York City: "Mrs. Lidcote, as the huge menacing mass of New York defined itself far off across the waters, shrank back into her corner of the deck and sat listening with a kind of unreasoning terror to the steady onward drive of the screws" (I: 257). Barbara White



discusses Mrs. Lidcote's shrinking into small spaces in the story, noting: "Spatial metaphors dominate the story" (74). Mrs. Lidcote repeatedly feels small and insignificant; her physical constriction serves as a metaphor for her social isolation and self-effacement. Later in Part II, when Mrs. Lidcote talks to Franklin Ide about the changes in society's view of divorce, she confesses to feeling lonely because if this change is real, she fears Leila may no longer need her as she did before: "Yes, yes, I'm happy. But I'm lonely too—lonelier than ever before. I didn't take up much room in the world before; but now—where is there a corner for me?" (I: 264). Mrs. Lidcote sees her insignificance in terms of space.

This image of small space contrasts with Susy Suffern's descriptions of the Barkleys' home in Part III when she updates her cousin on Leila's new life, with Wharton's flawless ear for exactly the right dialogue:

"You won't know Leila. She's had her pearls reset. Sargent's to paint her. Oh, and I was to tell you that she hopes you won't mind being the least bit squeezed over Sunday. The house was built by Wilbour's father, you know, and it's rather old-fashioned—only ten spare bedrooms. Of course that's small for what they mean to do, and she'll show you the new plans they've had made. The idea is to keep the present house as a wing. She told me to explain—she's so dreadfully sorry not be able to give you a sitting room just at first . . ." (II: 266)

Leila's acceptance in the social world is reflected in the larger spaces she occupies and in the grandiose plans she makes, but even Susy sees Mrs. Lidcote as being squeezed and is, in fact, part of what squeezes her. When Mrs. Lidcote hears this news, she is reminded of her earlier concern about finding a corner for herself and expands on this in her own thoughts: "Where indeed in this crowded, topsy-turvy world, with its headlong changes

and helter-skelter readjustments, its new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations, was there room for a character fashioned by slower sterner processes and a life broken under their inexorable pressure?" (II: 267). Finally, at the end of the story, Mrs. Lidcote explains to Franklin Ide that times have changed for others but not for her, and she uses constricted spatial images once again: "But you and I are not out there. We're shut up in a tight little round of habit and association, just as we're shut up in this room. Remember, I thought I'd got out of it once, but what really happened was that the other people went out, and left me in the same little room" (II: 279).

As in so many of Edith Wharton's stories, perception and misperception play a dominant role in "Autres Temps . . . ." Mrs. Lidcote's vision is shaped by her own past and the isolation that followed. Her misreading of her daughter's situation and of the changes that have occurred creates most, if not all, of the disillusionment she suffers throughout the tale. Rushing to New York in the belief that Leila needs her support sets the stage for all that follows. On the ship before it docks, when Mrs. Lidcote and Franklin Ide discuss whether Leila will meet her mother in the city, Mrs. Lidcote assumes her daughter will not want to see people, but when Ide laughs at this notion, we suspect that she is attributing her own emotions to Leila. Susy Suffern meets her cousin in the city not because Leila fears contact with other people but, as we later learn, because Leila must prepare for weekend guests, and her mother's arrival has upset her schedule. Mrs. Lidcote also misperceives Wilbour Barkley as she remembers her own difficulties, telling Ide that she is pleased that "*he* seems to have behaved as well as possible, to have wanted to marry her as much as--" (II: 261). Ide interrupts, assuring her Barkley will be devoted to

Leila. He is surprised that she would think such a thing, but she insists that such a situation strains a relationship: “I’m not sure that Leila realizes—” (II: 261). Again, it is evident that she does not see clearly, as Ide interrupts once more to say: “I’m not sure that you realize. *They’re* all right” (II: 261).

Mrs. Lidcote continues to misunderstand the situation when she relates her conversation with Susy Suffern to Franklin Ide in Part II. As noted in the earlier quotation in the discussion of this section, Mrs. Lidcote thinks Leila is being considerate of her and would be disappointed if she accepted Susy’s invitation for the weekend. Perhaps, as we read this part, we can imagine Leila worrying that her mother would not want to be in Lenox with other guests, or Leila having only her mother’s interests at heart. We also know, however, that sending Mrs. Lidcote to Susy’s for the weekend would solve the whole problem for Leila as well, and as our apprehension is being fed throughout the story, we suspect the situation is more complicated.

Mrs. Lidcote’s most important misperception occurs as she lets herself believe that she might be redeemed after all these years. Listening to Franklin Ide and Susy Suffern proclaim the changes in society and watching Leila’s solid acceptance into that world contribute understandably to this notion. Given her daughter’s experience, she has reason to hope that her old friends will welcome her or at least greet her kindly.

Wharton’s genius here is reflected in the difference between the way society treats Mrs. Lidcote and the way it treats her daughter, Leila. Mrs. Lidcote’s despair at the end comes not only from the ostracism she has endured for so long but also from the disappointed hope that had been awakened only to be shattered. The disillusionment that follows

seems sharper after her few days of optimism. In the last section, when Ide tells her she might be imagining the other guests' slights, she answers bitterly:

I didn't imagine the fact of Harriet Fresbie's not even asking if she might see me when she knew I was in the house. Nor of Mary Giles's getting Susy, at the eleventh hour, to smuggle her up to my room when the others wouldn't know where she'd gone; nor poor Leila's ghastly fear lest Mrs. Lorin Boulger, for whom the party was given, should guess I was in the house, and prevent her husband's giving Wilbour the second secretaryship because she's been obliged to spend a night under the same roof with his mother-in-law!" (II: 278).

At the conclusion of the story, Mrs. Lidcote finally grasps her situation most accurately. She now understands her cousin Susy, her former friends, and Franklin Ide, but her understanding of Leila proves to be both more complicated and more interesting. The relationship between mother and daughter in this story evolves as Mrs. Lidcote becomes aware of the difference in their situations and of Leila's acceptance of that difference. Gradually, as Mrs. Lidcote's perception changes, she is able to actually *see* her daughter, something she was unable to do at the beginning. Though Edith Wharton had no children, her interest in the connection between parents and children occurs many times in her stories and novels. Like Kate Clephane in *The Mother's Recompense*, Wharton's 1925 novel, Mrs. Lidcote left her New York family for a lover and a life in Europe, and like Kate, she returns to New York to aid and to support her daughter. In the end as well, like Kate, she cannot remain with her daughter and must return alone to Europe. In fact, Hermione Lee considers the novel a reworking of "Autres Temps . . ." (352).

Early in the story, Mrs. Lidcote wants to believe that her daughter needs her and that they share an intimate bond. In fact, she makes Leila's well-being her first priority,

and we see evidence of this throughout the story. Out of love, but also out of guilt, at every turn Mrs. Lidcote puts her daughter's concerns ahead of her own: she rushes to New York to be at Leila's side when the imagined rejection comes; she makes excuses for Leila's failure to meet her ship or to come to New York to bring her to Lenox; she cheerfully stays in her room for most of the weekend so that Leila will not have to explain her mother's presence to her guests; and finally, she quickly returns to Florence when she realizes her daughter does not need her help. As Mrs. Lidcote comes to understand upper-class New York social values and Leila's place in this world, she also learns her own fate and flees.

Because Edith Wharton tells the story solely from Mrs. Lidcote's point of view, the reader is left to deduce Leila's true feelings from her words and her actions, which prove to be ambiguous and contradictory. We are aware throughout the story that Leila finds the timing of her mother's visit inconvenient because, at the moment Leila is trying to secure a post in Rome for her husband, Mrs. Lidcote's presence could alienate the very people that can help her achieve her husband's wish. Susy Suffern, however, informs Mrs. Lidcote that the Barkleys deliberately chose Rome so Leila can be near her, suggesting that she does indeed love and want to be with her mother. We see Leila's pretenses about the weekend and her condescension as she calls Mrs. Lidcote "you old darling," "you duck," "you precious darling," and we cringe at her heavy-handed efforts to keep her mother in her room and away from her guests. Though she has been humiliated by her daughter, Mrs. Lidcote tells Franklin Ide: "I know Leila was in an agony lest I should come down to dinner the first night. And it was for me she was afraid,

not for herself. Leila is never afraid for herself” (II: 278). Though this could mean that when Leila isolated Mrs. Lidcote, she was indeed trying to spare her mother any embarrassment, and not for ulterior motives of her own; however, it may also be a delusion on Mrs. Lidcote’s part because she wants it to be true. Still, the conversation takes place in her suite at the end of the story when her illusions are gone, lending credence to Mrs. Lidcote’s judgment of the situation. In the end, Wharton leaves this unanswered. Finally, when Mrs. Lidcote announces that she is returning at once to Florence, Leila appears genuinely upset and tries to convince her mother to wait and travel with them to Rome: “So certain did this [Barkley’s appointment to Rome] seem that the prospect of a prompt reunion mitigated the distress with which Leila learned of her mother’s decision; it seemed to Leila absolutely unintelligible that Mrs. Lidcote should not stay on with them till their own fate was fixed . . . ‘Oh, we’ll be with you soon . . . so soon that it’s really foolish to separate,’ ” Leila tells her mother. (II: 275)

When judging Leila’s behavior toward her mother, it is important to be aware that Leila has become part of the upper-class society which Mrs. Lidcote once fled, which ostracized her over the years, and still does. Leila is one of them, and ultimately, she treats her mother as they treat Mrs. Lidcote. Though Leila may indeed love her mother, and may not realize, or choose to realize, how banishing her to her room and excluding her from the weekend activities deeply distress Mrs. Lidcote, nevertheless in the end, she isolates her mother as the others do. Mrs. Lidcote does not belong to this society, but her daughter does; therefore Leila’s actions reflect both social and personal values as she cannot give her mother what she needs most: acceptance and inclusion in her daughter’s

world. Leila belongs in society while, literally and figuratively, Mrs. Lidcote must remain in her room. Wharton cleverly leaves the emotional connection between mother and daughter ambiguous so the reader recognizes the appropriate complexity of this relationship and, therefore, of most parent-child relationships.

“Autres Temps . . .” may be considered the story of Mrs. Lidcote’s gradual awareness that society’s values and conventions have changed for Leila’s generation but not for her own. Wharton’s exploration of society’s shifting moral codes still resonates and infuses this tale with a timeless appeal that extends beyond her personal anxieties about separation and divorce. By today’s standards, the issue of divorce itself may appear to be dated, but after a careful reading, it becomes apparent that Wharton’s view of society, her interest in the relationship between mother and daughter, and her treatment of perception and clarity are modern concerns as well. Society still passes judgment on those who break its rules; mothers and daughters do not necessarily understand or treat each other well; perception and clarity remain critical elements in forging true connections in both personal and social relationships.

Edith Wharton gives the intriguing title, “Xingu,” to a story she wrote in 1911 that has also received universal acclaim. A mix of light-hearted satire, witty character sketches, and delightful wordplay, the story became the title for the collection published in 1916, *Xingu and Other Stories*. R. W. B. Lewis in his Wharton biography claims that “Xingu” is the best story in the entire book. Since this collection contains “Coming Home,” “The Long Run” and “Autres Temps . . .” as well as other well-regarded stories, singling out “Xingu” is a bold critical declaration (394). Wharton frames her tale around

the meaning of the mysterious word as she amusingly ridicules the pretentious, pseudo-intellectual women's clubs she so disdained. Like "The Recovery" and "The Pelican," discussed in Chapter Two, "Xingu" takes place in the fictional university town, Hillbridge. In each of these stories, Wharton uses Hillbridge to embody certain social and personal values she satirizes. In "The Recovery" the focus is on a mediocre, provincial artist, while Wharton's targets for contempt are those who believe him to be a great talent. In "The Pelican" Wharton satirizes the woman who fancies herself an intellectual and gives lectures to the public, the audiences who believe they are being exposed to serious learning, and those who buy tickets simply to support Mrs. Amyot's efforts to raise her son. In "The Pretext," as noted in Chapter One, Wharton mocks the small college town, Wentworth, and the Higher Thought Club where a group of women study and present papers on various cultural topics. In these stories, and again in "Xingu," Wharton satirizes small-town, bourgeois, trivial values and pretenses of intellect and knowledge; however, particularly in "Xingu," she employs a tongue-in-cheek, light tone to make her points.

Divided into three sections, the plot is uncomplicated. A group of Hillbridge women pursuing Culture (with a capital C) have formed the Lunch Club, where they lunch at their various homes, debate topics of interest, and periodically entertain occasional distinguished visitors. These women would be the target audience for Mrs. Amyot in "The Pelican." The ladies have discussed the deeply pessimistic novel, *The Wings of Death*, at their last meeting, and now the famous author of the book, Osric Dane, has accepted an invitation to attend a future meeting. Part I introduces the various



women in the club as they prepare for this special event, quickly setting the tone as Wharton outlines her cast of characters. Like “The 400,” the socially prominent group in Wharton’s time whose number was determined by the size of Mrs. Astor’s ballroom, this club is limited to six members by the dimensions of Miss Van Vluyck’s dining room, which is the smallest one in the group. Mrs. Ballinger, the founder, “pursues Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone” (II: 209). Because of her seniority, Mrs. Ballinger has claimed the privilege of hosting the special meeting, much to the distress of Mrs. Plinth who believes her greater wealth and larger home entitle her to the honor. Mrs. Leveret is nervous about the discussion with Osric Dane and insecure about her own ideas. Practical and confident, Miss Van Vluyck suggested the book for discussion at the last meeting, while Laura Glyde is a pretentious, intellectual snob who enjoys using esoteric references and archaic allusions.

The final member of the group, Fanny Roby, has recently been accepted into the club on the recommendation of Professor Foreland, Hillbridge’s respected biologist. Mrs. Roby has returned from an extended trip to Brazil, and in their zeal to add a biology enthusiast to their group, they have quickly admitted her, though the reader never learns why she wants to join the club. When *The Wings of Death* is discussed at the meeting, Mrs. Roby shocks and disappoints the group and signals her unusual role in the Lunch Club by announcing that she has not read the book in spite of the imminent arrival of Osric Dane. She alone is uninterested in intellectual posturing and does not care what the others think of her. When the women try to persuade her of the book’s value, Mrs. Roby asks possibly the most unsophisticated question one could imagine: “Do they get married

in the end?" She explains, when they ask her who: "Why, the girl and the man. It's a novel, isn't it? I always think that's the one thing that matters. If they're parted, it spoils my dinner" (II: 211). As the women discuss the book, they reveal their own eccentricities by speaking without substance or specific details, using obscure references and trying to impress each other. Mrs. Roby's comments and attitude continue to be discordant, and the members leave the meeting assuming she will not be an asset to their group.

In Part II, the women gather at Mrs. Ballinger's home for Osric Dane's visit. Mrs. Leveret carries her copy of *Appropriate Allusions* on which she relies for every kind of conversation. Mrs. Ballinger has placed a variety of books on her drawing room table, hoping that one of them will coincide with Osric Dane's interests. Mrs. Ballinger always places books of current interest on this table, proving she is well-informed, and therefore may speak with authority on any topic. Wharton adroitly mocks this misplaced confidence by noting that her proficiency on any subject is fleeting: "Her mind was a hotel where facts came and went like transient lodgers, without leaving their address behind, and frequently without paying for their board" (31). The other ladies arrive, nervously trying out various topics that might intrigue Osric Dane, assuming somehow it would be inappropriate to concentrate too closely on Dane's novel. When the author appears, all are disappointed by her arrogant and aloof behavior. Mrs. Dane does not recognize their importance and is uninterested in exchanging ideas. At the luncheon table matters do not improve as the women struggle to engage their guest, and later, after taking their seats in the drawing room, they try to explain to Mrs. Dane why Hillbridge in general and their club in particular stand for art, literature and culture. Though the reader

wonders why the author agreed to the club's invitation, perhaps we are to assume that visiting these groups helps her sell books; in any event, Wharton is satirizing the author as well as the club.

Osric Dane's reaction to all of this effort makes the ladies even more uncomfortable and anxious to prove themselves to the novelist when she simply repeats their trite phrases and turns them into questions: "What do they represent? . . . What ethics? . . . How do you define objective? . . . Which psychology? . . ." (II: 216-217). Mrs. Ballinger excuses their shortcomings by telling Mrs. Dane that this winter they have been completely absorbed in, intensely absorbed in . . . and she cannot finish her thought. At that moment, the previously silent Mrs. Roby comes to her rescue and finishes her sentence for her: "In Xingu" (II: 217). The ladies are totally mystified by this term but also delighted that someone has offered a possible solution to their dilemma. Mrs. Dane also appears to be fumbling for the meaning of this word and is embarrassed when Mrs. Roby presses her for her opinion on the matter. The following conversation is the comical focal point of the story, as each member pretends to understand the word, "Xingu," and poses questions for the author, trying to force her to discuss this topic that only Mrs. Roby comprehends. Finally, just when Mrs. Dane is about to discuss *The Wings of Death* at last, Mrs. Roby rises, announces that she has not yet read the book and is late for her bridge game. Before the club can regroup, Osric Dane also leaps up, hurriedly joining Mrs. Roby on her way out, telling her: "I should so like to ask you a few more questions about Xingu" (II: 221). The two outsiders have joined forces, Mrs. Roby for her bridge game and Mrs. Dane to escape the Lunch Club and to find out more about Xingu.

In the third part of the story, the remaining members try to decide how they feel about the meeting. The consensus is that Osric Dane behaved badly toward them, and they are grateful to Fanny Roby for upstaging her with a topic she knew as little about as did the members of the club. They decide they need to learn more about Xingu but gradually realize that none of them even knows what it is. In turn they suggest a book, a religion, a rite, a custom, a thought, a philosophy, a language, and they try to remember what Mrs. Roby said about Xingu that would provide clues to its meaning. Eventually Mrs. Plinth suggests looking up the word. When the maid finally produces a volume of an encyclopedia, it takes the group some time to learn that the mysterious word is located under the letter X, not the expected Z. Their surprise is complete when Miss Van Fluck tells them that Xingu is a river in Brazil, where Mrs. Roby had been living before moving to Hillbridge. The ladies are shocked and recall each other's remarks about Xingu when they had no idea what it was. Miss Van Vluyck reads the information given by the reference book, describing the discovery of the river, its statistics and its course. Remembering the various hints that Mrs. Roby dropped during the earlier discussion, the women realize that, although they have been fooled by Mrs. Roby, so has Osric Dane; this fact gives them great satisfaction. Nevertheless, they now blame Mrs. Roby for tricking the author at their expense and manipulating the situation so that Mrs. Dane left with her. All assume they are being mocked by the two women at this very moment. Quickly they decide that Mrs. Roby must be asked to resign from the Lunch Club to prevent such situations in the future, and the tale concludes with Mrs. Ballinger composing a letter requesting her to leave the group.

As we consider the implications of “Xingu” in the context of social and personal values, we should be aware that Wharton’s characterizations reveal her wider view of the women’s clubs and their interest in intellectual stimulation. Geoffrey Walton praises Wharton’s decision to make Osric Dane as uninformed as the members of the Lunch Club: “Edith Wharton has avoided the obvious contrast of introducing a genuinely cultivated person and in this way given her satire more devastating implications. But it is as a *jeu d’esprit* that one values *Xingu*; it is both highly intelligent and very funny” (112). If Mrs. Dane had been written as a well-mannered and charming intellectual, Wharton would have only the members of the club to carry her views about this pretentious and superficial pursuit of Culture. As it is, Osric Dane’s rudeness and affectations extend the scrutiny to the creators of Culture as well. Still, the tone remains lightly satiric, not pessimistic. Summarizing “Xingu” and analyzing the various characters and attitudes presented add to our understanding of Wharton’s disdain for the pretense to intellectual curiosity and learning. The values of these women illustrate a popular approach to culture that Wharton scorned; nevertheless, no summary or discussion can quite capture the delightful quality of the piece or the clever way in which the story unfolds. The genius of “Xingu,” evidenced in the examples below, is in its skillful, witty repartee and tongue-in-cheek tone of its author. The plays on words surrounding the meaning of Xingu occur throughout the story and provide the vehicle for humor and character study.

Fanny Roby, the only character who does not pretend to be an intellectual but outwits them all, guides the discussion of the meaning of Xingu while the members and Osric Dane pretend they are familiar with the term. At the first reading of the story, one

probably does not recognize that Mrs. Roby is scattering hints throughout their conversation. After the meaning is revealed, the reader with admiration and delight, and the club members with dismay, review the discussion and discover the double meaning of the clues Fanny has left. When answering a remark made by Osric Dane, Mrs. Roby replies that the author must give her opinion of Xingu because “some people say that one of your last books was saturated with it” (II: 218). Later, when we learn Mrs. Roby’s copy of that book had been tossed in the river during a boating party, we realize what she means by “saturated.” Mrs. Roby then tells Mrs. Dane: “We’re dreadfully anxious to know just how it was that you went into the Xingu.” After a long pause, Mrs. Dane questions sharply: “Ah—you say *the* Xingu, do you?” Fanny confidently answers her: “It *is* a shade pedantic, isn’t it? Personally, I always drop the article, but I don’t know how the other members feel about it.” (II: 219). Mrs. Roby continues her comments about Xingu, telling the ladies much time is needed for it because “It’s very long . . . and deep in places . . . and it isn’t easy to skip . . . one must just wade through” (II: 219). When Mrs. Ballinger protests that one cannot really call it wading, Mrs. Roby concludes, “Ah—you always found it went swimmingly?” (II: 219). Mrs. Ballinger then posits that there are difficult passages, and Mrs. Roby continues, “Oh, it’s really not difficult up to a certain point, though some of the branches are very little known and it’s almost impossible to get at the source” (II: 220). When Mrs. Plinth asks her if she has ever tried to do this, Fanny Roby replies, “No—but a friend of mine did; a very brilliant man; and he told me it was best for women—not to . . .” (II: 220). The club members conclude that there is something naughty and salacious about Xingu and consequently are even more

curious, though they protest becomingly that they must avoid any indelicacy in their discussion. Subsequent readings of “Xingu” underscore the witty word play and clever clues.

The members of the Lunch Club together and separately provide us with further evidence of Edith Wharton’s satire on their values. These characters do not acquire the perception and self-awareness we see in so many of Wharton’s stories. Instead, they remain unchanged by the events of the tale, relieved that their club will ask Fanny Roby to resign and that their meetings can return to the way they have always been conducted. In “Xingu,” only the reader sees their superficial pretenses, false displays of knowledge, and their pompous exclusivity. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her introduction to *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, finds deeper meaning below the surface of “Xingu:”

“Xingu” may be the most lighthearted piece of satire Wharton ever wrote. It takes aim at pretentiousness, snobbishness, and above all the kind of “gotten-up learning” that tries to pass itself off as “culture.” Yet even “Xingu” has a sober side and one which is characteristic of much in Wharton’s best work. The shallow group who have erected false standards of self-esteem are all women: one might even say (after a merely superficial reading of the tale), that Wharton had a paradoxically anti-feminist streak in her work. Yet what may seem to be misogyny is, in fact, a subtle, often brilliantly compelling form of satire (xi-xii).

Each member of the Lunch Club exhibits different characteristics of this snobbery and elitism, and each has a role to play in the story as she represents the superficial women Wharton is satirizing. Mrs. Ballinger, founder and President, is concerned about her position in the club and is constantly ensuring that no one usurps her rights and powers. She is the voice of their group and protector of their image. Long on generalities, but short on specifics, she fancies herself the embodiment of intellectual curiosity and

ferently defends the members' pursuits. No subject, however, receives attention in depth or is studied for any length of time. When Mrs. Ballinger explains the club to Osric Dane, she claims: "The object of our little club is to concentrate the highest tendencies of Hillbridge—to centralize and focus its intellectual effort . . . We aspire to be in touch with whatever is highest in art, literature and ethics" (II: 216). Although Mrs. Ballinger is resourceful enough to suggest looking for Xingu under the letter X when it cannot be found under Z, and is the first to realize that they have been fooled by Fanny Roby, she does not display true intellectual curiosity when she admits to keeping "useful" reference books in her husband's dressing room, far from her own reading material. Mrs. Ballinger epitomizes the Lunch Club in its pompous and superficial search for culture.

Mrs. Leveret, nervously insecure about her abilities and opinions, tries to please the others and stay on everyone's good side. Wharton characterizes her as quite willing to change her views at a moment's notice. When one member decides amusement is not a quality one should look for in a book, Mrs. Leveret agrees: " 'Oh, certainly, *The Wings of Death* is not amusing,' ventured Mrs. Leveret, whose manner of putting forth an opinion was like that of an obliging salesman with a variety of other styles to submit if his first selection does not suit." When questioned about her comment, Mrs. Leveret answers, " 'Assuredly not—that is what I was going to say,' assented Mrs. Leveret, hastily rolling up her opinion and reaching for another, 'It was meant to—to elevate.' " Then, a moment later, when questioned again, she corrects herself: "I meant, of course, to instruct" (II: 211). Her indecision and her need to have the approval of the group render her tentative and too quick to agree with whatever is said. Mrs. Leveret's volume of *Appropriate*



*Allusions* provides a concrete example of her dependence on others' ideas. The book is meant to provide her with just the right comment or reference for any possible occasion; unfortunately, the only phrase she can actually remember is one for which she has yet to find a need: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?" (II: 213). Though Mrs. Leveret does not always refer to the book, carrying it usually gives her courage and confidence. The day of Osric Dane's visit, however, she brings the book but is still nervous. What if the great author has a different volume of allusions and is not familiar with her quotations?

Mrs. Plinth proudly views her position as the wealthiest member of the Lunch Club as a serious responsibility. Owning the largest home of the members, she feels it her duty to entertain their various guests; therefore, Mrs. Ballinger's insistence on hosting Osric Dane's visit vexes her, along with the rest of the group: "Mrs. Plinth was almost as proud of her obligations as she was of her picture-gallery . . . and only a woman of her wealth could afford to live up to a standard as high as that which she had set for herself" (II: 209). She believes her gallery and footman trump Mrs. Ballinger's two parlor maids for this special occasion, but Mrs. Ballinger's rank allows her to prevail. Ironically, Mrs. Plinth dislikes being asked her view of what she reads: "Books were written to read; if one read them what more could be expected? To be questioned in detail regarding the contents of a volume seemed to her as great an outrage as being searched for smuggling laces at the Custom House" (II: 212-213). Of course one would expect her opinion to be sought frequently at the meetings of the club; on the contrary, the other women permit her this idiosyncrasy and disapprove when Mrs. Roby boldly asks her what she thinks of

*The Wings of Death*. Wharton's wittiest characterization of Mrs. Plinth occurs as they wait for Osric Dane. Miss Van Vluyck frets about what will happen when Laura Glyde speaks and "we shall be deluged with literature," and Mrs. Plinth questions her: "Literature? . . . But this is perfectly unexpected. I understood we were to talk of Osric Dane's novel" (II: 214).

Miss Van Vluyck, self-assured and pragmatic, is skeptical about Mrs. Roby's hasty admission to the club at the beginning of the story and regrets accepting the recommendation of the biologist, Professor Foreland: "At Miss Van Vluyck's first off-hand mention of the pterodactyl Mrs. Roby had confusedly murmured: 'I know so little about meters' . . ." (II: 210 ). During the discussion with Osric Dane, Miss Van Vluyck is willing to press the author to speak of her book and to push her to elaborate on it. Later, she asks Mrs. Ballinger to get a "useful" reference book when they cannot find the definition of Xingu in Mrs. Leveret's copy of *Appropriate Allusions*. After looking up Xingu in the encyclopedia, she announces it to the group and realizes that Fanny Roby has been talking about a river the whole time.

Laura Glyde, a pompous, pedantic elitist who delivers obscure quotations and cryptic allusions, shares her view of *The Wings of Death* with the group: "The beautiful part of it is surely just this—that no one can tell *how The Wings of Death* ends. Osric Dane, overcome by the awful significance of her own meaning, has mercifully veiled it—perhaps even from herself—as Apelles, in representing the sacrifice of Iphigenia, veiled the face of Agamemnon" (II:212). Mrs. Leveret quietly asks Mrs. Plinth if Mrs. Glyde has just recited a poem, and others seem confused as well. Laura Glyde clarifies: "Oh, but

don't you see that it's just the dark hopelessness of it all—the wonderful tone-scheme of black on black—that makes it such an artistic achievement? It reminded me when I read it of Prince Rupert's *maniere noire* . . . the book is etched, not painted, yet one feels the color-values so intensely . . ." II: 212). Mrs. Leveret whispers the perfect counterpoint to this profound pronouncement as she turns to her neighbor and inquires, "Who is *he*? Someone she's met abroad?" (II: 212).

Although "Xingu" has been included in this chapter on social and personal values because the Lunch Club and Osric Dane serve as sparkling examples of Wharton's social satire, some critics have placed it among Edith Wharton's artists and writers stories. Barbara White, who generally has little praise for these tales, applauds "Xingu." "Probably the most solid generalization that can be made about Wharton's short stories is that the artist stories are her least successful . . . Wharton never accomplished much in this subgenre ('Xingu,' 1911, is her only real triumph)" (36). White suggests that arrogant Osric Dane is a combination of Henry James and Edith Wharton; her book is titled *The Wings of Death*, suggesting James' *The Wings of the Dove*, and Dane's "superior air" and condescending attitude about these women mirrors Wharton's own opinion of these groups (88-89).

Wharton's most subtle satire in the story occurs in the relationship between the members of the club and the encyclopedia's discussion of the river, Xingu. After the dry facts, the book states: "Its source was first discovered in 1884 by the German explorer von den Steinen, after a difficult and dangerous expedition through a region inhabited by tribes still in the Stone Age of culture" (II: 226). It is obvious that the ladies do not

realize the parallel between the explorer's trip through uncultivated people and Osric Dane's visit to the Lunch Club, but the reader appreciates the humor in Wharton's choice of the word, Xingu, on which to base her story. In addition to the small-town characters in "Xingu," who make an easy target for parody, Wharton also satirizes other pseudo-intellectual women who presume they engage in cerebral activity, possess artistic judgment, and cultivate sophisticated tastes as she has in other stories; however, the brilliant satire in this case is more playful than cruel, more humorous than cynical. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out that Wharton realizes these women, such as Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, have no power in their society and much of her satire is focused on these types:

Not surprisingly, Wharton uses the same method in her short stories. The women's club in "Xingu" is a parody of any authentic intellectual activity, and its members are self-deceiving and silly and vain. Yet one must, perhaps, ask a larger question about even this frothy little tale. What alternatives were they offered? Were they silly by choice—by laziness and default; or would some more strenuous scholarly ambition on their part be inevitably doomed to defeat by society's restrictions concerning "proper" activities for females? (*Roman Fever and Other Stories*, xiii).

Wolff's question speaks to a recurring theme in Wharton's work, an issue she herself faced throughout her life. As noted in the Introduction, when she began to write stories and poems, as a woman, she was not encouraged to do so, particularly an upper-class woman. Even as an established writer, critics frequently treated her less seriously than male authors.

Though some critics believe that Edith Wharton's later short stories lack the quality of her earlier ones, "After Holbein," written in 1928, stands as an example of one of her finest pieces. Initially a reader might think the story is a comedy about New York

society manners, or a spoof about two aging friends, or possibly a droll examination of the relationship between employers and their servants. While the tale reflects all of these topics, its comic nature is a veneer covering Wharton's more serious treatment and reveals both social and personal values of the characters and the times in which they live.

Probably the most important clue about the story comes from its title, which refers to the sixteenth century artist, Hans Holbein the Younger. Holbein specialized in portraits and is also known for a series of forty-one woodcuts called "The Dance of Death." The woodcuts depict the figure of Death, represented by a skeleton, leading away various types of people from all walks of life. Rich and poor, aristocratic and commonplace, all are summoned. In his discussion of the story, R. W. B. Lewis identifies the parallel between one of the woodcuts and the main characters of "After Holbein," Anson Warley and Evalina Jaspur: "One may think in particular of the engraving of a lavishly dressed lady and gentleman being led away by Death as a drum-beating skeleton. . . . Warley and Mrs. Jaspur are responding to a summons from the land of the dead; they engage in a slow-motion dance toward it; and quite literally, as he is leaving the house after dinner, Warley loses consciousness and falls dead on the pavement" (Introduction, *The Selected Short Stories of Edith Wharton* xix). Wharton's title makes death an unseen but ever-present character in the story.

Written in 1928 and published in the 1930 collection, *Certain People*, "After Holbein," like many other Wharton works from her later years, looks back to New York City society in the late nineteenth century. The action of the story takes place during only one evening as the main characters find themselves in a situation familiar to Edith

Wharton's readers: one character, with the help of his valet, prepares to dine out at the home of a friend, while a hostess, with the help of her servants and a nurse, readies herself for the evening's festivities. Wharton has used the dinner party situation in many of her novels and short stories, describing the elegant table settings, fabulous flower arrangements, elaborate menus, and well-dressed New Yorkers. The novels *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Hudson River Bracketed*, and short stories "Autres Temps . . .," "The Last Asset," "The Choice," and "The Long Run" all include scenes that take place during a dinner party. Wharton drew from her own life experiences as she places her characters in the ultimate social scene. Hosts and hostesses invited only those from their own class, and in this distinctive setting, Wharton's characters reveal their prejudices, their values, and their passionate desire to maintain the exclusive society they enjoy. Wealth alone does not guarantee admittance to this privileged group; one needs distinguished family connections, memberships in upper-class clubs, and elite social relationships. In "After Holbein," the hostess is thought to be modeled after Wharton's cousin, Mrs. William Backhouse Astor, a founder of "The 400." (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 13).

The story opens with background information on Anson Warley, an elderly, upper-class New Yorker who has always believed he has a dual nature: part of him prefers intellectual activities and solitude, while his other self wants to join the social world and all its trappings. As a younger man, Warley catered to his cerebral side most of the time, but finds he is becoming increasingly gregarious as the years pass. Gradually, Warley has accepted invitations more frequently, abandoning, for the most part, the quiet

evenings at home. He has always chosen his social activities with regard to how he would seem to others, the figure he would cut in the eyes of his friends, the host, and the other guests at the exclusive parties he attends. Wharton's description pinpoints the shallowness:

It was in the interest of this self that Warley, in his younger days, had frequented the gaudiest restaurants and the most glittering Palace Hotels of two hemispheres, subscribed to the most advanced literary and artistic reviews, bought the pictures of the young painters who were being the most discussed, missed few of the showiest first nights in New York, London, or Paris, sought the company of the men and women—especially the women most conspicuous in fashion, scandal, or any other form of social notoriety, and thus tried to warm the shivering soul within him at all the passing bonfires of success (II: 532).

Interestingly, Warley understands his own poseur nature. He imagines his increasingly superficial self mocking the original one, examining the desire for intellectual achievements. As the story unfolds, the reader questions how genuine these pursuits have actually been; perhaps this later Anson Warley is the real and only one. Picturing this quest as a climb to rarified heights, the social Warley, who fears being excluded and spending nights alone, sneers at his other self:

What's the use of scrambling up there, anyhow? I could understand it if you brought down anything worth-while—a poem or a picture of your own. But just climbing and staring: what does it lead to? Fellows with the creative gift have got to have their occasional Sinais; I can see that. But for a mere looker-on like you, isn't that sort of thing rather a pose? You talk awfully well—brilliantly, even (oh, my dear fellow, no false modesty between you and *me*, please!) But who the devil is there to listen to you, up there among the glaciers? And sometimes, when you come down, I notice that you're rather—well, heavy and tongue-tied. Look out, or they'll stop asking us to dine! And sitting at home every evening—brr! (II: 533).

Now, as the story begins, Warley has abandoned the pretense of cerebral, artistic, and creative pursuits. A social snob, he spends time only with those he deems worthy of his company, those in New York's upper-class society. Thinking of himself as fastidious, he presumptuously considers his friends lucky to have him as a guest, choosing carefully from the available invitations: "Oh, but only at the right houses—always at the right houses; that was understood! The right people—the right setting—the right wines . . ." (II: 534).

Tonight, as Warley dresses for the evening's dinner party, he brushes off the objections of the loyal valet, Filmore, who urges him to stay home occasionally and rest. A little high blood pressure, some dizziness, and occasional confusion will not keep him at home. He tells himself he is not an aging fool like Evalina Jaspar, a once prominent hostess, who believes she is still a brilliant entertainer, sought after by all of New York society. Since her stroke, though she continues to invite guests and plan menus, the parties take place only in her senile imagination. He remembers the lavish dinners of old, the elaborate table settings, the dull conversation, and congratulates himself on escaping these boring evenings:

Poor old Evalina Jaspar! In his youth, and even in his prime, she had been New York's chief entertainer—"leading hostess," the newspapers called her. Her big house in Fifth Avenue had been an entertaining machine. She had lived, breathed, invested and reinvested her millions, to no other end. At first her pretext had been that she had to marry her daughters and amuse her sons; but when sons and daughters had married and left her she seemed hardly aware of it; she had just gone on entertaining. Hundreds, no thousands of dinners (on gold plate, of course, and with orchids, and all the delicacies that were out of season), had been served in that vast pompous dining room . . . He lost himself in amused computation of the annual number of guests, of saddles of mutton, of legs of lamb, of terrapin, canvas backs, magnums of champagne and pyramids



of hothouse fruit that must have passed through that room in the last forty years (II: 535).

Warley's musings reveal a snobbish cruelty as he remembers accepting some of her earlier invitations, only to skip the party at the last minute in favor of something more amusing and then joke about it with his friends. Now, he insists on going out tonight to dine with a few friends and looks forward to delighting the group with his wit.

As Anson Warley dresses for dinner, Evalina Jaspas is also dressing for the evening with the help of her staff, her day and night nurses and her maid. All of her servants pretend that Mrs. Jaspas is having another elaborate dinner party, and they flutter around her, bringing her gown, straightening her wig and fastening her jewelry. The night nurse, young Miss Cress, anticipates a quiet evening in a chair, while the day nurse, the worn-out Miss Dunn, frets about her patient's anticipation and over-excitement. Both women humor Mrs. Jaspas about her parties; they like their situation and "knew on which side their bread was buttered" (II: 538).

Both women rely on Lavinia, Mrs. Jaspas's lifelong maid, who knows everything about her and is loyally devoted to her well-being. Unlike Miss Cress, who teases Mrs. Jaspas unkindly and deliberately confuses her by telling her she is already wearing her diamond necklace when it has not yet been brought from the safe, Lavinia dedicates herself to her mistress in every way. Older than Mrs. Jaspas, she ignores her own health to meet her employer's demands: "These dinner party nights were killing old Lavinia, and she did so want to keep alive; she wanted to live long enough to wait on Mrs. Jaspas to the last" (II: 541). Evidently Lavinia even supplies the daily fresh flowers out of her own funds, since the family has refused to continue the expense. Today she manages to

remember the combination to the safe and fetches the necklace, as Munson, the elderly butler, has once again forgotten to return to duty after his day off. Mrs. Jaspar is unaware of Lavinia's kind acts and does not show appreciation for her devotion. She only knows that her maid moves too slowly and that she must occasionally repeat her orders: "Quick, Lavinia! My fan, my gloves, my handkerchief . . . how often have I got to tell you? I used to have a *perfect* maid—" "That was me, madam," Lavinia answers patiently (II: 540).

After she is finally dressed, Mrs. Jaspar descends to the drawing room to await her phantom guests. At the same time Anson Warley refuses his valet's suggestion of a taxi and insists on walking in the bitter cold to his own dinner party. Imagining how young and vigorous he would seem to a hypothetical friend who happened to see him walking jauntily along Fifth Avenue in such weather, Warley suddenly realizes he has no idea where he is headed or whose party he is planning to attend. Unable to clear his throbbing head and remember the invitation, he suddenly finds himself in front of Evalina Jaspar's home, all lit up for a party. Warley incorrectly assumes that this must indeed be his destination and rings the bell with relief. Inside, the sound of the bell sets off a flurry of activity because, of course, no one is actually expected. Lavinia and Miss Cress flutter around, trying to decide what to do, while George, the footman, shows Anson Warley into the drawing room where Evalina Jaspar awaits her guest. As the servants haphazardly try to create a dinner party instantly, the reader understands with great amusement, but also with a sense of great pathos, that though neither hostess nor guest is correct about the evening's plans, both believe they are exactly where he or she is expected to be.

Lavinia and Miss Cress look at the dining room and see that, in Munson's continued absence, George has not followed the usual instructions on these evenings. Instead of the gold plate, he has set the table with the blue and white servants' plates. In place of real flowers, or even the less expensive, artificial ones a daughter has arranged for instead, George has crumpled up some old newspapers to look like a bouquet and stuffed them into the porcelain vase and smaller dishes. At this moment, George announces dinner and Lavinia and Miss Cress watch the hostess and guest make their way from the drawing room:

What they saw, far off down the vista of empty drawing rooms, and after an interval during which (as Lavinia knew) the imaginary guests were supposed to file in and take their seats, was the entrance, at the end of the ghostly cortege, of a very old woman, still tall and towering, on the arm of a man somewhat smaller than herself, with a fixed smile on a darkly pink face, and a slim erect figure clad in perfect evening clothes, who advanced with short, measured steps, profiting (Miss Cress noticed) by the support of the arm he was supposed to sustain (II: 548).

This image brings to mind the Holbein woodcuts mentioned earlier of the skeleton leading a well-dressed couple to their death.

Edith Wharton creates an amusing scene as the characters enjoy their meal, but the scene has a sad edge to it as well; neither Mrs. Jaspar nor Anson Warley realizes the substitutions that have been made in décor or food. Warley admires the flowers while both believe the mashed potatoes are oysters. George passes sparkling water which the diners assume is champagne, then the main course of spinach, while they converse with other imaginary guests. At last, as George brings in the dessert of grapes and apples, Mrs. Jaspar is exhausted, and though she suggests that Warley join her in the drawing room after cigars, she slowly makes her way upstairs instead. Warley, feeling overheated and

confused by the loud laughter of the “other guests,” puts on his coat and prepares to leave. Never forgetting appearances for a moment, he remembers to announce: “Slipping off early—going on; ‘nother engagement” (II: 550). On the stoop outside, he remembers with pleasure the wonderful champagne and witty conversation. Then the story ends abruptly as “he took a step forward, to where a moment before the pavement had been—and where now there was nothing” (II: 550).

“After Holbein,” as stated previously, may appear at first to be a light and amusing tale. Edith Wharton describes Anson Warley’s affectations with a wry tone in the internal dialogue between his dual natures:

“After all, that highbrow business has been awfully overdone—now, hasn’t it?” the little Warley would insinuate, rummaging for his pearl studs, and consulting his flat evening watch as nervously as if it were a railway timetable. “If only we haven’t missed something really jolly by all this backing and filling. . . .”

“Oh, you poor creature, you! Always afraid of being left out, aren’t you? Well—just for once, to humor you, and because I happen to be feeling rather stale myself. But only to think of a sane man’s wanting to go to places just because they’re hot and smart and overcrowded!” And off they would dash together. . . (II: 533-534).

Similarly, she treats Evalina Jasparr’s dinner party with humor; images of mashed potatoes and spinach, newspaper flowers and bottled water create a light-hearted and rather silly impression. Nevertheless, while “After Holbein” may be superficially amusing, the story proves to be fundamentally profound and pathetic, dealing with issues that are serious and troubling.

Two major themes are explored in this short story: Wharton’s 1928 view of old New York in the 1870s and 1880s and her satiric treatment of that society, and her exploration of the specter of death. In considering the first theme, it is important to note

that in this period of her life, she often wrote of old New York in an effort to find some continuity and perspective between past and present. *The Age of Innocence* is her best work of this type, while “After Holbein” is another excellent example. Wharton’s disillusionment with America after World War I motivated her to write about an earlier, more comfortable time, however, Wharton’s reflective look back did not preclude her from examining and satirizing the New York social world she remembered. In the two works mentioned above, and others as well, including her four-part novella, *Old New York*, and her short story, “Roman Fever,” Wharton applies her post-war perspective to this earlier period. R. W. B. Lewis, in his Wharton biography, refers to her portrayal of late-nineteenth century New York as “a safe, narrow, unintellectual, and hidebound world, but from the tremendous distance of time and history, an enduring and honorable one” (424). Louis Auchincloss, in his introduction to *A Backward Glance*, discusses Wharton’s conflicted attitude about the New York of her youth as she recalls it in her 1934 autobiography and writes about it in her later fiction:

Yet there was always an ambivalence in her feelings toward New York. On one hand she loved it for the very completeness of her understanding of it and for the richness of the material with which it supplied her. It was, after all, her cradle and family. On the other hand she resented the smallness of its imagination, the dryness of its appreciations and its ever turned back (or at the most its condescending smile) towards everything that made life worth while to her. In time, living abroad, these resentments turned shrill, but with old age came the reflection that in a rootless world the roots of that lost brownstone city were better than none. And when she evokes the quiet, graceful life of her parents and of her uncles and aunts, it is with more than nostalgia; it is with regret, almost with apology (xi).

Edith Wharton’s depiction of the social scene in “After Holbein” is particularly caustic. While she shows some affection for Anson Warley and Evalina Jaspar,

nevertheless, she mocks the endless round of dinners and parties that have characterized their lives because they have wasted their existence pursuing empty values and are unaware of the vacuity. Barbara White makes a distinction between Wharton's sympathy for the characters in this story and her merciless view of the society they inhabit, but Blake Nevius does not (White 93). He refers to the story as "a heartlessly bad and rather theatrical joke" and believes that Wharton's nostalgia has turned to cruelty: "The tone is the most chilling Edith Wharton ever assumed. Those who would deny that any bond of sympathy exists between Mrs. Wharton and her characters have their best argument here; not by a word does she betray the least compassion for her actors in this grim morality" (193, 194). Nevius' judgment is understandable, given the events in the story, but seems unduly severe. While Wharton's satire in this story is more intense and piercing than in other tales, nevertheless, she sees these two characters compassionately in a larger sense. Because they join the Dance of Death, along with all types of humanity, they become part of the fate we all share and deserve sympathy. As White asserts, Wharton elicits pity for Evalina Jaspar as old age and senility claim her and a degree of respect for Anson Warley as he struggles against his own deterioration (93). Still, their lack of self-awareness, particularly when they were younger and more capable of introspection, limits the reader's emotion to commiseration and sympathy.

Edith Wharton's treatment of employer and servant in this story reflects another element of the upper class, pre-war society she examines. The reader learns a great deal about Warley and Mrs. Jaspar from the way they treat their loyal retainers; the device shows us much about the main characters, rather than simply describing them. Both are

unkind to those who serve them and dismiss Filmore and Lavinia's concerns about their employers' well-being. Warley snaps at Filmore and accuses him of losing his black onyx studs or leaving them in the shirt sent to the laundry, shouting his refusal to stay home and rest, "Oh, damn your doctors!" (II: 535). Mrs. Jaspar, too, berates the faithful Lavinia and reprimands the older woman for her slowness: "Oh, but my diamonds—you cruel woman, you! You're letting me go down without my diamonds! . . . Everybody's against me, everybody . . ." (II: 540). Displaying their jewelry has become part of Anson and Evalina's social personae and represents proof of their rank. While Wharton surely is not implying that all employers were cruel to their servants, undoubtedly many did take advantage of their position as Warley and Mrs. Jaspar do. Their lack of appreciation for the loyal care they receive, their inattention to the sacrifices the servants make on their behalf, and their self-absorption with their own demands, speaks to this point. Although many of the servants in "After Holbein" are unquestionably loyal and protective, it is also true that they need their jobs and must work hard to please their employers. Barbara White discusses the servants' dependence on their situation; they need their employment to survive, and for most, their ages would make finding another position difficult. Pointing out that Lavinia is old and forgetful, but not senile, she comments dryly:

Wharton shows, in fact that servants cannot afford senility. The kind of rationalizing that dominates Anson Warley's consciousness, so that he can imagine himself still young and alert, can only be maintained because his social position shields him from the criticisms to which he subjects Filmore. Mrs. Jaspar's dinner party fantasy is sustained by the servants' need to keep their jobs. In the lives of the servants the infirmities of age have much grimmer results, so that the servants provide an entirely different view of the imaginary dinners (94).

Perhaps one mitigating factor in this story is the age of Warley and Mrs. Jaspar. We can imagine that possibly, in their younger days, they were kinder to their servants; however, the reader can view only the present time. In any event, all of them will eventually be called to the Dance of Death, as will the guests at high society dinner parties. The value of their lives, or the waste of them, is Wharton's issue here. In "After Holbein," the faithful servants, though they lack other options, appear to be wasting their days as well as they cater to the childish, even delusional behavior of their employers.

The two nurses' roles are another factor in this story. Though they are not Evalina Jaspar's longtime servants and have little of Lavinia's loyalty or devotion, nevertheless, they also value their jobs, both for the money and the relative ease of the work. Miss Dunn, the older day nurse who supports her mother and her brother's twins, is kind to Mrs. Jaspar and would even stay late to help with the fantasy dinner party; yet, though she seems worried about her employer's blood pressure, her reason is "we're very well off here. . ." (II: 537). Miss Cress, the younger night nurse, as noted earlier, is rather cruel to Mrs. Jaspar and takes advantage of her senility by telling her she is wearing her jewelry when, in fact, it has not yet been brought to her. Actually, she is hoping to be engaged soon and therefore takes greater liberties with Mrs. Jaspar as her own future seems more secure. Neither of them displays the warmth and concern exhibited by Filmore and Lavinia. Mrs. Jaspar calls them both "Miss Limoine." This was her first nurse's name, and they are all the same to her. She does not see them as distinct women, but rather, they exist only to serve her and are indistinguishable from one another.



The other important theme in “After Holbein” concerns the inevitability of death. From the title, which refers to Holbein’s “Dance of Death,” to the final moment when Warley steps forward into “nothing,” Edith Wharton casts the shadow of death over this short story. In fact, death is actually an unseen but ever-present character in the piece. With the exception of Miss Cress and George, the footman, all of the characters are aged. Failing memories, physical infirmities, and childish behavior signal the reader that their best days are over.

References to death and dying occur throughout the story. Warley’s earlier, more intellectual self has disappeared in an image of murder by the beginning of the tale: “The lesser one had made away with the other, done him softly to death without shedding of blood” (II: 534). In fact, in a rare moment of bright clarity, the day the story takes place, Warley perceives the ephemeral nature of his life: “He stood still for a minute under the leafless trees of the Mall, and looking about him with the sudden insight of age, understood that he had reached the time of life when Alps and cathedrals become as transient as flowers. Everything was fleeting, fleeting. . .” (II: 536-537). Although this insight should make him more sympathetic to Filmore and Mrs. Jaspar, Warley does not identify himself with them, or connect their lives with his own. In fact, he does not see himself as a part of humanity, but rather, as a superior being and deliberately turns away from the perception that he shares the same fate as everyone else. Instead, he joins friends at lunch and jokes lavishly because “he could not tell all these people at the lunch table that very morning he had arrived at the turn in the path from which mountains look as transient as flowers—and that one after another they would all arrive there too” (II: 537).

Later that evening, death is still on his mind as he shouts at Filmore who is helping him dress: “Don’t stand there staring at me as if you were watching to see exactly at what minute to telephone for the undertaker!” (II: 543-544).

Evalina Jaspar is “gently dying of softening of the brain” since her stroke and seems like a “petrifying apparition” to Miss Cress (II: 535, 538). As mentioned earlier, Lavinia thinks often of death. She desperately wants to outlive Mrs. Jaspar, not only so she can care for her until her employer dies, but also so she can “see to it that she’s properly laid out and dressed,” considering this her duty and honor (II: 547). Lavinia also worries that before their mother dies, Mrs. Jaspar’s daughters will dismiss Munson, who has again forgotten to return for the dinner party, and asks herself: “. . . where’s he going to go to, old and deaf as he is, and all his people dead? Oh, if only he can hold on til she dies, and get his pension . . .” (II: 546). The most vivid image of death is Anson Warley and Evalina Jaspar’s previously quoted procession from the drawing room to the dining room as they appear to be joining the skeleton in “The Dance of Death.”

Through these events and images, Edith Wharton reinforces the pervasiveness of death in the lives of these characters; considering their ages, this is not unexpected. What adds special interest to the story is Wharton’s implication that their lives have been wasted, in itself a kind of death. Like “The Muse’s Tragedy,” “The Angel at the Grave,” “The Long Run,” and so many others, Wharton again returns to the topic of a meaningful life in this story as well. Warley’s constant socializing would not alone provide evidence of a wasted life. Part of the waste stems from his choices that must conform to what the socially elite consider to be correct: the right people, the right homes, the right wines, all

selected to make him appear popular and important to others, while he turns his back on whatever intellectual interests he once had. Warley's sudden realization of time passing suggests that he has a glimmer of how he has missed opportunities, but his perception lasts only a brief moment, as he turns a blind eye to the thought, and prepares to dine out with the usual crowd. Evalina Jasper, too, has lived by the opinions of others as, through the years, she plans her elaborate dinner parties for unappreciative acquaintances, wasting her time and money on the same faces over and over again. She has never attained an awareness of the superficiality that defines her. In this story, Edith Wharton illuminates the lives that have been wasted through the blindness of her characters and their inability to understand what their existences have meant. Just as Mrs. Jasper and Warley, seated in her dining room while they imagine other guests at the table, do not see the table decorations, the food and drink they are served, or each other's ill health, so are they unaware of what they have missed: the ability to see themselves, their lives and others clearly.

Margaret McDowell, in her book, *Edith Wharton*, finds "After Holbein" a masterpiece. She notes the interplay between the two characters as they enact their roles:

Just as the skeleton in the Holbein engravings summons his figures to death, Anson and Evalina are such spiritual skeletons to each other. Each is the other's victim, perhaps, but each is also the agent who brings the other to a confrontation of a final, inescapable reality . . . a kind of fellowship is reached, a moment of spiritual communication long absent in their lives (86).

Wharton's point to the reader involves no sadness about the approaching death of these characters but rather, the recognition of the emptiness of their lives: "Tragedy lies not in the death of the principals, since death is a fate no one evades, but in the pointless lives

they have led . . . They have paid for their death-in-life with the death of their own souls. Both have made life itself a dance of death” (McDowell 86). In “After Holbein,” Wharton implies that not only these characters wasted their lives but also that others of this class have done the same. Her reflective return to the social scene of her younger years carries an indictment of that society as well. In her 2007 biography of Wharton, Hermione Lee notes:

Wharton based the story on the pathetic old age of her distant relation Caroline Astor, once the queen of Old New York, and wrote it as she was thinking about the remote days of her own New York childhood for her memoir. What if that world of social niceties, snobbery and malice, which she had so often written about, were to have lingered on long after its time? The idea of an atrophied remnant, a life withering away inside its fixed conventions, haunts her terribly (720).

Numerous other stories also focus on social and personal values, including “Joy in the House,” “Quicksand,” “Permanent Wave,” “The Dilettante,” and “The Day of the Funeral. Some of the previously discussed tales may be viewed in this way as well, such as “Souls Belated,” “The Reckoning,” and “The Long Run.” The tension between individual values and the freedom to pursue them and society’s values and expectations occur throughout Edith Wharton’s body of work. As we have noted in the first chapter, Wharton endured these strains in her own life. Demands of her family, her husband, and the social world in which she lived often conflicted with her aspirations as a writer and her need for solitude and privacy. Wharton regularly struggled to find the right balance between participating in all the social activities which were expected of her and which she also enjoyed and her need to fulfill her personal literary ambitions. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find this pressure in her stories as well. The issue can be

viewed as a universal concern, as noted by Cynthia Griffin Wolff: “The dilemmas that she examines are not time-bound—not limited to the world of America’s upper classes in the early twentieth century. They are dilemmas that beset all human beings and haunt all social arrangements” (Introduction, *Roman Fever and Other Stories* xx).

## Conclusion

In this dissertation I have discussed perception and vision in Edith Wharton's short stories. For Wharton, seeing clearly with acute insight and conscious awareness, is not only essential for a character's growth and emotional strength, it is also often the crux of her stories. The reflector, the person from whose viewpoint the story is seen, may be in a situation where changing perceptions affect how he sees himself, other characters in the stories, or how he relates to the social world. He may realize that the motives of others in the tale are different from what he expected, or come to understand his own motives better. A changing situation can also precipitate a new comprehension, as the reflector sees the circumstances from a fresh point of view. Sometimes he changes course and goes in a different direction, but often, the increased awareness proves to be the only change in Wharton's character, and in some of the stories the character does not attain a new understanding of himself or anyone else and remains unaware. In story after story, seeing clearly means turning from past illusions or attitudes, questioning the validity of those assumptions, and finding the strength and the will to face the new reality. In many of Wharton's stories, new perceptions and understanding means that the reflector can actually forge a connection or intimacy that was previously impossible but now available, but sometimes this insight creates the opposite effect and drives the characters apart. Still, it is clear that Wharton values clear vision, even at the cost of personal relationships.

In Chapter One, I discussed stories that particularly focus on marriage and divorce, examining the influence of perception on these characters. Wharton's own

marital difficulties and divorce color her emphasis on this topic as well as her attitudes about her characters' dilemmas, responsibilities, and expectations. Most of the stories considered in this chapter end with failed or damaged relationships as keener perceptions bring isolation and loneliness more often than new intimacies. In "Souls Belated," Lydia Tillotson escapes the confines of her monotonous and rigid marriage only to find herself restricted by the expectations of others and the lack of options for her relationship with Ralph Gannett. After both characters realize that their romanticized views of their love affair will not survive in everyday life, they submit to society's conventions and intend to marry, but this insight destroys their intimacy and drives them apart. In "The Pretext," Margaret Ransom's placid acceptance of her plain appearance, dull marriage and tedious routine develops into a new awareness of the possibilities for herself and her life because she believes herself to be loved by Guy Dawnish. When Margaret is persuaded that she is mistaken, her new energy and confidence disappear as she reverts to her earlier view of herself, but without her previous satisfaction with her life. We cannot be certain why she is so easily convinced that Guy does not love her, but Wharton's focus is on Margaret's changing perceptions, which now bring her despair and loneliness. In "The Other Two," Waythorn's recognition that he cannot reconcile himself to his new wife's two previous marriages destroys his pleasure in her company. Julia Westall, after blithely leaving her first husband because the "new morality" means one may divorce at will in "The Reckoning," becomes conscious of her own cruelty when her second husband requests a divorce from her. Julia's new sensitivity enables her to apologize to her former husband, but it cannot rescue her from a lonely future. In "The Long Run," Halston Merrick and

Paulina Trant discover an intimacy and a bond together even though Paulina is married, but destroy it. Paulina wants to leave her husband, but because Merrick fears personal consequences and society's judgment, he rejects her plan. Years later, when he perceives that the lost opportunity can never be recaptured, it is too late for happiness for either of them, and sadly they both realize it.

In contrast to the stories mentioned above, Lizzie West Deering in "The Letters" discovers that, even though the husband she once idolized lacks ambition and has lied to her about his motives for marrying her, she still loves him. In this story, Lizzie's illusions about Deering are gone, but her newfound understanding does not ruin the marriage; she sees her husband clearly now and perhaps will find an unforeseen connection. Primarily in the stories about marriage and divorce, after illusions are dispelled and few options are available, characters may attain a clearer sense of themselves and each other, but this newfound perception rarely leads to a closer relationship or a true intimacy. In an article about Wharton's short stories, Claudia Roth Pierpont claims: "But, then, in Wharton's world, all the alternatives are bleak. The essential experience, behind every choice, is loneliness . . ." (68). Loneliness and isolation may follow, but at the same time, Wharton's characters frequently find wisdom, insight, and strength. In the end, this grouping of stories does not offer optimism about the most personal of relationships and does not resolve the concerns Wharton explores in them. The only real triumph she allows her characters is increased perception and understanding, but this is a victory that Wharton respects.



In Chapter Two, I argued that Edith Wharton's anxieties about her writing career, particularly as a female writer motivated and influenced many of her stories about artists and writers. I also contended that Wharton's exploration of artistic standards in these stories involves questions about good and bad art, how artistic judgments are made and by whom, and certain moral issues the artist or writer confronts. In this chapter, changing perceptions assume a critically important role, both in the way the artist sees his work and the way he sees himself and others. In most cases, the artists and writers are more closely connected to their work than to those around them, though occasionally the new insights draw characters together, such as the Kenistons in "The Recovery," and Theodora Dace and her father in "April Showers."

In the first part of the chapter, I analyze some of Wharton's stories that explore issues of art and vocation. In "The Muse's Tragedy," Mary Anerton, muse to the late poet, Vincent Rendle, deludes herself that he will love her as a woman as they collaborate on his work. Although they share a connection through the poetry, Rendle never values her that way, Mrs. Anerton pretends to the world and to herself that she is "Silvia," the beloved in his poetry. An affair with Danyers, an admirer of Rendle's work, forces Mrs. Anerton to recognize that the tragedy in her life is not that Rendle did not love her but that she wasted it in pursuit of a fiction. Like Mary Anerton, Paulina Anson worries about wasting her life as well when she discovers that her grandfather's reputation, which she has carefully spent her time documenting in a book, has faded. Later, Paulina has an opportunity to resurrect his stature and rekindle her own purpose, but this possibility does not cancel the lonely years in between. Her perception of her value fluctuates with her

grandfather's prominence, while her anxiety about devoting her life to his memory echoes Wharton's concerns about her own career. In "Copy," two successful writers perceive the risks of being public figures and the difficulties they face in protecting their private identities. Personal papers and letters are burned, but it appears that the real peril may lie in their lack of genuine emotion, preventing an authentic connection. In "April Showers" Wharton satirizes the popular writing of the female sentimentalists from whom she distanced herself, while "The Pelican" focuses on a pseudo-intellectual woman who appeals to the same audience as the these women writers Wharton disdained. Mrs. Amyot first lectures to support her son and later to have a following and feel important, but this character never perceives that her lectures are superficial and her audiences shallow and eventually, unappreciative. In "Full Circle," Geoffrey Betton's anxiety about his reputation as a writer and his delusions about what people think engulf his life and lead him into an elaborate deception to keep the esteem of his secretary, an unsuccessful writer who flatters and misleads Betton to keep his job. Betton's perceptions about his previous commercial success and his public persona drive him to extreme and ridiculous actions to preserve his reputation. Wharton satirizes popular taste in "Expiation" when Paula's Fetherel's novel becomes a best-seller only after it is denounced by the Bishop as immoral, while pompous friends in "In Trust" first commit to and then delay a grand Academy of the Arts.

In all of these stories, Wharton explores issues about the life of an artist or writer and what it means to commit to this vocation. Perceptions about themselves and their work influence the quality and direction of their careers and affect their personal lives as

they confront fears of wasting their lives and question what gives their lives meaning and value. In most cases, the artists and writers are closely connected to their work while their personal relationships suffer. Lev Raphael discusses this point: “Wharton tends to depict her artists and writers as alone . . . Those wives, lovers or relatives of artists she does treat are made unhappy by their deeper insight into the artists’ work or personalities: Lizzie West in ‘The Letters,’ Claudia Day in ‘The Recovery,’ or are wasted by their devotion, like Paulina Anson, who has never even met her grandfather” (216). Raphael also notes the failed relationships of the writer, Gannet, and Lydia Tillotson in “Souls Belated” and the poet Rendle and Mary Anerton in “The Muse’s Tragedy” (217-210).

In the second part of Chapter Two, the stories involve artistic standards as Wharton explores the quality of art, how this is judged, and the difficulties the issue can create. In “The Portrait,” George Lillo sacrifices quality and artistic credibility in his portrait of the corrupt Alonzo Vard to spare the feelings of Vard’s daughter, while in “The Recovery,” after Keniston recognizes his talent is mediocre, he affirms his integrity by dedicating himself to learning how to paint by studying the great European artists. Unlike Keniston, when he realizes he lacks talent, Jack Gisburn gives up painting in “The Verdict,” but still squanders his life cultivating the idle rich on the Riviera. Ned Stanwell sacrifices his genuine but undiscovered talent for easy money by imitating a popular portraitist in “The Potboiler.” In “The Moving Finger,” art becomes the vehicle for intimacy when Claydon twice changes the portrait he painted of Grancy’s dead wife so that her husband can remain connected to her as she ages along with him. After Grancy’s

death, Claydon restores the portrait to its original state so that he can reclaim Mrs. Grancy for himself.

An artist's perceptions about his work and his relationships to those close to him play an important role in these stories as well because how the artist and his audience actually see his art directly influences his career and his personal choices. Particularly when it comes to artistic standards, which can never be determined in a purely objective way, the way one sees is vital. In the various stories that involve artistic standards, Wharton explores the value of the Master painters of the past as well as the nature of artistic integrity. In these stories, Wharton writes about art and literary art, but not as isolated topics as her interest remains in the artists and writers themselves and the characters that have relationships with them. In her discussion of the artist in society, Penelope Vita-Finzi emphasizes this point:

Edith Wharton's fiction about the artist from 1899 until the end of her life explores themes common to all her fiction and, indeed, to her non-fiction: the struggle between individual will and social codes; the need to balance the inner world of the imagination with the actual world; the obligation to have absolute standards of taste in social groups swayed by fashion; the necessity for order in private lives which requires compromise. The lesson Edith Wharton's individual must learn is that he or she has to make do with the actual world, with marriage, with society, with the petty irritations of everyday life, while never losing sight of the ideal, and for the artist with his heightened imagination that lesson is particularly hard . . . Edith Wharton shows the artist's problems in balancing his inner and outer lives as being common to humanity but exacerbated because it is the artist's privilege and affliction to be more at home in the world of the imagination than in the real world (126-127).

In Chapter Three, I contend that, although virtually all of Edith Wharton's stories involve the conflict between personal and social values, the stories chosen for this section particularly reflect Wharton's lifelong focus on the individual and the social world. Like

the first two chapters, characters also question what makes a life significant and gives it meaning. Wharton's brilliant satire plays a key role as she illuminates the superficial and shallow aspects of society. Sometimes her characters achieve a renewed perspective, and through that clarity, may reach an understanding about themselves that frees them in important ways and allows them an inner peace, but Wharton does not grant this awareness to everyone. Those who do not improve their vision often remain ensnared in society's tangle of expectations and demands.

In Wharton's first published story, "Mrs. Manstey's View," a desperate, elderly woman depends so completely on the scene from her window to sustain her that she sets fire to the house next door to prevent a construction project that will block her view.

Catching a chill the night of the fire, Mrs. Manstey remains isolated and her voice unheard as she dies without realizing that construction resumes in the morning.

Wharton's satire finds the perfect pitch in "The Last Asset" where she scrutinizes a representative cast of nouveau-riche Europeans and Americans living or traveling in Europe. Mrs. Newell uses the upcoming marriage of her daughter to an elite French family to better her own social standing. Though he finds the woman's behavior and her friends distasteful, Paul Garnett helps Mrs. Newell facilitate the wedding because he observes the genuine love between the young couple. In "Autres Temps . . .," Mrs. Lidcote, returning to America after years in Italy, learns that society accepts the recent divorce and remarriage of her daughter but continues to ostracize her for her own divorce years ago. Wharton's meticulous portrayal of Mrs. Lidcote's interaction with the other characters in the story, her cautious, early optimism, and her eventual, resigned

awareness of the situation brilliantly characterizes American upper-class values and customs at the time. Wharton's delightful and penetrating satire of pseudo-intellectual women's clubs in "Xingu" effectively illuminates the provincial, small-town characters she parodies. Though the members of the Lunch Club never gain any self-awareness in the story, the reader enjoys their eager attempts to impress the visiting author and each other, their search for the meaning of the word "Xingu," and the humor Wharton employs to make her point. In "After Holbein," Anson Warley and Evalina Jasper, pretentious, aging, upper-class acquaintances and their employees engage in an elaborate farce of a dinner party as Wharton explores the superficial, shallow life of New York society in the late nineteenth century. Both characters have wasted their lives pursuing endless parties and empty values, turning a blind eye to perceptions of their meaningless existences, and now, death approaches.

In the stories discussed in Chapter Three, many of the characters lack insights that would encourage new perspectives, but the reader understands what they cannot, supplying necessary emphasis and depth to the tale. In her discussion of Wharton's short stories in her Introduction to *Roman Fever and Other Stories*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes this point:

All [short stories] bear her unique stamp—a scrupulous attention to the interplay between individual character and the society that works to shape and constrain it; yet in the shorter fiction, the scope is necessarily more narrow. Thus while a novel can sweep through long periods of time and many strata of society, the short stories generally focus upon a single crucial insight; sometimes the insight is available to the characters themselves (often tragically so); at other times, however, only the reader is able to comprehend the full implications of the small drama being played out within the tale (x).

While Mrs. Manstey may faintly grasp the futility of stopping the construction, her desperation drives her to arson and subsequently her death. Although the members of the Lunch Club gradually realize that Mrs. Roby has put not only Osric Dane in her place but also the ladies of the club as well, still, they do not become aware of their own pretensions and limitations. Though Mrs. Newell never understands that her social ambitions have inappropriately superseded her responsibility to her daughter, Paul Garnett eventually discerns that the implication of impending marriage are complex and can benefit both mother and daughter. Mrs. Lidcote ultimately sees that society and her daughter as well exclude her for no reason other than their inertia and their inability to reevaluate her status in light of modern perspectives. Finally, Anson Warley and Evalina Jaspur do not perceive the shallow emptiness of their lives, although Warley nearly approaches the insight before turning quickly away. Regardless of the degree of perception Wharton bestows on the characters, the reader, as Wolff notes, sees and understands the “moral drama” Wharton describes in “Telling a Short Story.”

As noted throughout this dissertation, Edith Wharton’s view of her characters and how they relate to each other is often bleak. Disillusionment and loneliness frequently prevail, and the only mitigating factor may be a clearer sense of oneself and others, though even this perception can be obscured. As Wharton aged, the loss of many friends, her declining health, and her realistic perspective occasionally caused her to be distressed and discouraged, but she continued to write until her death, maintaining a practical fortitude regardless of the disappointments and challenges she faced. In the last paragraph of *A Backward Glance*, three years before she died, she wrote:

The welter is always there, and the present generation hears close underfoot the growling of the volcano on which ours danced so long; but in our individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant. Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death; yet there are always new countries to see, new books to read (and, I hope, to write), a thousand little daily wonders to marvel at and rejoice in, and those magical moments when the mere discovery that “the woodspurge has a cup of three”<sup>8</sup> brings not despair but delight. The visible world is a daily miracle for those who have eyes and ears; and I still warm my hands thankfully at the old fire, though every year it is fed with the dry wood of more old memories (379).

In conclusion, I often ponder a well-known and frequently cited image of Edith Wharton, writing in her bed in the morning and dropping the handwritten pages of her manuscript on the floor for her secretary to collect and transcribe (Lee 670). As recently as 2012, Jonathan Franzen in an article about Wharton in *The New Yorker* mentions her morning routine as an example of the wealth and privilege she enjoyed throughout her life (60). Certainly this view of Wharton connotes a woman with luxurious tastes and the means to indulge herself. Years ago, however, as I stood in her bedroom at The Mount, her Massachusetts country home that has been preserved, looking at the view from her window, I realized that the image carries a greater significance for me.<sup>9</sup> I saw a woman who found a way to be a writer and fulfill her other interests and obligations at the same time. Whatever the rest of her schedule included, Wharton spent the morning working on her current projects, and she became an inspiration to me. At the time, I had begun to pursue my doctorate in English and American Literature, and I was juggling the demands of our family life, running a home, and enjoying other interests that enhance all of our lives. Worrying that I would not be able to complete my degree with the part-time

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<sup>8</sup> From an 1870 poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

<sup>9</sup> I was pleased to be given a private tour of the upstairs of The Mount as the public is not permitted beyond the first floor public rooms.



schedule I had devised, I realized that Wharton could serve as an example to modern women as well. Perhaps she was ahead of her time, as the saying goes, but she found a way to combine her work with other activities at a time when few women were involved in any type of career. As I researched and wrote this dissertation, I have felt a strong personal connection to Edith Wharton: I have been in awe of her talent, enriched by her work, and motivated by her dedication.

Appendix A: Edith Wharton's Short Stories

**Collected Short Stories:**

*The Greater Inclination*, 1899

"The Muse's Tragedy"  
"A Journey"  
"The Pelican"  
"Souls Belated"  
"A Coward"  
"The Twilight of the God"  
"A Cup of Cold Water"  
"The Portrait"

*Crucial Instances*, 1901

"The Duchess at Prayer"  
"The Angel at the Grave"  
"The Recovery"  
"Copy"  
"The Rembrandt"  
"The Moving Finger"  
"The Confessional"

*The Descent of Man*, 1904

"The Descent of Man"  
"The Mission of Jane"  
"The Other Two"  
"The Quicksand"  
"The Dilettante"  
"The Reckoning"  
"Expiation"  
"The Lady's Maid's Bell"  
"A Venetian Night's Entertainment"

*The Hermit and the Wild Woman*, 1908

"The Hermit and the Wild Woman"  
"The Last Asset"  
"In Trust"  
"The Pretext"  
"The Verdict"  
"The Potboiler"  
"The Best Man"

*Tales of Men and Ghosts*, 1910

"The Bolted Door"  
"His Father's Son"  
"The Daunt Diana"  
"The Debt"  
"Full Circle"  
"The Legend"  
"The Eyes"  
"The Blond Beast"  
"Afterward"  
"The Letters"

*Xingu and Other Stories*, 1916

"Xingu"  
"Coming Home"  
"Autres Temps . . ."  
"Kerfol"  
"The Long Run"  
"The Triumph of Night"  
"The Choice"

*Here and Beyond, 1926*

“Miss Mary Pask”  
“The Young Gentlemen”  
“Bewitched”  
“The Seed of the Faith”  
“The Temperate Zone”  
“Velvet Ear Pads”

*Human Nature, 1933*

“Her Son”  
“The Day of the Funeral”  
“A Glimpse”  
“Joy in the House”  
“Diagnosis”

*Ghosts, 1937*

Preface

“All Souls’ ”

(Remainder consists of earlier stories already published)

**Uncollected Short Stories:**

“Mrs. Manstey’s View,” 1891  
“The Fullness of Life,” 1893  
“That Good May Come,” 1894  
“The Lamp of Psyche,” 1895  
“The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems,” 1896  
“April Showers,” 1900  
“Friends,” 1900  
“The Line of Least Resistance,” 1900  
“The Letter,” 1904  
“The House of the Dead Hand,” 1904  
“The Introducers,” 1906  
“Les Metteurs en Scene,” 1908  
“Writing a War Story,” 1919

*Certain People, 1930*

“Atrophy”  
“A Bottle of Perrier”  
“After Holbein”  
“Dieu d’Amour”  
“The Refugees”  
“Mr. Jones”

*The World Over, 1936*

“Charm Incorporated”  
“Pomegranate Seed”  
“Permanent Wave”  
“Confession”  
“Roman Fever”  
“The Looking Glass”  
“Duration”

Appendix B: Edith Wharton's Major Novels and Novellas

*The Touchstone*, 1900  
*The House of Mirth*, 1905  
*The Fruit of the Tree*, 1907  
*Madame de Treymes*, 1907  
*Ethan Frome*, 1911  
*The Reef*, 1912  
*The Custom of the Country*, 1913  
*The Bunner Sisters*, 1916  
*Summer*, 1917  
*The Marne*, 1918  
*The Age of Innocence*, 1920  
*A Son at the Front*, 1923  
*Old New York*, 1924  
*The Mother's Recompense*, 1925  
*Twilight Sleep*, 1927  
*The Children*, 1928  
*Hudson River Bracketed*, 1929  
*The Gods Arrive*, 1932  
*The Buccaneers*, 1937  
*Fast and Loose*, 1977

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<sup>10</sup> All entries refer to print media.

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