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**Edith Wharton's Material Republic:
*The House of Mirth***

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One unexamined facet of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is the allusion to Plato and ancient Greek culture employed to critique the wealthy elite of the American republic. By incorporating references to Plato's *Republic*, Wharton illustrates the consequences for a society that develops when all citizens are not sufficiently trained to contribute productive skills, or to consider alternatives when their circumstances change. Wharton indicts the United States by underscoring the lack of choices for women raised to be decorative accessories, witty conversationalists and models of moral purity.

Two critical responses to *The House of Mirth* lay the groundwork for a reading of the novel as an ironic presentation of the wealthy American republic. Carol J. Singley's *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* argues that reading Wharton as a novelist of manners has precluded our ability to see her strength as a novelist of morals. Singley portrays Wharton as "a writer not only of society but of spirit; a woman who, in life and in art, searched for religious, moral and philosophical meaning" (x). She demonstrates Wharton as a novelist with "mind and spirit intensely engaged in abstract questions" and reveals Wharton's connection to Platonists like Emerson, Santayana, and art historian Violet Paget (x-xi, 34). Wharton read Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and "had experimented with Platonic ideals as antidote to the materialism of

modern life in *The House of Mirth*" (34). Singley considers Lawrence Selden's republic of the spirit "a poorly executed—and ironically presented—alternative to the mundane" (34). Additionally, Carol Miller's study of the unifying irony in *The House of Mirth* claims that Wharton's central theme is the alienation of people "confronting a devastating reality—the complex loneliness of the human spirit and of experience itself" (83). Irony is one of Socrates's main strategies for communicating strategically in a politically charged environment. According to Miller, Wharton's characters are connected by their shared awareness of spiritual, emotional and physical isolation and by their bewildered and thwarted attempts to overcome it (83). Lily Bart is "brought down by the internalized conflict between the real and the ideal, between fate and freedom, and by the confusion these contraries engender in her about how to live" (84, 86). Selden offers Lily inaccessible ideals of freedom and self-possession which often mark a moment of danger because she makes poor choices each time she encounters him. This essay develops Singley's and Miller's ideas, demonstrating specific allusions to Plato's *Republic* and other aspects of Platonism throughout the novel and grounding them with biographical support.

Wharton's interest in philosophy began when she was young and continued throughout her life. Recalling the days before her social debut, she states that the books which made the strongest impression "reached a part of my mind that no one had thought of arousing" (*Backward* 71). Among these influential books, she cites textbooks that

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BOOK REVIEW

Kress, Jill M. *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James, and Edith Wharton*. Ed. William E. Cain, Ser. on Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory. New York: Routledge, 2002, 268 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0415939798. Hardcover

In her work, Kress moves from William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), and other of his works, through various social scientists including Charles Darwin, George Henry Lewes and Herbert Spencer to construct a "figure of consciousness" in turn-of-the-century America, which "reevaluates the cultural narrative of consciousness and [reveals] the crucial ways in which metaphor constructs each of its manifestations" (Kress xi). She applies this construct to the works of William James, Henry James and Edith Wharton to demonstrate how these metaphors emerge in their works thereby defining the cultural narrative of the time.

Kress's main argument is that each of these authors, through the use of the metaphorical aspect of discourse, establish and develop theories of consciousness using figurative language to establish identity. However, because of the use of symbols, any discourse in consciousness produces an equivocal version of the self so that identity shifts relentlessly, changing with every new linguistic configuration. (xii) Therefore, each author's language creates "figures of consciousness," rather than true interior identities; Kress asserts that the authors are aware of this elusiveness of identity.

Kress grounds much of her discussion in scientific theory. She compares scientific language to that of the named authors to explore the methods by which scientific writers bring consciousness into being. Her argument asserts that a shared figurative discourse exists between scientific lexicons and imaginative writing. She extensively discusses how metaphors for consciousness emerge in a variety of ways, and asserts that examining scientific theory and literary writings together helps to reevaluate the cultural narrative of consciousness.

Kress's choice of fiction writers James and Wharton provides fertile ground for her illustrations of the tension of portraying consciousness in a carefully constructed manner of social and cultural contexts, since consciousness is usually discussed in elusive, transcendental terms; this is when metaphorical language is often employed, which, Kress asserts, can cause anxiety to the reader when interpreting a character's interior locus of identity, and reconciling this with the exterior images of the world in which they live.

A main tenet of Modernism is the author's portrayal of characters who simultaneously hold contradictory thoughts in their minds while their actions display an attempt to resolve this interior tension in ways which are doomed by the inherent opposition of their held ideas. Thus the authors of this genre engage in elaborately conflicting metaphors to explore the inherent contradictions

within their character's consciousness. This author closely examines the work of the three chosen authors to present her assertions of consonance and dissonance of depictions of consciousness among and between each, mainly through extensive quotation of their works, including letters and essays as well as larger writings. Her conclusions are well supported and a "figure of consciousness" is painstakingly developed throughout the entire work.

Chapter One is entitled "Studies in Nature and Interiors: The Discourse of Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Science." This introductory chapter connects scientific language of the time and what is usually considered "literary" language in nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts. The main concept of the Figure of Consciousness is initially well drawn; the remainder of the text buttresses this concept with myriad examples and related concepts.

Chapter Two focuses on William James, a social scientist, philosopher, and brother of Henry James. Kress contests the metaphors and the discourse of consciousness in his works by reading his important works in conjunction with other scientific writings and those of Henry James and Edith Wharton

Chapter Three examines Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* and intersects its language with that of Henry's brother William to consider common metaphors. This presentation of overlap illuminates the author's hypothesis that the philosopher and the fiction writer both comprehend, and ultimately, create the concept of consciousness through a shared language of metaphors (62). The author examines correspondence between the brothers as well as H. James's acknowledged sources and his own commentary on *The Portrait of a Lady* to explain the consciousness of James's characters. She effectively utilizes quotes from these sources to support her assertions. Kress concludes this chapter with her perception that "[Henry] James suggests [in *Portrait*] that consciousness might indeed establish a path, a position, a standpoint that, if we refuse to forsake it, will hold the self in place" (86).

Chapter Four proceeds to explore gender metaphors in James's *The Golden Bowl*. William James's *Essays in Radical Empiricism* is compared and contrasted to this fictional work; the author again draws from letters of both Jameses, and particularly between them, the text of the novel, and Henry James's own commentary. Kress asks rhetorical questions relevant to the age such as "Is consciousness intrinsic to the self or dependent upon something outside of the self?" (89) She continues and identifies female metaphorical language and symbols as well as examining female characterizations in Henry James's work to construct her perception of his definition of consciousness in this work. After extensive quotation from both Jameses' works, she

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her brother used in college: an abridged copy of *The History of Philosophy* by Sir William Hamilton and *Copée's Elements of Logic* (71). According to R.W.B. Lewis's biography, Wharton's reading gave her a lifelong penchant for Greek culture. During the winter of 1888 she spent \$10,000 to charter a four-month cruise through the Aegean islands. The trip was important enough for Wharton to take a sizable financial risk; when she left she had no idea how she would support herself upon her return, having spent an entire year's income to finance the cruise. Fortunately, she received an inheritance shortly before coming home. Wharton waited until 1927 for her second trip to Greece, lasting ten weeks and including a trip to Delphi. She recalled these two cruises as the happiest moments of her life (Lewis 58-9, 469-70).

In addition, Wharton was actively engaged in reading Plato around the time she completed *The House of Mirth*. R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis's published collection of Wharton's letters yield some specific titles although few letters from 1905 and 1906 are included. The novel was published serially in 1905 and entirely in book form in October of the same year. In December 1905, Wharton tells Sara Norton she happily received a copy of Samuel Henry Butcher's *Some Aspects of Greek Genius*. Wharton refers to Lang's *Odyssey* as her "constant companion" during her trip on the Aegean (Lewis 100). Her letter continues, saying that she will appreciate the Butcher book because she has been reading Walter Pater's *Plato and Platonism* " & some of the dialogues, & am in the mood for the Hellenic" (100). In February 1906, she writes to Sara about a lecture, *Individuality and Immortality*, delivered and published by German scholar Wilhelm Otswold: "Ah, how it lifts one up to hear such a voice . . . It has a fine Stoic note—the note of Seneca and Epictetus—with the other-regarding experience of the Christian centuries fortifying, not weakening it" (102). She is also reading Freidrich Paulsen's *Introduction to Philosophy*. In August, she reads Butcher's book "with great joy" and a new translation of Aeschylus's *Orestes* trilogy (Lewis 105). On August 7, after getting caught in a car during a rainstorm, she tells Sara Norton that she and her companion were unharmed and "finished off the evening by reading the *Symposium*" (106). The novel includes minor references to the Furies, Eumenides, Perseus and Theocritus. *The House of Mirth* attests to Wharton's knowledge of Greek culture and her philosophical mindset at the time of the novel's composition.

Plato's *Republic* features Socrates talking to a group of his students to design an ideal city. He leads the conversation skillfully, primarily talking to two men who aspire to be strong political leaders, though one is more interested in securing a comfortable life than the other. In their imaginary republic, men and women are assigned roles according to their talents and the needs of the society. Philosophers and political scientists

disagree on two points: whether Plato's imagined republic was supposed to be a blueprint for a real city, and whether Plato was serious about women's potential contribution. I think that Plato's dialogue primarily illustrates the importance of rational thought and education for *individual* citizens to create a successful state, but that it was never intended to map a functioning city. Plato's *Republic* features the allegory of the cave, in which prisoners are shackled facing a wall of shadows that they mistake for real objects, having no other experience to the contrary until one of them escapes and returns to attempt to convince them of the truth. It contains stories about the temptation to break rules, like the Ring of Gyges, which can make a person invisible, and the myth of the sun, which equates the true, the good and the beautiful.

The Republic provides a wealth of images from which Wharton could borrow and against which she depicts the American republic. Wharton repeatedly contrasts the ideal and the actual, which is a main task of Plato's philosophy. Lily compares leaving a stifling party to a prisoner's first draught of clean air, which is like the philosopher's experience upon leaving the cave. There are multiple images of light and darkness where the light is associated with truth and darkness with illusion, perhaps alluding to the sun analogy in the *Republic*. She maintains a "philosophic calm" when contemplating the existence of the poor. There are frequent reminders that Lily and Selden are self-deceived, an intolerable situation that Socrates would have felt compelled to correct. These references further underscore the Platonic influences in the novel.

Wharton's opening description of Lily echoes a Platonic dualism between body and mind and associates Lily with corporeal existence. Plato's assertion that human beings are essentially immortal souls confined in mortal bodies is repeated in several dialogues. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates reminds his students that the body distorts knowledge, and that a philosopher's primary concern should be the immortal part of the soul, which includes one's rationality and the immaterial distillation of a person that survives death. In the *Phaedrus*, where the soul is compared to a charioteer with two horses, the horse which obeys reason is beautiful, but the one which strains against reason is ugly. In the *Republic*, the soul is divided into a rational part which reasons, and another which "loves, hungers, thirsts, and feels the flutter and titillation of other desires, the irrational and appetitive" part that concerns itself with the body's needs (439d). Though Socrates's attitude toward the body varies in the Platonic dialogues, becoming erotic in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, Socrates rarely departs from his belief that the body distracts and tempts the soul from its proper task of inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge.

With this dualism in mind, it is significant that *The House of Mirth* begins by depicting Lily Bart as a beautiful body. Wharton inverts the Platonic order by giving priority to beauty over goodness and illustrates the

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superficial result. In Plato's *Republic*, the form of the true, the good and the beautiful creates a unified triad, but goodness is supreme. Truth and morality are intrinsically beautiful. Reversing Platonic order, Lily Bart decides that her moral goodness consists in sharing her beauty. Lily "liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste" (35). Her identity is tied to her aesthetic achievement, and her comments about appropriate behavior are usually practical, related to her ability to find a husband rather than to seek an objective standard of morality. Unlike the Platonic ideal of beauty which is singular and unchanging, Lily's beauty requires maintenance, a clue to its impermanence. When she is well-dressed, she thinks, "Ah, it [is] good to be young, to be radiant, to glow with the sense of slenderness, strength and elasticity, of well-poised lines and happy tints, to feel one's self lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the *bodily counterpart of genius*" (116, emphasis added). Although Lily's appearance requires maintenance, she acts as if it is reliably permanent, considering it "not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience" so that "she could trust it to carry her through to the end" (49).

Lily's intelligence and confidence revolve around her understanding of the importance of her own presentation, and on the power of vanity. She considers the wealthy but boring Percy Gryce a potential husband because she could be "the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it. She knew that this generosity to self is one of the forms of meanness, and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence" (49). Her situation makes it practical for Lily to objectify herself. She reasons primarily to enhance her performance and to surmise the motives that drive each potential spouse. From the beginning, Wharton's heroine struggles with the choice between maintaining her beautiful appearance and upholding her moral standards without becoming destitute, as if to emphasize the distance from a Platonic beauty closely aligned with truth.

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates finds himself surrounded by the sons of politicians who are drawn to his wisdom and to his independence. Dependent and uncertain, Lily seeks moral and aesthetic guidance in her quest for a respectable but rich husband from an honest friend. Although her choices are limited, she selects Laurence Selden because he's single, attracted to her, and insufficient as a potential spouse. Lily informs Selden about the kind of friend she wants him to be: "there are men enough to say pleasant things to me, and . . . what I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them" (9). Her

understanding that she needs assistance indicates an intelligent assessment of the situation.

Selden appreciates Lily's material presence, and the environment that creates and sustains her. Wharton reiterates the manufacturing of Lily's image. While Selden contemplates Lily's beauty, he "had the 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" so that she could stand out from the "herd of her sex" (5). While recognizing that Lily is an outstanding example of the female form, Selden simultaneously thinks she has been given a "futile shape" (5) that leads to her inevitable demise: "[s]he was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (7).

Lily realizes that Selden is an imperfect choice, but she appreciates his ability to appear as if he's outside her social realm and therefore better able to view it. She realizes Selden is neither brilliant nor exceptional but that he seemed detached from the social milieu, as if he had "points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at" (54). Lily feels trapped inside the cage, but realizes she could leave. She fears that she is like most of the captives, who are like flies in a bottle, who never regain their freedom after flying in. In contrast, Selden remembers how to escape once in a while. Wharton revises Plato's cave allegory, replacing the shackled prisoners with flies in a bottle or birds in a gilt cage who could escape but never do. For both Wharton and Plato, few prisoners are motivated to leave the cave and the familiar surroundings of their daily lives. In Plato's *Republic*, the prisoner who leaves discovers that the old knowledge was merely a shadowy truth. For Lily, there's no incentive to leave elite society. The alternative, like the life of Gerty Farish, is unimaginably limited.

After Selden flatters Lily by suggesting that she's too beautiful and too good to spend time with her pretentious friends, his critique causes her to reassess them. Dining with the Trenors one afternoon, Lily observes that they "had seemed full of brilliant qualities, now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievements. It was not that she wanted them to be more disinterested, but that she wanted them to be more picturesque" (55). When Selden's assessments are inconvenient or unpleasant, she avoids him, knowing that "his presence always had the effect of cheapening her aspirations, of throwing her whole world out of focus" (88). Selden's most grave personal flaw though, is his hypocritical self-deception, because he maintains his connections to the people he presumes are beneath him. He neither tries to educate them, nor avoid them, preferring to be self-righteous.

The key passage linking Wharton to Plato occurs in the sixth chapter of Book One, when Selden

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introduces Lily to a vaguely developed "republic of the spirit." On a Sunday morning during a weekend in the country, Lily has planned to attend church to impress Percy Gryce, but instead she fails due to her "impulse and truancy" (58). At one point, Selden tells Lily that her genius lies in converting impulses into intentions. In this case, Lily simply changes her goal, intending to catch Mr. Gryce as the service ends. Selden interrupts her walk toward the church. The ensuing conversation has a skilled, playful quality. Critic Carol Miller has observed that their stylized, ironic talk creates such ambiguity of intention and meaning that they fail to communicate, so that ultimately "their double-edged repartee cannot nurture or even sustain the fragile empathy that springs up between them" (88). Their conversation dances around issues that are vital to Lily's survival. Their topics and tone wander, first flirtatious then serious, fragmented and distracted rather than following a sustained Socratic path.

Lily suggests that success in life is getting as much out of it as one can. Selden counters with a definition of success as personal freedom, "[f]rom everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—" (68). Selden's republic is an ironic invocation of the Platonic outlook which neglects a citizen's need for shelter, clothing and food. In Plato's version, all citizens occupy roles which support the community as well as their own talents, and they are educated accordingly. Physical needs are met for all inhabitants. The city supports its philosopher king, who seeks wisdom. Key to his leadership is his ability to share his knowledge to benefit the community. Lily tells Selden that no one has told her about "the republic of the spirit." Selden's reply that individuals must find their own way departs from the Platonic model created as part of a conversation among friends. Furthermore, although Socrates leads a conversation with his students by asking them questions and testing their replies, Selden insists that there are sign-posts to the republic of the soul, but that "one has to know how to read them" (68). He fails to teach Lily how to find them or interpret them, presumably because his concept is vaguely developed.

Plato's republic is a Socratic invention. As an historical argument, the Athenian state rejects the proposal to let the philosopher lead the people, and executes Socrates even though he argues that the state produced him. Laurence Selden is a poor copy of Socrates. Wharton underscores Selden's diffuse focus by changing the ownership of the republic throughout the conversation. First it's a place one must find alone. Then, after Selden invites Lily to join his republic, he excludes the rich and the married, saying "we" cannot admit her, but the nebulous "we" remains unidentified (69). Neither of Selden's exclusions exist in Plato's *Republic*. In fact, material comforts are acknowledged to contribute to the quality of life. Lily retorts that being single is an unjust requirement of the republic because

"one of the conditions of citizenship is not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it" (69). Selden claims that rich people breathe money and cannot handle being taken into another element, and in Lily's case he's portent. Lily accuses Selden of spending a lot of time with the element he disapproves of, but he doesn't mind, agreeing and insisting that the trick is to be amphibious (70). His attitude affirms Lily's sense of Selden's objectivity. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates steers the conversation. When he finds someone who claims to have true knowledge, he interrogates him. If he cannot teach someone to consider his views, he finds a way to silence or embarrass him, as he does in the beginning of the *Republic* with Polemarchus, a senior statesman. For Socrates, no topic is sacred or taboo. In contrast, Selden has little wisdom to offer Miss Bart, and he never risks alienating his hosts by questioning their values. Although he's acting as if he's wiser than Lily, it's clear his republic is a little more than the wish not to be bothered with the mundane acquisition of possessions that he has no intention to sacrifice.

Lily redirects the conversation in order to persuade Selden that neither money nor society need be inherent problems: "people who find fault with society are too apt to regard it as an end and not a means, just as the people who despise money speak as if its only use were to be kept in bags and gloated over. [...] Isn't it fairer to look at them both as opportunities, which may be used either stupidly or intelligently, according to the capacity of the user?" (70) Lily's question remains unanswered. They switch from the overt discussion of money, which obviously makes them uncomfortable, to the subject of social entertainment. Selden suggests that, "The people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use; but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life" (70). Lacking meaningful work, the elite mistakenly make entertainment an end in itself. Selden suggests that they ought to know which aspects of their life are illusion and which are "real life . . . on the other side of the [stage] lights" (70), implying that he knows the way out of the Platonic cave. As he disdains the value of social functions in which he often participates, he ignores the function of money to sustain the entertaining illusions, and suggests that he wants a freedom from material concerns without facing either his complicity or his consumption.

Lily challenges Selden's republic, calling it a closed corporation with arbitrary rules. Selden insists that it is not his republic and that if it were, he would let her in. If it's not his, he's not responsible for its flaws. Once again, Wharton deviates from Plato's republic, where neither sex nor marriage categorically bar women from ruling. Although *The Republic* is not a feminist text, common ancient Greek restrictions on women are missing. In Book 5, Socrates suggests that women can do anything men can do except in cases where women

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are physically weaker. Women need the same training as men to do the same jobs (451e-452a). Socrates suggests that if the only difference between men and women is their procreative roles, both sexes should be educated similarly, according to their inherent talents (454e). People with artistic abilities would be raised by artisans. Those who demonstrate a facility with numbers and bargaining would be merchants. Those with the appropriate loyalty and fierceness would be trained as soldiers, whether they are men or women. Although Plato is disinterested in the individual happiness of women and men in his republic, since individuals are subordinated to the good of the whole state, the life's work of each citizen is matched to one's talents and inclinations, a plan which could potentially produce contentment. Nevertheless, for someone seeking a brief argument that women could participate in a republic as equals if they were educated as equals, Plato provides sufficient if not ample evidence, as Platonists like Julia Annas have maintained.

Selden changes the topic from the proper purpose of society to the wasted energy of human beings. His most hypocritical moments occur when he appreciates Lily's beauty, while insisting that the creation of material affluence is a waste. He complains, "If we're all the raw stuff of cosmic effects, one would rather be the fire that tempers a sword than the fish that dyes a purple cloak. And a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple" (70). The reference to purple might allude to an analogy Socrates uses to explain the ability of training and education to adhere to a soul. Socrates mentions the process by which wool is dyed purple (*Republic* 429d-e). Good training sticks to a person like color set with a mordant, a chemical which causes dye to adhere to fabric. Historically, purple dye has been expensive and difficult to set. Like a soul's education, it is easily washed out. Selden fails to acknowledge the extent to which he uses Lily as his little patch of purple, as if she were produced for his enjoyment. Furthermore, his comparison that he would rather be the fire than the fish dye elevates the masculine art of fighting over stewing mollusks to create a merely aesthetic effect.

While Socrates insists that the unexamined life is not worth living, and that it is essential for a person to "know thyself," Lily Bart avoids self-reflection. Lily has "never learned to live with her own thoughts" (178). She wants "to get away from herself, and conversation was the only means of escape that she knew" (17). Rather than knowing herself, she becomes what others expect her to be: Lily "for all the hard glaze of her exterior," is "inwardly as malleable as wax . . . like a water plant in the flux of the tides" (53). She is "not accustomed to the joys of solitude except in company" (61) because the "real self of hers" does not know how to be alone (95). Even as Lily becomes bored, longing for "anything different, anything strange, remote and untried," she lacks imagination to picture her life "anywhere but in a

drawing room diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume" (100). She foresees her future as "servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (101), without a clear sense of what that underdeveloped individuality might entail. A partitioned self, her physical beauty, moral sensibility, and mental acuity are at odds. This lack of personal integration prevents her from self-reflection. Wharton suggests that Lily could have been educated differently.

This inability to reflect leads to Lily's gradual descent into a liaison with Rosedale. If she could foresee the chain of events and imagine an alternative she might have avoided him. Wharton portrays a woman with a weakening moral code:

. . . what she craved and really felt herself entitled to, was a situation in which the noblest attitude should also be the easiest. Hitherto her intermittent impulses of resistance had sufficed to maintain her self-respect. If she slipped she recovered her footing, and it was only afterward that she was aware of having recovered it each time on a slightly lower level. She had rejected Rosedale's offer without conscious effort; her whole being had risen against it; and she did not yet perceive that, by the mere act of listening to him, she had learned to live with ideas which would have once been intolerable to her. (262)

Wharton demonstrates that a person's morality can be affected by the suggestion of an ethical breach, and reminds the reader that Lily's experiences educate her in a way that leads to her demise.

Selden participates in Lily's descent into poverty by observing her as a curious object, beautiful as long as she remains independent and flirtatious, but less attractive when she most needs help. He lacks empathy and the ability to consistently question his assumptions about her. He observes her as a source for his own personal fantasies, and interferes in her plans for the sake of his amusement (68-9). If Lily "settles" for a rich husband, she fails in Selden's eyes, but without one she becomes destitute. As Helen Killoran astutely remarks, "While readers tend to agree with him about the materialism of Lily's goals, worse evil than a loveless marriage based on business principles results from his game playing" (22).

Selden's republic of the spirit is a poor copy of Plato's, which made room for people of various talents and abilities and did not require everyone to philosophize. In theory, Plato's ideal republic secures the basic necessities of life and some of the luxuries. Selden's ethereal republic assumes that people will have their physical and aesthetic needs met. He fails to articulate what positive action might occur because of individual freedom. The pursuit of wisdom is not mentioned at all. Since Selden lacks sufficient interest in wisdom and ideas, he does not lead the republic of the spirit that he describes. He neither designs an improved city, nor finds an appropriate place for Lily within their society. As they contemplate the possibility of finding

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solace in each other, each understands the other's reluctance to act on their mutual but qualified attraction.

As in Plato's allegory of the cave, Wharton leaves the people inside, unchained but apathetic about venturing outside. The prisoners in Plato's cave are unaware of any other life until someone escapes and returns to share his new experience with them. Wharton's elite citizens sometimes glimpse other people's poverty, but are blind to any broader sense of the quality of life. Men are required to have enough money to spend it freely on their wives and families. Married women hardly think about money, or choose to spend it while presuming they have sufficient funds to be comfortable. Even though Rosedale and Trenor know what supports the theater of the rich, they are expected to act as though its creation is automatic, like women's beauty. Wharton indicts bourgeois New York for failing to give individuals' lives a purpose beyond their own perpetual entertainment. Wharton and Plato appear to agree that people's preoccupation with material things can prevent them from contemplation and self-reflection. They also emphasize the importance of education to train individuals for life in the republic. For Plato, when citizens do their jobs, they are contributing to justice, and doing the work one is best suited for accompanies self-mastery (443d). For Wharton, lack of training may leave a person destitute. Lily Bart's dilemma occurs because her republic trains her for an economically dependent role. While she realizes that she might have been taught to value different things, she has only enough self-awareness to assess the facts of her situation and she has no viable options.

Plato's *Republic* offers an ideal city structure led by a philosopher, but the more important goal is to educate citizens about balancing reason and emotion, desire and obligation, consumption and necessity. People are trained for occupations that will be useful to the state and that reflect their talents, but they also learn a moral sense of purpose within the community, and many learn to consider knowledge of Platonic forms, or the ideal version of love, truth and justice in contrast to circumstantial versions that occur in ordinary life. Likewise, Wharton emphasizes the distance between any philosophical ideal and New York society, where elitist citizens excel in spending and repartee. While Wharton and Plato implicitly acknowledge the lives of the poor, for both authors, the focus is on the education of leaders needed to improve the quality of people's lives through rational choices and economic distinctions between necessities and luxuries. People don't need to forgo aesthetic pleasures, but they must contemplate the essential elements of life first, and presumably realize that entertainment and services may be supplemental.

Wharton borrows Socrates's ironic stance but replaces Socrates with Selden. Together, Lily Bart and Laurence Selden embody the implicit tenet that

material desires can distract people from considering any Platonic ideas. Lily resembles Socrates by being the focus of social functions, a valued ironic and diplomatic guest who becomes one of its sacrifices. The dual realization that the society Lily seeks is not worth having and that there aren't real alternatives available for single women form the tragic core of Wharton's plot. In fact, she illustrates a Platonic dystopia: without training, an elite caught up in the competition to show off wealth leads to shallow, frustrated human lives that contribute little to the republic at large, in spite of their self-important air.

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Nietzsche, German Culture and Edith Wharton

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This essay focuses on Nietzsche's analysis of German culture, particularly as it contrasts with Mediterranean culture, and Edith Wharton's use of these philosophical ideas with final emphasis on her story "Roman Fever." In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Friedrich Nietzsche escaped the isolation and disillusionment of the North (specifically Germany and Switzerland) with long stays on the Italian shore. As he wrote to his intimate friend Paul Ree, here he was "Prince Free as a Bird"; in a later poem he explains, "I love to soar aloft on my wings/Following every bird[...]. To think alone I call wise,/But to sing alone—would be stupid! /So hearken to a song in your praise/ And sit quietly around me in a circle,/Ye bad little birds! So young, so faithless, so cunning,/ Ye seem made for love/ And every charming pastime" (qtd in Kohler 171). According to private letters and the testimony of some of his intimates, the "bad little birds" were young Italian male prostitutes, many of whom posed in the nude for

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"art" postcards. Although he tried to keep these affairs secret, Nietzsche's Dionysian behavior is in keeping with the notion of the aristocratic *Übermensch* who is exempted from bourgeois Christian morality. This sensuous side of Nietzsche's personality may come as a surprise to those who think of him as providing the philosophical underpinnings for Hitler and Nazism. In fact, Friedrich had died in 1900 after ten years of silent insanity, perhaps from the effects of tertiary syphilis, and it was his sister Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche who courted the Nazis and even forged documents to make him seem sympathetic to the Fascist cause.

A recent biography of Nietzsche, entitled *Zarathustra's Secret*, by Joachim Kohler, psychoanalyzes his subject. He details Friedrich's repressed childhood as the son of a Prussian reform pastor who died early of "softening of the brain" leaving him to be raised by a house full of women whose straight-laced bourgeois morality suffocated him. This upbringing no doubt has to do with his adult repugnance for women in his life and work. Even in his days as a student, first in theology and later in philology, Friedrich rarely felt independent and free to be himself. His only escape was music, the wordless expression of human creativity and genius. He longed to merge with the forces of nature which he frequently portrays in his writing as man enduring the lightning and thunder of a violent storm (a scene very evocative of the German Romantic *sturm und drang*). Disillusioned with Wagner's attempts to bring new genius to reform the German people, Nietzsche turned to the Mediterranean. It was in Italy that Nietzsche found himself to be "natural," and according to Kohler, able to live as an unrepressed homosexual. It was there, Nietzsche claimed, that he met the true "Superman," he who dares to live beyond conventional morality. In his own view, he merged the literary idea of the isolated, nonconforming genius with his life. Despising democracy and "the herd," he was his own Superman.

Nietzsche is classically associated with Modernism, especially in his connection with Richard Wagner. Nietzsche was a composer and a brilliant literary scholar. Acutely aware of style and language, he had hoped to make his writings "[...] a landmark of German prose, and he wrote poems that regularly appear in collections of German poetry" (Foster 4). According to John Burt Foster, "Anyone who came to intellectual maturity in Europe and much of the Americas between the 1890s and the 1930s would have had trouble avoiding contact, either direct or indirect, with [Nietzsche's] work" (3). Wharton was no exception. In 1908 Wharton penned a letter to her dear friend Sara Norton in which she indicates she is reading Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* as a "diversion" from her "novel" (*Ethan Frome*?). She writes,

"I never read any Nietzsche before, except a glance at *Zarathustra*, which didn't tempt me but this is great fun—full of wit & originality &

poetry [...]. He has no system & not much logic, but wonderful flashes of insight, & a power of breaking through conventions that is most exhilarating, & clears the air as our thunderstorms just now do—not! I think it salutary, now & then, to be made to realize what he calls "[the re-evaluation of all values]," & really get back to a wholesome basis of naked instinct" (July 7, 1908, Lewis and Lewis, 159). [This at the time her affair with Morton Fullerton was at a period of intensity.] She goes on to say, "There are times when I hate what Christianity has left in our blood—or rather, one might say, taken out of it—by its cursed assumption of the split between body & soul" (July 7, 1908, Lewis and Lewis, 159).

Although in the *Biography* Lewis asserts that Wharton was merely rationalizing her affair with Fullerton, Macnaughton, among other scholars, cites evidence that Wharton was familiar with and influenced deeply by the corpus of Nietzsche's works. The difficulty with tracing the influence of Nietzsche is that he left a vast body of work, and he frequently revised his thinking about a subject. As a German satirist once quipped, "Tell me what you need and I'll supply you with the right Nietzsche quotation" (qtd in Safranski 11). As in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche frequently writes in aphorisms whose meaning becomes more profound with further thought. All this diffuseness makes writing about Nietzsche and any specific topic difficult.

During the nineteenth century, the German historian Winckelmann had popularized the notion that ancient Greece was a civilization of reason and order. This idea is also seen in Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light." In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche radically revises this notion. He points to Greek culture as the synthesis of two metaphysical life forces: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Apollo is the god of form, clarity, solid contours, ideas, and above all, individuality. By contrast, Dionysus is the uninhibited god of transport, rapture and ecstasy; individual barriers melt away. In a synthesis, cultures sublimate Dionysian energies through cultural institutions, rituals and myths. But as with the Freudian *id*, the threat of destructive Dionysian power lurks under the surface. Nietzsche sees this power as the world of the compulsive will, creative, cruel and unholy. According to his view, unlike the Christians, the Greeks transcend suffering and death to create a thing of beauty, the great art of the tragedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche expresses his hope that Richard Wagner's music-drama will serve the same purpose in his contemporary Germany. Although in Nietzsche's eyes Wagner failed, his exploration of the composer's work may have suggested to Wharton that she read Wagner. In fact, in a 1910 letter to Fullerton, Wharton writes that "Wagner's *Life* has saved mine—literally!" (May 12, 1911, Lewis and Lewis, 231).

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Like Wharton, Nietzsche admired Goethe as the greatest of German poets, but in formulating his concept of the Superman, or *Übermensch*, (a term Goethe uses in the poem) he found the character of Faust to be weak by "[...]allow[ing] himself to be redeemed by the principle of the Eternal Feminine" (Kohler 40), that is, the salvation of Faust's soul through the love and sacrifice of Margaret. You will remember that *The Age of Innocence* is framed by Gounod's operatic interpretation of Goethe's *Faust*. Nietzsche's interpretation of Faust's character sheds light on the anti-heroic passivity of Wharton's Newland Archer in sacrificing Ellen's love to will himself to power in the State Assembly and in New York municipal government. At the novel's end, he is ironically compared to the superhero Hercules (cleaning out the stables of corrupt politics). Nevertheless, he believes that "He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante [...]" (*A of I* 330). In Nietzschean style he calls his marriage "a dull duty" (331), not appreciating until later that May knew all along of his sacrifice of his love for Ellen. The principle of the Eternal Feminine applies doubly in *The Age of Innocence*, with the love of both Ellen and May redeeming Archer. Nietzsche is critical of the contemporary German bourgeoisie preference for home and family rather than exerting himself in heroic effort to a higher culture. In *The Gay Science* he writes that because of self-interest, "[...] the descendant of an old and proud family [...]" requires pompous principles that can be mouthed at any time; principles of some unconditional obligation to which one may submit without shame. [That is], refined servility" (80-81). This is an idea that may certainly be applied to Newland.

Nietzsche's dream had been that Richard Wagner, drawing on the myth of the Norse sagas and other medieval legends, would bring German art to a new aesthetic plateau. Then came the rude awakening. Wagner and Nietzsche had been united in their frank atheism; thus when in January 1878 Wagner sent Nietzsche his score of *Parsifal*, the latter regarded it as shameless. Based on a legend of the knights of the holy grail who seek "an innocent fool," i.e., Parsifal, to cure their wounded king, the opera exploited Christianity for theatrical effects. Nietzsche was incensed at Wagner's use of a completely anti-Greek hero (Kaufmann, Introduction, *The Case of Wagner* 149). Furthermore, he was disillusioned and disgusted with the failure of Bayreuth to usher in the rebirth of the Dionysian spirit in Germany (Safranski 138). Nietzsche's idealist hope had been that the superior few could be educated by the music drama's illustration of the heroic achievements of the human will. In fact, Wagnerian performances at Bayreuth became desperate efforts for Wagner to earn money and were much more like a gathering of the dregs of idle European society, with "[...]monarchs, princes, bankers, diplomats, and women

of ill-repute [as] the center of attention. These people typically languished during the performance but perked up at the social events" (Safranski 138). One can imagine Undine Spragg as an uncomprehending member of the audience; indeed, Macnaughton suggests that Nietzsche provides a framework for *The Custom of the Country*. The history of Elmer Moffat is that of educating a superman.

At the conclusion of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that Wagner's super hero Siegfried had appealed to the Germans "[...] thanks to the circumstance that we [...] are closer to barbarism than the French" (190). The aristocratic Siegfried is forever inaccessible to the Latin race because he is "[...]too free, too hard, too cheerful, too healthy, too anti-Catholic for the peoples of an ancient, mellow culture" (191). But Wagner atones by composing *Parsifal*, and Nietzsche responds with a poem that sums up his strong anti-Christian feelings:

--Is this still German?--

From German heart this sultry ululating?

Of German body this self-lacerating?

German, this altar-priest prostration,

This incense-perfumed stimulation?

German this reeling, stumbling, tumbling,

This muddy booming bim-bam-bumbling,

This nunnish ogling, Ave-hour-bell chiming,

This false-ecstatic higher-than-heaven climbing?

--Is this still German?--

Reflect! And then your answer frame:--

For what you hear is Rome—Rome's faith in all but name!

But Rome for Nietzsche, as for Wharton, had political associations as well as religious ones. Rome for Nietzsche was the great cultural heir to the classical Greeks. This fact did not escape the former philosophy teacher and reader of Nietzsche, Benito Mussolini, tyrant of Italy at the time of Wharton's story, "Roman Fever." By 1936, Mussolini had already aligned himself through a pact with Fascist Germany. In 1870, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Nietzsche believed that Germany had fallen into a state of non-creativity, a period of decadence. He describes German literature as "Everything staid, sluggish, ponderously solemn, all long-winded and boring[...]" (BGE 59). He waxed enthusiastically in Heraclitean terms about war providing opportunity for the rise of a superman, the "military genius." His great examples include Napoleon (a Corsican), Julius Caesar and Cesar Borgia. The Dionysian principle, then, has a military aspect. Furthermore the militant cruelty could be sublimated in contests such as in politics, social life and art. In "Homer's Contest" Nietzsche quotes Hesiod's description of the contest between two goddesses, one who promotes discord, the other envy. The contest comes to closure when envy produces competition and

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resultant prosperity and higher culture (Safranski 69). According to Safranski, the necessary association of 'battlefield and artwork' reveals the truth about culture [...]. But Nietzsche goes further; a second form of cruelty is a necessary condition, a form that he advocated: slavery. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he states that every advanced culture needs an exploitable working class, a 'slave class' (148). In other words, in the ideal cultural environment, to produce art and the highest level of culture, the master aristocratic class must cruelly dominate the barbaric slave class. According to him, the slave *par excellence* is woman.

In "Roman Fever" Wharton neatly portrays both a battlefield and artwork to reveal truth. She represents two women seated goddess-like above the "outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum" (9). Like Hesiod's aforementioned goddesses of discord and envy, the two engage in a dialectical Apollonian dramatic ritual, a civilized battle of wills. The undercurrent of Dionysian destruction, however, is made clear by their names: Slade [slayed] and Ansley (with a German prefix indicating about to slay). While Mrs. Ansley indicates her daughter's "[...] collective modern idea of Mothers," a Dionysian idea, she refers emphatically to "me," an individualistic Apollonian idea. Mrs. Ansley had flaunted conventional Christian morality in her liaison with Delphin Slade,—his name suggesting the Apollonian temple of the oracle at Delphi. The result, of course, is the "vivid" Barbara. (10) Mrs. Slade *thinks* unconventional thoughts but acts according to Nietzsche's "slave morality", that is, she is obedient and dependent. "Few are made for independence," states Nietzsche, "—it is a privilege of the strong" (BGE 60).— Their daughters, the two young American girls, seem to be sexually liberated, flying off "free as birds"—like Nietzsche—with two of Mussolini's officer pilots. Mrs. Slade believes that Jenny's life is "a little boring." "She wished that Jenny would fall in love— with the wrong man, even [...]" (14). Their daughters are in "[...] no more danger than the middle of Main Street" (15). Her daughter seems to be identified with San Gennaro, connected by Nietzsche with Christian piety and care of the sick. What the mothers fail to recognize, however, is that the girls are on their way to Tarquinia, the site of the rape of Lucretia, an event that led to Civil War (Etruscans vs. Romans) leading to the founding of the Republic. Mrs. Slade refers to herself in her youth as a "ferocious" girl in love. She assumes then that the daughters can defend themselves, but Barbara's name signifies that, like the Germans, she is drawn to the superman. Her desired Italian pilot is a Marchese, an aristocrat who, according to Nietzsche, follows his own "master morality." Part of that morality is the propagation of the species. Wharton here employs Nietzsche's idea of the Eternal Return: history repeats itself, within the story, with the possibility of a rape, and in reality, the possibility of war. In the country where Nietzsche felt the most "natural" and where he

encountered the superman, Barbara had been conceived in adultery. At the end of the story, Mrs. Slade and the reader learn the shocking truth about "master" morality. Yes, writes Nietzsche, "The will to truth [...] tempts us to many a hazardous enterprise" (BGE 33).

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Edith Wharton, Charles McKim, and the American Renaissance

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In Edith Wharton's first war novel, *The Marne* (1918), France becomes, for young Troy Belknap, "his holiday world, the world of his fancy and imagination, a great traceried window opening on the universe" (9). For young Edith, the whole of Europe became just such a window, a vision of beauty and order that colored her whole life. Charmed as a child by the visual world and fascinated by art and architecture, Wharton as a young adult became an apologist for the buildings and beliefs of the American Renaissance, allying herself in particular with the work of its leading architect, Charles Follen McKim. This first public role placed her in a context of wide-ranging cultural and political importance.

Her very early years were dominated by the family's 1866 migration to Europe "to economize," "a

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happy misfortune which gave me, for the rest of my life, that background of beauty and old-established order!" (*Backward Glance* 44). These early aesthetic memories "positioned" the novelist, as Shari Benstock observes, in "relation to traditions that privilege visual harmony and order" (29), traditions to which her individual subjectivity was deeply linked. The capitols of Europe came to represent a visual and spatial standard to which the American scene never measured up. She would have seen not only historic European architectural monuments but the results of recent development of major capitols. The most important was the opening and ordering of space in the center of Paris under Baron von Haussmann in the mid-nineteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, Berlin had laid out the grand Unter den Linden and throughout the nineteenth century built a series of monumental museums, theaters, churches, and other public buildings, many designed by the neoclassical heavyweight, Carl Friedrich Schinkel. These two cities in particular became the ideal toward which the City Beautiful movement aspired at the turn of the twentieth century in the U. S.

Wharton reflects both these architectural movements, the European and the American, in the repugnance in *A Backward Glance* at the "little low-studded rectangular New York" of the 1870s, a "cramped horizontal gridiron of town, . . . hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness" (55). Even as an adult, she hated "the wild, dishevelled backwoods look of everything."¹ Early in her marriage, she developed friendships with those who could nurture and school her passion for the visual arts. Egerton Winthrop, a cherished older friend of fine intelligence and judgment, helped to focus and discipline her "roving curiosities." He frequently traveled with the Whartons in quest of eighteenth-century Italian paintings and buildings, as did French Academician Paul Bourget and his wife Minnie in pursuit of other Italian treasures (*Backward Glance* 94-96, 102-4). These finely tuned aesthetic and spatial sensitivities are evident even in her earliest fiction, such as the tiny room of "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891) and the meticulous order of "Bunner Sisters" (1892).

Then, in 1897, *The Decoration of Houses* launched Wharton into contemporary American architectural discourse and allied her with the aesthetic arm of the Progressive movement. Just as France and Italy were her early windows on the world, that first volume was a doorway to professional success. *A Backward Glance* describes the book as the "odd and unexpected beginning" of her "literary life," written with that "clever young Boston architect," Ogden Codman, Jr. (*Backward Glance* 106). Codman had studied briefly at MIT, apprenticed in the architectural office of his uncle, John Howard Sturgis, and recently launched himself as an interior decorator.

Codman's association with the Whartons

began in the early 1890s when they bought a house in Newport. She turned to him for the interior, "a somewhat new departure, since the architects of that day looked down on house-decoration as a branch of dress-making" (*Backward Glance* 106). In their mutual "dislike of . . . sumptuary excesses" and belief "that interior decoration should be simple and architectural," they saw themselves as reformers. The shared ideals that emerged with the remodeling of Land's End led, Wharton recalls, "I hardly know how, toward the notion of putting them into a book" (*Backward Glance* 107). Their correspondence shows that the more practical information and most of the illustrations are his, drawn from his experience and his immense collection of drawings and photographs, while the language and conceptual framework are hers. Even after their falling out over design fees for the Mount, she reiterated the value of their friendship, their "close sympathy in things architectural," and her "great interest" in following his work and helping others "understand what it represents."²

That sympathy and understanding, as well as the book itself, drew Edith Wharton into a wide circle of architectural writers and practitioners. Of particular importance was the great neoclassical architect Charles Follen McKim, at that time the dean of American architects, soon to be twice elected president of the American Institute of Architects, and head of McKim, Mead & White, the principal firm of what came to be called the "American Renaissance." Wharton's architectural concepts and commitments provide significant parallels to McKim's work at the peak of his career and to the Progressive architectural discourse of the day.

The Importance of Charles McKim. Wharton considered McKim's ideas to be "the 'high-water-mark' of criticism in that line in America."³ Indeed, the two fledgling architectural writers could have received no greater boon than his reading of the final draft of *The Decoration of Houses*. She had sent the manuscript to ask his advice, on the basis of their support for his proposed American Academy at Rome:

I would not have troubled you about the matter at all, if I had not fancied from some talk we have had together that you felt that there were things which needed saying on this very subject & had I not hoped that, if Mr. Codman & I could say them in the right way, we might, in a slight degree, co-operate with the work you are doing in your Roman academy.⁴

His three-page response chiefly refines their observations about principles of classic design and the practice at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, at that time the premier architectural school in the world. In particular, he warned her explicitly about "sweeping assertions" and drew distinctions between "slavishness" and evidence of "original design." He also insisted "that the Italian villa

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type can as easily be adapted to modern uses as the type of French or English country houses built after 1600," a principle that echoes in Wharton's later work. Elsewhere he exclaimed, "Hats off to every word!"⁵ Wharton wrote to Codman that McKim had sent suggestions only for the introduction, while "the other chapters he entirely agrees to, which is nice."⁶

Born in 1847 in Philadelphia to a Quaker mother and an abolitionist father, McKim grew up in a household humming with the most ardent reform thought of the day. With others of his generation, he brought that moral energy into architecture. After briefly trying his hand in the office of Russell Sturgis, a Gothic revivalist and architectural critic, he entered the École des Beaux Arts in Paris for his actual training. There, the emphases on neoclassical principles and dignified accommodation of large crowds turned him away from the Gothic picturesque and toward a more functional sense of space, in both the plan and siting of buildings (Roth 13-31).

He returned to New York in 1870 to work with H. H. Richardson, often considered the first original American architect. After Richardson died, he entered into partnership with William Rutherford Mead, the brother-in-law of William Dean Howells who functioned primarily as the firm's manager, and then with Stanford White, whose erratic energies and flamboyant imagination made him the firm's most original designer, often given charge of interiors. The new firm, McKim, Mead & White, first developed "Shingle Style" houses from colonial models and then turned toward its signature structures, classically ordered, finely proportioned large masonry buildings, based on Italian Renaissance models and their English and French descendants. By the time McKim died in 1909, his was the largest architectural firm in the world, employing over a hundred workers, with branch offices in Boston and St. Louis and commissions as far away as Texas (Wilson, *McKim, Mead & White* 10-15). It left behind some 900 buildings and a published portfolio of plans that influenced architecture for decades throughout the English-speaking world (Wilson, "Introduction" ix-xi).

Wharton's association with Charles McKim, however limited, reinforced her own architectural principles and heartened her toward further work. He helped to give her voice and place in his own world. The book he critiqued became their credo, and what recent readers have called "the classic primer for traditional interior decoration" (Bayley vii). Yet its importance for its writers' careers went well beyond the articulation of ideals. Architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson claims that Wharton's "analytical eye was crucial to [Codman's] development as a decorator and architect, and without her writing skills he would have hardly been remembered" ("Edith and Ogden" 133). Indeed, Charles McKim noted that Codman "is not an Architect by profession," and that he "has no more right to call himself an Architect than I have to call myself a

Doctor."⁷ Wharton herself noted wryly that the book continued to bring "in an annual tribute to its astonished authors" 35 years after its publication and became such "a touchstone of taste" that her friends often chided her for not applying its "rigorous rules" to "the arrangement of [her] own rooms" (*Backward Glance* 110-11). Working on *The Decoration of Houses* seems to have further developed Wharton's already fine eye for detail, historical knowledge, and analytic capacities.

The book also led to further architectural activities. McKim at least initially asked her to write up his remodeling of Theodore Roosevelt's White House and a publicity piece on the American Academy in Rome.⁸ More significantly, in 1902, the *Century* magazine commissioned a series of articles that would lead to *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904). Wharton's growing architectural confidence also led to The Mount, an estate in the Berkshires with a villa modeled on an Italianate English country house, in all aspects of whose eclectic design she was involved. After the falling out with Codman, Wharton hired Francis L. V. Hoppin, who had apprenticed with McKim, Mead & White, and later turned to her niece, Beatrix Jones (later Farrand), one of the first American women to become a professional landscape architect, for the drive and gardens and to Codman for the interiors. But much of the vision was Wharton's, her first and most complete attempt to create an environment that united the best of Europe and America in order to meet her own complex needs. Its classical symmetry, the American qualities of its siting and landscaping, and the flexibility of its spaces demonstrate a capacity both to harmonize diverse elements and to focus on the human activities it would be required to serve.

All this work clearly placed Wharton in a loosely structured interpretive community⁹ of architects, actual and ideological, centered in the design and criticism of buildings and evident in a series of overlapping face-to-face groups along the Boston-New York-Washington axis. In an alliance between the old hereditary eastern elites, including Wharton herself, and the new nationally oriented professionals, including Charles McKim, they turned to public building and city planning to perpetuate the aesthetic of European high culture, to order the emerging metropolis, and to provide for themselves both place and purpose in a dizzily changing society.

The Principles of the American Renaissance. By 1900, *The Decoration of Houses*, her friendship with architects, and her allegiance to their cause had placed Wharton squarely into what came to be called the American Renaissance. Its aesthetic arm was the Progressive architecture that characterized the City Beautiful movement, the goal of which was to shape American culture and society aesthetically, morally, and professionally. Urban buildings and planning would bring order to American cities; help to acculturate and assimilate the foreign-born, the poor, and the new rich

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alike; and establish the professional authority, even hegemony, of architects themselves. The residential focus of Wharton's architectural work should not obscure the essentially public qualities it shared with other writings of the period. The fact that Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman turned to buildings, and a book, to make their first significant public impact placed them in the mainstream of American Renaissance thought and activity, most clearly identified with McKim, Mead & White. A long 1906 review piece on the firm in *The Architectural Record* claimed that American "political and social institutions" were founded "unreservedly on renewed faith in mankind and in the power of men to act and think for themselves," making Americans "of all modern peoples . . . most completely the children of the Renaissance" (Desmond and Croly 226).

The Aesthetic Imperatives of the American Renaissance. In *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, Wharton emphasizes both the origins and the importance of this architectural achievement. She traces contemporary European urban design and the early nineteenth-century plan of Charles Pierre L'Enfant for Washington DC to the Genoese "conception of a street of palaces" (177). McKim had earlier observed to Wharton that American urban architecture has "Italian rather than English or French precedent."¹⁰ In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton observed that "before Charles McKim had seen its possibilities, and resolved to develop them on Major L'Enfant's lines," Washington "was in truth a doleful desert" (8). These aesthetic principles lie behind Ned Van Alstyne's satire of Fifth Avenue façades in *The House of Mirth*, the Greiners' "complete architectural meal," lest omitting a style suggest "the money had given out," and the Brys' "wide white façade" suggesting "the clever corseting of a redundant figure" (159-60).

The architectural discourse, then and now, has affirmed Wharton's assessments. By the mid-1880s, McKim, Mead & White had become identified with Italian Renaissance classicism, which provided an architectural vocabulary useful for a great variety of buildings, from townhouses to state houses. The firm's urban sensibility manifested itself in the environmental effects of their buildings, which harmonized and humanized through proportion and symmetry, strong horizontal lines, and emphatic, often rusticated, foundations. Clad in limestone or marble, symmetrically designed, finely crafted, and publicly conceived, these structures defined not only the firm but also our national sense of urban buildings, our state capitols, libraries, railway terminals, art museums, banks. Like classical art they are scaled to the human body, meant to be enjoyed close up, walked past and into and out of, and above all "read," as makers and manifestations of dignity, order, and delight.¹¹

We can still see McKim's work for New York's Century Club (1891) and Columbia University's Low

Library (1893), and Boston's Public Library (1898)—all in place before *The Decoration of Houses*—as well as the later Boston Symphony Music Hall (1900), the University Club (1900), the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (begun 1897), the Morgan Library (1906), Bellevue Hospital (1906-16), and the additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1906-10), with their Renaissance fenestration, rusticated base, and clarity of form and color, some with symmetrical wings or interior courts.

Leland Roth asserts, in addition, that the firm's most valuable asset was its concern "with larger spatial and visual relationships" among groups of buildings and for the whole city, work that "helped define a new role for the American architect," making "his proper province . . . the whole of the built environment" (244). In his presidential address to the AIA in 1902, McKim praised the attempts all over the U. S. "to treat the city as a unit and to develop a municipality as a consistent work of art."¹² This strong sense of context was first evident in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which drew on the considerable talents of five architectural firms under the direction of Beaux-Arts trained Daniel Burnham, who credited Charles McKim with the fair's artistic success (Roth 174). Today, that environmental vision is particularly evident in McKim's many campus projects and in Washington, DC. When Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. pulled McKim onto the Senate Park [MacMillan] Commission, he was given responsibility to redesign the Mall and the new buildings in the city's center. In trying to "sell" Congress on their restoration of L'Enfant's design for the District, McKim mounted a huge display in the Corcoran Gallery that featured models of the Mall as it was and as he had redesigned it, with the symmetrical open green space we now know, large colored perspectives of the proposed structures by well-known artists, and a bird's eye view by Francis L. V. Hoppins, Wharton's architect for The Mount (Roth 251-57).

The Decoration of Houses participated in this aesthetic vision. It began from the Beaux-Arts premise, as *A Backward Glance* declares, that "the interior of a house is as much a part of its organic structure" as the exterior, thus requiring design "based on right proportion, balance of door and window spacing, and simple unconfused lines" (107). Declaring itself to be a "study of house-decoration as a branch of architecture," *The Decoration of Houses* relies upon "close study of the best models" (2), that is, Italianate houses of the last four hundred years. As the noteworthy home evolved from ceremonial to more familial functions, its comfort, privacy, and intimacy became more important, a principal concern being "the material livableness of a room" (19).

And its axioms are firmly neoclassical: that "proportion is the good breeding of architecture," that "symmetry" is "the sanity of decoration," and that "each room should speak with but one voice" (31, 33, 28). Because "in all but the most cheaply constructed houses the interior walls are invariably treated as an order," the

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reader is enjoined to see base, shaft, capital, and cornice in the configuration of wall surfaces, and to reject "the flat meanderings of wall-paper" for "the strong architectural lines . . . of panelling" (36-37, 44). Windows not only provide the "chief essential of comfort—light, heat and means of access" but "form the basis of architectural harmony" by relating "voids" to the "masses" of the walls and "the inside of the house and the landscape" (67).

Such ardent neoclassicism aroused highly partisan responses. Wharton fumed to Codman that a review in *The Nation* must be by Russell Sturgis: "There can't be two such d___ fools living in the same place at one time. . . . Such blind, stupid, total misapprehension makes me sick."¹³ The reviewer was in fact the first editor of *American Architect and Building News*, William P. P. Longfellow, who saw the book, though "handsome, interesting, and well-written," as a "reversion to quasi-classic styles and methods" and a rejection of "the lately accepted doctrines of constructive virtue, sincerity and the beauty of use" (485). A year or so later, Wharton's lifelong friend, Walter Berry, writing for *The Bookman*, cheered the book's "plainness," praising in particular its "luminous" history of domestic interiors, its emphasis on architectural proportion, and its substitution of "organic unities" for the prevailing "labyrinth of incongruity." Even at its worst, then, critical response placed the book in the larger architectural discourse.

The Moral and Social Principles of the American Renaissance. A second element of this aesthetic branch of Progressivism was its strong moral agenda. In 1903 Wharton alluded to the "healing uses" of the physical beauty of Milan's Ospedale Maggiore ("Picturesque Milan" 134). A *Motor-Flight through France* (1908) describes a country house at Nohant as "the image of those grave ideals to which George Sand gradually conformed the passionate experiment of her life," its "weight of association and habit" helping to effect that conformation (47).

In an 1895 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*, Royal Cortissoz, Wharton's friend and sometime McKim, Mead & White employee, declared that though Paris and Berlin increasingly set standards for urban order, "our picturesque Renaissance up-town," displayed over two full pages and centered on McKim's Low Library, would bring New York closer to European standards and "surpass Haussmann" in springing "from the deep inner growth of the people" ("Landmarks" 542-44). In a 1902 review piece in *Scribner's Magazine*, McKim's revival of L'Enfant's plan for Washington employed "the ennobling influence" of "nature and art," making "the face of the City Beautiful . . . the mirror of its soul" (Leupp 144). In 1907, as the movement crested into city planning, ardent reform lawyer Frederic C. Howe claimed that our cities "embody their ideals in fine monuments," "our generous democratic sense," as medieval cities embodied theirs in "splendid gothic cathedrals" (118-19). For another

reformer, Brand Whitlock, the urban novelist and mayor of Toledo who later became Wharton's Riviera neighbor, what inspired City Beautiful was the "divine craving" for "harmony, for beauty, for order, which is the democratic spirit" (631).

This socio-cultural rhetoric cast individual public buildings as aggressive agents of acculturation, as moral improvement trickled down to the masses. In 1896, *Scribner's Magazine* particularly celebrated the new Boston Public Library, the "fine art" of McKim's Renaissance design, the sculptures and decorations by several hands, the "modern Italian" entrance hall as a suitable setting for Massachusetts worthies. Easy access to over a million volumes and a commodious reading room left "the humblest creature that ever learned to read and write" only "himself to blame if he yields supinely to the darkness of ignorance." The whole structure demonstrated "that familiarity with things ideally beautiful is an education in itself" (Sullivan 84, 90-91, 97). Even railway terminals "delight the eye and improve the taste of all the millions who use them" (Dunn 417, 442).

Correspondingly, in *The Decoration of Houses*, a properly designed and decorated house is conducive to self-development, meaningful conversation, family life, even raising children. Lamenting the recent passage "from the golden age of architecture to the gilded age of decoration," *The Decoration of Houses* emphasizes the "science of restoring wasted rooms to their proper uses" (20, 22), that is, to their social and moral functions. Anticipating Thorstein Veblen, the book attributes much of that "waste" to "the feminine tendency to want things because other people have them, rather than to have things because they are wanted" (17). To ignore the central placement of fireplaces, the availability of natural light, or the fit of desks and chairs is to neglect basic human needs (49). The fireplace retains its traditional importance not only for "good taste and *savoir-faire*" but for good ventilation, comfort, and hospitality (74, 87, 88). The drawing room should be "made comfortable" for family use, for talking, reading, writing, and enjoying "what is best worth looking at" (124, 127, 129). Even as a physical structure, a house educates children, since "the child's visible surroundings form the basis of the best, because of the most unconscious, cultivation" (175). Because a house also connects the inhabitants to their community, the entry hall must function "like a public square," requiring simpler and more formal treatment than rooms for private activities (115).

Professional Principles of the American Renaissance. The third element in this Progressive architectural agenda was the status of the profession itself. As Wharton turned toward serious writing in her mid-thirties, she saw herself as an apologist not only for McKim but also for the class and status they shared. Accordingly, *The Decoration of Houses* is less democratic, or perhaps simply less populist, than any of

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her fiction. In a breathtaking appeal to trickle-down aesthetics; the book's opening historical chapter claims the authority of "political economists that changes in manners and customs . . . usually originate with the wealthy or aristocratic minority, and are thence transmitted to the other classes" (5), justifying both the emphasis on grand houses and the work of its upper class authors.

We can also hear a gendered note in the book's association of conspicuous waste with women and of comfort and privacy with men. In fact, throughout her architectural work, Wharton not only worked with men, placing herself in partnership with Codman and McKim in particular, but her authorial voice also identified with men, casting women—as she often does in her fiction—in consumer roles. She later expressed little interest "in travelling scholarships for women—or in fact in scholarship, tout court!—they'd much better stay at home & mind the baby" and gave a \$500 scholarship "for a young decorator (stipulating it sh[oul]d be a he) in the Codman-Odom Decorative Art School."¹⁴ She continued to value her ties to actual practitioners such as Ogden Cogman, Christopher Grant La Farge, and Laurence White,¹⁵ and in 1920 she called Henry Adams' *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* "amateur work," "belated Ruskinism" at which "the real people smile."¹⁶ Though these acts might seem typical of an imperious woman of wealth and privilege, they also suggest identification with male perspective and authority, at least in an architectural context.

Wharton's misgivings about women's artistic education converges with prevailing professional prejudices. Though McKim, Mead & White worked wholeheartedly on women's colleges, McKim also helped to found and fund the American Academy in Rome, which was clearly—staff and students—for men only. As Daniel Burnham intoned, "women would distract the men fellows" and inhibit their work (as qtd. in Valentine and Valentine 57-58). Inspired by European precedents like the *École des Beaux Arts* and the French Academy housed in the Roman Villa Medici, with their historical orientation and atelier structure, McKim located the new school in Rome, "the true center of civilization, especially for the artist" (Valentine and Valentine 1). Begun with the help of Wharton's lifelong friend, Margaret (Daisy Terry) Chanler, the school placed aspiring architects, as McKim wrote to sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, "in close contact with the great examples of Greece and Rome and the early Renaissance" (as qtd. in Valentine and Valentine 7). Its purpose was to professionalize American architecture by creating "an elite cadre of exceptional taste and culture" and by layering moral ideals upon "perfect historical models" that would "foster the creation of an American style of art and architecture" (Yëgul 3, 7). The board included a variety of painters, sculptors, and architects, with Charles McKim as chair. During the

winter of 1897-98, New York high society was drawn in by "an influential committee of distinguished women," including Edith Wharton, to generate interest and financial support for the new school. The first such "evening," held in the home of Egerton Winthrop, was conducted by painters John LaFarge and E. W. Blashfield (Valentine and Valentine 29). McKim reported the event "'a great success, 500 invitations having been sent out,'" the Academy presentations followed by "'an orchestra and supper'" (as qtd. in Moore 164). Wharton later hosted another such *soirée* at her Park Avenue home, and in 1900, when the Academy was trying to buy a permanent home, she helped to raise funds among her "social followers" (Moore 168).

In addition, McKim frequently served as spokesman for the profession. At the 1903 meeting of the AIA he emphasized that an architect must "have an artistic sense, a broad education, long training, special knowledge in the history of art and construction, together with business knowledge and executive ability" (as qtd. in Roth 363-68). These complex demands underscored the necessarily wide range of skills and high level of expertise, thus defining the architect's status and implicitly defending his fees. In the same year, McKim accepted the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects "for the whole profession in the United States," and emphasized the many public roles of the AIA (as qtd. in Moore 236-40). In 1904 Columbia University gave an honorary doctorate to McKim as one of the "master spirits" that express "the stirrings and inspirations that have begun to move their age" and as the "savior of the White House and artistic benefactor of the nation's capital."¹⁷

Suitably, *The Field of Art* in *Scribner's Magazine* devoted its last full-scale architecture column to an obituary for Charles Follen McKim in 1910. Royal Cortissoz cast him as the heir of abolitionist parents who found "his 'period' waiting to be made over," an age for which "architecture was more important than any other human interest." Having "framed for us a new architectural language" in the salutary rigor of Italian Renaissance forms, McKim's historic importance lies in his firm's atelier structure and his own work "in the stuff of American life," addressing "our social and civic needs" and providing "a steadying force in American art" (Cortissoz 125-28). He represented superbly the architect as citizen, the artist and educator reifying cultural ideals into monumental forms, a titular chief of the position and principles of the Eastern elite.

With McKim's heroic example in mind, we can understand why Wharton casts her rare fictional architects as problematic young men of privilege in situations with high moral stakes. In *The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems* (1896), three of the ten parables place an architect before a choice between professional responsibility and childish play or between a childish mate, simple greed, or plain vanity. In

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"Sanctuary" (1903), recent Beaux-Arts graduate Dick Peyton enters a competition for a museum of sculpture in New York City and agonizes over whether to submit his own design or the superior work of a gifted friend who has just died. His choice especially challenges his mother, who sees herself as a moral sanctuary from the flawed inheritance of her husband and now must conquer her own narcissistic identification with her son's career.

All these early works illustrate the very high stakes that architecture—as beautiful spaces, as moral order, and as public profession—held for Wharton herself. Her awareness of the visible world began very early, as an acute, instinctive sense of beauty and ugliness that she assiduously developed through her powerful capacities to analyze, compare, and synthesize her experiences. This aesthetic, social, and professional education gave her a set of deeply held and clearly articulated aesthetic principles to which she remained loyal the rest of her life. Her finely tuned sense of beauty—symmetry, balance, proportion, order—meshed well with the neoclassical work of Progressive America and, for the first time, gave her a conscious and significant public place and purpose.

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Notes

1. Letter to Sara Norton, 5 June 1903, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
2. Letter to Ogden Codman, Jr., 25 March 1901, Codman Family Archives, SPNEA.
3. Letter to Ogden Codman, Jr., Thursday [1896], Codman Family Archives, SPNEA.
4. Letter to Charles McKim, January [1897], Maloney Collection of the McKim-Garrison Family papers, New York Public Library.

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5. Charles Follen McKim, "Memoranda" "to Mrs. Wharton" [between 2 and 5 February 1897], Charles Follen McKim papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
6. Letter to Ogden Codman, Jr., Thursday [1896], Codman Family Archives, SPNEA.
7. Charles Follen McKim, letter to John M. Carrere, 19 February 1897, McKim Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
8. Letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, 27 April 1900, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University. However, McKim turned the White House piece over to Charles Moore (secretary to Senator MacMillan, the chair of the Senate Park Commission), who wrote it up for *Century* magazine and later became McKim's biographer. See Moore, 222. I have been unable to locate the publicity for the Academy.
9. I borrow from Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14, who uses the term to refer to "those who use interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts."
10. Charles Follen McKim, "Memoranda" to "Mrs. Wharton," Charles Follen McKim papers, Letterbooks, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.
11. Wilson, "Edith and Ogden," 177, finds the "strongest statement" about this sensuous quality of classical architecture in *The Architecture of Humanism* by Geoffrey Scott, Wharton's good friend and Bernard Berenson's sometime secretary. Because "the goal of classical architecture was 'to transcribe in stone the body's favorable states,'" its focus and strength "was this relationship to the human body."
12. Charles Follen McKim, [1902 in Washington, D.C.], McKim-Garrison Family Papers, New York Public Library.
13. Letter to Ogden Codman, 17 December 1897, Codman Family Archives, SPNEA.
14. Letter to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 25 April 1923, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University. She refers to the Frank Alvah Parsons School of Design in Paris, then called the New York School of Fine and Applied Art, of which Codman was a patron and William Odom was the Paris director.
15. Longtime friend Christopher Grant La Farge, painter John La Farge's nephew, was the initial architect of St. John the Divine in New York and eventually a trustee and historian of the American Academy in Rome. Wharton's letter to John Hugh-Smith, 7 November 1917, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University, describes befriending Laurence White after he married one of Daisy Chanler's daughters. The "son of 'feu' Stanford White," he has entered "the very front rank" of American architects and "loves all the things that we do—books, pictures, & a good joke."
16. Letters to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 23 January 1919, 30 May 1920, Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

17. [Prof. Hamlin's presentation speech, LLD to Charles Follen McKim, June 8, 1904] McKim-Garrison Family Papers, New York Public Library.

The Architecture of the Short Story: Edith Wharton's Modernist Practice

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In spite of R. W. B. Lewis's early pronouncement of "the resolutely traditional cast of Mrs. Wharton's imagination" (ix), Edith Wharton has been the focus of an ongoing critical controversy over her status as a Modernist writer. Indeed, placing Edith Wharton within the established literary tradition of American letters has been perhaps the single most difficult task for Wharton scholars over the last three decades. She simply doesn't fit into any category in a satisfactory way, and the broad range of her writing in a number of genres makes classification a perilous activity. Numerous reconsiderations of Modernism, which began with Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* and which continue even today, point to an awareness of the limitations of a rigidly defined period of literary production that excludes all but the avant-garde. These broadened definitions of Modernism shed light on the modernist tendencies in Edith Wharton's short stories. In the short stories, the interplay of tradition and innovation is most evident, and Wharton's short fiction refutes many of the dismissive charges against her—her "limited scope," her "narrow" social range, her resistance to exploring the unconscious, and her persistent "intellectual conservatism"—to name only a few (Howe 2-5). Complicating this assessment of Wharton as an antimodernist are her theoretical and critical essays, which, as many critics have noted, are inadequate guides to the complexity of her literary practice. In applying Wharton's literary criticism to her own production, we should keep in mind D. H. Lawrence's warning: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (3). Writing short stories over the entire course of her long career, Wharton always felt more sure of her skill in this genre, and it is in the short stories that she is more formally experimental, more self-consciously ironic, and more explicitly critical of her contemporary society's materialism and hypocrisy. Wharton's experimentation with the short story is strikingly modern and subtle, an aesthetic that developed not from her later critical writing but from her earliest writings on art, architecture, and design.

One way to situate Wharton within the emerging modernist tradition, a way that suggests the subtlety of her practice, is to examine a letter she wrote to William Cray Brownell at Charles Scribner's Sons in 1902. There she attempts to explain her interest in the period in Italian

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history she explored in her first novel, *The Valley of Decision*: "The Valley, then is an attempt to picture Italy at the time of the breaking up of the small principalities at the end of the 18th century, when all the old forms and traditions of court life were still preserved, but the immense intellectual and moral movement of the new regime was at work beneath the surface of things" (*Letters* 58).

This accurately describes Wharton's own cultural milieu as well, which is one explanation for her fascination with late eighteenth-century Italy—it provided the beginning writer with a sufficiently veiled paradigm for her own experience. America at the turn of the century, especially educated, literate America, was still governed in many ways by the forms of the genteel tradition, even though the spirit of change was breaking through. But the given reason for her attraction to the slow, almost inevitable dissolution of old forms in Italy also explains much of Wharton's own literary practice, where the forms and traditions may be preserved, but where there is a surging moral, intellectual, and aesthetic movement of defiance beneath the surface.

The conflict has always been, in Wharton criticism, not if, but to what degree, her work exhibits the characteristics of Modernism, with recent feminist interpretations placing Wharton firmly in the modernist camp, or at the very least as a transitional figure. Carol J. Singley argues persuasively, for example, in *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, that Wharton was "a realistic and modernist innovator in her own right" (7). Singley focuses primarily on "the religious and spiritual dimensions" (1) of Wharton's fiction, and like many discussions of Wharton and Modernism, her most extensive interpretations deal with the novels. More relevant to discussions of Wharton's contested relationship to Modernism in the short stories is Suzanne C. Ferguson's essay, "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form," in which she lists the similarities between modern novels and short stories:

The main formal characteristics of the modern novel and the modern short story are the same: (1) limitation and foregrounding of point of view, (2) emphasis on presentation of sensation and inner experience, (3) the deletion or transformation of several elements of the traditional plot, (4) increasing reliance on metaphor and metonymy in the presentation of events and existents, (5) rejection of chronological time ordering, (6) formal and stylistic economy, and (7) the foregrounding of style. (219)

Wharton's short stories exhibit almost all of these characteristics, marking her as less of a traditionalist and more of a modernist than we give her credit for.

In "Form, 'Selection,' and Ideology in Edith

Wharton's Antimodernist Aesthetic," Frederick Wegener articulates in almost painful detail the barriers that critics face in identifying anything modernist about Wharton's work. Focusing on Wharton's literary criticism and her later novels, Wegener notes Wharton's scorn for high modernist formal experimentation, her cavalier dismissal of such writers as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and her heavy-handed satire in the later novels of "the posturings and eccentricities of modernism" (118). He judges correctly, however, that what he calls Wharton's often "confused, even incoherent" criticism and satire stem from an awareness of her own waning popularity and power in the literary marketplace: "[T]he inconsistencies and confusions in her criticism reflect... the fear, of course, that her own work has already been overlooked and forgotten" (128). Virginia Woolf noted the discrepancy between a writer's criticism of other writers and a clear perception of his or her own work: "No creative writer can swallow another contemporary. The reception of living work is too coarse and partial if you're doing the same thing yourself" (10 April 1935). Wharton's defensive posture often clouds her vision of her own writing and the writing of others, but her complicated response to Modernism is, as Wegener acknowledges, "not always quite so stodgy or reflexive" (121). We can also discern in her critical writing and her letters a delight in and respect for innovation and experimentation. Anyone familiar with Wharton's letters knows of her exuberant appreciation for Friedrich Nietzsche and Walt Whitman, for example, and she devotes an entire chapter of *The Writing of Fiction* to Marcel Proust, celebrating his originality.

Wharton's alignment with Modernism begins with form. Considerations of form preoccupied Wharton, from the planning of her home to the outlining of her fiction. For over four decades, from her earliest writings on architecture and design in the 1890s to her autobiographical memoir, *A Backward Glance*, published in 1934, Wharton examined, analyzed, and theorized about the formal aspects of art and literature. Throughout her career, Wharton defended and championed innovation and originality in art when it was informed by knowledge of a received tradition. Wharton admired transgression in art and literature, but she expected it to be formally grounded. In the opening chapter of *The Decoration of Houses* (appropriately titled "The Historical Tradition"), she discusses originality in all art:

What is originality in art? Perhaps it is easier to define what it is *not*; and this may be done by saying that it is never a wilful rejection of what have been accepted as the necessary laws of the various forms of art. Thus, in reasoning, originality lies not in discarding the necessary laws of thought, but in using them to express new intellectual conceptions; in poetry, originality consists not in discarding the necessary laws of rhythm, but in finding new rhythms within the

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limits of those laws. (9)

In Edith Wharton's world of art, "the supposed conflict between originality and tradition is no conflict at all" (10). When she celebrates the innovation and experimentation of other writers, she argues for an informed rejection of tradition, something she did not see in all high modernist practice. Interestingly, Wharton's critical dismissals of Modernism focus almost entirely on the modernist novel, limiting her theory of the short story to a brief chapter in *The Writing of Fiction*. In "Telling a Short Story," Wharton insists that the success of the short story depends upon "the observance of the two 'unities'--the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes" (43). At the same time, however, Wharton asserts the flexibility of the genre, arguing against the apparent rigidity of her traditional theories: "There is no fixed rule about this, or about any method; each, in the art of fiction, to justify itself has only to succeed" (100). Her oscillation between pronouncement and withdrawal makes it difficult to pin Wharton down to a specific articulation of her own methods, especially in terms of the short story.

In her contradictory and defensive critical essays, Wharton joined what Rita Felski calls "a cacophony of different and often dissenting voices" attempting to come to terms with Modernism (11). In her own creative practice, however, Wharton persistently undermined, subverted, and defied her own conservative and often antimodernist rules and proscriptions, readily abandoning the unities of both time and point of view. As Margaret B. McDowell notes, "in her criticism she wanted to limit the short story more drastically to insure unity than she herself was willing to do as a creative artist" (49). Wharton seldom followed the critical standards to which she held other writers and which she so dogmatically espoused in her critical and theoretical essays, and to use her own limited and often defensive principles as guidelines for her writing practice is a mistake. As she said herself in *The Writing of Fiction*, "General rules in art are useful chiefly as a lamp in a mine, or a hand-rail down a black stairway; they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them" (42). A more useful aesthetic principle and a more accurate elaboration of her artistic practice can be found in *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton's first published book.

The Decoration of Houses proved to be an innovative interior design manual, written not only to dismiss the excesses of Victorian house-decoration but also to foster a reintegration of interior design and architecture. Wharton and architect Ogden Codman, Jr., wished to restore the decoration of houses to its rightful place, "as a branch of architecture" (xx). In so doing, they come to the conclusion that two principles

dominate successful house-decoration: proportion--the relation of parts to a whole--and symmetry--the relation of parts to each other:

Proportion is the good breeding of architecture. It is that something, indefinable to the unprofessional eye, which gives repose and distinction to a room: in its origin a matter of nice mathematical calculation, of scientific adjustments of voids and masses, but in its effects as intangible as that all-pervading essence which the ancients called the soul. (30)

Symmetry contributes to the "harmony of parts" (30) that Wharton insists is essential to superior decoration: "If proportion is the good breeding of architecture, symmetry, or the answering of one part to another, may be defined as the sanity of decoration. The desire for symmetry, for balance, for rhythm in form as well as in sound, is one of the most inveterate of human instincts" (33). Wharton was an astute reader of modern culture, and she judges, in *The Decoration of Houses*, that she has to defend her own "regard for symmetry" against a cultural artistic bias: "In the lay mind there still lingers not only a vague association between outward symmetry and interior discomfort, ...but a still vaguer notion that regard for symmetry indicates poverty of invention, lack of ingenuity and weak subservience to a meaningless form" (34). In terms of the popular and critical reception of her own work, Wharton felt that her careful attention to structure was very often overlooked or misunderstood by her readers. The objections to symmetry she described at the turn of the century persist today and have governed until recently much of the critical analysis of Wharton's formal characteristics. Daniel Joseph Singal, in "Toward a Definition of American Modernism," argues for a broader, more inclusive definition of Modernism—one that contains a desire (so evident in Wharton's writing) to achieve order in the midst of chaos: "Far from being anarchic, Modernist thought . . . represents an attempt to restore a sense of order to human experience under the often chaotic conditions of twentieth-century existence, and it most assuredly does contain a unifying principle if one knows where to look" (8).

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton repeatedly uses the terms "rhythm" and "logic" to describe the harmony that should exist in and between proportion and symmetry. Rhythm and logic are standards by which interior decoration and, by extension, all art, may be judged. The laws that govern poetry and reasoning, she argues, "best help to explain and illustrate the character of architectural limitations" (10). There is a difficulty here in that Wharton doesn't always clearly define her terms; we can discern her meaning from the context of her writings on art and design, though perhaps not as precisely as we would like. According to Wharton, a structure should reflect an overall regularity of design and décor (rhythm) existing in harmony with our sense of the structure's purpose (logic). Wharton

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expects her readers to accept the premise that all form follows function, that a building begins with a plan, a purpose, from which the art of its architectural design and decoration arises.

Wharton's ideas of rhythm and logic and of proportion and symmetry translate readily to the short story. She recognized the "architectural limitations" of this rigorously limited form, and she felt completely in control of them, perhaps because the short story as a formal structure (what she made of it, at any rate) most clearly resembles her earliest aesthetic and analytical object of inquiry--the design of a house. When she writes of design, she calls attention to the "scientific study of the relation between voids and masses," (32) in other words, to the spatial relationships between the rooms of a house, between the exterior and the interior, and between the ornamentation and structure of a house. These correspond to the relationship of parts to whole that has been, as contemporary theories of the short story make clear, the special province of the short story. In order to explain one essential part of a developing short story--the authorial choice of narrative point of view--she describes the choice initially as analogous to the planning and construction of a house:

It should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building-site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house, and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and, above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter. (WOF 46)

Ideally, according to Wharton, the careful calculation involved in planning a short story or a house leads to an effect that transcends the mathematics of literary or architectural construction. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, there exists a fluidity to the construction that allows for experimentation and innovation. The result is a seamless whole, what appears to be an effortless creation of art.

While Wharton strives for that kind of seamlessness in her short fiction (a single, overarching purpose or design), her structural division of the stories and her manipulation of narrative point of view interject at the same time important subversive elements that suggest the literary equivalent of the rooms of a house. In *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, Judith Fryer describes at length the physical layout of *The Mount*, Wharton's home in Lenox, Massachusetts, whose design and construction Wharton closely supervised. As Fryer points out, an individual's movement through the carefully planned rooms at *The Mount* was "controlled, not random:"

Drawn into predetermined patterns, one would

move from passageway to passageway with a sense of what Wharton called "spaciousness and repose." One would have felt a tension between public and private both reassuring and enticing; although the public rooms connect, and each has multiple doorways, there is a clear sense of leaving one and entering another because their "room characters," as James would have called them, were so distinctive. The passage through the gallery is a kind of journey, with intriguing choices to be made. (70)

In much the same way, a passage through one of Wharton's short stories is a kind of journey through different, though connected, rooms in a well-planned house.

One of the most obvious formal characteristics of Wharton's short stories is their compartmentalization, a kind of fragmentation without the implied discontinuity. She habitually divided her stories into numbered sections, a practice that increased in intensity over the course of her career. For example, in the first volume of *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, twenty-seven of the forty-three stories are divided into three or more parts, and only seven stories are single, unbroken narratives. In the second volume of collected stories, thirty-nine of the forty-three later stories contain three or more parts; more than half are divided into five or more sections, and only one story can be considered a single, unbroken narrative. Wharton divided even her shortest stories into five and sometimes six sections; and those sections can be as short as a single paragraph. Clearly the intensity of such compartmentalization is calculated on Wharton's part, and it reveals a consciousness of the relationship between parts and whole that is one of the hallmarks of later American short fiction. In addition to establishing a more traditional sequential relationship between the different parts of a short story (the logically ordered working-out of the plot, for example), Wharton may employ the juxtaposition of alternative points of view, or she may develop a cause-and-effect relationship between parts. Although Wharton never completely abandons what Elizabeth Ammons calls "the conventional Western short story pattern of exposition/conflict/complication/climax/resolution" (383), her manipulation of that pattern shows considerable experimentation.

The interruption of rhythm and logic and the challenges to proportion and symmetry in Wharton's short stories demonstrate a resistance to the well-made story and a transgressive modernist sensibility. Her short fiction exhibits what Austin Wright describes as "formal recalcitrance," that is, "the resistance of the shaped materials" in the story to "the force of a shaping form" (115). Although the parts of each story contribute significantly to the whole effect, they draw attention to themselves as individual parts, as discrete units of narrative. The divisions in Wharton's stories are one of a number of stylistic techniques she employs to forestall the

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conventional linear march of the plot. Wharton often constructs a story so that the climax occurs offstage, after the story is complete. Wharton's concomitant endorsement and undermining of traditional form in the short story signal her own distaste for the merely conventional and her desire to create a more meaningful form. Never entirely content with the blind acceptance of a received tradition, Wharton used the short story as a vehicle for subtle experimentation and risk-taking within the tradition.

"Souls Belated," (1899) an early story published in Wharton's second collection, provides an excellent example of her often discordant narrative technique. One of Wharton's many stories of marriage and divorce, "Souls Belated" is divided into five narrative parts and traces the trajectory of a couple's supposed intimacy to their profound emotional distance. Like so many of her stories, it displays a kind of narrative fragmentation that delays the forward progress of the plot. For the first four sections of the story, Lydia Tillotson is Wharton's reflector. Newly divorced, Lydia is travelling through Italy with her lover, Ralph Gannett. Having enjoyed the freedom and leisure of their "outlaw" status, they find their situation subtly but irrevocably altered by the fact of Lydia's divorce. The first section records, over the course of a tedious journey by train, Lydia's attempts to read Gannett's silence in the new light of her divorce, her efforts to clarify her own thinking on her new position, and her unvoiced conviction that their relationship must come to an end. The entire narrative division is a supremely awkward dance of two people who have begun to realize the insufficiency of their isolated and socially criminal intimacy. Lydia appears as an idealist and a rebel, battling against the institution of marriage and striking out for individual freedom. Although Gannett assumes she will now marry him and accept the conventions of society, she finds the hypocrisy of such a position humiliating: "We neither of us believe in the abstract 'sacredness' of marriage; we both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other; what object can we have in marrying, except the secret longing to work our way back gradually—oh, very gradually, into the esteem of the people whose conventional morality we have always ridiculed and hated?" (CS 110). Ironically, although this section of the story ends in an impasse, with the couple decided on no clear path of action, the following three sections are the elaborate working out of the ever so gradual process Lydia anticipates.

The second section of "Souls Belated" shows the alacrity with which the outlaws slip back into the fashionable world they have avoided for almost a year. Comic in its satire, the tone reveals a dramatic shift from the emotional intensity of the first section. It is almost as if Wharton can't resist satirizing the stifling social conventions of a typical European watering-hole. Registered falsely as Mrs. Gannett, Lydia is at once

welcomed into the rigidly closed social circle dominated by Lady Susan Condit. In this section, Miss Pinsett confides to Lydia the niceties of Lady Susan's discrimination, ironically drawing her farther into an essentially deceptive position. In the garden, Miss Pinsett and Lydia observe a colorful couple newly arrived at the hotel. Because "nothing is known about them" and because the woman is considered "too handsome" (I 114), Mr. and Mrs. Linton have been snubbed by Lady Susan, and according to Miss Pinsett, the rest of the little Anglo-American colony ought to follow suit. As Miss Pinsett puts it, "it's always a bad sign when loud people come to a quiet place" (I 114). Lydia's silent acquiescence to Miss Pinsett's judgment of the Lintons is yet another mark of her hypocrisy.

Lydia comes face to face, as it were, with the falseness of her position in the third section of the story, when the thoroughly snubbed Mrs. Linton approaches her in the garden. In an effort to gain Lydia's help, she reveals the truth of her situation—that she is really Mrs. Cope, and she and Lord Trevenna (Mr. Linton) have run away together and await Mrs. Cope's divorce settlement; their elopement had been a major scandal in London. With obvious distaste for the woman's vulgarity, Lydia refuses, at which point Mrs. Cope threatens to expose the truth of Lydia and Gannett's relationship:

Shall you go and tell Lady Susan Condit that there's a pair of us—or shall I save you the trouble of enlightening her? ...Oh, I'm not spiteful by nature, my dear; but you're a little more than flesh and blood can stand! ...You're too good to be mixed up in my affairs, are you? Why, you little fool, the first day I laid eyes on you I saw that you and I were both in the same box—that's the reason I spoke to you. (I 118)

The narrative section ends abruptly as Lydia, recognizing with despair the similarity of their situations, drops into a garden seat and allows Mrs. Cope to go and presumably tell Lady Susan her secret.

There is very little difference in time and tone between section three and section four. Knowing she will be exposed and snubbed, Lydia avoids returning to the hotel until dark. Saved by the sudden departure of the Lintons, and assured by Gannett that Lady Susan knows nothing, Lydia's secret is secure. But in spite of her relief, and in a passion of renunciation, guilt, shame, and self-abasement, Lydia asks Gannett to tell the others their secret. She hates the lie they have been living, but acknowledges her own culpability in the deception:

Oh, do you see the full derision of it? These people—the very prototype of the bores you took me away from, with the same fenced-in view of life, the same keep-off-the-grass morality, the same little cautious virtues and the same little frightened vices—well, I've clung to them, I've delighted in them, I've done my best to please them....Respectability! It was the one thing in life

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that I was sure I didn't care about, and it's grown so precious to me that I've stolen it because I couldn't get it any other way." (I 122)

Gannett offers Lydia marriage as a solution to their difficulty, a way out of the lie. But she is convinced that to marry would be to deny they were once lovers, to create "another form of deception and a meaner one" (I 123). Finally Lydia tells Gannett what she has intended all along—that she will leave him. There is a slippage in point of view in this section; we glimpse some of Gannett's feelings when he cruelly responds to her pronouncement: "At length some impulse of retaliation for the pain she was inflicting made him say deliberately: 'And where would you go if you left me?'" (I 124). Wharton demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling their two opposing moral stances, and the section ends inconclusively, with Gannett and Lydia at an impasse similar to that in the first section. Although Lewis contends that "one of this early story's minor flaws is a certain shiftness in point of view" (I xii), the brief, unexpected shift in narrative perspective in this section is deliberate, for it prepares the reader for the final section of the story.

The abrupt change in the final section of the story to Gannett's point of view allows the reader to witness Lydia's actions from a distance impossible in the other sections of the story, to see her as others see her. Gannett hears Lydia leave the hotel surreptitiously, and he watches her movements through the window. We are privy to his awakening (though still partial) understanding of the full ramifications of their actions. Some of his obtuseness drops away as he recognizes the truth of what she has said: "Even had his love lessened, he was bound to her now by a hundred ties of pity and self-reproach; and she, poor child, must turn back to him as Latude returned to his cell" (I 125). Thus Lydia is both infantilized and imprisoned in the last section, not only by society, but by Gannett as well. As Barbara White notes, the change in narrative voice is therefore sadly appropriate: "The sudden switch to Gannett...creates a chopped-off effect, as though the previous center of consciousness had died—and so in a sense she has" (59). Gannett watches her buy a ticket on a steamer leaving at dawn, but Lydia is unable to complete her final act of independence, and she returns wearily to the hotel. The story ends with Lydia's defeat, with Gannett investigating the day's trains to Paris, and with the couple's presumed, rehabilitating marriage somewhere in the near future. The shift in the two conflicting narrative points of view, reflecting the alternatives represented by Lydia and Gannett—either the doomed attempt to defy social convention and live an untrammelled existence, or the self-deluding abandonment of principles for comfort—is a manifestation of Wharton's tragic view of the collision of the real and the ideal, with a sense of loss rather than reconciliation dominating the narrative.

As she does in her other stories, Wharton here

preserves the integrity of effect of each narrative section. She symmetrically balances the beginning and ending of her story, for example, with the introspection of her two main characters, but she disrupts the rhythm and logic of her construction by abruptly shifting her narrative point of view, by removing every vestige of irony from the first and last sections, and by isolating irony and satire to a single narrative section. The orderliness with which Wharton orchestrates loss, renunciation, and tragedy in her short stories is striking. Wharton's short stories possess an illusion of seamlessness, but like the different rooms in a house, the narrative divisions in each story have distinctive and separate purposes and characters. The overriding concerns of plot are equivalent to our exterior view of the house in question—important and obvious, but not the whole picture. The pieces of her narrative fit together like those of a puzzle, combining a number of very different stylistic techniques into a single, overarching inevitable effect, creating both depth and ambiguity.

The compartmentalization and attendant fragmentation of narrative in Wharton's short fiction are not only manifestations of her early aesthetic inquiry into architecture and design; these qualities also demonstrate Wharton's modernist resistance to conventional form. At the same time, the construction of a typical Wharton short story exhibits careful planning and selection, and the sum of the parts is somehow always greater than the whole. The possibilities presented by Wharton's manipulation of form and voice in the short stories, and the aesthetic ramifications of such manipulation, look forward into the twentieth century rather than back to the nineteenth century, and they constitute Wharton's often unrecognized and subtly modern contribution to the theory and practice of the American short story.

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BOOK REVIEW

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concludes that the "Jamesian consciousness must integrate, must, indeed, accommodate itself to include social relations"(130).

Chapter Five continues the examination of self-consciousness and social awareness in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, which the author entitles "Designing Our Interiors." Kress asserts that Wharton, in her novels generally "focuses, specifically, on the contest between a defining interior life and a socially constructed self. The exclusive sanctuary of the individual mind exposes its permeability the moment Wharton insists that neither social nor personal space have an absolute border"(131). She relates these assertions to ideas and concepts of William and Henry James and brings in those of George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, whom Wharton had read. An excellent analysis of the character Lily Bart is compared with many of these ideas. Kress concludes that, in *The House of Mirth*, "Wharton repeatedly dramatizes the conflict between a natural self and the notion of socially constructed identities. Wharton's metaphors direct her narrative, creating multiple versions of subjectivity until it becomes difficult to determine which one she endorses"(158).

Chapter Six concludes the work with a short illumination of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, which the author believes demonstrates "The Price of a Conscious Self".

"Newland Archer, the central character of *The Age of Innocence*, spends a great deal of time inside his head"(165). She uses this interior mind to pull together the various threads of figures of consciousness that she has expanded upon in the previous chapters. Her conclusion is concise: "The narrative of consciousness does not resolve [the split of the belief in the 'real me' and the sense that who we are is bound by social ties and collective responsibilities and our history within the community], but rather, intensifies it, maybe even elevates it so that it becomes the question and thereby the legacy of the culture of the modern mind"(186). All other assertions apparently have been satisfactorily concluded in the chapters in which they were presented.

The *Figures of Consciousness* text is dense and requires concentrated, intellectual scrutiny; the reader's understanding will be more complete if he or she has some knowledge of philosophical, scientific, social and cultural concepts of the times. Otherwise, some collateral reading suggested by the Notes and Works Cited is necessary for complete understanding of the work. This is not a just a literary criticism; it is an application of cultural theory of the nineteenth and early twentieth century time frame to certain literary works. The theory of this time era is explored in depth and then used to analyze the named works, with the concept of the author in the forefront. The depth of analysis is extensive and the cross disciplinary nature of this analysis will be useful to those interested in this kind of multi-disciplinary analysis, while

the pure literary criticism readers may feel confused or unable to comprehend the work in full.

The main drawback to Kress's book is the nearly excessive depth with which she explores her proposed concept, the perhaps indefinable symbol "consciousness." Her work is ambitious, but at times obscure due to her need to address this concept in definable terms; her detail is impressive but may only serve to obscure her message to some readers. Her narrow focus of literary examples after extensive scientific and cultural background is, perhaps, unbalanced. This depends upon her purpose and audience. There are other authors that may have been used as examples, but few are as culturally aware as James and Wharton. Therefore, her work has a limited application to literary works of the period, especially since she has confined her scientific, social and cultural background to that time period.

This work is useful to the scholar of cultural theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in tandem with a selection of Kress's works cited and would be most welcomed by students and scholars of James and Wharton for the extensive multi-disciplinary approach to the concept of the *Figure of Consciousness*. Kress's work is a brilliant and unique combination of the scientific and literary of a time that was in flux and emerged as Modernism; her assertions illuminate some of the reasons why this new movement occurred, and she attempts to answer profound philosophical questions by using scientific and literary works to support her drawing of *The Figure of Consciousness*.

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