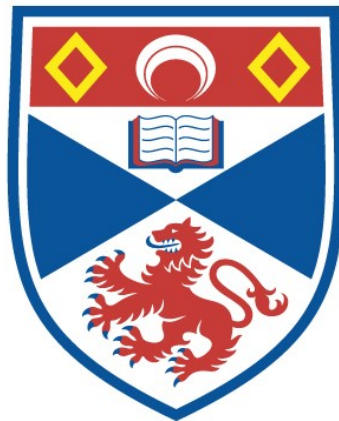


**THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN IN EDITH
WHARTON'S FICTION**

Deborah A. McLauchlan

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews



1993

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I, Deborah A. McLauchlan, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 55,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

1/10/92
.....

I was admitted as a research student under Ordinance No. 12 in April 1990 and as a candidate for the degree of M Phil (Mode A) in October 1990; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between April 1990 and October 1992.

1/10/92

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M Phil (Mode A) in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

1/10/92

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To Alan Armit,
my uncle and godfather,
with all my thanks.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following people and organisations:

The University of St. Andrews, and the Russell Trust.

Jean, Gordon and Fiona McLauchlan, Nana, Alan and Anne Armit, Geraldine Higgins for her tea and critical help, Anthony Mellors, Matthew Rampley and Bob Tomlinson.

Phillip Mallett, for his unfailing friendship and help.

Philip Meyler, for everything else.

Abstract

Edith Wharton is commonly perceived as a reactionary conservative looking back to the past. In this thesis I explore the idea that she is rather a woman ahead of her time, with a keen perception of the pressures brought to bear on women and men in the new industrialized society of the twentieth century. I think that feminism, and a dislike of commodification which approaches Marxism, lie embedded in her work. I try to unearth these in her major "society" novels, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country*, in two minor novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, and in her novel of "ordinary folk", *Ethan Frome*.

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INTRODUCTION

"The inequity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity"¹. Oblivion's inequity is not scattered quite so blindly as Sir Thomas Browne supposed. Much art may be rejected not on the basis of some 'understood' notion of value, but on the strength of a person's race, creed or sex. There is, of course, much more at stake in the acceptance or rejection of one particular writer than the possible merit of the work. A canon can be many things to many people, but from whichever angle one views it, it must inevitably be a "load-bearing element of the existing power structure"² since those who select the texts to be included are those in power, i.e. in positions of power in academic institutions.

The necessity for some kind of selection to be made needs little justification: for discourse on literature and by implication on culture, those taking part need to have read some of the same books, and have seen some of the same paintings, and as neither our memories nor the time we can allocate to reading allow us to read everything, it is necessary to have some loose idea of a canon. Opinions differ widely about its nature: it is said that it should be a fixed list of texts including "The Battle

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of Maldon" and *Ulysses*, or that it should be a fluid body allowing 'new' texts in and putting old ones in a recoverable limbo, or that it should be entirely new, pushing aside the former worthies and allowing the voices which have hitherto been silenced to be heard.

Having used the phrase "voices which have been silenced", I am not keen to imply that there is a grand conspiracy at work here, that there are thousands of Milton addicts determined not to see Toni Morrison's name beside, or replacing, his on any syllabus. If I were suggesting that, then Kermode's book *History and Value*, would offer some evidence of at least one influential man overly concerned with perpetuating the canon of dead white males.

What I take to be nearer the truth is less sinister in intent but no less so in results. It is likely that the canon is to a large extent self-perpetuating. Pupils are taught Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Dickens and Lawrence, and naturally find it easier in their turn to teach these too, or have been persuaded that to teach English is to teach these. To do so is to conform to the traditional cultural hegemony of the West. As this practice is chiefly undertaken by those who prefer to walk the primrose path of orthodoxy rather than trouble with forging a new canon, it is as little to be condoned as the deliberate eschewal of "feminist Afro-American Derridean"³ texts by those "in authority", who at least have an understandable interest in keeping those who seek to undermine them out of power.

Despite the tendency of the canon to lurch towards conservative orthodoxy, there are counter-forces at work dedicated to the entire overthrow of the very concept of the canon. The argument is that it is "an entirely gentlemanly artefact"⁴, too narrow in its scope and too dangerous

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to minorities of many kinds in the world view which it propagates. The proponents of this stance undoubtedly have a point. Yet an arrangement which allows no discourse between one age and those preceding it, nor between accepted 'liberal art' and art divergent from our idea of liberalism, has very dubious implications of the world of letters being turned into a police state. If the rhetoric of sociologists convinces us we should not read Spenser because of his anti-Irish sentiments, nor Ezra Pound because of his Fascism, we are in danger of being swamped by a sociology which is in itself a kind of Liberal Fascism. I am not claiming that in art there is to be found an autonomous purity; autonomous art has never existed. Rather, I am claiming that the exclusion of certain texts on sociological grounds rather than artistic ones may well lead to a kind of pan-liberal uniformity, which, in its very uniformity negates art altogether.

Therefore the Oxbridge notion of a canon should be deconstructed only in order to be reconstructed. Which texts are "chosen" is of crucial importance in that our necessarily selective canon will shape our very notion of history: wilful exclusion of good art produced by those who diverge from some general notion of 'good art' is tantamount to book-burning, and leaves new artists isolated in the present, with no idea that their dissent joins other voices. The following is a quotation from Primo Levi's *Potassium*:

The seed of active struggle had not survived down to us, it had been stifled a few years before with the final sweep of the scythe, which had relegated to prison, house arrest, exile, or silence the last Turinese protagonists and witnesses...We had to begin from scratch, "invent" our anti-Fascism, create it from the germ, from the roots, from our roots.⁵

And this one is a quotation from Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*:

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Almost uninterruptedly since the Interregnum, a small group of women have enjoyed dazzling literary prestige during their own lifetimes, only to vanish without trace from the records of posterity". Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex.⁶

In the same way as the pyramids cannot be rejected as works of art because slaves died in the making of them, and Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, as well as Nicole Warren in *Tender Is the Night* cannot be dismissed because so much pain went into the production of so much beauty, so books cannot be rejected as works of art because of the opinions or beliefs of the artist. As Walter Benjamin said, "There is no work of art which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"⁷. Milton should not be discarded because some feminists see him as a misogynist, Kipling should not be forgotten because he has been stamped variously as an Imperialist, an Anti-Imperialist and a sentimentalist, and Edith Wharton should not be ignored because she is widely supposed to be a deeply nostalgic conservative. It is clear that each writer should be judged afresh by each successive generation of readers, so that we do not stop reading Lawrence because of the distaste he has provoked in many people, feminists in particular, but read his critics as well and form our own judgments. We should look at writers from different epochs not as guardians of the natural order, transcending geographical and temporal limitations, but as being bound up in real historical contexts, and being the more valuable for that.

The unthinking use of man, mankind, he, him as a set of terms referring to both sexes shows a disturbing set of cultural assumptions. As Jonathan Raban says; "From Wittgenstein's famous dictum that 'the limits of our language are the limits of our world' we have learned that the

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essential nature of any statement is fundamentally inseparable from the verbal form which it takes"⁸. So, inverting this it might be said that if a man's speech is allowed to ignore women, so will his brain. Perhaps the start of the solution is some form of enforced "political correctness". Toril Moi asks whether this does not merely make it less easy to spot sexism, "How are we to choose between the average macho guerilla fighter in the jungle of El Salvador, and the Vice-President of Standard Oil who has learnt to say 'he or she'?"⁹ I would answer that the Vice-President, however sexist he may still be, has moved a little further towards understanding in acknowledging the need to say 'he or she'. At least he has been made aware that there is enough power behind feminism for him to *have* to say it.

It has long been contended that our language was made by men and is still controlled largely by men. Irigaray, Cixous and Gauthier claim that women have been force fed this male language, using it to become a 'Second Sex', and "as long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated"¹⁰. The idea that there is a female 'essence', that language is the ultimate patriarchal control, and that women are enclosed in a kind of venn diagrammatic way by the male language is clearly an extremist concept. There is an implication that men are in some way trying to plug the gaps in language with patriarchal dogma as the "captains of consciousness" try to control the leisure time and the thoughts of their workers.

If it is taken as a given that those in power do not want to relinquish it, then this idea of the male domination of language becomes plausible. I believe that there is no such female essence which can only

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speak through the gaps and spaces of patriarchal language: rather it is the case that language is a constituting system in writing and being, and that if the institution of language is male, women have no special speech which will peep through the blanket of male language.

To say, as Gauthier says, that "if we had left these pages blank, we would have had a better understanding of what feminine writing is all about"¹¹ is to deny any responsibility for language at all, is to ridiculously romanticize the idea of language. Irigaray says feminine language "has nothing to do with the syntax we have used for centuries, namely...subject, predicate or subject, verb, object"¹². If this is the case then 'feminine language' will be of no use at all. Men are also oppressed by language, forced to think inside the limits which language sets. It is not useful to talk of blank pages saying more for women than words can, but it is useful to try to bring to prominence through critical study the words of women whose language will necessarily be informed by the different world, different civilization they have inhabited.

There is value too in looking at what a woman had to say in a time when women were supposed to be silent, and especially in looking at a woman who, whilst never seeming to openly espouse feminism, allows it to infuse her work. I am interested in looking at how far Edith Wharton takes her feminism, and how far the rather too simple view of her as a woman, therefore automatically concerned with the plight of women, is problematized by her social class and experience.

The traditional *modus operandi* of the Anglo-American feminists has been the re-examination of female writers who have passed into oblivion or something very similar. Marks and de Courtivron refer to this practice as "filling in the cultural silences"¹³. Sometimes this re-examination is

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undertaken with an eye to positive reassessment, working under the assumption that women writers have been ignored merely because they are women. In other instances the socio-economic restrictions which women have been placed under throughout the centuries have been taken into account.

This retrospective methodology employed by the Anglo-Americans is, to a certain extent, the handmaiden of the French theorists, explaining the history of women and letters up to the present day, and giving countless fascinating examples of how, time after time, "our lovely mouths have been gagged with pollen"¹⁴ and women have been forced into silence. A greater awareness of the literary history of women is of much value in terms of integrating women into the literary field, and even in giving them a certain pride and confidence, knowing that they also have a "great tradition" behind them.

The Great Tradition in America has been the preserve of men to an even greater extent than has been the case in Britain; there they have not an Austen or an Eliot to grace their annals. It is no accident that women have been marginalized until recently in the American canon. Whereas Europe has its roots in feudal societies, with women accepted as queens and warriors as well as mothers and wives, America has Puritanism as a basic premise of its culture, and with Puritanism comes the 'purity', reticence and domesticity required of its womenkind¹⁵. Writers in America have been under pressure from Hawthorne onwards to write a specifically American book, embracing universals which supposedly apply to everyone in America. The universal, according to Leslie Fiedler¹⁶ is the unease with which 'we' relate to the Indian and negro and to the woman, This last is characterized by the temptation a man feels to "'light out for the territory'...but civilization once disavowed and Christianity disowned, the

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bulwark of woman left behind, the wanderer feels himself without protection, more motherless child than free man". According to Fiedler, (who described women *en masse* as creators of the "flagrantly bad best seller"), American Literature worthy of the name is characterized by the theme of the Frontier Way of Life, where men seek sanctuary from cloying, clinging woman. Writing of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Fiedler says that Rip Van Winkle "presides over the birth of the American imagination; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the shrew"¹⁷. The flight of the dreamer, with whom we are meant to sympathize, away from the shrew, with whom we are not meant to, appears to have been the pattern for many of the canonical American works of fiction, such as the novels of Melville, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. The male bonding which goes "deeper than sex", as the blurb on the back of my copy of Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* proclaims, is in evidence from that book through Melville to Mailer.

When we take up a novel by a good female writer, such as Edith Wharton, it is very much easier to read as a woman, and interesting to see the male critical response to her work. For Wharton it is not women who impede the path to freedom, as it is for Melville and for so many "classic" American writers. In *Moby Dick*, for example, Starbuck wants to abandon the senseless chase of the whale and turn the ship home. Ahab's rhetorical address to the crew persuades them to stay on course. Starbuck's love of his wife and son is ultimately to be read as something not worthy of the first mate of the *Pequod*, as a bond which keeps nobility at bay and may turn the whole crew back to the horrifying domesticities of Nantucket. Even as Melville gestures towards the condemnation of Ahab, "In his fiery

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eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride", the admiration bursts out. Which man, reading *Moby Dick*, is not learning to admire Ahab more than Starbuck? Which woman, reading it, is not made to feel marginalized; not subsumed under the generic 'man', but pushed out to the very edge as one of those females who gave birth to men, and is the object of all resentment because she is, in Mailer's words, all powerful in being "one step closer to eternity"?¹⁸

The contempt and fear is evident throughout *Moby Dick*: in the description of Mrs Hussey at the Inn, and of Ahab's wife. Ishmael, betraying fear of sex and women in his word "unwedded", says "our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it"¹⁹. Our mothers are the cause of our birth and our death: we go to our graves searching for our fathers, because our mothers were too sinful to bear their names. It is a tale infused with misogyny, every word male-bonding with every other to exclude women from the language of it, from the writing and from the reading of it.

Being widely considered to be *the* American novel, Melville's *Moby Dick* must be a starting point for a thesis on one of the female writers which the American establishment has marginalized, and it is necessary to criticize this book from the viewpoint of a marginalized woman.

Even now, books about American Literature exclude or minimize the contribution of women writers. F.O. Matthiesson, Richard Chase and Fiedler have not been superseded by a new group of male critics who see the necessity of including Cather, Chopin, Glasgow, Wharton, Morrison and Alice Walker in their discourse. They are still being ignored by critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch, seen now as women who are the preserve of the

feminists.

Much feminist criticism, like many other forms of criticism, is not trying to present a case for the exclusion of particular canonical works from the canon. It is rather trying to show that there is not merely one way to read a text; that we do not all have to agree about the moral direction of a text to agree that it is great art. Kate Millett wrote in *Sexual Politics* that "Critics who disagree with Lawrence, for example, about any issue are fond of saying that his prose is awkward....It strikes me as better to make a radical investigation which can demonstrate why Lawrence's analysis of a situation is inadequate, or biased, or his influence pernicious, without ever needing to imply that he is less than a great and original artist"²⁰

Criticism of Edith Wharton has been undertaken to a large extent by people 'reading as men'; that is to say, by people who instantly see that the reader is being addressed as a male, and therefore unconsciously shift their response accordingly.

Irving Howe said that Wharton "knew only too well how experience can grind men into hopelessness"²¹. Only *men*? The word is tremendously important: a man writing about a woman writing about the plight of humanity translates her as writing about the plight of men.

The critic Edmund Wilson is far further down the narrow path of patriarchal values in his rather ironically titled essay "Justice to Edith Wharton"²². Undine Spragg, the heroine of *The Custom of the Country*, has a character which is patiently explained in the novel as being that of a woman who is the result of a system designed to exclude her. As Bowen says, "all my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the

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preoccupied male - the money and the motors and the clothes - and pretend to themselves and each other that *that's* what really constitutes life!"²³. Edmund Wilson must have missed that bit when, in according his particular brand of justice to Wharton he calls Undine "the prototype in fiction of the gold-digger...the international cocktail bitch"²⁴.

Likewise with *Summer*, the story in which Charity Royall is brought down to live with Mr Royall and his wife. The wife dies, and Charity reaches adolescence still under Mr Royall's roof. There is a scene in which he comes to her room in the night and whimpers that he is lonesome. She "simple felt a deep disgust"²⁵ and rejects him. He exerts moral blackmail to prevent her leaving to be educated. Edmund Wilson calls him "the rather admirable old failure of a lawyer".²⁵

The House of Mirth has had its fair share of responses from a male perspective, by critics of both sexes. Diana Trilling sees Selden, the man whose priggish and hypocritical sensibilities are instrumental in the fall of Lily Bart, as Lily's "counterpart in delicacy and imagination"²⁷, and assures us that he is unmarried "not because of any insufficient wish for final commitment to a woman". Her proof is Selden's sexual arousal upon watching Lily display herself as an object of desire. I am not as happy as this critic to equate one instance of sexual desire with "final commitment to a woman".

Virginia Woolf's reaction as a feminist to patriarchy, in particular to the realist trend which seemed to embody it in its hard concentration on *things*, was to write a kind of diaphanous prose which concentrated on hiatuses, abstractions, personal impressions. But Wharton, before her, wrote novels firmly in the realist framework, not attempting a separate women's writing but instead using the same style to say rather different

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things. She is a good example of a woman who, using the traditional forms of male dominated language, managed to subvert them, but not to the extent that she was discovered in her subversion.

Edith Wharton was working against the ideologies which much of her generation embraced: her revolt is particular in *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country*, but is also evident in *The Fruit of the Tree* and *Ethan Frome*. In *The Reef*, commonly called "the most Jamesian of her novels", she seems to run counter to the feminism she espouses elsewhere, pitying Anna for her lack of sexual and social experience, but critical of Sophy Viner for her wealth of it. It is this ambivalence, the pull of Puritan aristocracy pitted against the pull of justice to the oppressed which gives Wharton's work its peculiar dynamism. I shall attempt to discover whether the war between these contradictions in her sensibility is ever resolved.

Edith Wharton has been championed in the last few years by Anglo-American critics such as David Holbrook, Walter Benn Michaels and Judith Freyer, who have realized that what Wharton had to say about the power of society to repress people, especially women, has importance both for the history of feminism and for understanding our own age. Yet I do not believe Wharton should be left alone now because she has been rediscovered: it is a matter more of continual rediscovery until she is naturally a part of the texts commonly studied by both sexes. To know there were women like Edith Wharton, so important in their lifetimes, is a cause of optimism. To know they have been steadfastly and systematically marginalized since can only be a source of anger. As Adrienne Rich puts it; this "re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for us more than a

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chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions with which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves."²⁸

Notes

1. Sir Thomas Browne, cited without reference in Jay B. Hubbell: *Who Are the Major American Writers*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1972.
2. Frank Kermode, "Canon and Period" in *History and Value*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.
3. *Ibid.* The quotation is "there may develop subcanons and revisions of periodization to suit, say, feminists or Afro-Americans or Derrideans, or even feminist Afro-American Derrideans. What is certain is that revolutionary revisions would require transfers of powers, a reign of literary terror the prospect of which many of us enjoy less than the Professor of English and Human Relations". Kermode's book is littered with these anxious warnings about what will happen to Frank Kermode if Anglo-Saxon Dead White Males stop constituting most of the canon.
4. Lillian Roberts cited in Jan Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon*, Athlone 1991.
5. Primo Levi, 'Potassium' in *The Periodic Table*, Paladin 1988?
6. Elaine Showalter, Chapter One, *A Literature of Their Own*, Princeton University Press, 1982.
I would include in this vanished group women such as Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Eudora Welty, Sarah Orne Jewett and Edith Wharton
7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, cited in Jonathan Arac's essay "The Politics of the Scarlet Letter" in Bercovitch; *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, C.U.P. 1986.
8. Jonathan Raban, p58 *The Society of the Poem*, Harrap & Co., London 1971.
9. Toril Moi, reporting Gayatri Spivak in p161, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Methuen & Co. London 1985
10. Xavier Gauthier, p.163, "Is there such a thing as women's writing?" in Marks and de Coutivron; *New French Feminisms*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1981.
11. *Ibid*, p.162.
12. Deborah Cameron, p82, "What is the nature of Woman's oppression in Language?" in *Sexual Difference*, *The Oxford Literary Review*, Southampton 1986.
13. "American feminists are interested in going back, in resurrecting lost women, in re-evaluating those who managed to survive...They are engaged in filling in cultural silences and holes in discourse", Marks and de Coutivron; pxi, "Why this book?" in *New French Feminisms*.
14. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminisms*, op. cit. in 7.
15. See the general consensus on this view, e.g. from F.O. Matthiesson or Richard Chase.
16. Leslie A. Fiedler, p339-441, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Penguin Books, London 1984. See note below.
17. Jonathan Culler, 'Reading as a Woman' in *On Deconstruction*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1983. (Culler quotes Fiedler as saying "the flight of the dreamer from the shrew" - my edition reads "the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town".
18. Cited on p48 of *On Deconstruction*, above. In the passage Norman Mailer reaffirms the idea of woman being closer to the earth, of being Nature as opposed to the Culture represented by the male. He is reifying Melville's

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idea of woman.

19. Herman Melville, Chapter 114, *Moby Dick*, Penguin Books, London, 1972.
20. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, cited in (13).
21. Irving Howe, in "A Reading of *The House of Mirth*", in *Edith Wharton, A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Irving Howe, Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey 1962.
22. Edmund Wilson, p24-25 in "Justice to Edith Wharton", in Howe's *Collection*, cited above.
23. Edith Wharton, Chapter XV, p120, *The Custom of the Country*, Penguin, London, 1984.
24. Edmund Wilson, p25, *op cit*.
25. Edith Wharton, Chapter 2, *Summer*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1980.
26. Edmund Wilson, *op cit*.
27. Diane Trilling, p113, "The House of Mirth Revisited", in Howe's *Collection*, above.
28. Adrienne Rich, Chapter 7, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Norton, New York, 1979.

Que c'est un dur metier que d'etre belle femme,
Et que c'est travail banal
De la danseuse folle et froide qui se pame
Dans un sourire machinal;

Que batir sur les coeurs est une chose sotte;
Que tout craque, amour et beaute,
Jusqu'a ce que l'Oubli les jette dans sa hotte
Pour les rendre a l'Eternité!'

*Confession, Baudelaire*¹

What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!²

The House of Mirth, Wharton

CHAPTER ONE: THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Edith Wharton is an intensely moralistic writer, and, in the manner of so many other realists of around the same time, seems determined to guide us into making similar responses. The saving grace with Wharton is that we are not being driven into accepting the cultural norms of which Catherine Belsey and Roland Barthes complain³; those which the bourgeois white Western male represents to the rest of society. Wharton's cultural position is that of the liberal feminist; and it is hard to emerge at the end of *The House of Mirth* with anything except this viewpoint. The moral signposting she employs, discussed below, assumes that her readership will hold a broadly humanist position, and her rhetoric is such that the assumption works subtly as an exhortation. As we are both petitioned and expected to respond in a certain way, it becomes extremely difficult to escape such a response, so the moralist has done her work well. Yet, although we are in some sense being bullied, the bully is someone who firmly believes that this is the only ethical reaction to

the situation she has portrayed. *The House of Mirth* is infused with a sense of the author's moral urgency.

In "The Documentation of Fiction" Wharton sets out her moral stall and shows herself to be firmly in the realist mode:

In one form or another there must be some kind of rational response to the reader's unconscious but insistent inner question: "What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?"

There seems to be no escape from this obligation except into a pathological world where the action, taking place between people of abnormal psychology, and not keeping time with our normal human rhythms, becomes an idiot's tale, signifying nothing.⁴

Wharton actually does us the service, in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, of telling us the answer to her generic reader's question:

The problem was to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on "the old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.⁵

Other characters are shown to be debased in a similar way: Ned Silverton, the idealistic young writer, is shown to be on the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire, and then is summed up by Wharton dryly:

Young Silverton, who had meant to live on proof-reading and write an epic, and who now lived on his friends and had become critical of truffles⁶.

Yet Ned plays a minor role. The symbol of utter debasement in this novel has to be someone who is also perhaps capable of being utterly fine - and Lily, in sparing thoughts for her maid and in destroying the compromising letters, shows she has this capacity. Ned Silverton cannot be the abject symbol of society's irresponsibility

because he is a man, and as such has a thousand more opportunities and freedoms than a woman does.

Wharton's perceived moral duty in *The House of Mirth*, is to provide a realistic and poignant story about what society does to individuals, particularly to women, and then to guide her readers to an ethical response.

She "pictures" life in her novels and then gives a title, as it were, to each of these pictures. Almost every motive of almost every character is revealed once their actions have been depicted. Lily's reaction to the family's ruin and her father's death are explained in detail, Selden's decision to attend the entertainment proffered by the Welly-Brys is said to be prompted neither by his vulgarity nor his willingness to admit the newcomers into society, but by his enjoyment of spectacle: he "enjoyed spectacular effects", he "found himself surveying the scene with frank enjoyment", he "could yield to vision-making influences as completely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale"⁷. This all contributes to the impression of the unthinking aesthete for whom Lily is never a person but only, in John Berger's words, "an object of vision, a sight"⁸. Thus the pictures are the handmaidens of the moral purpose always present in realist novels.

This is one of Norman Bryson's themes in his book *Word and Image*. Writing of mediaeval images and religious paintings, and the vital importance of their titles, he continues:

With pedagogic imagery such signposting is essential - left to his own devices the spectator might prolong his contemplation beyond the requirements of instruction. The inscription guarantees closure: the image must not be allowed to extend into independent life.⁹

Bryson's phrase "terminal signposting" is explained in Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, when Berger shows a stormy blue-black painting by Van

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Gogh, but omits the title, and then reprints the same painting on the following page with the words "This is the last painting Van Gogh painted before he killed himself"¹⁰. Immediately the spectator is impelled to connect words and image, she is not truly free to interpret the painting purely on its own terms.

This is something close to Wharton's intention when she metaphorically provides us with the "words beneath her pictures".

Edith Wharton's narrative method is not indicative of contempt for her readers, but rather of her belief that what she writes of is not meant to be an aesthetic entity, dangling in an aether far above day to day reality, but fiction which can and should have a bearing on individual morality, which should include what, in "Permanent Values in Fiction", she calls the "reasoned relating of their (the characters) individual case to the general human problem"¹¹. Bryson's idea of closure is vital here. If her novels are meant to illuminate the commonality of the human condition, then she is obliged to attempt to channel the reaction to the events related down certain grooves so that all readers can be imagined to arrive at a fairly similar conclusion.

As with almost all of Wharton's characters, Lily's very name is indicative of her character and therefore her fate, as Thomas Hardy might say. The potential she carries for tragedy is almost limitless, because she is flawed enough to need something (wealth, status) madly, and noble enough in spirit to realize the essential emptiness of her desires. But to her name. Her first name represents purity and beauty, and of course, the lily is the flower famous for being spoilt by being artificially decorated:

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet,

To smooth the ice, or add another hue
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.¹²

Lily Bart herself is "fashioned to adorn and delight", but in order to adorn a situation she has first to adorn herself. Like Undine Spragge in *The Custom of the Country*, in order to attain any kind of security she has to be constantly delightful. The extent of this is brought home to us when we are informed that Lily cannot even be irritated or upset in private, because "she knew that such emotions leave lines on the face as well as in the character"¹³. Lily's only coinage is herself, which lies in continual danger, as every minute passes, of being debased. She has to market herself, displaying the only commodity she has which, according to Edith Wharton, such a society could possibly want. Thus she has to "gild" herself with commodities in order to become a marketable commodity. Reverting back to the old systems of self-production and bartering, which she is forced to do because she does not have money, she must transform herself into a product which she can then barter with in order to gain access to high society. We could condemn her for the lack of integrity which this apparently displays, were it not for the fact that Lily simply has not been trained to survive in any position except somewhere near the top. She can gather crumbs from the table of the great with consummate skill, but she cannot make hats which will sell.

That Lily is supposed to be a victim because of the way American society treats women, and because of the way Lily has been taught to see herself, is made clear continually:

she was so evidently the victim of her civilisation which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate¹³

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As Lily must have golden bracelets jangling on her wrists as part of her image, part of her self-advertisement to the world, they are in this novel represented as the metaphor for her bondage. The bracelet is a commodity which is instrumental in her own commodification. Later, in chapter five, another reference is made to the fact that all of Lily's set are all in bondage to their dream of success, even when the present manifestation of such success is a procession of dreary dinners and dull weekends. The members of the "elite" with whom Lily associates are

all captive inside a great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her!¹⁴

The image of flies believing themselves trapped in cages, whilst they actually have the means of freedom, is clearly a powerful one for Wharton, as it is one she repeats later in the novel. The image is obviously apt; the question the reader will ask, as Lily falls towards her doom, is why some kind of work, such as that endured by Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie*, is more abhorrent than almost anything else to Lily Bart. The flies incapable of flying out of the open window explain it very well; even as Lily knows that the window is open, she also understands her own inability to escape.

Lily's problem, which is also the source of any greatness she possesses, is her inability to fall for the swindle quite so willingly as many of her contemporaries. Time and time again Lily is on the verge of a "great match" and seems wilfully to ruin her chances. As Carry Fisher observes in the novel:

"That's Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic.

Mrs Fisher paused... "Sometimes," she added, "I think it's just flightiness -and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she

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despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study.¹⁵

In these few words, rather too obviously, lies the crux of the novel. It is a crux which has already been displayed in the numerous references to Lily as a victim of her environment and yet as a possessor of a strong moral sense.

It is tempting to interpret her summer walk with Selden, for which she neglects attendance at church with the illustrious Percy, as the only decision a woman of her age and with her zest for life could make. Yet she is aware that this action could doom her hopes of what she believes she wants more than anything, what she believes she wants more than true love: the banishment of even the possibility of poverty.

Wharton lets us see that Lily is misguided in believing this is her aim; moreover, plenty of hints are made that somehow it is Lily's mother who is indirectly to blame for her ambition. It is with a "fierce vindictiveness" that Mrs Bart often tells Lily that her beauty will be the means of their rehabilitation. Lily is the "mere custodian" of a beauty which her mother sees as "a weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance"¹⁶. It is not very surprising then, that Lily feels an immense pressure to marry people like Percy Gryce, who is summed up by Wharton's aside on him as making a fortune "out of a patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels". It is Lily's mother who provides the key to understanding Lily. As with Undine Spragg and May Welland, it is the mother who is partly to blame for the most dislikeable aspects of Lily Bart. And whilst this does not advance Wharton's feminism very far, it is consistent with the

accounts of Wharton's fraught relationship with her own mother.

Lily's mother transmits her abiding fear of dinginess, of which it seems, she eventually dies, so strongly to her daughter that any natural desires Lily may feel are almost always smothered. When Selden stands next to Percy for a moment at Bellomont, Lily looks at them both and "the comparison was her undoing". We can smile in recognition at the scene, but then comes the old monster of poverty to force her to reassess.

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom...the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears.¹⁷

Selden, Lily sees, has nothing real to offer which has the same purity as his ideals. She is practical and disdainful of Selden's dislike of money, "You seem to spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of" she tells him at one point. On their walk she asks poignantly, "Why do you do this (ie destroy all her dreams)...if you have nothing to offer me instead?"

Selden's image is almost as carefully cultivated as Lily's. Lily learned "the value of contrast in throwing her charms into relief; and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs Fisher's volubility was enhancing her own repose"¹⁸. Selden might be equally aware of the effect he will have upon Lily if he stands next to the unremarkable Percy when she is trying to stop liking the former and marry the latter. Selden is a man who knows that intelligent analysis of the woman he is with is a powerful aphrodisiac, and who also knows that his idealistic ideas can be worded so that they form an irresistible charm. The woman who carries an *Omar Khayyam* in her valise is bound to be won over by musings such as "Why do we call our generous ideas

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illusions, and the mean ones truths? Names can alter the colour of beliefs."¹⁹

One can read *The House of Mirth* as a post-Victorian sentimental novel with Selden emerging at the end as the tragic hero who realized his love minutes too late to save Lily's life, as in *Les Miserables* the son is so nearly present for his father's final moments that there are still warm tears on his father's face, and "such was the measure of the son's delay". Fiction like this is purely for the purpose of eliciting still warm tears from the reader also, but Wharton, whilst she can incorporate such devices, can also reach beyond them. Selden does not reach Lily when she has overdosed merely to give the reader a pleasing sense of poignant tragedy. He reaches her too late because for all his morality he has never had enough faith in Lily to overcome his hypocritically fastidious dislike of what he sees her as being, and has never bothered to think out the fact that she is what he, as well as the rest of New York, has made her become.

Wharton guides us into a specific attitude towards Selden from the beginning. He is said to have long been aware that "his pleasures were mainly to be found in a small group of the like-minded" rather than in large New York 'crushes'. There are oblique pointers to his system of living, and we are made aware that Wharton would approve of such a system were it based on a personal, well thought out ethic rather than on a shoddy adoption of what society calls the best principles.

Selden "takes a luxurious pleasure in (Lily's) nearness", and suspects that her hair might be "ever so slightly br^ort". Thus, despite all his moral posturing, he is just as judgmental as his

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contemporaries. Then "he had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her".²⁰ This of course is a broad hint from Wharton that the fault with Lily's appearance is the external sign of what is tainting New York society through and through. The way in which people have been sacrificed to produce Lily Bart is not "mysterious" at all, it is one of the obvious and uncontestable products of the American capitalist ethic. F. Scott Fitzgerald, sometimes seen as a literary descendant of Edith Wharton, makes a similar point when he makes Nicole Diver illustrative of American's self-destructive corruption:

Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors -these were some of the people who payed a tithe to Nicole...She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom.²¹

That the theme was certainly a popular one for the realist writers of the time is indicated in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* when Carrie first comes to Chicago and gets a job earning \$4.50 a week punching holes in shoe leather:

There was nothing to be done, however. The halves of the uppers came piling steadily down. Her hands began to ache at the wrists and then in the fingers, and towards the last she seemed one mass of dull, complaining muscles, fixed in an eternal position and performing a single mechanical movement which became more and more distasteful, until at last it was absolutely nauseating.²²

In a capitalist society, especially one before Dreiser's "new socialism" came to provide better working conditions for employees in industry, there must always be the very rich and the very poor, as the

ideology is bound up in having more than one's peers, not in a joint effort to improve the standard of living of everybody. Thus one of Mrs George Dorset's pearls would fund Gerty's girls club for a year if transformed into hard cash, but it stays firmly around her neck to proclaim her wealth and taste. It is a clue to the perhaps wilful naivety of Selden that he can use the word "mysterious" in relation to Lily's beauty and finery when he is supposedly a thinking man. A great many aching muscles contribute to making Lily Bart fine. The other sacrifice made, which Selden almost comes to understand but never gets to because his dilettantism obstructs, is the sacrifice of Lily, who has had to sacrifice *herself* in order to be suitable for consumption in the marketplace. Selden thinks:

that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a vulgar shape?²³

Lily's clay is not vulgar but "real", it is the personality which occasionally flashes out from beneath the veneer of beauty and necessary adornment, and assumptions which seem to be signified by the use of Selden's generic noun "the *herd* of her sex" show him to be the more vulgar of the two.

The two main indications of Selden's hypocrisy are his affair with Bertha Dorset and his self-justification for attending the prototype beauty competition where Lily appears draped in pale garments as a Reynolds portrait. Wharton's choice of the portrait of Mrs Lloyd by Reynolds says a great deal. The ostensible, fictional reason is that the generic classical garment she wears shows off

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Lily's figure to its best advantage, but the painting is unusual in that rather than having the subject staring back out at her audience, Mrs Lloyd ignores her audience and is engaged in carving the name 'Lloyd' upon a tree. Her stance seems to suggest that she is not entirely unaware that she is being observed. Linking this portrait to Lily makes it plain that Lily is simultaneously aware of being an object of beauty, and of being slightly contemptuous and dismissive of the society which takes adoration of surface loveliness as its creed. Mrs Lloyd's carving upon the tree, which may be a carving of her name or her husband's, implies either an intense need for personal identity or a sublimation of personal identity under that of her husband. It could even symbolize the lack of a woman's real self until she *has* a husband.

In the novel, Lily Bart is always metaphorically writing the name of her husband on a tree and never finishes it. She will not look back at her spectators, even though fully aware that she is a spectacle, and she will not finish carving the name of a man which is only a passport out of the current boring round into another. The implications of this kind of display for Lily Bart and the rest of her sex are best described, by John Berger in his art history book *Ways of Seeing*:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life.

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men

look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at... Thus she turns herself into an object -and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.²⁴

When Lily Bart presents herself as Reynolds's "Mrs Lloyd", she is most definitely "offering up her femininity as the surveyed", for, as the narrator painstakingly explains, "keenest of all was the exhilaration of displaying her own beauty under a new aspect". She is marketing herself again.

Wharton's theme of women being changed and compromised by nineteenth century city life resonates strongly with other literature of the time. Many writers felt the threat of the industrial revolution, and many of its consequences were picked up by poets such as Baudelaire. For him, as for Wharton, women all too easily become commodities and lose their natures in the struggle to live.

In "Confession", cited at the beginning of the chapter, Baudelaire remarks that "it is a sad fate to be a lovely woman", which seems to be the abiding theme of many of Wharton's novels.

Judy Trenor, the wife of the wealthy and "carnivorous" Gus, has eyes suggestive of a "jeweller's window lit by electricity", for Baudelaire, a woman's eyes are also "illuminated like shop windows...insolently making use of borrowed power". Judy's eyes make use of borrowed power likewise, but their only use is to display her beauty and wealth. They do not fulfill their normal function of *looking*, because women who have no option but to become commodities, objects adorned and beautified in order to be chosen, have no need of eyes which look in order that the brain may judge. These women's eyes have the role of helping to illuminate the rest, not of seeing. Benjamin says, of Baudelaire, that "he has become addicted to those

blank eyes which do not return his glance".

This sheds some light on the problematic relation between Selden and Lily, because it is when Lily is not using her eyes that Selden seems most "addicted" to her. When she poses as Mrs Lloyd, necessarily affecting oblivion of her audience and presenting herself as a thing of eternal beauty, then both Selden and Gerty see her as "the real Lily Bart". There is an interesting narrative ambiguity in Selden's ponderings, whilst alone with Lily's body, on whether Lily is now 'real' or not:

That it was her real self, every pulse in him ardently denied. Her real self had lain warm on his heart but a few hours earlier - what had he to do with this estranged and tranquil face which, for the first time, neither paled nor brightened at his coming?²⁵

This would seem to suggest that when Lily's whole being was addressed to him, Selden thought of her as being at her most 'real', but when she can no longer be conscious of the sexual appeal that she has for him, when he cannot subdue her by making her aware that she is an object for him, then what he deems to be the 'real' Lily must perforce become invisible.

Selden's most "real" Lily is the motionless figure draped in classical robes for his, and society's, delectation. Lily's beauty "was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part". In other words, Lily Bart is for Selden an object only, and her reality is most apparent to him not in moments of crises or vivacity, but when she is just a thing to be surveyed, a *tableau vivant* or a tableau even more motionless.

In the death scene, once Selden has decided that the woman on the bed is not the "real Lily", he goes on to feel:

that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible...²⁶

"Invisible" because he was only seeing Lily as a female who was aware of being surveyed by the male, "still there" because all that seemed to matter about Lily to Selden, the "note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part"²⁷ is still there.

Selden cannot quite decide, then, whether Lily is at her most real when she is the motionless form draped in suggestive folds, or when she is the motionless form on the bed in the shabby room. The difference being, of course, that in one she is alive, in the other dead. Why the two conceptions of Lily should be even remotely similar, is perhaps explained by Joan Smith in her assessment of Marilyn Monroe:

In a perverse way, Marilyn's death was the logical next step in her career as a sex symbol. By dying when her looks had only just begun to fade, she removed at a stroke the possibility of other, older images replacing those she had assiduously peddled during her years as a movie star...but, above and beyond everything, she guaranteed for ever the passivity of her sexual response by imbuing it forever with the glamorous stillness of death.²⁸

Wharton's feminism, plainly present throughout the novel she first decided was to be called "A Moment's Ornament", reaches its zenith in the *tableau vivant* at the Wellington Brys'. The *tableau eau vivant* is the clearest demonstration of Wharton's feminism, for it is exhibiting a woman who cannot find a way to express herself except through this, and thus becomes somewhat complicit in the male desire to debase women.

Towards the end of *The Custom of the Country* it appears the men

have progressed so far as to demand intelligent conversation, for Undine is aware of her magnificent entrances to social gatherings having no sequel of sparkling talk, but here, as in *The Age of Innocence*, what the men demand is the presentation of their women as Incorruptable American Womanhood in all its glory. The *tableau vivants* speak for themselves: Botticelli's *Spring* nymphs are presented, a Goya, a Titian, a Vandyke, Kauffmann nymphs, and "lute-playing comedians, lounging by a fountain in a sun-lit glade". There is a great preponderance of nymphs in all of this, and this again may be deliberate irony on Wharton's part. Nymphs are "emanations of the feminine productive powers of the universe; later guardian spirits, especially of groves, fountains, springs and mountains."²⁹ In the boom years before the crash, around the turn of the century and onwards, the men who made the money, those who paid daily visits to Wall Street, were extremely fond of apotheosizing their women, making them into icons or idols of absolute perfection. This meant that when they fell off their pedestals their fall from grace was as swift as Lucifer's, and they were dealt with as summarily.

This glorification of American womanhood may have been a subconscious effort to frame a role for women from which it would be inexpedient for them to step, but the solution proffered by Edith Wharton through the character of Charles Bowen in *The Custom of the Country* is also very plausible. He says that American businessmen are far more interested in business than they are in women, which is why Americans divorce far more often than the French. Europeans, it would seem, have their priorities right. Americans idolize and *adorn* their wives because the wives are not allowed to be in the least interested

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in business, and are so badly educated that scarcely a thought runs through their heads which is not the product of this queer, gorgeous and luxurious oppression of women.

The men at the Welly Bry's entertainment are delighted with the spectacle of nymphs, the "emanations of the productive powers of the universe", but the women who portray them are robbed, by the men, of all productive powers except that of providing offspring.

It would be problematic to decide who is most debased by the scene at the Welly Bry's, but certainly, Selden is. Selden's excuse for being present at the entertainment given by the Welly Brys displays an attitude very much at odds with his almost priggish philosophy on life, with its concomitant strictures on the triviality of wealth and personal adornment. To gain admission to his 'republic of the soul' appears to be as difficult for the wealthy New Yorkers as entering the Kingdom of Heaven, yet he is not above living on their yachts, feasting at their tables and loving their women. His hypocrisy is apparent, as are his snobbery and inconsistency, in the lines below:

If he did not often act upon the accepted social axiom that a man may go where he pleases, it was because he had long since learned that his pleasures were mainly to be found in a small group of the like-minded. But he enjoyed spectacular effects, and was not insensible to the part money plays in their production: all he asked was that the very rich should live up to their calling as stage-managers, and not spend their money in a dull way.³⁰

After the tableau Wharton dryly contrasts Selden's idealising of his own sexism with the coarser and more honest vulgarity of his countrymen. He and Lily kiss briefly, but he does not go after her because he "knew too well the transiency of exquisite moments to attempt to follow her". After the beauty of the tableau and then the

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kiss, he decides to leave to savour his experiences. Van Alstyne sullies this at the door with;

"Hallo Selden, going too? You're an Epicurean like myself, I see: you don't want to see all those goddesses gobbling terrapin. Gad, what a show of good-looking women..."³¹

Van Alstyne does not want the image to be shattered by the knowledge that the women he saw, motionless and incorrupt and for *his* delectation, should tuck into a meal afterwards for their own. The Victorian prescripts which would not tolerate sexual appetite carry over into intolerance of any kind of appetite, presumably because all the others, particularly an oral appetite, can ultimately be referred to sexual desire.

Selden is really no different in his outlook at this moment from Van Alstyne, but it is clear from the lack of reply that Selden thinks himself so far above the other in terms of taste and culture that he does not deign to answer. Still, Wharton does not lead us into absolute condemnation of Selden but merely makes us aware of his human frailty and self-deception in thoroughly enjoying such a questionable treatment of women and defending it with a strange mixture of Benthamite and aesthetic philosophy.

Selden sees himself as an observer of the frivolous social whirl, being apart from it by virtue of his slightly more refined sensibilities. Selden represents "the male gaze", spending much of the novel looking at Lily Bart, "because you're such a wonderful spectacle".

As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment...³²

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He has a course, indicating direction towards a set ambition, whilst Lily has an orbit, moving in social circles. The idea that man follows a linear course and that woman has a more cyclic life plan, is turning into something of an old saw beloved of many anti-feminists. Wharton subverts many sexist assumptions in *The House of Mirth*, including this one. It is in fact Selden who is in orbit, dancing edgily at the borders of the social scene and indulging in self-satisfied dilettantism with no specific goals in mind. Lily, in contrast, is determined to achieve happiness, but fails in the end partly because Selden fails her.

Edith Wharton's intention is not a vendetta against her hero. She shows that men are also caught up in the wheels of capitalism.

One male victim in *The House of Mirth* is a figure illustrating such a desperate view of society that only lovers of Kafka and Camus may want to carry on reading after they have encountered him. He is the ultimate victim of the house of mirth, which is what the New York stock exchange was ironically dubbed by its brokers. He is Lily's father, filling, in her childhood, "the intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks". All day and much of the night he is "down town", busy making money to meet the financial demands of his uncomprehending wife and daughter. His step is "fagged", his kiss "silent", his posture "stooping", and when his family went away for the summer, "he was never mentioned or thought of till his patient stooping figure presented itself on the New York dock". When he is ruined, the fact of their financial predicament "overshadowed her father's slow and difficult dying. To his wife he no longer counted, he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his

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purpose"³³. They are the paradigmatic family for Charles Bowen's strictures on the failures of America in *The Custom of the Country*. Wharton evokes much sympathy for the man who relieved his daughter by his death.

Selden is also, aside from being cast in the role of the hero with feet of clay, portrayed as a victim. Describing the delight Selden himself has in luxury, and the need for charm which keeps him dazzled by Lily, Wharton comments that "in a different way, he was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment"³⁴.

But as is pointed out, Selden is in a better position than Lily not only because he has more than his face as a possible source of income, he is trained and works as a lawyer, but in the fact of being male enjoys innocuous freedoms completely forbidden to Lily, who must keep up her strict regimen if she is to have any hope of success. He may live alone, may go where he pleases, may dress a little shabbily without fear of censure, may marry if he finds the right woman. As Lily says, "Ah, there's the difference - a girl must, a man may if he chooses".

At the beginning of the novel the presentation of Selden as an urbane, intelligent and attractive man who sees through Lily's little foibles and smiles indulgently upon them, seems to indicate a sympathy with Selden. He is endowed superficially with certain likes and dislikes which seem to make him figure as the moral and cultural touchstone of his world. However, his presentation is in fact more complex, because whereas a fairly stereotypical hero such as Mr Knightley in *Emma* operates as a moral touchstone within a society which, though it may err at times from the straight and narrow, has at

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its core a collective Christian and Western conscience, there is no such conscience in Selden's society any more. Thus, in *Emma*, Knightley is the figure of wisdom who keeps closest to the collective moral code, whom Emma can marry rightly and truly, whereas in *The House of Mirth* Selden is the figure closest to a moral code which was drained of all its last dregs of morality long before. He surrounds himself with the conventions, traditions and habits of standards which are, in his New York, null and void. Behind the author's descriptions of him as a cultivated connoisseur of aesthetics and morality is the figure of a self-justifying prig full of judgments about everyone except himself.

If this view of Selden is accepted, it must have some bearing upon our view of Lily's character. She is, on one level, very aware of the lack of cultural stimuli which can be obtained from her society. From Wharton's descriptions of Lily's home life when she was growing up, without the benefits of a firmly rooted tradition or fixed, enduring home, it is also evident that she needs a sense of stability and sees one, morally speaking, in Lawrence Selden. But the other part of her childhood education, the belief instilled in Lily by her mother that she needs all the appurtenances of wealth not only for public display but for private satisfaction in ownership, forces her to eschew the values she believes to be enshrined in Lawrence Selden.

The supposition that he does not have these values, or that the principles he holds to are not feasible in a society where so much emphasis is put upon wealth and epicurism, means that Lily is caught between a rock and a hard place. Whatever she chooses she will still be trapped in the house of mirth. Had Lily chosen Selden her move may

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in some small way have altered her society, setting a precedent and forcing Selden into a more wholehearted immersion in his principles, but Lily cannot choose him because he is too blind until the last to choose her.

Perhaps Lily senses the basic untenability of Selden's position, especially after his failure to arrive when he is most needed, and so she spirals down to the clearest appraisal of what her life has become - as Ellen Olenska says, the gorgon does not make you blind but fixes your eyes open. With that appraisal, of the unappealing choices that lie before her, Lily Bart reaches for the sleeping potion with its "incalculable" effects. The idea that the drug's potency is *incalculable* rather than intense offers a rationale for Lily's suicide. At the beginning of the novel, Wharton makes reference to "the American craving for novelty", and then, when Lily is considering the idea of marriage to Percy Gryce:

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce-the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice-but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life.³⁵

Lily is always after what is novel, and the course of the novel is the path to her realisation that there is no new thing under the sun. This affliction seems to be prevalent at the onset of the industrial revolution: Baudelaire as well as Lily Bart suffers from it. Walter Benjamin explains it when he says that "the more that life is regulated administratively, the more people must learn waiting. Games of chance have the great attraction of making people free from waiting". Buck-Morss comments on this; "Endless waiting thus makes the

finality of fate seem appealing"³⁶. Lily, of course, has spent her whole life waiting; it is all a woman of her position, born into this kind of society, can do. She knows, as the passage above indicates, that she is actually waiting to be bored, the very thing she covets holds no real allure for her. It is the bourgeois malady, the refrain for which Eliot's and Fitzgerald's characters chant: "What shall I do now? What shall I do? What shall we do tomorrow? What shall we ever do?"

Taking the sleeping draught is incalculable, and it takes Lily to the final novelty, what her soul really craved for; death. This longing was symptomatic of many people at the end of the nineteenth century. In the new society where money meant everything, Lily could obviously achieve status, it was not necessary any longer to be old blood to be respected. So, in the hope of this, she whiles away the days and months of the book in expectation of some great happening, a spectacular wedding which will be the supreme novelty. This expectation becomes a boredom, which is why she runs away from it, but she runs from it finally to the ultimate novelty. Her path has so many resonances with the poetry and the apparent preoccupations of Baudelaire that it is worth quoting the end of the last of *Les Fleurs du Mal* poems:

O Death, you ancient mariner, the hour has come. Let us weigh anchor!
O Death, we are weary of this land, let us spread sail...

Pour us the hemlock, for our comfort: its fire so burns our brains
that we long to dive into the gulf's depths, and-what matters if it is
heaven, or hell?-into the depths of the Unknown, in quest of *something*
new.³⁷

Lily Bart perceives life as fundamentally inadequate; she longs for death in some way because it is her only true way out of the

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stricken life she has led, and would, if she lived, continue to lead. She is destroyed because the society she is part of has nothing to make her live for. Wharton writes in *A Backward Glance* that Lily is the symbol and result of a capitalist society estranged from all faith, hope and love.

Selden, as the representative of the best of this society, is the one who must perforce let her down in the end. He is the ultimate Epicure, willing to look but not to act, to collect but not to bid, willing to enjoy but not if it means a reckoning must be paid. He must learn in the end, as Auden says, that

Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreadful cards foretell,
Shall be paid²²

Or as the bible says, that

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.²³

Wharton does make it clear in the final pages, and especially the final lines of the novel, that Selden has to pay, that he comes to a realisation of his folly.

The bitter tone which I think pervades *The House of Mirth* is interesting because it reflects the very deep bitterness which Wharton undoubtedly felt towards her society where, to repeat John Berger "*men act and women appear*". Lily can only sell her beauty, and she has been on the shelf too long, she soon finds it necessary to lower her price, which then makes her less desirable. Because of what New York has taught her, combined with what Selden has taught her, she can bear neither success nor defeat, and must find sanctuary in death.

There is a positive aspect to this gloomy tale, in that in

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understanding finally the happiness of Nettie Struther (albeit because one man had faith in her, a luxury Lily never had) and in burning the love letters which were the route to her financial and social security, Lily has made a moral journey of some magnitude. Finally, what Gerty believes motivates Lily's gestures of generosity really does happen to Lily, "that sharpening of the moral vision which makes all human suffering so near and insistent that the other aspects of life fade into remoteness". She has seen that wealth is not the only good, but once the dream of wonders which wealth might provide has been shattered for her, then there is nothing else, certainly not Selden's hypocritical 'republic of the soul' which can save her.

Yet the fall and fall of Lily Bart does not settle easily into the category of what we like to call tragedy. A realist novel will not give us any Lear-like catharsis, but *The House of Mirth* succeeds completely in illustrating the destructive nature of "frivolous society". Harold Gardiner remarks:

Perhaps what she lacked was a sense of glory. Certainly not form, nor art, nor morality, nor a sense of beauty - she had an almost painful awareness of it - nor even a sense of eschatology, for all her novels state, if only implicitly, a belief in the four last things. Or at any rate, in three of them - death, judgment and hell. She misses heaven and glory - good old knock-down glory, as Humpty Dumpty called it.⁴⁰

Yet if anything is clear from this novel, it is that Edith Wharton wanted to show what life was like for someone like Lily, like Selden, like Gertie. She most certainly meant to miss out the glory.

Notes

1. "That it's a thankless occupation, being a beautiful woman, like the inane toil of a crazy numbed dancing-girl, who goes on dancing till she drops, with the same mechanical smile:
"That it's foolish to build anything on human hearts - for everything cracks, yes, even love and beauty, till oblivion flings them into its hod and gives them over to eternity..."
From "Confession" in *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Baudelaire, translated by Francis Scarfe.
2. Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 1905, this ed. Virago Press, London, 1990. Henceforth referred to as *Mirth*.
3. Catherine Belsey; *Literature, history, politics in Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, Longman, 1988, and Roland Barthes, p140 in *Mythologies*, Paladin, 1973.
4. Wharton; "Documentation in Fiction", mss. in the Beinecke Library, Yale.
5. Wharton; *A Backward Glance*, p.207, this ed. Century Hutchison, 1987.
6. *Mirth*, p62.
7. *Ibid.*, p144
8. John Berger; *Ways of Seeing*, BBC & Penguin, 1972, p47.
9. Norman Bryson; *Word and Image*, 1991.
10. Berger; *Ways of Seeing*, p27. 10. Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction", mss. in the Beinecke Library, Yale.
11. Edith Wharton, "Documentation in Fiction", op cit.
12. Shakespeare, *King John*, ii. 11.
13. *Mirth*, p46.
13. *Ibid*, p12.
14. *Ibid*, p61.
15. *Ibid*, p201.
16. *Ibid*, p34.
17. *Ibid*, p71.
18. *Ibid*, p53.
19. *Ibid*, p78.
20. *Ibid*, p9.
21. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, 1934, this ed. Penguin 1986, chapter X11, p65
22. Theodore Dreiser: Chapter iv, *Sister Carrie*, 1900, Doubleday, Page & Co.
23. *Mirth*, p9.
24. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p46.
25. *Mirth*, p346.
26. *Mirth*, p347.
27. *Ibid*, p146.
28. Joan Smith, *Misogynies*, *Ibid*, p85
29. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, J. C. Cooper, Thames and Hudson, London, 1987
30. *Mirth*, p142.
31. *Mirth*, p150.
32. *Mirth*, p8.
33. *Mirth*, p38.
34. *Mirth*, p146.
35. *Mirth*, p30.

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36. Susan Buck-Morss, p195, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, MIT Press, Boston, 1989.
37. Baudelaire, *Baudelaire, The Complete Verse, Volume One*. Edited by Francis Scarfe, Anvil Press Poetry, London, 1986.
38. W.H. Auden, "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love", *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927- 57, Volume 1*. Faber, London, 1969.
39. Ecclesiastes, Chapter 7, Verse 4.
40. Harold Gardiner, *Fifty Years of the American Novel, 1900-1950 - A Christian Appraisal*. Gordian Press, New York, 1968.

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Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there
beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the
lesson,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Pioneers! O Pioneers, Walt Whitman

CHAPTER TWO: THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

How can a society "barricade itself against the unpleasant"? How can a society persuade itself and those excluded from it that it has a different and infinitely superior moral code to all those around? How can a society look down on tribal rituals with fond condescension and yet be more locked into ritual than many societies which are called tribes?

The answers seem to be somewhere in the text of *The Age of Innocence*. Edith Wharton evokes a world in this novel in which the individual benefit or freedom of choice is sacrificed to the wider good, or rather, to the preservation of the status quo, where maintaining the codes of behaviour, irrespective of their merit, is regarded as being of primary importance. Characters who try to reveal the irrelevance of these values, who try to live according to a more personal code are dealt with summarily by the custodians of the old order.

Wharton makes a serious, piercing re-evaluation of the values of New York society and by extension the values of the West. Her vehicle for it is a woman and a foreigner, Ellen Olenska. The advent of Ellen forces one of the sons of Old New York, Newland Archer, into a moral

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confrontation with all he has been taught to respect, a confrontation in which he ultimately capitulates. There are no final judgments offered in this novel, only the choices which are proffered and the consequences of one particular choice.

There is a belief held by many characters in *The Age of Innocence* that the Old World is corrupt and corrupting, that moral values there are decaying, and that the fresh air which the Puritans breathed will never blow through the heavily perfumed boudoirs of Europe. The problem for New York high society with the advent of Ellen Olenska, the American who married a Polish count and then was heard of only as living a fast and luxurious life in darkest Bohemia, is that she has come trailing clouds of that perfume, and the merest scent of it could intoxicate the innocent American. The difference between America and Europe has long been seen in American literature as the difference between the former climbing towards the peak of its civilization and the latter being way down the other side and still descending.

The notion of American innocence versus European worldliness stems from a complex historical background. Initially, those coming to America from Europe as the first colonials had to construct a concept of their new land as one uncontaminated by the decadence of the old civilizations from which they had fled. This was the dream of people like Jefferson and Franklin. The problem is obvious, however. The people were not new even if the continent was; as Hawthorne says of the emigrants from England, "the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition"².

As with their morals, so with their language, and as all thought

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and all culture is mediated through language, one cannot shake off the shackles of the old world if its language is imported wholesale to the new. As Susan Manning writes in "Literature and Society in Colonial America"³, "European observers and settlers have confronted the pristine facts of America with a language already freighted with centuries of tradition and association". The Pilgrim Fathers came to America to escape from oppressive and corrupt social and political systems, determined to build a new kind of society on 'the fresh green breast' of the New World. They were conducting an experiment; attempting the formation of a society in which the nature of man was to become fundamentally different from what it had been hitherto. To this end, certain values had to be pretended initially, in the hope that they would be absorbed into the culture and collective consciousness of the society. These were basically what Henry James called "the consciousness of sin and hell, of the fearful nature of our responsibilities and the savage nature of our Taskmaster"⁴ (Hawthorne 1879). Initially, it was far from successful, although of course now the Puritan psychology can be seen to have deep and tenacious roots in American thinking. The scaffold in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* has to be built "almost as seasonably as they mark out the first burial ground", and Dimmesdale, America's "new man" with "a reputation of whitest sanctity" in fact has red guilt seared across his breast. It is a dangerous theory for a society to be built upon, and ends almost inevitably in duplicity.

The myth of American innocence has persisted, however, and from Jefferson and Whitman through to Wharton and beyond, there is often at least a hint of the attitude Whitman takes in 'Pioneers! O Pioneers!',

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quoted above.

Yet at the same time American Literature proves its awareness of the possibly illusory quality of American innocence. Edith Wharton joins a long list of American "greats" when she adds her voice to that of Hawthorne, Twain, James and Chopin, with Fitzgerald after her to take up the banner. All of them undermine the supposition that radical innocence such as that represented by Gatsby, by Isabel Archer, by Newland Archer, by May Welland, is either desirable or advisable.

Wharton explores the concept of innocence with great irony. The women of New York high society cling to it desperately; Mrs Welland's "invincible innocence" as she says "I don't know any of the details; I only ask not to,"⁵ is bequeathed to May, who goes to her grave "so incapable of growth that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change"⁶. They use innocence as a protective shield around them, neither noticing nor understanding change until the change has been assimilated and become part of the normal.

Ellen, on her return to America, attempts to recover lost innocence, to find something genuine and wholesome after her life in "corrupting" Europe. She takes the exterior of upright morality at face value at first, and appears to Newland somewhat in the guise of a prodigal daughter of New York. Ellen has returned and now "want(s) to feel cared for and loved"⁷, but because of her exile is uncertain of her way and needs guidance. She professes to have left Poland and Bohemia to escape from the intricacies of lies and deception and corruption, and to have come back to New York for the sake of its simplicity:

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She lifted her thin black eyebrows. "Is New York such a labyrinth? I thought it so straight up and down like Fifth Avenue. And with all the streets cross-numbered!" She seemed to guess his faint disapproval of this, and added with the rare smile which enchanted her whole face: "If only you knew how I like it for just *that* - the straight-up-and-downness, and the big honest labels on everything!"⁹

The phrase "she seemed to guess his faint disapproval of this" indicates that Ellen may be at pains to promote an ingenuous image of herself. She expresses her joy at the honesty and lack of ambiguity in everything she finds in New York. Then, in exposing the rationale behind the van der Luydens' self-imposed rarity, she shows herself the possessor of a competence in comprehending the hypocrisies of that society which is far in excess of Newland's own:

"The van der Luydens," said Archer, feeling himself pompous as he spoke, "are the most powerful influence in New York society. Unfortunately -owing to her health - they receive very seldom,"

She unclasped her hands from behind her head, and looked at him meditatively.

"Isn't that perhaps the reason?"

"The reason_?"

"For their great influence; that they make themselves so rare?"¹⁰

It is supposedly here that Ellen seems first to understand that New York is not really the land of milk and honey she has imagined during her time in Europe. Her position is ambiguous; we cannot know if she is telling the truth, as for all her proclamations of wanting to fit in and behave like everyone else, she actually sets out to draw attention to herself, as the women are not slow to realize.

In Chapter Eight she says, "I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again"¹¹, and immediately afterwards exclaims "Ah, here's May arriving, and you will want to hurry away to her". Wharton adds, with irony directed at Ellen's claim, that she does not move to allow him to do so, and that "her eyes turned back from the door to rest on the young man's face". Yet Wharton does not

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imply that this utter failure to comply with the codes of behaviour is altogether intentional: Ellen will clearly have problems turning back into an American, given that she left as a child and has returned as an exotic, voluptuous woman.

Mrs Archer complains to Newland that "people should respect our ways when they come among us. Ellen Olenska especially: she came back to get away from the kind of life people lead in brilliant societies".¹¹ Escaping from unmentionable horrors in corrupt Bohemia, she settles in the most Bohemian part of town and gives her little house the quality of an Eastern bazaar. The house owes a good deal to Baroness Munster's house in *The Europeans*. Ellen has decorated its interior with strange fabrics and transformed it into a foreign place. As Newland perceives, she succeeds in replacing the snows of a New York winter with the atmosphere of attar-of-roses in Samarkand. But whatever attracted young Ellen Mingott to marry her Polish count may hold lingering attractions for her now that she is back in America, and the lure of the different should not necessarily be held as proof of duplicity.

Yet she pays lip-service to the supposed benefits of "simplicity", and to the idea of needing guidance from the venerable matriarchs, and innocently claims, with authorial irony looming large, that the guidance she finds most valuable is that offered by Newland and by Julius Beaufort. Here Ellen overplays her hand, for she believes that her self-portrayal as an unhappy foreigner used to being looked after by men will soften Newland, as will her own more pliable attitude to him. This is perhaps being unjust to Ellen, as she plainly thrives in the company of men and is plainly perplexed by the

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lack of sexuality evinced by the women around her. Yet she must also know that she is more intelligent than many of these women, and that she has managed to escape from an execrable situation and is all in all a very capable person. She is capable enough, perhaps, to fall back on wiles whenever it seems expedient:

"You mean-I'm so evidently helpless and defenceless? What a poor thing you must all think me! But women here seem not-seem never to feel the need, anymore than the blessed in heaven."¹²

Her ambiguous *need* is not elaborated upon even after Newland softly asks her to. However, her avowal of weakness comes only a few pages after Newland decides that "she knew how to take care of herself a good deal better than the ingenuous May imagined"¹³, and he is aware of Ellen's easy manipulation of men after she has won the heart of Mr van der Luyden: " a lady who knew how to thank all-powerful elderly gentlemen to such good purpose for a bunch of flowers did not need either the private consolations or the public championship of a young man of his small compass".¹⁴ The fact that Newland is our "central consciousness" in *The Age of Innocence* means we cannot know whether Ellen was simply following European etiquette or shoring up some goodwill from Mr Van der Luyden. It is perhaps only important that Newland *decides* that she is being manipulative.

Ellen, as the subtle vehicle for Wharton's critique of her own society, is necessarily different in order to offer an outside view. She is not in the picture, but looking at it. She perceptively dismisses traditions and conventions which are blindly clung to and rarely thought through by anyone else, except briefly by young men like Newland before they realize that the society they are trying to emancipate is terrified of emancipation. Ellen is the antithesis of

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New York itself, for where the city puts on a front of simplicity and is at heart a complicated set of prejudices and sophisticated corruptions, so she wears her risqué Empire dresses, invites married men to her house to see her, and yet strips away the pretensions of the top families with the clear-minded innocence of the small boy who notices that the emperor is naked.

It does not take too long for Ellen to realize that the requirements of form make her kind of brutal simplicity an alien and subversive force; and one which New York will not countenance. The others continue to speak the truth and more than the truth, and Ellen gradually abandons her pretence or her ambition to be just like everyone else. On the night when Ellen receives Beaufort and then Newland, she wears clothes which show her to be "heedless of tradition", and yet is upset when Newland says she will never be like everybody else, answering, "Ah, don't say that. If you knew how I hate to be different!"¹⁵

She speaks to Newland of her disillusionment, when he mentions that the older women want to help her:

"Oh, I know-I know. But on condition that they don't hear anything unpleasant. Aunt Welland put it in those very words when I tried...Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!" She lifted her hands to her face, and he saw her thin shoulders shaken by a sob.¹⁵

Ellen never tells Newland the terrible truth either, and we are left to vague imaginings of unspeakably Bohemian things in unspeakably Bohemian places. Had Ellen forced her womenfolk to an understanding of what she had gone through due to the Polish Count, then they may have been less hasty in deciding to despatch her back to her "rightful place" in Poland. The fact that they will not even permit her to

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speak of what she endured means that there are not even words employed to mediate between Ellen's experience and their own. Because such unpleasant happenings are *never* articulated in the presence of these women, their understanding of Ellen's situation is severely limited, which elicits a corresponding limit to their sympathy. Women hardly have a language through which they could foster some solidarity for each other. What could be so bad as being ostracised by one's husband, and being the subject of terrible rumours, they ask each other, but the question is only rhetorical: their world is too strictly circumscribed for them to be able to provide an answer.

Ellen Olenska is Edith Wharton's most complex and intriguing character: perhaps this in itself marks its superiority over most of her other works. Her spiritual journey is of course akin to Newland's: they both must decide the relative merits of turning away from society's dictates to live in happiness together, or doing what is required to satisfy everyone else.

Ellen is a useful medium for Wharton's re-appraisal of her old society because she was born in America but left before it could stamp her as a member of the tribe forever. Her distance enables her to be more discerning. For Simone de Beauvoir, she would fulfil another of the requirements necessary for an outsider in that she is a woman, and a woman not trained to either the acceptance or the arts which make belonging to "the subject race" bearable. Wharton shows that she did not have to wait for *The Second Sex* in order to understand this:

A woman's standard of truthfulness was tacitly held to be lower: she was the subject creature, and versed in the arts of the enslaved. Then she could always plead moods and nerves, and the right not to be held too strictly to account

She is a woman, and therefore her deliberate eschewal of the

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forms of New York society serves as a piece of impertinence which has greater consequences than would have been the case had a man taken similar action. This society is matriarchal only in the sense of the women having a firmly circumscribed way of life which they are allowed to police themselves. The matriarchs such as Mrs Welland and Mrs Mingott are vigorous in enforcing the rules by which the women in their culture are supposed to live, because the successful subversion of these rules would invalidate the purpose and power of their whole lives. It is also the case that this female sub-group, operating within the larger society of the male, functions in the same way as a trade union might. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman says in *Women and Economics*, there is the scorn of the striker against the scab labourer in the wife's scorn of the mistress. In this power structure is a virulent antagonism against those women who ignore the exacting standard which society has set up for them, because in ignoring the standard they also forgo the reward the other women get for accepting their lot, thus devaluing that reward. As Gilman says, "The loathing of the 'good' woman for the 'bad' is not actually a moral response at all", but is rather an economic one. The prostitute "offers the same goods...for a far less price".

The women in *The Age of Innocence*, with the singular exception of Ellen Olenska, expect loyalty from all the women around them in this way, and expect their allegiance to each other to exceed their respective allegiances to their menfolk in some instances. They are part, too, of a conspiracy of keeping up the forms and sacrificing the letter of the truth, all to keep the tottering edifice of their society up a little longer. The fact that Ellen refuses altogether to

compromise on the truth in any respect pushes her out of society as

much as her involvement with Newland Archer does. She cannot; she finds hypocrisy in the ears deaf to confidences and the lips unable to comfort. She thus eventually turns away, thankful, perhaps, to be expelled from such a severe tribe. She can live in Europe away from the compromises of New York society, but treasuring up the dignity it taught her.

Camus explores the idea of the person who refuses to compromise upon the truth in *The Outsider*, and what is true for Meursault is also true for Ellen Olenska:

A long time ago, I summed up *The Outsider* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: 'In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.' I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual...you must ask yourself in what way Meursault does not play the game. The answer is simple: he refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels. He refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened.²⁰

This is Ellen's case in a concentrated form and in an existentialist style. It is a state of mind which is so much alien to Newland's own that he can hardly hope to bridge the gulf between them. For Ellen will not tolerate the position of Outsider, the one alien force against the many in agreement, nullified by being so much on the periphery. Until the visit to Skuytercliffe Ellen has been given the position of the Other, the outsider, defined for the community by her otherness and difference. Ellen is no longer ready to comply with this status, and so Newland and Ellen begin to take up positions in *opposition to each other*. *All Ellen's otherness is*

posited on the fact of her foreignness as far as New York society is concerned. For Newland, though, it is encapsulated by her independent womanhood, her unabashed sexuality which the women of his time and class are anxious to bury deep down. Such self-effacement as that displayed by May and her kind is shown as the traditional behavioural pattern in Western women by Simone de Beauvoir, in her introduction to *The Second Sex*:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: "Woman, the relative being..." And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: "The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man." She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other

Ellen is different in that she does not see herself as the Other but as the Subject, yet knows that this is unacceptable in the culture to which she has returned. Until Skuytercliffe, Newland has tried hard to believe in the illusion that Ellen has created for him. The illusion that she is a subject creature as May is, that she has not really an independent will because towering over any autonomy she may have grasped for herself is an overpowering sense of lack, of need; "she cannot think of herself without man". It was what D.H.Lawrence wanted to hear, what he made Hermione Roddice in *Women In Love* want²², and it is what Ellen knows Newland, Beaufort and most men of her acquaintance want to hear. Newland is entranced before her open declaration of need for a man, and the scene is heavy with irony for she has no such need, not as May has. Ellen needs men as her equals and her opposites, not as "the absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined"²³.

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Newland is shocked once too often by Ellen's way of life. Until he chases her to Skuytercliffe, she represents the mysterious, the exotic, the world where Newland can give his intellect, passion and aesthetic sense free rein. Ellen is transformed for him in and by the environs of Skuytercliffe. In that innermost sanctum of New York high society, Newland begins to feel, rather than understand, that the personality which attracts and fascinates him is too strong for him in real life although it feeds his hungry imagination. Ellen is an ideal of passionate womanhood, but when Newland is with her he is often stiff and pompous and awkward, hide-bound by the cultural rules he affects to deplore.

Any evidence given by Ellen Olenska that she has sexual desire would earn her the disapproval of Newland; her plea of need is as close as she is allowed, and this limit produces her petulant response to him, "Ah, don't ask me! I don't speak your language."²⁴ She does not, her language is not the purified dialect of the tribe, it has a larger vocabulary.

Gradually Ellen takes the measure of the society, for she is intelligent and knows that if she entirely fails to integrate, and decides to leave, she will run the risk of Newland leaving New York to be with her. Although Ellen is in love with Newland, she knows that he is a man very much of his time and place, and that in dispossessing him of all he holds familiar, she will of necessity change him, possibly make him unhappy. The other part of the risk involves the possible pain to people like May who are umbilically attached to the entire concept and structure of Old New York. For May, Newland's desertion would involve much more than a man leaving

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her for another. It might even sever the cord between her and her belief that her way of life is fixed and unchangeable. May is like a bird which has been raised in absolute captivity. It would be a cruel act to free her from all she believes and have her try to learn to fend for herself.

Ellen therefore abandons her house in the Bohemian quarter of New York and after a brief time away, prepares to live with Mrs Manson Mingott. But her proximity to Newland cannot be tolerated by anybody including the couple themselves; she is soon to be "eliminated from the tribe". It is interesting to observe that Newland cannot tolerate her presence in any kind of meaningful way. When she is summoned back because of the Beauforts' disgrace, she decides to stay on, and the action changes Newland's attitude. He is all ready to be dashing and impetuous, to jump onto a train and go with Ellen as far as she wants to go. Yet when she stays in New York he sees it as her decision to "accept the compromise usual in such cases", and is conscious of "a growing distaste for what lay before him":

It seemed to him that he had been speaking not to the woman he loved but to another, a woman he was indebted to for pleasures already wearied of: it was hateful to find himself the prisoner of this hackneyed vocabulary.

"She'll come!" he said to himself, almost contemptuously²⁵.

The dream made real and near and open to the judgment of the society moralists makes a nullity of that dream. Ellen continues to speak to Newland of her difficulty in coming to terms with his society, and as she treats him as the representative of that society, so he responds accordingly. They thus form between them a hostility to each other because of their cultural exclusion from each other's lives. Newland will ultimately settle for the kind of wife which

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s society has produced for his delectation.

His wife, May Welland is a product, and where Lily Bart is a beauty product, May is a product of studied innocence. This innocence is real only in that she is innocent about the extent of her capacity for self-deception. She is the incarnation of American innocence because she has been deceived and guarded from reality all her life, has become an automaton responding to certain stimuli. Wharton undermines the myth of American innocence by depicting her innocents as capable of the most artful stratagems. May Welland is not ingenuous, but instead guilty of sharp practice in telling Ellen she is pregnant before she is sure, and yet even this is a reflex action, blind belief in the precedence of marriage over love. May's action is justified in her code by her former offer to give him up: "I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong -an unfairness- to somebody else..." This offer is hard proof that there is indeed "good in the old ways", for if it is innovative of itself, it is mistakenly seen as "recklessly unorthodox" by Newland. It is one of the natural and positive results of generations of individuals bringing up their children to scrupulous integrity.

But once Newland has refused the proffered freedom, and has accepted the bond of marriage with all that that implies, a further bond of honour has been forged between the two of them, which gives May the right to follow and impose the rigorous traditions with which she has been brought up, and makes it incumbent upon Newland to bow to them also.

The complete obedience with which May Welland follows the ordinance of her tribe is an ironic reversal by Edith Wharton of the

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patronising tone taken by people of the time when speaking of the popular interest in anthropology. This novel shows that the fascination in the nineteenth century with anthropology is a facet of the imperial mindset. Finding out about the "quaint" and "superstitious" customs of tribes promotes a sense of one's own superiority, which Old New York, challenged on all sides, needed to do very much. Newland, however, because he has studied some anthropology, is obliged to see that his own society is no more free of ritual and superstition than any African tribe. *The Age of Innocence* forces us to see that the structure of western society is not necessarily the God-given, natural way to do things, but instead just another way of social organisation. Thus Wharton undermines the sense of superiority to which this society clings. Elitist comments from the lips of May or her mother reach us dripping with irony.

May has always been told that the way she has been brought up is the only really proper, natural way, in accordance with God's holy ordinance. She is the child who has always been crooned to sleep with feigned assurances of her way of life being incontrovertibly justified. As F. Scott Fitzgerald writes in *Tender is the Night*, this illusion began at the inception of the New World, and has been propagated ever since:

...the illusion of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people - they were the illusion of a nation, the lies of a generation of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely that there were no wolves outside the cabin door.²⁶

The idea that the whole of American society is built upon an illusory premise is backed by evidence from many great American writers, both the detractors and supporters of the "American way".

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Twain writes that slavery "poisoned the morning" of America, and Hawthorne's Hester Prynne expresses her hope that a new truth would be revealed in America one day "in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness". Unfortunately, by the time Wharton comes to write *The Age of Innocence* matters have not mended very much. Slavery has gone, racism and sexism remain, and the prejudices of the prim and frugal society which dogged Hester have spread to the prim and extravagant society of aristocratic New York and now dog Ellen Olenska. Ellen does not wear a scarlet letter but she has a metaphorical one; she wears red very frequently as if in mockery of a still new world in which old worn-out conventions still take such precedence. As she asserts in a conversation with Newland Archer, Christopher Columbus would hardly have bothered if he had known what would ensue; "It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country"²⁷.

Metaphor and symbolism play a significant part in Edith Wharton's fiction. In this novel there is heavy symbolism in Wharton's descriptions of clothes. The fact that clothes receive so much attention in Wharton's work must not, I think, be dismissed as a rather cynical pandering to the widely held notions about female readers' requirements in popular fiction, but should be seen as something integral to Wharton's earliest perceptions about people and society, as she shows in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*.

It is firstly by her dress that Ellen's exoticism is delineated. She is already offending against "the dictates of Taste", of American Society taste, that is, when Newland first sees her, for she is

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wearing a dark blue velvet "Empire" dress with no tucker and a head-dress of diamonds. These European-style clothes are, to the assembled company, a declaration that their wearer has mixed with the decadent old world societies, and they also mark her as a woman apart from those around her. It is at *her* that the men lift up their opera glasses and stare, for her clothes are a challenge to their conventions and to their willpower. They must disapprove, yet they are attracted, and whereas this situation is commonly found between men and the women they believe to be below them socially, it is more tricky here where Ellen Olenska is a member of their own society, a woman with their women. It is impossible to dismiss her as a low-born hussy without class, beauty or brains, impossible to scorn her and thus increase one's own sense of self-importance. Ellen's clothes fundamentally call into question the ethics and conventions by which these New York men live, because they prevent her being categorized with either their wives or their mistresses, and because they are a sign of female independence and power.

The dress of May Welland reaffirms "Old New York's" sense of what is right and seemly. She sports no head dress, instead her fair hair is braided. She is clad all in virginal white, with "a modest tulle tucker fastened by a single gardenia". She is protected on all sides, in life as in the opera-box, by "brocaded matrons" who are so wrapped up in finery and finesse that they can give no advice except the outdated variety which will be of some use to her as a wife, but little as a woman.

May is dressed similarly to Mrs Nilsson, the prima donna at the opera, for both are proclaiming their innocence with their white

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dresses and their braids. Wharton links them in appearance because she is anxious to illustrate that they have a deeper kinship; that of being obliged to be actresses, and entities visually and aurally pleasing to men. The soprano, on stage, "listened with downcast eyes to M. Capoul's impassioned wooing, and affected a guileless incomprehension of his designs"²⁸. May, in real life, does the same thing, with the disturbing difference that although she does *affect* a "guileless incomprehension" in accordance with the upbringing she has received, she is much less knowledgeable in matters of marital and sexual relationships than she would ever dream. Believing that she is in some degree *assuming* a role of demure maidenhood, she is in fact the embodiment of it. She is linked to the prima donna because both are surveyed by men, both of them promote an image of their own innocence, and both of them know that this representation is likely to bring them rewards within the parameters of their own culture.

For Wharton, Ellen and May are both heroines, both prima donnas, both, to borrow from Catherine Clément, imprisoned in a circle of light which fixes their position in the world. One plays the young virgin, the other the scarlet woman. Yet in this novel, written by a woman, the categories of madonna and whore are not strictly delineated. May stoops low and Ellen reaches high on the ladder of morality, and the punishment meted out to women for being women in love stories written by men, is not received here.

Marguerite, in Gounoud's *Faust*, which is what *The Age of Innocence* opens with, is young and pretty and falls for Faust, who hides a great deal of his character from her. One day she finds he has deserted her, and turns for solace to Siebel, who is not

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effectual enough to help her after so much suffering. The situation is not unlike Ellen Olenska's, but for Ellen the inability of men to live up to her standards or expectations does not end in her death.

The trend of realism which Wharton was caught up in can go some way to explaining this lack of patriarchal justice, as can her liking of Browning's poetry, because Browning is extremely fond of stopping short at authorial judgment and presenting his characters so that the reader judges them instead, or realizes that an accurate judgment is impossible.

It is vitally important that Wharton was a woman writing about a complicated love triangle, and that she does not see it as her authorial right or duty to condemn or condone any particular party. So often the ideology, patriarchal, feminist or otherwise, condemns the woman to death as the finale of the story: examples include Desdemona, Tess, Madame Bovary, Maggie Tulliver, Anna Karenina and Edna Pontelier. For the sake of narrative closure the women are sacrificed, and it is necessarily always the women. It is as if there is no more reason for a woman to live once she has played out her role in the drama of romance. However, in this case Wharton is at pains to create the impression that the characters are not dolls upon a stage which stop existing once the curtain falls, they are women who must go on with their day to day existence whether it is enlivened by love or not. *The Age of Innocence* also differs from many novels written from a male perspective in that it is emphasized that women have other concerns which are important to them aside from the success or failure of their love affairs.

At the end, when Newland is taken to see Ellen by his son, he

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decides not to go up to her apartment with Dallas. As he thinks to himself, "It's more real to me here than if he went up"²⁹. He does not want to see the woman who has been the focus of his emotional life for thirty years, because she will have changed and may have little memory of him "like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was not time to pray every day"³⁰. She is to him "the flower of life" which he failed to grasp, "the composite vision of all that he had missed". He can not go up to see her; the risk of seeing the flower he has dreamt of crumble to dust is too great. We are shown a carefully constructed social organisation where the biggest tragedy is not that love fails because of the personalities involved, but because all of the characters have been taught, from childhood or more recently, that one must sacrifice one's own happiness for the good and for the continuance of the tribe. There is a certain value in this tradition, in terms of personal self respect as well as for the benefit of society, but it may mean depriving oneself of the things in life which may give one most happiness, and perhaps Wharton would join with Browning in pronouncing her judgment upon them;

And the crime I impute to each frustrate ghost
Is the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin.³¹

It becomes clear that this society, "wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant", has to devote more and more time to the endeavour, as the monotony of keeping to the old forms when their necessity is obsolete provokes people into breaking the time-honoured rules. This is the last generation of New York society to try so steadfastly to ignore the truth, for as the epilogue of the novel shows, the Archers' children are unimpressed by

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such dissimulation. The title of the novel is at the same time ironic and straightforward. Wharton definitely believes there was some kind of innocence in the society, even if it was the innocent belief that they could prevent the Invaders from changing everything. As Newland says, "There was good in the old ways". The innocence of May and Newland I have attempted to explain, the innocence of their children is of a different variety, being a naive belief that they are free of the past and its accompanying shackles. Edith Wharton is more interested here in reviving that 'faint fragrance' of the society she remembers, which is the last great age of enforced innocence.

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Notes

1. Edith Wharton, chapter II, p98 of *The Age of Innocence*, Virago, London, 1988. First published, 1920. Henceforth referred to as *Age*.
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Chapter One, *The Scarlet Letter*, Penguin, London, 1986.
3. Susan Manning, p3, "Literature and Society in Colonial America", in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: American Literature*, Penguin, 1979.
4. Henry James, *Hawthorne*, English Men of Letters Series, New York, 1879.
5. *Age*, p134, chapter XVI.
6. *Ibid*, p292, chapter XXXIV.
7. *Ibid*, p78, chapter IX.
8. *Ibid*, p80, chapter IX.
9. *Ibid*, p89, chapter IX.
10. *Ibid*, p71, chapter VIII.
11. *Ibid*, p89, chapter X.
12. *Ibid*, p124, chapter XV.
13. *Ibid*, p115, chapter XIV.
14. *Ibid*, p102, chapter XII.
15. *Ibid*, p81, chapter IX.
16. *Ibid*, p83, chapter IX.
17. *Ibid*, p258, chapter XXXI.
18. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, Small, Maynard & Co., Boston, 1898.
19. Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, Penguin, London, 1983.
20. Simone de Beauvoir, p16, *The Second Sex*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1953.
21. D.H. Lawrence, Chapter One, *Women In Love*, Penguin, 1960, London. Hermione is described by Lawrence: It was a lack of robust self, she had no natural sufficiency, there was a terrible void, a lack, a deficiency of being within her, and she wanted someone to close up this deficiency, to close it up forever. She craved for Rupert Birkin."
22. Simone de Beauvoir, p 15, *The Second Sex*, op cit.
23. *Ibid*.
24. *Age*, p124, chapter XV.
25. *Ibid*, p207, chapter XXIV.
26. F. Scott Fitzgerald, p65, *Tender is the Night*, Penguin, London, 1985.
27. *Age*, p207, chapter XXXIV.
28. *Ibid*, p26, chapter I.
29. *Ibid*, p303, chapter XXXIV.
30. *Ibid*, p301, chapter XXXIV.

-We must run glittering like a brook
In the open sunshine, or we are unblest:
The wealthiest man among us is the best:
No grandeur now in nature or in book
Delights us.

Written in London, Wordsworth

CHAPTER THREE: HUDSON RIVER BRACKETED

Mr Dreck, the publisher in this novel, tells Vance Weston that *Ulysses* is an elephant of a novel. It is a criticism better turned upon *Hudson River Bracketed* itself, for this is a book which carries a great deal of excess weight to no avail. The tight construction which marks Wharton's best work, *Ethan Frome*, for example, is replaced here by a wandering dissipation. Many descriptions are laboured, far too much time is spent delineating peripheral people and places. The dilemmas of Vance and Halo are reiterated to such an extent that the reader could be forgiven for thinking she had lost her place and was reading the same section twice. Too many subjects are taken up and expounded upon, to the detriment of what is essentially a fascinating core issue; the development of a writer in relation to a world which is sinking into an easy union with the purveyors of mass culture.

One of the main flaws in *Hudson River Bracketed*, and there are many, is its lack of even a semblance of objectivity. W.B. Yeats once expressed the common belief that it is "not a writer's business to hold opinions": Wharton not only appears to hold many in this novel, she also expresses them constantly. She uses her fiction as a forum for her views upon the "cultureless", "pastless" *nouveau riche* of the

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Midwest, for her views upon the prostitution of the New York literary society, for her disparagement of home-brewed religiosity, for her scorn of educational standards in America. The novel only comes into its own when her writing loses its pedagogic quality, and she delves into the relationships between the writer and other people, and more importantly, between the artist and mass culture.

When the focus is on the Midwest, scorn is the predominant tone, although it is witty enough, and sometimes indulgent enough, to be forgiven. Vance's family move from Pruneville in Nebraska to Hallelujah, where, praise be, the family fortunes increase dramatically. From there they move to Advance, where fortunes steadily get better, and finally settle in an untouchable state of financial safety in the petit bourgeois haven of Euphoria.

Euphoria, Illinois, is presented by Edith Wharton as an aesthetic void wherein nothing of any worth can flourish. In her sketches of place and people she treads a thin line between gentle laughter and patronising snobbery. Mrs Weston, Vance's mother

stayed at home, looked after her children, fed her husband well, and, whenever he made a "turnover", bought a picture or a piano cover to embellish one or the other of their successive dwellings. She took a wholesome interest in dress, had herself manicured once a week after they moved to Euphoria, and by the time they had built their new house on Mapledale Avenue had saved up enough to have a sun parlour with palms and a pink gramophone which was the envy of the neighbourhood.'

In a new town such as Euphoria, old methods of identifying class distinctions are non-existent, for there are no rooted old families with old money to give them any validity. However, in this society of industrial capitalism, in which "'There' was where the money was-always and exclusively" social distinctions are still of enormous

importance. A grid or table of wealth is necessary so that one can chart one's social standing in relation to everybody else. With no recognized class structures to do the job, this has to be done by a sophisticated system of polite behaviour, "tasteful" acquisition and ostentatious display. Mrs Weston does it by being *seen* to have a weekly manicure and by possessing items hardly useful or beautiful; pink gramophones find their chief use in being pure commodities. This is why Mrs Weston's one weakness is her fear of burglars. Rachel Bowlby comments on commodities as symbols of wealth:

The commodity is a sign whose value is derived from its monetary price relative to other commodities, and not from any properties of usefulness or necessity.²

This system, named "conspicuous consumption" by Thorstein Veblen³ is used by Undine Spragg in *The Custom of The Country* and by Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, but here it is operating all around the hero, Vance Weston, and he reacts against it. The only values Vance knows are Euphoria values, "where electric light, hot water, the telephone, a wireless, and a Ford in a cement garage are no longer privileges but necessities", where the town's motto is "Me for the Front Row", where the past is another country and family houses are "shells shed annually, almost, like a crab's". Despite this, Vance is a sensitive soul: "he had an idea that they were starving to death there without knowing it."

Vance's disillusion with his background comes first from witnessing his grandfather's lecherous encounter with Floss Delaney, a girl whom Vance is seeing at the time. It is the pain of this which galvanizes him to go to New York state, where he meets Halo Spear, the

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girl from an old house and old family who is too bright, like her name, but who imbues Vance with a sense of the importance of history and ancestry.

It is Halo who inculcates what is to become Vance's theory of art, which is that there is a tradition which one should not run from in vainglorious hope of sounding a "new note", but rather run towards and immerse oneself in so that one is not merely "another orphan" in the world, but part of a great continuity, busy shoring up fragments against one's ruin.

Aside from owing something to Eliot, Vance's theory may have some of its foundation in Thoreau, for like him he takes art to be organic, relating to nature and humanity, and not merely using the totems of western culture to give it authenticity. But Vance's theory is not intrinsic to the novel; the passages detailing it read like pieces of Walden dropped from a great height. The Willows give Vance

the idea of a different rhythm, a different time beat: a movement without jerks or breaks, flowing down from ever so far off in the hills, bearing ships to the sea...⁴

Vance cannot imagine writing anything that had not been "hailed up with infinite precaution from some secret pool of being as to which he knew nothing as yet but the occasional leap, deep down in it, of something alive but invisible". Much of the material for this novel has not been hailed up from any "pool of being". Instead of writing with "infinite precaution" Wharton does not seem to attempt a very cohesive structure, and her characters are less well drawn than normal. Speeches such as Halo's "Do you get up early - do you care about sunrises?" and her "We'll see the stars fade like flowers and a

new world born - don't you feel it's a new world every morning" grate harshly on the ear. Some of the musings of Vance or Halo, both with the inevitable dots to show how freely their minds roam, come close to being unbearable:

...At least, they're only magic carpets, some of them, to carry one to the other side of the moon. But they won't stand banging and beating. You see, books have souls, like people: that is, like a few people....⁵

It is Halo who is really responsible for Vance leaving Euphoria, and Wharton never indicates that this is anything other than a wise move. But there are rather too many references to the go-getting nature of a town like Euphoria, where people do not look into the past because they have no connection with it. Vance "hardly knew that collections of books existed as personal possessions" before he came to the library at the Willows. Vance is constantly seen as the ill-educated kid from way out West, misunderstanding Halo's reference to the Delphic oracle and believing that "morn" and "gone" rhyme in English poetry. There are also too many examples of how little he has ever been exposed to "great" poetry, and a rather unbelievable passage in which he is filled with wonder at reading "Kubla Khan" for the first time, having no idea who wrote it, and yet is perfectly familiar with "The Ancient Mariner". By the time he runs to Halo near the end of the novel, desperate to know who "The Russians" are and to read their work, it is easy to be heartily tired of his perennially jejune enthusiasm.

Yet his enthusiasm is natural and logical: he has discovered that there is something beyond the pink gramophone world inhabited by his family. In fact, Vance's superiority is shown by his frank admission

that he does not know who "The Russians" are; his family are the kind to pretend knowledge for fear of demonstrating their lack of it: knowledge is also a commodity which confers a high standing in a community. Vance has lived all of his life in an environment where things, achievements and even intellect only function as commodities which have a certain value in relation to each other, and ultimately serve to indicate the status of the owner of these commodities. All his life there has been no indication that there is more to life than purchasing wealth symbols and seeing "the whole period of industrial development" as "humanity's supreme achievement". Therefore the sudden discovery of a world relatively uninvolved with commerce and the profit motive, preoccupied with truth and beauty, will be a source of constant amazement. This is one of the strengths of the novel, and a proof that Wharton was not so old-fashioned as is commonly supposed. ed. Rachel Bowlby, citing Jean Baudrillard, does not seem so very far from Edith Wharton:

In pre-capitalist society, there was an order of meaning in which things, gestures, work and activities were recognizably connected with a stable and functioning social ground. The ultimate effect of capitalism, Baudrillard claims, in its reified, consumer form, is to turn this system of use values into one of exchange values...All is (arbitrary) signs: we live in a structuralist universe where meanings are given by the relation of opposition and association existing between terms, and there is little possibility of getting beneath the surface layer of its system to see the supposedly existing reality - the real relation of people and things - beneath.⁶

By a very circuitous route, *Hudson River Bracketed* charts Vance Weston's attempt to escape from Euphoria's standards, which are the fairly new standards of unquestioning American capitalism. He tries to replace the neo-real, the surface life based on acquisition which passes for reality, with the real⁶, trying to cut away the social mesh

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everybody seems caught in to find whatever is beyond it. Postmodernists might contend that there is nothing whatever beyond it; that the new real is not a pseudo-real, is not a mask hiding the flesh of the real, but has merged irrevocably with the flesh to produce the 'neo-real'. But in this novel, the preoccupation with finding the "real" is not invalid, for Wharton is interested in the idea that there is still some sort of 'old real' that America is in danger of losing; has already lost, perhaps, and which, provided he is true to himself, someone like Vance can find:

The real trouble, (Vance) thought, was that most people took so long to discover the essential; wasted such precious moments clearing away rubbish before they got to the heart of a thing.⁷

Yet does Edith Wharton suppose that there was an idyllic time before capitalism when there was no screen blocking our understanding of "the real relation of people and things". According to Marx, this popular conception merely confuses the issue: "Let us not go back to a fictitious primordial state, as the political economist does when he tries to explain. Such a primordial state explains nothing. It only pushes the issue back into a grey, nebulous distance"⁸. There is a tendency when surveying the detrimental effects of capitalism to see the time before the industrial revolution as a kind of Spenserian Arcadia, when rural people lived in harmony with each other and with the land. This is not indulged in by Edith Wharton. The problem as she sets it out in *Hudson River Bracketed* is that in places like Euphoria the consumer culture which has grown as a result of economic prosperity is not a "real" culture because it offers no prospect of challenge.

To explain, the culture of a society should always challenge

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itself, else it cannot develop. A culture in the most general sense can be defined as the body of belief, understanding, knowledge and taste which each generation inherits and then changes in a society. Consumer society, aping this, is a shabby construction centred on the deception of the people, because it spoons out an easily digestible culture which does not so much as attempt any kind of cultural advance, which even stops up the passages to action because it offers ostensibly easy ways to pass the time and fulfil one's dreams. According to Theodor Adorno.

Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them. In so far as a culture becomes wholly assimilated to and integrated in those petrified relations, human beings are once more debased.⁹

In Euphoria, the consumer culture of which Mrs Weston is so committed a member, accommodates itself entirely to the status quo. This is what Wharton objects to; the communities which have been built up in the West have been built by people escaping from the last civilizations they have known, and they have not seen any need to bring with them high culture, which they do not understand:

The meagreness of his inherited experience, the way it had been torn off violently from everything which had gone before, again struck him with a pang of impoverishment. On the Fourth of July, at Advance and then at Euphoria, the orators of the day (and Grandpa Scrimser foremost among them) had been much given to dilating on the priceless qualities the pioneers had brought with them into the wilderness. To Vance it sometimes seemed that they had left the rarest of all behind...¹⁰.

As Vance realizes, "the social classifications of Euphoria were based on telephones and bathtubs", with these objects functioning as synecdoches for the obsession with the acquisition of the new. Even Grandma Scrimser's religion is really a continuous thirst for bringing

in the new:

She (Grandma) and Sadie were always rushing about to religious meetings, or to lectures on Sanitation (if she'd only looked at her own drains!), or on Diet (when you'd eaten Grandma's food!) or whatever the newest religious, moral or medical fad was. Generally too, there would be some long-haired fanatic there, holding forth about the last "new" something or other in religion or morals, as eloquently as Mrs Weston herself discoursed on refrigerators and electric cookers.''

Grandma Scrimser and her husband are in great demand on the Fourth of July in tableaux picturing traditional American scenes, which would seem to run counter to Grandma Scrimser's zeal for reformation, except for the fact that her favourite tableau is as the Pioneer Couple, going forth forever to discover a new and better world.

The fetish of the new has taken on unprecedented proportions with the advent of mass consumption born of industrial capitalism. Capital, personified in the kind of men to whom Wharton referred in contemptuous tones as "The Lords of Pittsburgh", strongly encouraged the populace to believe that they needed new commodities, and set out to make the products as seductive as possible. The promise of necessity was often seen as fraud when the goods were brought home. The advent of capitalism altered the mind-set of the average man or woman, so that suddenly whatever you owned *meant* something, and it was imperative to be better than your peers.

The novel is set in the time when the new was grafting itself onto the old, so that the characters are sometimes aware of what is happening to them. The fiction unwinds around the question of whether or not it is too late to save a few souls from encroaching uniformity and commercialism. Halo Spear has a finer comprehension of the problem

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than Vance, with his background, can have. She expresses exasperation that the old standards in teaching are now no longer considered effective- "Oh why aren't people in our country taught-", and, in musing about Vance after her marriage to Lewis Tarrant, remembers that "she heard the *authentic* note" when he recited his poem to her, and thinks now: "Poor little product of a standardized world, perhaps never to be thus laurelled again!" Halo knows what the "real" is, and understands its importance: she spots the "real thing" in Vance and has to marry Lewis Tarrant, quite palpably an example of the "neo-real", who has to pretend his academic acumen until his wife primes him with appropriate eloquencies. Tarrant is so much the unhappy figure of Wharton's new man that he can understand nothing except in terms of cash and status.

Tarrant buys Halo by putting her under a financial obligation; she is the payment by the Spears for their financial debt to Tarrant. Thus we see human beings are given an exchange value in the novel, and as long as Halo is mindful of the debt and shoulders the responsibility for it, she will behave like a commodity in that she will be a useful and decorative purchase to Tarrant for as long as is necessary. Financial necessity and familial pressures force Halo into marriage with a man whose measure she took long before marrying him.

In Vance Weston, Halo sees everything that her husband is not. Primarily, he is to her an artist to whom she can act as Muse. But Vance shows little indication of being a great artist in anything except temperament. It is a flaw of the novel that his genius is so difficult to take seriously.

Vance's output at the end of *Hudson River Bracketed* consists of

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two short stories and a novella; he has written some bad reviews on the works of his contemporaries - the implication being that there is no core of genius in them to which his instinct can attach itself - and has torn the initial chapters of his big New York novel to shreds in a fit of pique and frustration before Lewis Tarrant. Throughout the novel he is dogged by problems with money, women, business and freedom; in fact, life generally is more problematic to Vance the artist than it is to many other people. This may be autobiographical also; Wharton may have taken refuge from the chaos of life in the ordered classicism of art and made Vance do the same. In *The Gods Arrive* more is made of the egotism of the artist, very much at the expense of Vance, but here his social ineptitude is looked on more fondly by Wharton. His marriage and subsequent mistreatment of Laura Lou (in that once having married her he should either have relinquished her to her mother or looked after her properly) are written about as the folly of the young artist, rather than as the selfishness of the egotist. All of his failings in personal relationships are due to his "relationship" with his writing, and this is a fundamental part of the novel.

His marriage to Laura Lou is born of his supposedly "artistic" impetuosity, his desire to possess her immediately. After two days of wanting to kiss her he has taken the rather precipitous and presumptuous course of informing her that they will get married, and then flies into a fury when she says Bunty Hayes is calling on her the next day:

"Bunty's day?" Wrath descended on him like a thunderclap. "How dare you, after this afternoon-how dare you speak to me as if you belonged to that fellow and not to me?"¹² (my italics)

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Laura Lou functions in the plot like a commodity: he sees her, sees her new beauty, and wants to snatch her away from Bunty Hayes, whom he decides is a fatuous fool, to claim her and keep her for himself. But, like any commodity of industrial capitalism, she is brightly packaged to appeal to the consumer, who buys in his haste to possess, and only then understands the inutility of his purchase. Apart from being able to provoke his guilt, she does not become more than a commodity for she is entirely passive, his own to do with as he pleases.

His dislike of Bunty is based upon snobbery; Bunty has pretensions to connoisseurship and taste, which naturally annoy Vance because he thinks himself to be the true possessor of these qualities with no platform to prove it. Thus his proposal to Laura Lou is also born partly of his desire to have mastery over a man of less taste, giving himself a sense of ascendancy.

The same need to disdain low or "off the peg" culture, what Adorno calls "the culture industry", is evident in his revulsion from his grandmother's evangelistic preaching. Mrs Scrimser is now popular all over the Midwest for her own particular kind of religious faith, but to Vance's shame it has little intellectual substance. His overwhelming reaction, upon hearing his grandmother preach in New York to the "Seekers", is shame. It is part of his immaturity to be embarrassed by "those hideous drawling gutturals", to be unable to judge her words because of the "hideous slur of her pronunciation, blurring and soiling every word". Vance has rejected Euphoria and its get-rich-quick ideology; he therefore wishes to be accepted by New York, which will not happen if he is continually seen as a youngster

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from the sticks. He will not admit this to himself, but the shame occasioned even by her accent is proof enough. He is also antagonistic to her work because the New Yorkers want something new, a new religion now because novelty is all that sustains them, and yet his grandmother's words are not new at all, neither in style nor substance.

Vance wants Mrs Scrimser's preaching to be new enough to satisfy the novelty-hungry "Seekers" (although he knows it fails in this, as he hears Mr Spear say, "Seems to me I've met Mrs Scrimser's God before- and Mrs Scrimser too.") and yet wants her to realize that what she is currently saying in evangelistic, layman terms is what clerics have been saying for centuries. He also wants her to understand and agree with his conviction that Christianity has no need to be changed because its antiquity is in Vance's eyes its vindication, the reason it should be allowed to remain.

To Vance, wholly rejecting the pink gramophone culture which turns even religion into a commodity which can be glibly sold and easily bought, his grandmother's new trade is utter anathema, comparable in worth to the manufacture of airport novels and soap operas in giving a sop of temporary comfort to the consumer and a lot of cash to the seller. His own artistic struggle is so genuinely difficult that he is shocked and troubled by the suave dissemination of a "belief" and the unquestioning acquiescence of most of his grandmother's audiences. She is grounded absolutely in Euphoria values, and does not comprehend Vance's accusation of a lack of intellectual integrity.

This kind of culture, as Adorno points out, has its "servile

intellectuals" who defend it because

it bestows all kinds of blessings, they point out, for example, through the dissemination of information, advice, and stress reducing patterns of behaviour. Of course, as every sociological study measuring something as elementary as how politically informed the public is has proven, the information is meagre or indifferent. Moreover, the advice to be gained from the manifestations of the culture industry is vacuous, banal or worse, and the behaviour patterns are shamelessly conformist.¹³

The fact that Wharton sees Mrs Scrimser's preaching as a commodity is clear from her dry portrayal of Bunty Hayes's involvement with her tour. He explains to Vance:

"'Storecraft' aims to handle all the human interests. We can't leave out religion, any more'n we could art or plumbing. And the minute I heard about this grand new religious movement of Mrs Scrimser's, I said: "That's exactly our line of goods, and there's nobody but 'Storecraft' can do it justice."¹⁴

Mrs Scrimser acts from the best of intentions, willing to preach for no money at first and then, upon the realization of her "pecuniary obligations, she was anxious to make money by her lectures". She sees herself as a plain woman whose "message is for the plain folks who want to be told how to get to God", and as her aim is not to capture people's intellects but their hearts and souls, she is not discouraged when she fails with the lacklustre "Seekers", stripped as they are of Mrs Scrimser's innocence and yet having nothing with which to replace it.

However, Vance is now steeped in the values of the past and of great literature, and "his long hours at the Willows had made any kind of intellectual imposture seem the lowest form of dishonesty". Vance is unable to tolerate the degradation of religion or art to the stage where it can be marketed by a big capitalist concern like "Storecraft"; to do so he would have to abandon hope of being an

artist. Unlike Tarrant or the affable Gratz Blemer, Vance cannot but feel despair when art is given an exchange value in the commercial world like everything else. In the end, to see art and by extension culture, in Euphoria's terms, is to give up all hope of true progress. This is Adorno's point in "Culture Industry Reconsidered":

The concepts of order which (the culture industry) hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo. They remain unquestioned, unanalysed and undialectically presupposed, even if they no longer have any substance for those who accept them... (The culture industry) proclaims; you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness...

Order is not good in itself. It would be so only as a good order. The fact that the culture industry is oblivious to this and extols order *in abstracto* bears witness to the impotence and untruth of the messages it conveys. While it claims to lead the perplexed, it deludes them with false conflicts which they are to exchange for their own.¹⁵

This is the essence of what Vance Weston fears; that his grandmother, in descending to the level of disseminating low culture, would be working directly against all that he is struggling for in his attempt to write great literature. What Adorno describes in his essay is enacted in Euphoria, and Vance is trying not only to escape that personally but also to do something to prevent mass culture, including of course religion, being the low grade opiate of the people.

Vance, in standing up for high culture and despising "the culture industry", is keeping true to his ideals:

The fraud was there, it was only further back, in the national tolerance of ignorance, the sentimental plausibility, the rush for immediate results, the get-rich -quick system applied to the spiritual life... The being he loved with all the tenacity of childish affection was exactly on a level with her dupes.

He did not answer the letter and his grandmother did not write again.¹⁶

Yet this honourable course, undertaken at the emotional expense of his grandmother, is also undertaken at the physical expense of Laura Lou. His grandmother sees it is necessary for Laura Lou to have a stable and comfortable environment, not to mention adequate health care, and she is willing to pay for this. In keeping to his principles, Vance, selfishly oblivious of his wife's needs, is effectively signing Laura Lou's death warrant.

Vance measures the problem, reflecting that his grandmother's incomprehension of his objections exonerates her to a large extent, for as far as she was concerned "She was only giving these people what they wanted, and what she sincerely believed they ought to have." Yet this reasoning does not move him to an acceptance of her offer; what can be called his intellectual snobbery, his elitism, or his honest attempt to preserve consciousness at the expense of unthinking conformity, prevents him from doing so.

That other artists do not share his concern either with the ethics of intellectual fraud for financial ends, or the wonder of the creative act, is a cause for sombre musings in Vance. Commercially, the work of Gratz Blemer is more successful than his own book *Instead*, if only because it is a more marketable size. Wharton pointedly reports the publishers as judging art in purely commercial terms, as Bunty Hayes does:

If *Instead* had a blemish, it was being what the *dry-goods stores called an "outsize"*; the public did like to get what they were used to.... (my italics)¹⁷

Blemer himself is described as an artist who is fully content with worldly success, good-naturedly giving Vance his opinion of novel writing at a cocktail party. He is drawn as a man clearly at odds with

the romantically conceived notion of the artist: rather than struggling in a garret he is at home at literary parties where music is played on the Steinway, and Blemer can help himself genially to cigars and cocktails. Vance, anxious to commune with his fellow artist, asks him about the mystery of novel writing. Blemer proceeds to disillusion him:

"Novel-writing? Why, I don't know. You have a story you want to tell, and instead of buttonholing a fellow and pouring it out -which is the only natural way-you shut yourself up and reel it off on a Remington, and send it to the publisher so that more fellows can hear it. That's the only difference, I guess -that and the cash returns," he added with a well-fed chuckle.¹⁸

Vance is perplexed by the paradox he finds in Blemer, in that the other writer is not given to musing on artistic processes and does not seem buried in abstruse profundities all the time "...and yet he had written a good book". Wharton draws Blemer so that his decency is apparent, and Vance is shown more sharply as the idealistic young writer. He is caught up in the image of the struggling writer, and it is part of his innocence that he cannot conceive of great art being born within a framework of financial reward.

Vance is intensely aware of the opulence of his surroundings, and the of opportunities open to these people which are open to so few others. By the end of the chapter he is determined to use New York as the subject of his next book, but even here he is aware of the superficiality of the society, albeit a society which soaks up the higher arts. The air is full "if not with ideas at least with phrases and illusions that have led up to them."

Temporary immersion in this society is "intoxicating", that is, it provides a temporary stimulus to Vance as a writer, an observer,

but it would not suit him to belong to it. The artists here treat art as a craft, labour for which the reward is both money and renown. Those who look at and buy the art seem not to be doing so from any purely aesthetic impulse, but for purposes of social intercourse and integration. People flutter around Vance and ask him questions which illustrate to him how half-hearted they are -if they are even that enthusiastic- about getting genuine answers to what they ask. He is used as a mere focal point in gatherings by those who feel as if they need an emblem of Art or Culture to justify their indulgence.

It is too close to the consumer culture of Euphoria for Vance to be happy with it, but as an artist all is grist to his mill and when he takes the first chapters of the book to Tarrant he is convinced they are good.

Unfortunately Tarrant, without Halo to modify his excesses, accuses Vance of double dealing and completely refuses either to absolve him from his contract or amend it to give him a living wage. Tarrant's undoubted superiority in this instance, having the right of ownership of all that Vance produces, as well as having some mysterious right of ownership to Halo (her family's debt, of which Vance is ignorant) causes Vance to fly into a blind temper. He tears up the manuscript in Tarrant's face; "He could not resist the sombre physical satisfaction of destroying under that man's eyes what he had made..."

This is of course a barely conscious demonstration that Vance still possesses some degree of autonomy. If Tarrant is the owner of every word Vance writes, if Vance is in effect his bondsman, then he can at least assert some small degree of power by the complete

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annihilation of the very words which were to bring Tarrant new acclaim and more funds for his flagging enterprise.

Tarrant, after this display, refuses more steadfastly than ever to release him from the contract, and Vance proceeds to step out into the street and beat up a nearby pedlar who is busy in his turn beating his horse.

It is almost impossible now, and certainly would be in 1929, to write a realist novel including a scene in which a poor man senselessly beats a horse, without comparisons being drawn at least with *Crime and Punishment*, if not with *The Secret Agent*. In the former novel, R. comes across a man beating his horse because it has already fallen down. In *The Secret Agent* the cabbie, desperate for a fare, finds his emaciated horse has come to a standstill and, despite Stevie's repulsion from the act, proceeds to whip the poor animal. "He did this, not because his soul was cruel and his heart evil, but because he had to earn his fare". It is a metaphor for the pyramid of capitalist economics. Those at the bottom are obliged to concentrate on making enough money regardless of other considerations, and may just as well be slaves. No welfare state will be there to help these men if they cannot make their horses work, and when they see the means of providing food for their families flag under them, they beat them. It would probably be more appropriate to beat the people who keep them in thrall, except that it is to all intents and purposes a faceless system.

With Vance it is different. He is Tarrant's slave; all that issues from his pen belongs to Tarrant, a man who has the human sensitivity of an iron block. Tarrant cannot see what is irking Vance

anymore than the pedlar can see what is wrong with his horse, and so Vance vicariously, and mistakenly, punches the pedlar in the face, thus perpetuating the system. If it had been a genuine blow against Tarrant, expressing his horror of art being fettered to the dollar, it would have been a blow in the right direction.

Wharton has a very ambiguous relationship to her hero, as Marilyn French has reflected. Any *Künstlerroman* can be taken to be in some degree autobiographical, indeed Louis Auchincloss said that Vance Weston was "an extension of Mrs Wharton's vision of herself". But this portrait of the artist necessarily contains within itself a dialectical opposition. As an artist, or at least as a man with high aesthetic principles, we can respect him. But as a man he is not worthy of respect. He refuses to release Laura Lou, not from love but from a mixture of pity and of pride. He rejects his warm-hearted grandmother on the basis of what is essentially an esoteric principle. Vance absorbs love from others but does not give a great deal out in return. Thus respect for him is mingled very much with scorn, and as Marilyn French says, "since he is the centre of the novel, the core is soft, weak, and the novel less compelling than it might be"¹⁷.

The dialectic is resolved to an extent by the conclusion of the novel. Vance fails to understand Halo when she displays her depth of feeling over Laura Lou's death, and fails to match up to the genuine grief of Bunty Hayes. His own reaction is nowhere near as vehement. That this is not simply because Laura Lou is by this time little more than a burden is evidenced by the last paragraph of the novel. Vance is the kind of artist who has to be distant from the world, who, indeed, can often be nothing else. Wharton did not write the novel as

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a portrait of the artist as a young hero, and here she provides a rationale for the two different sides of his personality. He is an artist, but an anthropological attitude and the discerning, distanced eye of the scientist are necessary components of his art.

he wondered if at crucial moments the same veil of unreality would always fall between himself and the soul nearest him, if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones¹⁹

Perhaps if he had had more of a genuine capacity for feeling, he would not have been a writer, might have "thrown poor words away/ And been content to live". As it is he is alone, filled with a sense of his mission and his own importance.

Vance, in refusing to be dragged down into the culture industry and in refusing to be the slave of capitalism as represented by Lewis Tarrant, is escaping the fetters and aiming at greatness. Helene Cixous is very conscious of the strength needed to effect this distancing, because it must be in spite of the "fear of exile, of cold, of solitude, which follows the artist." As she says, even Moses wanted to go down and join his people at the bottom of the mountain, who were intent on the adulation of the golden calf. There are links here which are illuminating. Moses is entrusted with carrying the truth down to the people, who are busy worshipping money and commodities. The commodity, the calf, has more importance than all the jewellery from which it was made because it is the culmination of a community effort. They *dance* in celebration of that fact it is there. Moses, upon seeing them dancing and singing, in his eyes refusing to hear the truth, is angered;

And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his

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hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink it.²⁰

Vance throws away the newspapers which proclaim the new found popular success and wealth of his grandmother, and his equivalent of making her consume the powder, of making her eat her words, in some sense, is to refuse to communicate with her on a personal level any more. "He did not answer the letter, and his grandmother did not write again". He is ashamed of her, and his reaction is to shame her in return, as Moses does with his people, making those who do not understand come to see why what they have done is wrong.

Helene Cixous says that many people love society more than the ritual of truth, and therefore fear governs tastes and activities. The fear, according to her, is of "death by social starvation" - if you write the truth it is likely that you will have articles rejected, there will be no banquets, no cliques. What estranges Vance from the other writers is the same thing as that which severs him from his family; they are all needful of others more than Vance is, or perhaps we should say more than Vance is willing to acknowledge. Mrs Weston buys her pink gramophones and her bulging pink plant pots, of course because she wants to set herself up as higher than her peers, but more importantly, because she wants to establish herself as slightly superior to them within the same framework, within the framework of their own understanding.

In Vance's eyes, people are duped by big business and the slick, easily digestible culture it manufactures. It is the fact that these people exist and are duped which forces Vance to write.

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The acceptance of the canned culture which threatens to overrun America is as big as a biblical sin to Vance. It is for him a self-imposed necessity to reject all of it, "the national tolerance of ignorance" as well as the adoration of pink gramophones. And if he does that at the expense of his grandmother's feelings towards him, so be it. Vance must therefore exile himself, but surely he would concur with Hélène Cixous when she says: "It is not exile that frightens me most, it is not having the freedom of speech"²¹. Whatever else Wharton thinks of Vance Weston, she admires his scorn of the easy dollar and the integrity of his ambition.

NOTES

1. Edith Wharton; p8, *Hudson River Bracketed*, Virago Press 1986. First pub. in 1929, and henceforth referred to as *Hudson*.
2. Rachel Bowlby; p2, *Just Looking*, Methuen, 1985.
3. Thorstein Veblen, "Theory of the Leisure Class".
4. *Hudson*, p345.
5. *Ibid.*, p113.
6. *Rachel Bowlby*, p25, *op.cit.*
7. *Hudson*, p166.
8. Karl Marx, Economic Writings, 1857-1867 in *The Portable Karl Marx*, Penguin, London, 1983.
9. Theodor Adorno; p86, *The Culture Industry*, Routledge, 1991.
10. *Hudson*, p323.
11. *Ibid.*, p10.
12. *Ibid.*, p202.
13. Theodor Adorno, p89, *op.cit.*
14. *Hudson*, p440.
15. Theodor Adorno, p90, *op.cit.*
16. *Hudson* p497.
17. Marilyn French, p539, Afterword to *Hudson*.
19. *Hudson* p401
20. Exodus, chapter 32, verses 19-20
21. Helene Cixous, Amnesty Lecture, Oxford, June 1992.

Tis strange what a man may do,
and a woman yet think him an angel.

Henry Esmond, Thackeray.

Woman is valuable in so far as she permits man to fulfill his being as a man. But man is valuable in and of himself.

Male principles in *Parole de Femme*, Annie Leclerc.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE GODS ARRIVE

The Gods Arrive is Wharton's sequel to *Hudson River Bracketed*, and, unusually for a sequel, it is a more compelling and convincing novel than its predecessor. The protagonist, Vance Weston, formerly making his first steps into the writing world, is now more established, and is wandering around Europe dabbling into novel writing, and trying to "find himself" both as a writer and as a man.

At the beginning, Vance is setting sail for Spain with Halo Tarrant, the wife of Lewis Tarrant, and Vance's muse of old. Lewis has asked for a divorce in order to marry the stereotypical and lazily drawn figure of Mrs Pulsifer. In defiance of the old social codes of New York, Halo has taken rather precipitous advantage of her imminent freedom and is escaping to Europe with her lover. Divorce is now just about acceptable in the top New York circles, but speeding away the minute it is suggested rather than waiting for everything to be finalized, is definitely still indecorous behaviour, and New York still refuses to tolerate it.

Vance is viewed less indulgently than he was in *Hudson River Bracketed*. His selfishness of his spirit, which he and those around him rather too easily dismiss as the necessary self-preoccupation of

the artist, is much in evidence throughout this novel:

"Oh, damn artists! I just want to please Vance Weston," he rejoined imperturbably, his arm about her shoulder. She laughed, and kissed him; but inwardly she thought: "I must just adapt myself; I must learn to keep step."¹

Halo has many more obstacles, many more dependents, than has Vance, added to which is her steadfast determination to give Vance a trouble free path to individual creativity and freedom. She sees herself always as only fit to serve others; in childhood she served her parents and in adulthood she saved them from having to drop all their dreams and little self-indulgences by marrying Lewis Tarrant, devoting her energies and intelligence to serving his egoism, whose wealth supported the Spears. When Lewis becomes conscious that she is paying lip-service to him, and when Halo herself wearies of the endless placations and the subduing of her own sharp wit to make his appear more vital, Vance Weston becomes the flame to which Halo thankfully sacrifices herself. To some extent she welcomes the destruction of certain facets of her personality, seeing it as an opportunity to prostrate herself before Art and Man.

Halo's intellect is stressed in both novels, and at times her measured sentences and piercing insights show up the self-obsessed wallowings of Vance to his great detriment. Yet she perceives herself continually as a mere assistant, or source of inspiration.

Halo cannot seem to lift herself beyond the boundaries which society has set for her sex, and although she attempts to become oblivious of conventions, in reality she is chained to them by a need for a framework within which to set her life. When order, in the form of marriage and recognition by her peers is forsworn, she often seems

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to be blundering through a miasmic swamp in which her only rock is Vance Weston. He is a most unstable base upon which to found any mode of living, and both he and Halo must come to a greater understanding of both themselves and each other before Wharton will allow them a satisfactory union.

In Spain Halo stays at home whilst Vance goes to a party; one to which she is not invited because she is a mistress. She is understandably upset when Vance, whom she thought was aware of the nuances of her situation and her emotional response to it, goes blithely off to the party and dismisses any qualms with the attitude that Halo has chosen her bed and must lie on it. Characteristically, it does not occur to Vance that he might at least lie next to her and keep solidarity. Later, when he is confronted, he can hardly make sense of her grievance, and it is hinted that this is due to Vance's inability to grasp common sense realities on account of his genius.

He is excited at the thought of being invited to a party full of European aristocrats, and pays no attention to Halo's exclusion. As a man, he finds he can operate on a double-standard -enjoy the love and devotion of a married woman and still be included in the social world from which his attentions have excluded her.

Vance is eventually redeemed when the petty narrow-minded behaviour of Mrs Glaisher serves to show him how Halo has been suffering from this compatriotic intolerance and his own oblivion to it. He dashes straight to Tarrant to beg for a divorce, but even here he is disregarding Halo, for a few words with her could have shown him the potential harm of this. He returns to console her, only to find that she has learnt how to deal with her pain and has licked the

wounds caused by Mrs Glaisher alone.

Despite Vance's occasional flashes of insight and generosity, Halo is lonely. Wharton conveys this with an infectious sympathy and a welcome lack of sentimentality. Halo is always forgiving, welcoming, passive, enduring, yet eager, and beneath this is concealing a turmoil of doubts and jealousies and grievous loneliness of which only a saint could possibly be free, given the behaviour of Vance. In her fear of losing him, however, she struggles to appear angelic; never angry, never reproachful. Her very virtues, predictably, begin to irritate Vance. He needs her to be more responsive, even if it is to be angry or tearful. Her constant repression of herself begins to weary him, and he speaks of her as possibly being less of a woman because of it.

In *The Gods Arrive* it is made clear that the training Halo has undergone has made her believe in certain cultural imperatives as given, and although her talents and capabilities are obvious, Halo is unable to acknowledge them as useful in any capacity other than to serve. She has not learnt, even with her knowledge of the past and her common sense, that she could be independent and totally alone, without ever being as lonely as when she is honouring the unnoticing and unappreciative Vance with her life and soul. This fact never really hits Halo fully, although she does come to realize that all her actions and thoughts in the last few years have been for Vance, never for herself. When she sees this she leaves Vance and rejects a rather moving offer from Tarrant to have her back. It would be unfair, she explains, she would rather be alone. At this point in the novel, such a move looks quite promising in terms of Halo's potential for freedom. She looks set for a time of restful independence in which to restore

her emotional health, and to convince herself that to be a woman is not necessarily to be a slave.

Yet we would be mistaken if we believed Wharton would allow us to imagine Halo posed at the end of *The Gods Arrive* viewing the open sky, rather than accepting the sight of "the large and imposing figure of a gentleman which Milton recommended for (her) perpetual adoration."² One could wish that this were more Kate Chopin than Edith Wharton, for the former subverts the traditional responses to being deprived of a husband;

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial...She saw a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe that they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.³

This is normative feminist writing, emphasizing woman's need for independence and individuality, and ridding itself of the charge of sexism by stressing that women as well as men are guilty of imposing their will on others. The story has a twist, for the husband rather inconsiderately rings the doorbell and walks in to the house alive. However, the point of the tale is surely the familiar one of persuading the reader that the popular stereotypes of women are erroneous, that women are really passionately anxious to embrace life and rush into a whirlwind existent without a thought for security or stability.

The problem with rejecting stereotypes is that one usually finds oneself in the unenviable position of denying that which has at least

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its basis firmly rooted in fact. In this respect, *The Gods Arrive* is much more subtle, because Halo knows the open sky is there, but feels compelled to keep on adoring Milton's gentleman. In life it is not, contrary to what some feminists may maintain, a simple black and white issue. A woman's life is not necessarily improved if she manages to emerge from the normal role of female passivity to spiritual and physical independence, just by throwing off the burden of the man. She has been too conditioned for too long for it not to leave her, nine times out of ten, floundering in a desolate wasteland of ontological uncertainty.

Halo cannot work out what meaning life will have for her if her *raison d'etre* of serving is taken from her. It is fortunate for her that the child looks set to fill the gap. But when she leaves Vance and goes to see Tarrant for a divorce, it is clear that taking the decision to free herself from someone who freed himself of her long ago leaves Halo not as a free agent but as an aimless non-agent - in other words, someone with hardly any power to act. She is still bound up, like Lily Bart, in being the surveyed, the object and the tool of man, and can hardly create herself mentally in any other terms. With Tarrant, catching 'the cry under his pondered syllables' she thinks; Am I worth anything better than this? Shall I ever be wanted in this way again?

...It's true I'm alone, and that the future's rather blank. But all that can't be changed.⁴

Wharton shows that the ambiguity at the heart of this relationship is one of her key themes. She expresses the nuances of feeling, the problems which a real relationship are likely to bring, far from the Grimm's fairy tale of living happily ever after, and far

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too from the Bunyanesque voyage of self-discovery, where every character other than the hero is there simply as obstacle or aid. Nor is this novel in the mode of the French realists. It is a psychological novel which explores the traditions, norms and taboos of a culture together with the response of the individual to those things. The response of the individual, particularly when the individuals in question are Halo and Vance, is manifestly complex. In the Chopin short story the writer emphasizes the delight the married woman feels at the prospect of being 'free', trying to make the point that it is possible that half of society can feel repressed and domineered because they belong to a patriarchal society, or because they must invariably bow to the expectation that they will marry and remain married.

Wharton is not interested in such overt preaching; she is more concerned with trying to illuminate the ambiguities of the human condition, and of human relationships. The Halo who sailed into a future as Vance's mistress with such optimism is, by chapter 34, ready to face a very different future with some fortitude;

"Don't we all make each other unhappy, sooner or later -often without knowing it? I sometimes think I've got beyond happiness or unhappiness -I don't feel as if I were made for them any more. I have nothing to complain of -or to regret. But I want to be alone; to go my own way, without depending on anybody. I want to be Halo Spear again, that's all."⁵

Of course, Halo does not want to be on her own, Wharton is not about the business of showing how woman can be an island. When she goes back to live alone at the Willows she tries to think positively about "how far pots and pans could go toward filling an empty heart" and gets rid of her loneliness by looking forward to the birth of her

child;

Housemaking and housekeeping were her escape, she supposed: she must build up a home for her son...⁶

Halo busies herself convincing herself that she can be happy bringing up her baby alone, and that it will not be a substitute for Vance, or indeed anything to do with Vance. The fact that she always thinks of her unborn child as male is a major clue to how successful she is at this self-delusion. She tries not to think of it as Vance's child as well as her own; it is almost as if she is claiming the child as a reward for what she has endured in the relationship. The identity of the father is almost incidental anyway -the fundamental point is that the baby is another human being to whom Halo can devote all her energies.

Yet she seems bound by the patriarchal culture which tells us firmly that in some areas women have limitations of which men are free. We see that the character of Halo Spear is given fixed parameters not only to her ambition, but also to her ability, and this irrespective of social conditioning. There is a picture which Wharton paints in Chapter 10 of *Hudson River Bracketed* from which Halo never really seems able to escape:

Ah, how she envied the girls of her age who had their own cars, who led their own lives, sometimes even had their own bachelor flats in New York! Except as a means to independence riches were nothing to her, and to acquire them by marriage and then coldly make use of them for her own purposes, was as distasteful to her as anything in her present life. And yet she longed for freedom, and saw no other way to it. If only her eager interest in life had been matched by some creative talent. She could half paint, she could half write -but her real gift (and she knew it) was for appreciating the gifts of others. Even had discipline and industry fostered her slender talents they would hardly have brought her a living. She had measured herself and knew it -and what else was there for her but marriage?

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The question is only half ironic -apart from windfalls, marriage to a fairly liberal husband is one of the few respectable ways of escaping from the restraints imposed on maidens by the rest of this society. However, the limited Halo served up by Wharton in this passage and elsewhere does not correspond to the character we see acting and speaking and thinking in the novel. The girl and then woman of these two novels is eminently capable; if she cannot write she can criticize and review, and she begins to get a real feeling for paint and painting towards the end of *Hudson River Bracketed*.

Edith Wharton's apparent assumption that a woman can either be an artist or a wife does not seem to bring any moral questions into her head. She simply needs a reason for Halo's servility and for her acceptance of her role as dumb muse. It is glib to explain that because she is not an artist there remains nothing for her except marriage. Of course, a critique of society is implicit here; that economic necessity and social nicety limit a woman's choice to such an extent is indeed horrifying. But the very idea that a woman such as Halo can measure herself and not find a wealth of choice is just as horrifying. It is an untruth to claim that the only options are poet or mute muse. I regard it as a blemish to the book that Halo's acceptance of the age-old passive role as wife and mother is not held up to inspection. Why she accepts so readily is likewise left unquestioned, and nor are her so-called limitations pushed at to see if they will give.

However, in her responses to Vance's work she is portrayed as highly intelligent and ready to offer constructive criticism. She holds her own admirably when Vance's friends discuss his new novel

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with her, and we even feel a certain pride in her when she shows herself so quick-witted to Vance's peers. Yet we have been tricked into this, we should rather be irritated that her intellectual zenith seems to be the appreciation or criticism of her husband's work. She seems superior to Vance in so many ways -even intellectually at times. Vance never once shows himself as having one iota of perception greater than Halo's. Where he takes advantage, she makes allowances; where he indulges himself, she endures.

Finally, Vance comes to her, almost inadvertently, chastened physically and spiritually. Lear-like, he has been chastened by his ordeal, and has learned the extent of his folly. His first strategy is to come out with an "I am bound upon a wheel of fire but thou art a soul in bliss" routine which Halo dismisses, pointing out with her usual insight that "If you say no, it must be because I'm less to you than any other woman, and not more." She tells him then of her pregnancy, and the novel ends on an ambiguous but chiefly promising note. Vance's half-gods -those gods of fame, of lust, of self-indulgence, have proved themselves unworthy deities, and in his exile in the wilderness Vance has realized the hollowness of the bright clinking sound of uninformed, uninterested praise. He has had the fact of the final unfulfilment of lust flung in his face. At last, he returns to what he knew in his heart he always needed; the stability and deep-rootedness which his life could not offer in his youth, and which he could not accept later until he had the strength to banish the half-gods. In Emerson's words;

When the half-gods go
The gods arrive.⁷

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Yet far be it from Edith Wharton to offer a Walt Disney finale. The last scene in the book does not melt into the sound of wedding bells, but into a more prosaic vision of the future. Vance has much with which to come to terms, for his relationship here with Halo is more that of mother and son than of two lovers. There is still more than a trace of tension in the air; Browning's 'mortal screen' is still thick between them.

This screen may be that which society has erected in so strongly differentiating the roles of men and women, so that both sexes are conscious of a great gulf of understanding and empathy between them. The sexism which Virginia Woolf and so many others denounce so eloquently is here fashioned into a tale where the consequences of its poison are clear. Woolf speaks in *A Room of One's Own*, of women in Occidental society being mirrors in which to magnify the men's sense of their own importance and power. Luce Irigaray repeats this - woman is a "mirror entrusted by the masculine 'subject' with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself"².

Ever since the formative days at the Willows it has been Halo's greatest joy and pride that she has been able to "redouble" Vance in this manner, and she obviously extracted a little pleasure, at least, from her skill at manipulating her husband, too, into a better opinion of himself. Vance matures intellectually and spiritually with the aid of Halo's insights and education. At the beginning she is his muse, but not one with the vapid insipidity of an inspirational beauty. Rather, Halo played the role of muse in the same way as a political prisoner, prohibited from making her views known, would propel an idealistic writer into great heights of journalistic excellence. Halo,

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as a woman in her time and her place, and bound by the idea of her limitations, is as forbidden from being great as that.

Given all this, what bitter disillusionment must come when, after helping Vance so faithfully towards excellence, she is dismissed tersely as an appendage at best useless and at worst embarrassing, in *The Gods Arrive*. Halo sees that Vance puts her own lack of enthusiasm for the empty pretensions of his new friend Alders down to feminine inferiority. "Of course, general ideas always bore women to death", he says, and like misogynistic comments fall from his lips with increasing frequency throughout the novel. Her criticism of his work is soon peremptorily dismissed as that of an amateur and a woman to boot. Vance becomes so egocentric and super sensitive that her most gentle opinions on his work is rewarded by bitter retorts such as "an artist is never much affected by amateur judgments anyway". He tells her that he "asks other peoples opinions to please them and not to help himself".

As Vance's sexist attitudes deepen, Halo is not seen to oppose them in any way. At times she convinces herself that he is right, that she has been too pressing and too cloying. At other times she remains silent, but her silence is not commented upon by Wharton. When Vance finishes his tirade upon women, who "think that God created the universe on lemonade and lettuce sandwiches", nothing is said of Halo's reaction. Her endurance, seemingly is taken for granted by both Halo and her lover.

Vance grows away from Halo as the belief crystallizes in his mind that "Intellectual comradeship between lovers was unattainable; that was not the service which women could render to men". Such a remark

puts him rather too obviously into the category of unthinking sexists; is comradeship usually a 'service' rendered from one to another? Does Vance see Halo as his servant? And if this is not the service women can do, then what is? Floss Delaney's half-proffered favours?

At any rate, Vance sheds Halo as he would a garment suddenly unfashionable; he thinks he has her measure and that she can benefit him no further in his artistic endeavours. The pain of their estrangement seems to pass him by; Halo assumes he will cast out any hurt he might have in some story or other, whereas the pain will gnaw at her forever.

Wharton herself offers no authorial comment on Vance's behaviour; no moral strictures such as Hawthorne is fond of doling out. She believes the text should stand alone so that everyone can make a personal judgment, even if the author, like a judge, has subtly led the jurors throughout.

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Notes

1. Edith Wharton, p29, *The Gods Arrive*, henceforth referred to as *Gods*, Virago, London, 1987. First pub. in 1932.
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.
3. Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour", *Portraits*, The Women's Press..
4. *Gods*, Chapter XXXIV
5. *Ibid.*, Chapter XXXIV
6. *Ibid.*, Chapter XLI
7. Emerson, *Collected Poetry*.
8. Irigaray, *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks and de Courtivron, Harvester, 1981.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

"The genteel build themselves neo-Georgian mansions, but the fortunes that support their Augustan airs are made in sit-coms, drugs, and cheeseburgers. On both sides of the Atlantic, knights of the New Left and the Old Right prepare for the last great battle in the West, in which refinement will go forth to slay vulgarity. But the struggle is over. The dragon has long since won the victory."¹

Thus wrote Robert Pattison in 1987, in his book *The Triumph of Vulgarity*. In his first chapter, Pattison writes that "Vulgarity by its nature is impervious to condemnation. The point is not to condemn it, which has been done without success, but to describe it, which has yet to be undertaken."²

Pattison's intention in his book is not to describe it either, but to celebrate it as being part of the American way, with its symbol, rock music, having its vulgar roots in the poetry of Walt Whitman. Edith Wharton is clearly not a celebrant of the American way, and her depiction of the triumph of vulgarity is much more subtle and revealing than what Pattison has to say. Her criticism of vulgarity is located specifically in time and space. It is twentieth century American vulgarity. It is more alarming than any vulgarity of the past, although the deposed aristocracies of Europe might disagree, because it lacks any kind of transcendent vision and because it does

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not belong to a small body of people whom the ruling classes look upon with some disdain, but can be said to define America, proclaiming its own "loud good health", as Thomas Wolfe said.

Pattison, in defining America, makes no secret of his conviction that vulgarity has taken over with few ill effects, but despite his conclusions, his initial definition of the republic of Vulgaria sheds some light on *The Custom of the Country*:

The kingdom of Refinement views the prospect of an independent republic of Vulgaria with unalloyed contempt. In Vulgaria's democracy, cultivation would compete with unskilled labour. Public men with a taste for contemplation would be driven from office and replaced by noisy partisans of transient factions. Noise would be the legislated medium of all business, public or private...The transcendent forces of religion would be given the choice of conforming to the noisy sensationalism of vulgar ideology or disbanding their congregations. The media would be controlled to assure the steady flow of rabble-rousing facts and the suppression of reasoned reflection...Morality would be swallowed up in the orchestration of sensations. Culture, where it had not disappeared, would become the object of indifference or derision, and education would teach meaningful skills for the practical life. Civilization would pulsate briefly in the throes of anarchy, lapse into the paralysis of overindulgence, and pass finally into the void beyond mind, taste and decency. In short, a vulgar nation would be America, land of democracy, television, fast foods, cars, computers, high school, sexual liberation, Jerry Falwell and *The National Enquirer*.²

This passage sits awkwardly in a book which is supposed to exult in the triumph of vulgarity, for it has a distinctly Orwellian flavour to it, especially in the description of manipulation of the media, the banning of religions which offer transcendent ways of thinking and the disappearance of high culture in favour of pulp. The author believes that this new republic of Vulgaria grew independently and naturally out of the needs and joys of the masses. Edith Wharton did not believe that, and the proof is in her novels. The very idea of a republic is suggestive of the overthrow of a monarchy in favour of a form of

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government in which the people or their elected representatives possess the power. Notwithstanding the rather obvious fact that the United States never had a monarchy, it is naive to assume that those who run America, and also ran it in Wharton's day, are or were the elected representatives of the people. The people who control America are those whom Stuart Ewen calls "the captains of consciousness"⁴, whom Haug calls the "industrial capitalists"⁵, whom Adorno would call "the culture industrialists"⁶; men whose aim is to make money, and whose secular and religious principles crystallize this aim into an ideology. Far from being in power to do the bidding of the people, they manipulate the people in order to stay in power.

The encouragement of the people of America towards more consumption of luxuries, be they Undine's spare ballgowns or Mrs Weston's pink gramophones in *Hudson River Bracketed*, has two results, both of which are beneficial to the supplier, who also invariably needs some kind of bargaining chip in order to hold sway with the government. He makes a profit, and can use his increased wealth as a carrot or a stick to make the government comply with his wishes.

of docile subservience has long been a tactic of the people in power. William Cobbett once said that you could not get a man to riot on a full stomach, and conservative ideologues as well as revolutionaries have long known the truth of this maxim and acted accordingly. Rousseau is eloquent upon the subject of the taste of the masses:

Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of the taste for the arts and for superfluities...For, besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to slavery, they know well that the needs that people create for themselves are like chains binding them...The science, letters and arts...wind garlands of flowers round the iron chains that bind them [the people], stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seem to have

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been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called a civilized people.⁷

This point of view is not very far away from Adorno's theory of the culture industry: for Rousseau's princes we may simply substitute those whom Wharton bitinglly referred to as "The lords of Pittsburgh", doling out pulp fiction and low culture for the greater stupefaction of the masses.

Although this grand sweep bringing together Rousseau and Adorno may seem far from a criticism of Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, I believe that this novel, far from being an indictment of the "international cocktail bitch"⁸, is, as *The House of Mirth* was, an indictment of the society which forced Undine to become such a dislikeable woman. By the final chapters, Undine has learned to have taste for finery and has been turned into "what is called...civilized".

Edmund Wilson also said of Undine that "she is the prototype in fiction of the gold digger"⁹. Blake Nevius called her "the most egocentric and dehumanized woman in American fiction"¹⁰, with no hint that the dehumanization is anything other than her own fault. Richard Lawson observes that "whatever slight authorial sympathy there might have been is withdrawn, so that Undine becomes more and more a kind of dehumanized abstraction in her unswerving desire for possessions and comfort"¹¹. Berthoff sums up *The Custom of the Country* thus;

With *The Custom of the Country*, (Wharton) shifted again, to a broad satire of contemporary manners featuring, in gross caricature, the social-climbing, man-eating Undine Spragg of Apex City...The novel as a whole is put seriously out of joint by the absoluteness of the author's hatred for her main character.¹²

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David Holbrook, in a book published in 1991, makes an heroic attempt to show that feminism has not bypassed him altogether, but fails rather miserably¹³. Freud is his key to understanding Wharton, through whom he will then understand the texts:

The(sic) female view of (Undine's) sexuality is superbly done. Her main impulse is that of voraciousness: she is sublimely beautiful and spoiled, and her central impulse is to employ her beauty to gain everything she wants. There is a woman of this kind in two later works...Floss Delaney, who is a ruthless manipulator, but Floss is simply a gold-digger beside Undine. Undine is absolutely ruthless and her greed is integral with her idea of herself. She is, for instance, continually aware of herself in mirrors, and when she is alone in Italy with Ralph, what bores her is not so much the absence of shops and balls but the absence of the *world*, to reflect her. She is throughout preoccupied with how people regard her, and it is when she is not *reflected* in this way that she suffers distress.¹⁴

Holbrook goes on from this with no comment about *why* Undine is preoccupied in this fashion. Undine is "continually aware of herself in mirrors" because, to borrow the words of John Berger:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.¹⁵

When Undine looks in the mirror she is surveying herself, watching the exterior self which she knows is an object for male consumption. At the start of the novel we are told that Undine "was always doubling and twisting on herself" and think that it is merely a characteristic of her personality. When she dresses up in her finery before the mirror, "fanning, fidgeting, twitching", it becomes clear that this is a conscious attitude. In typical fashion, Wharton will not allow us to infer from her evocation of the scene that this is the case, but tells the reader in firm terms:

Her incessant movements were not the result of shyness: she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity.¹⁶

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When she abandons this attitude it is consciously once more, with the "instinct of sex". Ralph Marvell is so refined as to call forth an answering gentility from her, yet the 'simple and frank' talk to Ralph of which Wharton speaks bears no relation to the snippet of the same talk which she reports:

"I don't believe I'll ever learn New York ways either", she confessed, turning on him the eyes of youth and truthfulness. 'Of course I know a few people; but they're not- not the way I expected New York people to be.' She risked what seemed an involuntary glance at Mable...As she spoke she let her eyes rest on his, half-laughing, half-wistful, and then dropped her lashes while the pink stole slowly up them.¹⁷

I am not entirely sure how you fake a blush, but the rest of Undine's actions and speeches are entirely false, customized to Ralph's own unconscious requirements. She is always aware of the possibility that someone may be watching her, and so watches herself, is constantly thinking of her own image. At the art gallery she strikes rapt poses "while ripples of self-consciousness played up and down her watchful back". She sees that a lady is looking at the paintings through an eye-glass and "Undine was instantly struck by the opportunities which this toy presented for graceful wrist movements and supercilious turns of the head". She bumps into Peter Van Degen at the art gallery, and is conscious of being attractive to him, and then Wharton must inevitably ram the message home that Undine has not the slightest interest in art for art's sake, that indeed she has not the intellectual capacity for such interest, but that her aims are gratified if she has seen one Society male feast his greedy eyes upon her. Undine's entire being stands or falls on her external appearance; the way she looks, moves and acts. As Stuart Ewen observed,

Throughout the twenties, a noticeable proportion of magazine ads

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directed at women depicted them looking into mirrors...For women the imperative of beauty was directly linked to the question of job security - their survival depended upon their ability to keep a husband.¹⁶

Advertisements in this century often show women looking at themselves, in a bid to imbue women with the idea that they should do this, comparing their ideal notion of themselves with the reality, then buying the necessary products to lessen the gap between ideal and real. The auto-eroticism which these images try to provoke makes women complicit with men in seeing themselves as sex objects. Likewise in pictures by male painters of nudes holding mirrors, the function of the mirror is "to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight."¹⁷ In this novel, as explicitly feminist as Wharton could make it without being dismissed, the mirror which reflects the woman looking into it in preparation for the male gaze reflects a tragedy.

Every attribute of Undine's is a saleable commodity. She is "monstrously perfect" in this; the ability to think, to question, the sensitivity which dooms Lily Bart, interest in matters not vital to her personally, have been bred out of Undine because they are not necessary components of the woman men think they want. As Marilyn French says, "In themselves, women are only the most important goods the world has to offer to male buyers. Their sexuality, motherhood, beauty and labour are displayed as items available to men with enough money"²⁰. And of course, Undine is not just "perfect" but "monstrously" so. That is, the forces that went to create her did not know what they were doing. Made for men, exactly to the specifications that society seemed to dictate, she is a woman they can only deplore.

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Like Dr Frankenstein, they can only look aghast as what they have made, because she has been turned into what they wanted to turn her: pure commodity.

The commodification of women is a strong theme in this novel. The beautiful representative of Old New York, Clare, rejects Ralph because he is poor and, favouring instead the acceptance of commodities becomes a commodity herself, being a beautiful and elegant token of Peter Van Degen's respectability. Yet she is aware of the price she paid for her wealth and lifestyle:

Poor Clare repented, indeed - she wanted it clearly understood - but she repented in the Van Degen diamonds, and the Van Degen motor bore her broken heart from opera to ball.²¹

Clare is also a result of the system, but that one woman in particular, Undine Spragg, can be made to take the commodification of women to its last extreme, is the tragedy of the novel. Maternal feeling is neglected and replaced by its semblance, sexual desire is replaced by the need to produce a son in order to provide an heir and "keep up appearances".

David Holbrook is perplexed by Undine's sexlessness, as well as the lack of sex interest in *The Custom of The Country*. "The normal male reader" he writes, "might expect the sexual theme to be related to this voracious need, and no doubt it is"²². Then in his next paragraph, "To a male writer one might expect that authenticity would have its focus on sexual experience. Edith Wharton knows better". The next sentence contains the amazing discovery that "this novel does not have sexuality at its centre at all!". Holbrook is evidently surprised that a novel by a woman about a woman can centre on themes other than sex and love. It seems to me that Holbrook's "normal" male reader and

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writer had better go back to the book and look at the title (always informative with Wharton), and also read what Charles Bowen has to say about Undine. Bowen is a minor character, a friend of Mrs Fairford, yet his words have a ring of authorial authority to them.

Undine's callous attitude to those who love her, her greed for possessions and for adulation, her need to be constantly striving for higher status and her inability to read a book or look at a painting, all show her to be, according to Charles Bowen in the novel, "the monstrously perfect result of the system". It is not Undine herself who is the target of Edith Wharton's bitterness, as so many male critics seem to fail to understand, but those who made and maintain the system of which she is the natural product. Wharton understands the factors which have produced her.

The last custom of the country, forbidding Undine her final prize, is America's refusal to countenance divorced ambassadors. But the real custom of the country, which has made Undine what she is, is to treat women as inferior beings. Bowen says so in his conversation with Mrs Fairford on marriage:

"The weak point is so frequently the same that after a time one knows where to look for it."

What do you call the weak point?"

He paused. "The fact that the average American looks down on his wife...How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgement and help in the conduct of serious affairs? Take Ralph, for instance - you say his wife's extravagance forces him to work too hard; but that's not what's wrong. It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman- what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it."

"To tell Undine? She'd be bored to death if he did!"

"Just so, she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because its against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's again - I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work? Simply because we don't take enough interest in *them*."³³

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He declares his belief that American marriages do not work because American men are more interested in business, their tradition is to keep their women strictly on the periphery of their lives, to act as a dressing or as ornament, not integral except in a symbolic sense. The narrative is more powerful when Bowen speaks; there is some sense that this is the very crux and purpose of the novel. Wharton's voice is heard through the flimsy character of Bowen:

"The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. In America the real *crime passionnel* is a "big steal" - there's more excitement wrecking railways than homes...Isn't that the key to our easy divorces? If we cared for women in the old barbarous way do you suppose we'd give them up as easily as we do?"²⁴

Bowen's words go a very long way towards explaining Undine's character, and with our understanding comes a large element of forgiveness. She is motivated in part by the need to direct all her tremendous energies somewhere, and because she has no means to direct them in business, and has no real sense of moral responsibility, they are devoted to an unworthy cause. She has been educated as a woman, with the then concomitant ideology that women's education was not provided to make them into useful members of society, but rather to produce objects of adornment for that society. Undine has no thought of striking out for herself, of the necessity for freedom, honesty and independence which motivate Ellen Olenska. Her only notion of self-advancement is in the form of marriage and in each case Wharton makes marriage seem a most unappealing institution.

Undine has been brought up carrying all her mother's vicarious ambition, and has also learnt the idea that the higher up one gets in the social echelons, the less one employs oneself in activity. As

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Wharton rather sardonically puts it, "She (Mrs Spragg) had sunk into the relative inertia which the ladies of Apex City regarded as one of the prerogatives of affluence"²⁵. Undine is not, then, encouraged to educate herself in order to provide herself with a personal outlook or even in order to feel fulfilled. Nor is she shown that other skills apart from being able to market oneself may be beneficial both to her and to others. She believes that she can only be happy if she gains wealth and status, and her only route is through attachment to a man with that wealth and status. Undine's social aggrandizement can only be achieved through marriage.

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that Undine's opinion of wedlock and of sex is radically different from that of all her husbands. Ralph Marvell thinks of her as a virgin so far as society is concerned, still to offer her "flexible soul to the first grasp". She is an innocent, and in the matter of sexual relations remains an innocent throughout the novel. Emotionally, she also remains a virgin; nobody ever successfully claims her heart. Maybe it is her basic sexlessness, so much a part of her Midwestern religious and social background, which contributes to the hollowness of Undine's victories. Regardless of how she employs sex to achieve her ends, it never occurs to Undine Spragg to employ means to achieve sex. "To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence", Wharton writes of Undine.

To Undine, sex is currency, things are redeemable against it. It is the only currency to which she has access, and she would be unfortunate if she started caring about the currency she must use without discrimination.

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There is another aspect to her lack of interest in sex: the fact that her absence of desire and of love means she will not be distracted or persuaded from her ambition. She beats the patriarchal system. Ellen Olenska, in *The Age of Innocence*, is not perfect by New York definitions because she is clearly voluptuous and libidinous. Ellen's sexual drive frightens many members of society: the men are used to and desirous of the May Wellands of their world, whose innocence and purity they may smash like "an image of snow"²⁶. A woman who does not desire men sexually at all, and has no hidden founts of tenderness to be discovered, is indeed a "monstously perfect result of the system". In Ellen they see corruption because they do not see the semblance of docile subservience and sexlessness which May embodies. Undine therefore *submits* to sex without a murmur, it is part of the price paid for the show. This is again why she appears monstrous to them: men want her to want sex so that they can be revolted, or hate it so they can dominate her. Ambivalence leaves them shaking their heads and wondering what went wrong with the blueprints.

When Raymond de Chelles stops "bothering" Undine and begins to stay for long periods away in Paris, Undine is relieved that he is "less fussy than he was". There is a subsequent chilling episode, where Undine hints that she should probably get pregnant, but Raymond rejects her. It is testimony to her lack of interest in sex, and lack of love for her husband, that she seems to be prepared to sleep with her husband only because they are expected to produce an heir:

In the antechamber Raymond paused to take her cloak from her shoulders, and his eyes rested on her with a faint smile of approval.

"You never looked better; your dress is extremely becoming. Good night, my dear," he said, kissing her hand as he turned away.²⁷

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Undine does not tell anyone this, but as Wharton says, her *pride* is wounded, not her heart. Undine needs to have a sexual relationship with Raymond both because she needs to feel that she is sexually attractive and because if he is not sexually attracted to her, Undine may get into very deep social and financial trouble. As she thinks to herself:

She had the half-frightened sense that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him...She resolved to cultivate all the arts of patience and compliance, and habit might have helped them to take root if they had not been nipped by a new cataclysm.²⁸

The cataclysm begins when Undine displays bitterness over the financial help Raymond gives to his brother, then refuses to accept a less grand apartment in Paris. Matters only swell to cataclysmic proportions, however, when Undine decides to override Raymond's wishes and arranges to sell the great Boucher series of tapestries hanging at the family home, the aptly named Saint Desert. As she tartly informs her husband "In America we're not ashamed to sell what we can't afford to keep". Her behaviour earns her, and by extension all Americans abroad, the following character summary:

You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in - if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them;...You come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they are dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have.²⁹

The conviction that new is good and old is bad is one of Wharton's major signals of vulgarity, akin in symbolism to the desire to have things coloured pink in one's living room in *Hudson River*

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Bracketed. The love of the new which the vulgar have seems to fit in nicely with Wharton's perception of them as new people, the *nouveau riche* who have not yet been sanctioned and validated by the passage of time.

In this novel as in the Vance novels, and as in *The Great Gatsby*, one of the underlying themes is the radical innocence of Westerners, who bring to corrupted New York and to Europe the dregs of their Mid-west Puritanism and simplicity. But whereas F. Scott Fitzgerald, who is undoubtedly influenced by Wharton, seems equally shocked by their "vast carelessness", he is not so shocked by what Wharton sees as their vulgarity. At the end of *The Great Gatsby*' Nick says that

I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all - Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us all subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.³⁰

The Custom of the Country is "a story of the West after all" as well, of the Invaders coming and taking what they want without ever stopping to wonder why they want it, and like Tom and Daisy, the Western women Wharton depicts are "careless people...they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness³¹". The green light and orgasmic future of which Gatsby dreams has no less validity for Undine Spragg, and the dream sometimes seems very close and at other times almost vanishes, but she can never quite reach it. Her past defeats her even as it created her, and the defeat was inherent in the creation. Undine has a past but not a history, she has a sequence of events to remember which together make up her life, but no firm traditions or moral touchstones.

. She and her fellow exiles in American fiction are not so much

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displaced as unplaced, searching for something which they cannot find and would never recognize if they found it. Like Nick Carraway and Ishmael, they are exiles from all they really understand and bring no coherent or comprehensive creeds with them. Undine, Indiana, Mabel; they all come with their souls empty but for the last remnants of Puritanism, which was already steering towards hypocrisy in its initial phases, as Hawthorne asserts in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The narrative in *The Custom of the Country* soon shows the great cultural gap between Undine as Invader and the Fairfords as the subject race. This is most obvious, as is the humour, at Undine's first Fairford dinner, where Wharton seems continually to be whispering in our ear. She begins reasonably subtly, with the narrative focusing on Undine's disappointment that "there was no gilding", and that "instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of 'Back to the farm for Christmas'; and when the logs fell forward Mrs Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place..." The food too is traditional, and "with all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs Fairford not to have picked up something newer." The narrative goes on, poking fun at Undine. It is comic, but has distasteful undertones, calling us into complicity with the writer and the Fairfords as "people who know".

Undine did not even know that there were any pictures to be seen, much less that "people" went to see them; and she had read no new book but *When the kissing Had to Stop*, of which Mrs Fairford seemed not to have heard. On the theatre they were equally at odds, for while Undine had seen *Oolaloo* fourteen times, and was "wild" about Ned Norris in *The Soda-Water Fountain*, she had not heard of the famous Berlin comedians who were performing Shakespeare at the German Theatre, and knew only by name the clever American actress who was trying to give "repertory"

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plays with a good stock company. The conversation was revived for a moment by her recalling that she had seen Sarah Burnhart in a play she called *Leglong*, and another which she pronounced *Fade*; but even this did not carry them far, as she had forgotten what both plays were about and had found the actress a good deal older than she expected.³²

When Ralph goes to see Mrs Spragg he asks how they chose Undine's name, and the ensuing lines entertainingly sum up the gulf between the classes. They should perhaps have warned Ralph (given his belief in hereditary traits) that from such parentage he was unlikely to get a spirit akin to his, content to wander arm in arm through Italian villages and over mountains.

After she (Mrs Marvell) had lengthily deplored the untoward accident of Undine's absence, and her visitor, with a smile and echoes of *diverse et ondoyant* in his brain, had repeated her daughter's name after her, saying: "It's a wonderful find - how could you tell it would be such a fit?" - it came to her quite easily to answer: "Why, we called her after a hair-waver father put on the market the week she was born-" and then to explain, as he remained struck and silent: "It's from *undoolay*, you know, the French for crimping; father always thought the name made it take. He was quite a scholar, and had the greatest knack for finding names. I remember the time he invented his Goliath Glue he sat up all night over the bible to get the name..."³³

Mrs Spragg is quite comfortable in her new position, being quite unrepentantly tasteless, and is not nervous all the time with the desperate effort to impress. However, as an American mother in the late nineteen twenties, she is likely to be the defenceless victim of an assault by the advertisers. "The captains of consciousness" were aware that a large majority of the women who had the means to buy their products, did not necessarily have the inclination, for they were likely to be older and more settled. More importantly, they would not have been inculcated with the notion from early childhood that beauty and success are impossible without purchasing all the very latest commodities.

The advertisers therefore target these women by appealing to a

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mixture of moral guilt (you should buy your child the things which will help her be happy and successful - other mothers are doing so), and social fear (if you do not educate your child to these expectations and these luxuries, what is to stop her reverting to the class from which you have struggled to escape?). As Ewen observes, the advertizers strongly suggested that it was only through children that "cultural stability (could) be achieved".³⁴

Even if Mrs Spragg had not been so anxious for Undine to keep climbing up the social ladder, which she clearly is, the threat from the industrial capitalists is no less strong when it focuses on the love between the parent and the child. Companies of the time, such as Palmolive and Woodbury, or even companies selling jelly and quick desserts, were not above presenting a picture of a mother being adored because she used the product being advertized. Wharton says Mrs Spragg had "no ambition for herself"; it is plain that she has a very strong desire, however, and that desire is for the love of Undine. She is proud of having achieved a new social status, and, like the caryatid Wharton describes her as, she is keen to use it to the supposed benefit of her daughter.

It is easy to witness the scene between Ralph and Mrs Spragg as an overdone indictment of vulgarity, with poor Mrs Spragg proving herself to have no notion of how polite society lives, thinks and behaves. But we are not being dragged into collusion with the author or Ralph here. It is not a sardonic portrayal of the vulgar nouveau riche at all, as is made clear when Ralph reflects on how natural and simple she is, knowing even here that the thirst for success has already put such refreshing honesty beyond the reach of Undine.

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There are clear petitions for sympathy in regard to Undine's parents, in spite of their having spoilt Undine and acted in a less than genteel manner sometimes; for example, dressing up their grandson in Scottish garb. The Spraggs are forgiven, by the reader as well as by Wharton, because their motives are always love and honour. Even when Mr Spragg is forced to betray his old business associate, his motive for compliance is not greed but love of his daughter.

Ralph is a quintessential member of Old New York, retreating from the welter of what could be his social life into the shady haven of his library, the better to enjoy new discoveries in the arts. He at least, unlike the society in *The Age of Innocence* and the other members of Old New York in *The Custom of the Country*, is interested in new books, books which have not already been sanctioned by public approval and by time.

So many people of the old society go to the opera because they know it is seemly for those in their station to do so, but they go to old operas over and over again, repeating the patterns of behaviour of their parents and grandparents in a motion which makes for the increasing dissipation of energy. They behave rather like a pendulum in a clock which is only wound once, keeps to its set oscillation but never receiving any more energy, so that the oscillation diminishes and finally comes to absolute stasis. Unless the established families acknowledge their need for the nouveau riche, as their clock-winders, one might say, then those families will simply degenerate and die. Given that the established families in *The Custom of the Country* are not established in the time scale of European families, it could be said that their affection for all that is old and hallowed by time,

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such as Shakespeare, is rather suspect, being a self-conscious repetition of cultural forms without offering anything new to them. Ralph's family are thus early possessors of the postmodern sensibility.

Ralph, whilst his interest in contemporary high culture saves him from the pit of lassitude, is still guilty of withdrawal from the new society, and the only way he can save himself from extinction is by putting aside his refinement and mixing with the likes of Peter van Degen. He refuses to do this, and he and his family eventually refine themselves out of existence. They exclude themselves from anything remotely vulgar, including work, and are passing through the last phases of the decline of the civilized. The letter which Undine sends and which Ralph ignores is a testament to the results of his energy deficiency: had he read it, he would have seen that it meant he might lose his son, and he might have taken appropriate action. As it is, Undine claims Paul Marvell, and Ralph, with the final knowledge that Undine is entirely selfish and has lied to him from the very first, puts a bullet through his brain.

Ralph Marvell, his surname symptomatic of the state of romantic wonder in which he constantly finds himself, expects Undine to fall in obligingly with all his dreams of love, mutual respect and happiness which *his* education has led him to expect. Without pausing to discover whether or not Undine is fit to be his partner through life, he marries her. She is a party to this almost deliberate oblivion because it is in her interests to be so, but her notion of marriage is as a civil contract, where the act of marrying into a good family confers status, and where the fact of having a husband gives one access to more opportunities. Having made her match, Undine imagines she will be

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able to flaunt her beauty and wealth in the faces of those who snubbed her, such as Madame de Trezac (*nee* Miss Wincher), and also believes that she will be happy once she is admitted to this society, never more to be snubbed or ostracized because she has the soft cushion of Ralph on which to fall back. Ralph wants her as a soulmate- she wants him as a passport. It is not likely to be a match bound for reciprocal bliss.

Yet with Undine, and with Elmer Moffat, it is apparent that any respect the author might have for their energy is mingled with dislike for their vulgarity. Wharton shows much of Old New York refusing to feed and grow on this energy, refusing to turn into a parasitic organism. Their refusal to do so necessarily means that they become hosts to parasites; by far the more gracious of the two options.

Moffatt and his like attempt painstaking appreciation of what Old New York loves naturally. It seems apparent in Moffatt's case that it will come by degrees, for some of his things he appreciates for their purity of line or colour. Yet Wharton cannot resist portraying him as a man who caresses pink crystals; always the colour of vulgarity for her!

When Ralph goes to visit him to raise some money "Moffatt's office had been transformed":

"Paint, varnish and brass railings gave an air of opulence to the outer precincts, and its inner room, with its mahogany bookcases containing morocco-bound 'sets' and its wide blue leather armchairs, lacked only a palm or two to resemble the lounge of a fashionable hotel. Moffatt himself, as he came forward, gave Ralph the impression of having been done over with the same hand: he was smoother, broader, more supremely tailored, and his whole person exhaled the faintest whiff of an expensive scent...

...He sauntered over to the other side of the room, and took a small object from the top of the bookcase. "Fond of these pink crystals?" He held the oriental toy against the light. 'Oh, I ain't a

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judge - but now and then I like to pick up a pretty thing.' Ralph noticed that his eyes caressed it²⁵.

Once the office has been "transformed" it looks like a fashionable hotel, that is, it is made to look like something it is not, possibly with 'Loeey' chairs and much gilt. As the novel progresses we see that Moffatt, although undeniably from vulgar origins and of vulgar appearance, has an honourable spirit, a genuine nature and a dislike of dissemblance. As these traits become more apparent, so his *objets d'art* are replaced by new ones of a finer quality. Wharton lets him gradually shed his vulgarity. When Undine comes to capture him at the end of the novel and moves around his rooms, we feel a pity for Moffatt and for his art works: she is like a vulture preying on his status and accompanying symbols. And as Wharton must inevitably tell us, Undine's 'heart beat at the signs of his altered state'. For her the glass and marble are merely signs, signifying wealth or status or enjoyment. That is why the boat she sails upon with Moffatt is called the Semantic, for everything 'means' to Undine - nothing 'is'.

Jean Baudrillard states that "we live in a structuralist universe where meanings are given by the relations of opposition"²⁶. I take 'universe' to mean 'capitalist society', for in such a society everything is seen primarily in relation to something else. As Marx said, "If one considers the concept of value, then the actual object is regarded only as a sign; it counts not as itself but as what it is worth"²⁷. Wharton emphasizes this tendency of Undine's to distill from ordinary scenes and events what things mean in terms of money and status:

Moffatt launched out on a recital of plot and counterplot, and she

hung, a new Desdemona, on his conflict with the new anthropophagi. It was of no consequence that the details and technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant was clear as day to her.³⁸

Paul, her son, *means* that Undine can create a pretty picture of motherhood in Washington Square for the eyes of Moffatt, or the same in the French countryside for Raymond de Chelles. He is not her little boy, whom she wishes to be with, but a sign connoting many useful things; respectability, maternal feeling, attachment to one of the best New York families and even fertility.

So when she sets the scene for the snaring of Moffatt, Wharton subtly unites the reader with herself and with Moffatt; we are made to see the glass as a thing of beauty in itself rather than as a symbol of success, and we are called on to lament upon Undine's greedy philistinism:

Among them stood a lapis bowl in a Renaissance mounting of enamel and a vase of Phoenician glass that was like a bit of rainbow caught in cobwebs. On a table against the window a little Greek marble lifted its pure lines.³⁹

The same trick of eliciting contempt for Undine is at work whenever we see Undine in the middle of a seduction. Her name is a mixture of the pretentious and the prosaic; Undine is a female water spirit, and sprag is a word originating in the nineteenth century denoting "a chock or steel bar used to prevent a vehicle running backwards on an incline."⁴⁰

Spragg is of course her family name, and it is Undine's parents who act as the "sprag" to prevent her from sliding down the social slope. Undine must have a sense of her parents' failure in their own lives to achieve anything except wealth. They are of a much poorer background: "Poor Mrs Spragg had done her own washing in her youth"⁴¹

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and having once acquired money she is determined not to allow her daughter to become poor again. Thus Mrs Spragg 'had no ambition for herself - she seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child' and so the onus is very much on Undine not to roll back down the hill up which her parents have so laboriously struggled. Her parents "sprag" her, so to speak, by their own ineffectuality and by their financial and moral support.

Altogether, the name is one of Wharton's most outrageously grating, but it serves to illustrate Undine's character. Many of her names shed light on the characters by virtue of their semantics. Peter Van Degen's name echoes "degeneration", which means "to lose the qualities proper to the kind, to fall away from ancestral excellence, to become a lower type". Princess Estradina's name is derived from "estrado", meaning "on a higher level, on a dais". Claud Walsingham Pople, the parvenu portrait painter, is named after a flower which in the wrong place can be a harmful weed: the quotation cited is a biblical one, "that malicious one did sow popple among good wheat". Undine's father, the "patriarchal wage slave" is called Abner Spragg. Abner of course hints at abnegation, meaning "to deny oneself anything, to renounce a right". And Raymond de Chelles name is a corruption of *échelon* in French, which itself is from *echelle*, meaning ladder. Undine obviously sees Raymond as a ladder to still higher social "echelons"⁴².

It is surprising, after a novel so peppered with animosity as *The Custom of the Country* seems to be, to find that there are very few characters deserving of our absolute condemnation. The Dickensian Mrs Heeny, with her bag of press clippings, and Peter Van Degen after his

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offensive remark about the difference between male and female portraits, are perhaps to be included in this small group. Many others, with their ridiculous names (Mrs Spoff, Mrs Lycurgus Ambler, Claud Walsingham Popple, Indiana Frusk) are there to swell the scene, and to make the new, terrifying society of Corporate America look a little more ridiculous, a little more banal in the face of its success over the old ruling class.

The Custom of the Country warns that America, Inc. will become more and more materialist, and that the materialism will turn the mood of the country, the custom of the country, away from benevolence and towards greed. Undine, as the embodiment of America's preoccupation with appearance and money making, to the detriment of love, is a warning made flesh. Her warning is that the capitalist forces which produced her will carry on producing others just like her, living to spend, believing the "big sell" that to acquire money and to spend it on commodities, even to the extent of becoming one, is to advance one's position, is to acquire power. This, then, amply illustrated by the following decades, becomes the new custom of the country; the belittling of the people and the apotheosis of the dollar.

Notes

1. Robert Pattison, p3, *The Triumph of Vulgarly*, O.U.P., New York, 1987.
2. Ibid., p3-4.
3. Ibid., p9.
4. Stuart Ewen; *The Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976.
5. Wolfgang F. Haug; *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, Routledge, London, 1991.
7. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol 15, under Rousseau.
8. Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", in I. Howe's *A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey 1962.
9. Ibid.
10. Blake Nevius, cited on p46 of *Edith Wharton* by R.H.Lawson, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., USA 1977.
11. Ibid., R.H.Lawson.
12. Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism*, Macmillan, USA, 1965.
13. As on p8 of the work cited in 14., when Holbrook writes "a love relationship in which he or she can find his uniqueness and so find a confirmation of his being".
14. David Holbrook, p94, *Edith Wharton and The Unsatisfactory Man*, Vision Press, London, 1991.
15. John Berger, p46, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC and Penguin Books, London, 1973.
16. Edith Wharton, p16, *The Custom of the Country*, henceforth refers to *Custom*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1984.
17. *Custom*, p43.
18. Stuart Ewen, op cit.
29. John Berger, p51, op cit.
20. Marilyn French, p165, *The War Against Women*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1992.
21. *Custom*, p46
22. David Holbrook, op cit., p78.
23. *Custom*, p118.
24. Ibid., p119.
25. Ibid., p9.
26. Edith Wharton, p56 *The Age of Innocence*,
27. *Custom*, p287.
28. Ibid., p279.
29. Ibid., p307.
30. F. Scott Fitzgerald, p159, *The Great Gatsby*, Random Century, London, 1991.
31. Ibid., p161.
32. *Custom*, p24.
33. Ibid., p48.
34. Stewart Ewen; Op. Cit.
35. *Custom*, p254.
36. Raquel Bowlby, p25 (reporting Baudrillard), *Just Looking*, Methuen, New York, 1985.
37. Karl Marx cited in *The Dialectics of Seeing* by Susan Buck-Morss, MIT, London, 1989.

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38. *Custom*, p303.
39. *Ibid.*, p319.
40. Collins Concise Dictionary, 1990.
41. *Custom*, p9.
42. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933.

The mass of men lead lives
of quiet desperation. What is called
resignation is confirmed desperation.

Walden, Henry David Thoreau¹

CHAPTER SIX: ETHAN FROME

Virginia Woolf claimed, in *A Room of One's Own* that she could tell when a text was written by a woman. Many feminists have since claimed the same, but a novel such as *Ethan Frome* refuses to be categorized as being written by either man or woman. It is authoritative, and does not have the jubilant disregard for traditional discipline which, according to Cixous, is the mark of feminine writing². Terry Eagleton speaks of feminine writing in reference to Virginia Woolf, "whose fluid, diffuse, sensuous style offers a resistance to the kind of male metaphysical world symbolized by the philosopher Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Ramsay's world works by abstract truths, sharp divisions and fixed essences: it is a patriarchal world, for the phallus is the symbol of sure, self-identical truth and is not to be challenged.

Wharton was not brought up to accept a view of herself as inferior in mind or body to men; her wealth and status was a shield against the wearying sexism with which most women who "attempt the pen" invariably meet. Thus her writing does not appear to well forth from the body, does not issue from some mystic female otherness in the way French feminists urge.

Ethan Frome is a Mr Ramsay book rather than a Virginia Woolf one. It deals with man against the elements, man against economic hardship, man against what man has made woman, and man's confrontation with the loss of his autonomy. It is an American book, none the less so in its fundamental despair.

This novel is obviously very different from Wharton's habitual genre, in which she deals with the predilections and hypocrisies of upper crust Americans. Yet thematically, the work has affinities with Wharton's society novels. It treats of her great question of what worth is to be found in surrendering the individual will to the will of the culture by which one is surrounded. This is Wharton's abiding theme, explored in all of her greatest works.

Yet *Ethan Frome* veers towards a more standard form of realism than is usual in her novels. It incorporates romance elements such as the importance of love and courage in the face of adversity, the personification of abstracts and the spiritual quest of a sensitive spirit. Ethan fulfils the criteria expected by someone such as Howells, and thus *Ethan Frome* can steal quietly into the canon to nestle against the novels which aim to fulfil the mythic American criterion of innocent man's pioneering struggle with the land, impeded by cloying domesticities which would tear him away from his generation-honoured task.

From its beginnings, America wanted a literature which was not a colonial offshoot of British literature but something with its own character and flavour. There seems to have been a concern about the American flavour of novels and poetry from the States in a way that Europeans do not share. Books by Germans or Belgians are not judged

heavily on their ability to match up to some notional national qualities, but America, in its quest for an identity, wanted to look into American fiction and see itself mirrored there. As Emerson notes, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe"³. They were anxious to start anew. America was also proud of its democracy, which it saw as exceptional. F.O. Matthieson states that "the one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy"⁴. This suggests a concern common in much criticism of American literature about the amount of social relevance a work has. Novels and poems seem repeatedly to be assessed not on the basis of literary criteria but upon social ones. It is a case of "Ask not what literature can do for itself, but what literature can do for America".

Ethan Frome is the only novel by Wharton which is American enough - in a very specific manner - to be palatable to these critics. It opens up "possibilities of democracy" very clearly, and whereas much the same ethos motivates her society novels they are not seen as overtly realist. *Ethan Frome's* concerns are, amongst other things, the socio-economic dictates which prevent Ethan from positive action, and behind this the subtext whispers:

"This is our America. This is our land of the free. Something must be done - we must struggle to come closer to democracy". *Ethan Frome* appears to be a novella engendered by a newspaper article about a sled crash. In fact it offers a vision of what happens to the poor and uneducated in a country where money and status are the only gods.

Ethan Frome has been hailed as a prime example of realism by

American critics. When it was published in 1911 there was a strong trend towards a self-congratulatory fiction which emphasised all the positive aspects of American life, stressing the democratic nature of the government, the wholesomeness of the American family, the health of the nation in general. Towards the end of the 20th century this ethos has transferred itself to the media in the U.S. Its negative side amounts almost to a phobia about admitting that those who fall by the wayside in this capitalist society are relegated to an economic prisonhouse from which there is little chance of escape. As Thomas Wolfe put it, he was "terrified before the loud good health of America, which is really a sickness because no man will admit his sores". In *Ethan Frome*, Edith Wharton concentrates upon those sores; hence the assumption of realism.

As I have said, it seems very different from Wharton's more usual preoccupation with the high society of New York, and the ironies and discrepancies inherent therein. However, although the New England poverty and snows seem far removed from the plush furniture and glistening chandeliers of Old New York, there are common denominators in both subjects. Wharton concentrates on the social imperatives inhibiting Ethan and Mattie's personal freedom, on the psychological battle within the characters between what they would prefer in an ideal world and what they believe they must accept in this one.

The story and miserable conclusion of Ethan's love for young Mattie Silver and his joyless marriage with his cousin Zenobia has been the subject for a reasonable amount of literary debate, focusing on the final miserable tableau in the book and its moral and literary merits or demerits.

Lionel Trilling believed that the reaction from the intelligentsia to the "loud good health" of America; that of shunning it and claiming to apprehend the grim reality behind the chink of champagne glasses, was a way of exemplifying an author's greater perceptions. The status of suffering in the American literature of the early part of the twentieth century grows, stems, so Trilling says, from the mainstream concentration upon the American Dream. Thus came the American Realism, a genre depicting much pain, and accentuating the hopelessness of the human lot. It is often the case that this pain is not noticed and anguished over by all the characters, but by a single heightened consciousness, usually that of the narrator. Eugene Gant, from *Look Homeward, Angel*, exemplifies such a heightened perception:

The national demand for white shiny plumbing, toothpaste, tiled lunch-rooms, hair cuts...and the insane fear of disease that sent the voters whispering to the druggist after their brutal fumbling lecheries; all of this seemed nasty. Their outer cleanliness became the token of an inner corruption: it was something that glittered and was dry, foul and rotten at the core. He felt that...there was in him a health greater than they could ever know - something fierce and cruelly wounded but alive, that did not shrink away from the terrible sunken river of life; something desperate and merciless that looked steadily on the hidden and unspeakable passions that unify the tragic family of this earth.⁸

Perhaps in Wolfe's case a passage of such desolation and conviction can be taken as indicative of the writer's true feelings that the corruption behind the gleaming white smile of America is an ever-present fact, colossal in its implications for all of humanity. But for many it is merely fashionable pessimism. As Lionel Trilling says:

No one would wish to question any high valuation that may be given to the literary representation of unhappy events, except as the high value may be a mere cliché of an intellectual class, except as it is

supposed to seem the hallmark of the superior sensibility of that class.⁶

He goes on to say that the contemporary and latent popularity of Ethan Frome "satisfies our modern snobbishness about tragedy and pain".

Trilling is not alone in condemning Ethan Frome along moral grounds rather than literary ones. Contemporary critics lamented its unredeemed misery but praised its "art", and one anonymous reviewer states that the novel is marred by the end, and that

There are things too terrible in their failure to be told humanly by creature to creature...When we finish it we cover our eyes...we do not cover our eyes at the spectacle of a really great tragedy⁷.

Other reviewers, earlier and more aesthetically-based than Trilling speak of "the wonder" that "the spectacle of so much pain can be made to yield so much beauty"⁸ but there seems a general sense that Edith Wharton has inflicted upon her readers the undimable memory of those "three lives in supreme torture" without offering any route to assuagement. Trilling raises his voice again in specific condemnation:

Whenever the characters of a story suffer, they do so at the behest of their author - the author is responsible for their suffering and must justify his cruelty by seriousness of moral intention. Edith Wharton cannot...The representation of suffering ought to have an extra intention such as making us alleviate suffering, or think about Fate or God or challenge our fortitude or intelligence or piety.

Trilling has a stronger spirit than I, then, for *Ethan Frome* certainly challenges my fortitude. He gives no adequate reason for his assertion that literature "ought" to have a moral intent, and leaves phrases such as "seriousness of moral intention" hanging, important and inexplicable, in the midst of his tirade. If he means that injury or disfigurement must be appropriate to the story, as

Gloucester's blinding is in *King Lear*, then surely that is the case; Ethan and Mattie cannot achieve success in a suicide pact because it is vital and natural outgrowth of their personalities that they achieve nothing, not even death when they decide to die. The couple are completely helpless, in the hands of God, State and the spectre of moral duty, whose face flashes up to make Ethan swerve from his chosen path. If Wharton is not moral in ethical terms by presenting the reader with Ethan Frome, she at least has written a work which has inner integrity.

Henry James, in his essay "The Art of Fiction", stresses that fiction is an art and as such the question of morality is invalid. He asks how we can paint moral pictures or carve moral statues, and his answer would appear to be that art is moral if it has inner integrity, is "good" in the sense of being well-crafted and true to itself.

Jonathan Culler has provided an answer to Trilling in his explanation of Flaubert's insistence upon the novel as an aesthetic object rather than as an act of communication:

To explain a work by reference to a final cause is perhaps the basic mode of literary criticism. When an ultimate purpose can be named, the critic's task is to show how everything in the work contributes to this end and to demonstrate the teleological determination of its unity. But in the case of problematic novels which seem to have arisen outside the communicative circuit, the question "Why write a novel" or "Why write this novel" points towards an absent answer, a kind of empty meaning which must serve as a teleological determinant of our reading.³

Culler goes on to explain that the easiest way out of the problematical area of teleologies is to take up all that makes up the novel and explain that the existence of the novel itself was the goal. If this is the explanation, then the questions about why the

main characters of *Ethan Frome* are left to such a fate are not answerable.

What people like Trilling seems to disregard is that Wharton has a very obvious moral intent which is exactly appropriate to the realist technique employed here.

Trilling goes so far as to compare Wharton unfavourably with Wordsworth, explaining that the poet is laudable where the novelist is not because in *Lyrical Ballads* he attempts to show readers that suffering can touch the humblest and poorest men and women. Wordsworth's superiority can be found in his art, not his morality. the pain in *Ethan Frome* may be too great, we may block it out or turn our eyes away. The pain felt in the poem "Michael" is more poignant because it is in the subtext, behind the rougher surface of the characters and the poems. "The Ruined Cottage" is most successful when its suffering is quiet, weakest when it is most sharply stated. As Wordsworth is more subtle, we are less ready for the pain we find in such intensity behind the poem, and so feel it more.

It is apparent from *Ethan Frome* that Wharton believes suffering is more likely to be endured by the poor because poverty obstructs many courses to happiness. Ethan is desperate to learn but unable to afford an education, shows him desperate to support Mattie and leave Zeena comfortable but barred from doing so by financial imperatives, and makes the point that Mattie, as a genteel girl who has not been educated sufficiently to make her living, has the choice of surviving on backbreaking menial work or of marrying to secure her future. There is a third choice, of course; the one she made. She and Ethan face physically what Ellen and Newland faced non-physically.

There is a "seriousness of moral intention" here even if it does escape Trilling. The novel overwhelmingly demonstrates that although many problems are not insurmountable, a limited range of experience and a narrow education may make them seem so, and here send Mattie and Ethan tumbling to their horrible fate.

In portraying the enforced helplessness of women and the ensuing helplessness of those upon whom they depend, Wharton shows that the social structures have to be changed radically before any major improvements can take place. If Zeena had been made to feel like a real contributor to society instead of turning shrewish in the uncommunicative presence of Ethan, if Mattie had been educated to, provide a living for herself which would not kill her in the process, all would have been different. So is *Ethan Frome* a socio-economic-feminist novel, masquerading as a fashionable little tale of miserable folk? There is no reason why it should not be; Wharton spent all her life dealing with the issues of societal pressures, obligations and strictures.

However, one of the barriers to believing in *Ethan Frome* as having strong political direction is the sense of a lack of compassion one can derive from reading her non-fiction on the subject of poverty. In a letter to James, Wharton comments that;

To the student of human nature, poverty is a powerful lens, revealing minute particles of character imperceptible to the prosperous eye. Wealth keeps us at arms length from life, poverty thrusts us into stifling propinquity with it.

Statements of this nature do nothing to make Wharton appear more sympathetic to the poor. She speaks from a position of a writer with a keen intellectual interest in the way the contingencies of life

very often affect the poor more than the rich, as they are without the soft cushion of wealth to fall back upon. Like King Lear, Wharton is fascinated by the spectacle of "such a poor, bare, forked animal" as men and women are without the trappings of civilization, but unlike Lear, she has no wish to associate with such people.

As I have said, there are certain qualities which are taken to be characteristic of "The American Novel". One of these is the sense of spaciousness one gets, reflecting the vastness of the land and the pioneering spirit which lingers, corrupted and dispirited, in American fiction as well as fact. There is also the nearly requisite theme of man's struggle with the mighty elements, such as that of Melville's Ahab or Hemingway's eponymous Old Man.

Ethan Frome is in many ways the most "American" of Wharton's novels. The constant struggle against poverty, the women who impede Ethan, the mixture within him of sexual desire and pity which eventually is his downfall, the harsh alienating landscape and the constant emphasis upon "vast areas of snow" all point to this novel being specifically "American" in flavour. Symbolically, the snow that blankets Starkfield also muffles any impetus to action. Colours stand out small and brave against it; Mattie has a red hat, scarf and ribbon, the colour of lifeblood and the colour of defiance. She gets out the glass pickle dish to add to the cheering atmosphere when Zeena is away; it breaks and Ethan is unable to repair it in time because the snow has impeded him.

The sheer amount of snow, coupled with its reductive powers, links *Ethan Frome* to the concept of nullifying synthesis which has frightened so many literary Americans from Melville to Olson.

There yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood...Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation?'¹⁰

Wharton gives her characters this landscape as one of void, which approximates to death in its chill expansive nullity. It functions in part as the sea does in *Moby Dick*. As Ahab struggles against the sentient embodiment of the synthesis of colour, also that of death, and is finally vanquished, so Ethan struggles against a frozen landscape which permits no easy route to financial security. In its whiteness and bleakness it too represents the synthesis of death, and it blanches the life force out of those who live there. as Harman Gow puts it, and Wharton is anxious to emphasize its importance, Ethan has "been in Starkfield too many winters"¹¹. He has not been able to keep up with scientific developments, and there is regret that the world he was so interested in in youth should have progressed so far without him.

So, as Ahab in *Moby Dick* is the victim of a deadly synthesis, so Ethan is in *Ethan Frome*, except that in this case Ethan is not even permitted the rather dubious compensation of death. Ethan himself has similarities to Ahab; both are figures disproportionate to their social position, and both have an enormous tragedy contained within them.

It could be said that *Ethan Frome*, with its emphasis upon space together with its concentration upon two or three individuals and how they cope within that space, is fairly and squarely in the American tradition. The space, ironically, is not particularly spacious; the narration functions like a zoom lens, as in *Othello*, so that the

reader comes from the open streets to the area of the farm and then finally to the small room containing three souls living in quiet desperation. The claustrophobia, the panic induced in the reader by such a technique, is very effective.

As well as its American traits, the novel also owes a great deal to English literature. Structurally it has obvious affinities with *Wuthering Heights*, and Edith Wharton mentions the example which Browning's *The Ring and the Book* set for her. I think it fair to assume that anyone who has ploughed through *The Ring and the Book* has read the more accessible poetry of Browning, and Ethan's behaviour is not dissimilar to some of the characters who populate the love poems.

Some light may be thrown upon *Ethan Frome* by looking at poems such as "Cristina", "Too Late", "Prospice" and "Two in the Campagna".. In the first two, the speakers build themselves a fictional world in which they would be capable of passionate and successful love affairs, and the enriched reality which they give themselves obviates the need for positive action in the ordinary world. Up to a point, Ethan operates in the same way. Mattie Silver is his "dream kernel"; she, or Ethan's idea of her, is a kind of springboard from which Ethan could leap into fantasy. "Could" because it remains only a possibility; even extended daydreams are too much for Ethan.

It may be that his inability to articulate his thoughts goes beyond this to an inability to conceptualize his thoughts, leaving him floundering. If his minimal education and his ever-narrowing horizons slow down or halt his ability to imagine better things, then he is eternally trapped, for without the knowing desire for better things, one can hardly summon the desire for them.

It would be a blessing if such a dimming of imagination were so complete that he cheerfully accepted his lot, but enough remains for possibilities of a slackening of his misery to fleet across his mind. He is almost content, for example, just being alone with Mattie when Zeena goes off to the doctor's, deriving a kind of stationary joy from the situation. Yet in this passage there is a great deal of impotent need, constrained longing which tautens the narrative:

The sudden heat of his tone made her colour mount again, not with a rush but gradually, delicately, like the reflection of a thought stealing slowly across her heart. She sat silent, her hands clasped on her work, and it seemed to him that a warm current flowed toward him along the strip of stuff that lay still unrolled between them. Cautiously he slid his hand palm-downward along the edge of the stuff. A faint vibration of her lashes seemed to show that she was aware of his gesture, and that it had sent a counter-current back to her; and she let her hands lie motionless on the other end of the strip...¹²

Ethan goes on to kiss the end of the material he is holding. It is an image used by Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* too, in the scene between the stage lovers at the opera, and it is obviously a symbol of Wharton's used to articulate the inarticulate. He realizes that Mattie is packing up, and "When the door of the room had closed on her he remembered that he had not even touched her hand".

Ethan's circumstances have taught him restraint, and also taught him, by necessity, how to extract a great deal of emotional excitement from what may seem to be fairly lacklustre situations. He does not need to throw himself into an affair right away; his tardiness in his relationship with Mattie comes from his delight in the most simple things about her rather than from a psychological incapacity to deal with sexual repression.

Ethan and Mattie's circumstances make even the idea of falling in

love tempting; a clandestine affection for each other to warm the cold and uneventful days of their lives. Suddenly, under the influence of his relationship with Mattie, Ethan is no longer quelled by the sight of his ancestors' graves. He now feels that he is part of the cycle of life, not a sterile aberration. Formerly the Frome gravestones had "mocked his restlessness", but now when he is with Mattie "all desire for change had vanished" and the sight of the gravestones gave him "a warm sense of continuance and stability".

What is strange and disturbing about Ethan's passion is its nature; much of the time it is merely an abstract idea which stops the encroachment of the nullifying snow. At the end of the narrator's vision, the couple cannot die, because that would be too close to a Romantic fulfilment, in the sense of death being a culmination; a final erotic ecstasy. The novel is not aiming to present any sense of satisfactory closure.

Yet like the speaker in "Too Late", who, by the act of swallowing the red wine is allowed one surrogate erotic experience before the end, so here Mattie and Ethan are allowed a small degree of sensual pleasure before the smash-up. When they are faced with Zeena's implacability and Mattie's exile:

he laid his lips upon her hair, which was soft yet springy, like certain mosses on warm slopes, and had the faint woody fragrance of fresh sawdust in the sun.¹³

Later, he longs to touch it again and tell her of the scent, but he cannot, confronted with the fact once more that he is another to swell the ranks of the mute inglorious Miltons whom poverty has kept silent.

The pleasure becomes more physical, especially in its

implications, in the sleigh just before the crash:

...gathering smoothness and speed as they went, with the hollow night opening out below them and the air singing by like an organ.¹⁴

The final unity of death must necessarily be denied to them because their passion is not the helpless intoxication of the Romantics but a stimulation of their undernourished hearts and minds to ensure against complete paralysis; in Mérimée's words they may "se passionnent pour la passion". This view is more generous to Wharton than the hypothesis that she wrote a bleak book with a bleak ending without any "seriousness of moral intent."

The reading public found that a tragedy about ordinary people did not satisfy their preconceived ideas about what tragedy constituted. As Donald Davidson writes in 1929:

It becomes doubtful whether, in any old and well-understood sense of the word, (our writers of today) can write tragedy at all, but they can and do produce painful literature. The great writers of the past always had something to fall back on: Fate, the Gods, Divine Providence, a moral order...But our writers have passed beyond good and evil, beyond the moral order, beyond even a sense of the dignity of man. They have no religion - other than a vague religion of well-being, and so their Satan, their Evil Principle, their Hell is Pain.¹⁵

That they have nothing like God to fall back on, and that they pay so harshly for not having the hope which Davidson speaks of, is the tragedy of Mattie and Ethan, and is none the less great for it.

In this novel Wharton allows us a sense of seeing into "the depths of human souls/ Souls which seem to have no depth at all/ To vulgar eyes." The banal forms of speech which the couple use to speak to and think of each other are easily the equal in the quiet power of feeling which they hold to the flowery eloquence of more educated lovers.

Wharton describes their relationship in words full of sympathy for those who feel, and try in any way they can to express such feelings. For example;

And there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy: the cold red of sunset behind winter hills...or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow. When she said to him once: "It looks just as if it was painted!" it seemed to Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul.¹⁶

Mattie's assertion that the scene looks painted is appreciated not just because she said it, but because it reduces the alien quality of the snow for Ethan, making it less atheistic, to borrow from Ishmael again. The hand of God, or a human hand, could after all have created such a scene, and this gives Ethan a sense of integration with his landscape.

Mattie's arrival is "like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth"¹⁷ and Ethan soon formulates a role and even a personality for her which she does not truly possess.

Ethan has been denied any form of domestic happiness; his existence hitherto has been wintry and cheerless, and the vibrant life which sometimes flashes out of Mattie fills him with hope. She provide the promise of connubial comfort as well as of sexual pleasure. We only see Mattie through Ethan's eyes, and it may well be the case that he bases his live on a fictional idea of the girl.

It is often the case that when the narrator speaks of Ethan's passion for Mattie there is some association with stasis. There is a sexual aspect to their relationship but it is never made into lived experience. It remains an undercurrent, sometimes rushing headlong and sometimes a mere trickle, but never acknowledged or understood by

Ethan. He can derive great pleasure from holding Mattie "entranced" before a piece of granite which is "thrusting up through the fern" ¹⁸ but his pleasure is contained within the moment and is not mingled with any great longings.

If this is compared to the mood of the speaker in 'Prospice' the reason for the suicide being unsuccessful is again illuminated. Life for this man was fulfilling, he was so in love that the lover is "soul of my soul" and death will first become "a peace out of pain" and then a physical union. Expectation of physical union is dumbly present for a moment in Ethan's mind too. He wonders if they will be swathed together in blackness, and how it will feel, but then cold New England realism comes back to him and he thinks 'After this I shan't feel anything...' ¹⁹ He tries to kill them both, then, to destroy all the feelings, most of which are better ended. Even so, the speaker in 'Prospice' is enough of a Romantic to long for death- "to feel the fog in my throat...When the snows begin", and Ethan is enough of an American to fear it.

Is this the real point of Ethan's persistent preference for inaction? He hangs back and will not cross the threshold when he is fetching Mattie from the dance, just as he will not cross the threshold into leaving his wife or into death. He "would have liked to stand there with her all night in the blackness"-why? He is "never so happy as when he abandoned himself to these dreams"-dreams of he and Mattie lying next to each other in their coffins. What kind of daydream is that? It is what marks Ethan Frome as a man apart; Ethan is a man whose dreams are meant to be dreamt only, never acted upon. He enjoys he and Mattie having "a thirst for each other in their

hearts" but he does not want to slake that thirst through positive action.

It could be argued, of course, that Ethan is so much a part of his environment that he is deeply attracted to the expansive nothingness all around him and seeks to imitate it in his personal life. I would say just the opposite; that in his struggle to eke out a living and to maintain something approximating to a normal human life in Starkfield, Ethan has found a never-ending source of dialectic. In Humbert Wolfe's words, he has found

An ever-lasting answer to the snow
And a retort to the last precipice.²⁰

What must be remembered, and what adds the most important dimension to the story, is the fact that it is an internal story, presented not by the author but by a narrator. He is obviously useful in logistical terms; Edith Wharton needed a form which would present what had happened a generation ago and what was happening now with smoothness and immediacy; it had worked for Emily Bronte and it works here too. However, the influence of *The Ring and the Book* as well as 'Wuthering Heights' means that the narrator achieves much more importance than he does in Bronte's novel. Ethan's story is a vision only, something issuing forth from the deepest recesses of the narrator's mind. It illuminates his personality in the same way that the different accounts of the murder of Pompilia bring to life the personalities of the speakers. However, in *The Ring and the Book* the various narrators are seen in all the roundness of their political, social and gender-orientated prejudices. It is a poem delightedly, if somewhat long-windedly illustrating how our presuppositions

mediate reality. The creation of the Frome story by the narrator, and the creation of such a narrator by Wharton has no like aim, and seems altogether more sinister.

The fact that the narrator curiously alienates himself from us by not giving his name and by beginning as if he were a stranger starting to tell an unsolicited story, can perhaps be explained by looking towards *Moby Dick* again, which opens with the famous words, "Call me Ishmael". It is a phrase used by someone who has just been formally introduced with use of full names, and wishes to get matters onto a more casual level. We are therefore momentarily persuaded that this narrator is a friendly and unambiguous figure. That is, until we realize there has been no preamble, no full name. The apostrophe then becomes as inexplicable as the single footprint Robinson Crusoe finds in the sand, filled with significance and offering no semiotic paths to comprehension. "Call me Ishmael" is an abbreviated message, the full extent of which probably runs thus: "Call me Ishmael. My name is something else, but for the purposes of our temporary interaction Ishmael will suffice".

I imagine the narrator of *Ethan Frome* is in a similar state of alienation from the reader; another American male afraid of giving away any part of himself in case it is used to display his weak need for human contact. His fascination with Ethan is akin to that of Ishmael for Ahab; the fascination of the spectator for the person who is ready to act, who feels as Ahab does that the world is well lost for hate, or as Ethan that the world is well lost for love.

Essentially, the narrator has a vicarious nature, appropriating some measure of excitement from others' lives to fill his own.

Whether the events of which he tells are a mere vision, or have very solid foundations, we ought to feel pessimistic about the engineer's capacity for pleasure in any normal sense.

Yet his preoccupation with dismal potentialities may be illustrative of his Romantic spirit, as it is with the narrator of Balzac's "La Grande Bretache". That story-teller, wandering alone in the ruins of a great house, asks no questions of the loquacious inhabitants; our engineer asks few questions and tries to ignore the answers he receives. Both want to withdraw into the sanctuary of their melodramatic imaginations. Had the narrator of *Ethan Frome* been less taciturn, the words of Balzac's narrator would have suited him very well:

There, I made up delightful stories, I succumbed to charming little orgies of melancholy. If I had known the reason, perhaps very ordinary, for this desertion, I would have lost the unpublished fictions with which I intoxicated myself. For me, this refuge represented the most varied images of human life, clouded by misfortunes...But above all, it was provincial life with its meditations and its slow tempo. I have often wept there. I have never laughed there.²¹

Balzac's man may be more articulate, but he is articulating what must also be true for Wharton's narrator. *Ethan Frome* has been called beautiful, "too terrible in its failure", moral and immoral, but nothing seems to fit it quite so well as calling it a "charming little orgy of melancholy."

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, Chapter One, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. From *The Portable Thoreau*, Viking Portable Edition, Penguin, London, 1982.
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3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*, 1837, cited in Jay B Hubbell: *Who Are The Major American Writers*, Duke University Press, USA, 1982.
4. F.O. Matthiesson, *American Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, London & New York, 1941.
5. Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*. Penguin, London, 1989.
6. Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia", reprinted in *Edith Wharton, A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Irving Howe, Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1962.
7. Ibid.
8. *Saturday Review*, CXII 18th November, 1911.
9. Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, Routledge, London, 1976.
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11. Edith Wharton, p6, *Ethan Frome*, henceforth referred to as *Ethan*, Penguin, London, 1987. First published in 1911.
12. Ibid, p94.
13. Ibid, pl46.
14. Ibid, pl62.
15. Donald Davidson, reviewing Julian Green's *The Dark Journey*, on Dec 8th, 1929, quoted in Jay B Hubbell: *Who are the Major American Authors*, Duke University Press, 1972.
16. *Ethan*, p34.
17. Ibid, p33.
18. Ibid, p34.
19. Ibid, pl67.
20. Humbert Wolfe, "The Uncelestial City", circa 1930. Source unknown - taught at school. Other poems, *Snow*, pub. by Gollancz, London, 1931.
21. Honore Balzac, "La Grande Bretache", in *La Grande Bretache and other short stories*, Penguin, London, 1988.

O Crux Spes Unica

Epitaph on Edith Wharton's grave.

CONCLUSION

"Edith Wharton's thinking and her political attitudes were never other than conservative", we are told by Michael Millgate. It is an easy assumption to make, given that her usual subject matter is high society, but it is an assumption which is almost entirely groundless. Despite what close reading of her fiction reveals, the "popular" image of Edith Wharton is of a woman left over from the nineteenth century, gazing fondly into the past and shuddering when forced to consider the future. She has been stamped as an elitist and a conservative, and it is a character summary which her non-fiction and her autobiography do little to refute. Joyce and Woolf are strongly criticized under her pen, and her autobiography is at times a masterpiece of reactionary prose. She speaks in *A Backward Glance* of

the formative value of nearly three hundred years of social observance: the concerted living up to long-established standards of honour and conduct, of education and manners. The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change"².

Yet it is facile to accept the autobiography of a woman as the definitive word on her fiction. All of her major novels are full of passion about the present and the future; her major theme is the conflict between the fulfilment of individual lives and the injunction

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to obey society's laws. The industrial society which spawned the culture industry is now the society which pulls the strings of Society. The commodity culture is shown by Wharton to be more dangerous, more insidious than the old codes which used to govern the lives of people like May Welland.

Hudson River Bracketed, for example, pours scorn upon the Midwest middle class obsession with novelty and the new: pink gramophones crop up three times at least in the story, functioning as a symbol for Wharton's critique of the fetish of the commodity. Lily Bart's necessity for the new and fashionable, Undine's purchase of three ball gowns just for the pleasure of buying them, and her ceaseless purchase of commodities which find their only use in being useless, the Beauforts' bourgeois pride in having a ballroom which is only used once a year and absolutley does not justify its expense in terms of use value: al are described out to illustrate what happens to societies when they centre around the worship of money, thereby demoting the status of what Wharton herself held dear; Art, History, Education, good breeding, manners and friendship.

In *Ethan Frome* women break the back of the hero because the paternal society in which they live has never permitted them to learn how to support themselves, leaving basic alternatives of marriage or suicide. Kate Clephane's whole life is destroyed in *The Mother's Recompense* by her society's tendency to condemn women who become involved in extra-marital relations, without doling out a similar punishment for men, and without regard for the circumstances. Lily Bart, of *The House of Mirth*, is born and bred to adorn New York society gatherings, to be an ornament for a man. When she fails at

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that, she can do nothing else. Bessie Westmore, of *The Fruit of the Tree* has been turned into a trivial thing interested only in fripperies, because she has been told that such an attitude best fits a lady of her position. Undine Spragg is like Lily in her use of her beauty to gain advancement in society, but she uses sex more evidently too, and has none of that nobility of spirit which makes Lily fail in her ignoble ends at the last. Undine, in Wharton's philosophy, is a more perfect example of the product which America turns its women into, and as such is a more perfect example of the fault in the heart of American culture. Lily has a capacity for love and an innate hatred of hollowness, in spite of the layers of education which tell her to pull herself up by her beautiful bootstraps. Undine has not, and the American virtues of beauty, ambition and social grace which she possesses hide nothing more honourable behind. Thus Lily destroys herself and leaves the world to maintain its traditional wall against failure, whilst Undine, made of sterner and less likeable stuff, scorches her way almost to the top. Undine destroys anything of worth which obstructs her path, only to be defeated at the very last by a standard which remains firm when those who put it in place have been for the most part removed by people like Undine.

These brief points alone should dispel the myth that Wharton is merely an old-fashioned "woman who writes". She is anxious about the future but it is an anxiety entirely free of querulousness. Instead it is tinged with fear for the loss of every value which does not directly serve capitalism. She is not conservative, except in despising the encroachment of the culture industry, nor elitist except in believing, as the high modernists believed, that in order to resist

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commodity culture, art has to be difficult and therefore people have to work hard to gain understanding of it. Both the effort of trying to understand, and the understanding, keep the purveyors of the culture industry a little further away from the door. Artists such as Corbusier and Wright, who are high modernists, were not elitist in the sense of supporting exclusivity or right-wing politics. Indeed, in advocating a better standard of living for everyone, Corbusier was just the opposite. It is the prescriptive nature of his vision that makes it open to the accusation of elitism, and likewise with Adorno and Wharton.

Wharton is seen as a realist, a genre which has always been seen as prior to, and different from modernism. Yet real writers never fit happily into the standard categories, which sometimes harm by putting false perimeters around the artist's work.

The definitions of realism from its high priest, William Dean Howells, do not simultaneously define the novels of Edith Wharton. He said of American literature, "let it speak the dialect, the language that most Americans know - the language of unaffected people everywhere"². Under Howells definition realism seeks "to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against aesthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition".

"None of the characters in the society novels speaks in an "unaffected" language. Edith Wharton touches briefly on the theme of language in *The Age of Innocence* when Ellen cries that nobody will speak the truth, and that she does not speak Newland's language. In *Hudson River Bracketed* Vance is ashamed of his grandmother's accent, and in *The Custom of the Country* Undine soon refines her voice to make

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bullet in Ralph Marvell's brain, behind the hollow greed of the citizens of Euphoria. The people who make up Thorstein Veblen's leisure class are identical to the people who populate Wharton's novels, and all the time the call to private ownership, the call to achieve status by "the invidious distinction attaching to wealth"^{p36} draws people away from all else that was previously held dear.

Realism was born because of the Industrial Revolution. The materialist values emerging in society at large provoked an answering disdain of such values in the intellectuals of the time. Realists were "prophets of consciousness in a fundamentally spiritual calling, wilful instruments of moral reformation"⁶. They were horrified by the new unthinking materialism, and the acceptance of it in replacement of autonomy. Wharton's books are a constant plea to recognize and resist commodification, purely by presenting a commodified society and showing us its destructive force. Wharton is scorned by modernists because of her traditional style, yet Wharton is a modernist. As Eagleton says,

High modernism...was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture. Modernism is among other things a strategy where the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object.⁶

So, Wharton cannot be defined solely as a realist or as a modernist, which points up the inadequacy of categorization. The best that can be said is that she employs a realist technique whilst understanding and sympathising with the modernist ethos.

Warner Berthoff, having written a whole book defining realism precisely, then accuses Wharton of a mean-spiritedness in her fiction:

she is neither generous in herself nor able to imagine generosity in

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others...we sense a personal relish for punishing her characters. None of them are spared, neither those who violate the norms of decency, nor those who rebel against the falseness of these norms, nor those others who keep aloof from either course and so from life itself; all must be brought low and made to grovel.⁷

This is echoed by Luthi, who accuses Wharton of not being "generous enough in moral outlook"⁸.

Their apparent belief that all good realists are essentially optimists, and that a writer who offers a bleak vision of human nature is straying from the realist path, is utterly inaccurate. It is misleading to see Wharton's refusal to compromise on the message of her fiction as ungenerous. It would have been ungenerous to give us a less sharp moral vision, ungenerous to abandon her integrity and offer happy endings as a sop to our thirst for fairytales, and ungenerous, ultimately, to give us a commodity instead of art.

Conclusion

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