



# EDITH WHARTON REVIEW

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### **The Perfect Jew and *The House of Mirth*: A Study in Point of View**

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#### Author's Note:

Because of the accidental failure of the *MLA Bibliography* to index this article when it came out in 1993 and the subsequent mis-indexing of it for seven years, Wharton scholars have not had the opportunity to look at the full range of scholarship on race and anti-Semitism in *The House of Mirth*. Since the initial publication of the essay below, two others have come out, and together they create a textured reading of Wharton's racial strategies in the novel. Hildegard Hoeller's 1994 essay points out that race is "a complex and crucial notion" in the novel. Hoeller gives an interesting reading of the "racial" differences between Rosedale and Lily and how "race" divides the novel

generically between the sentimental love plot of Lily-Selden and the realist one of Lily-Rosedale.

Hoeller points the way, in her identification of Lily's "racial specialization" and of Wharton's racial anxiety in the book, to Jennie Kassanoff's recent essay in *PMLA*. Kassanoff argues more fully that Wharton was indeed expressing, and perhaps resolving, racial anxiety in the portrayal of Lily, who represents, for Kassanoff, "a supreme emblem of her race" and who "articulates a central set of early-twentieth-century patrician anxieties" (61). Kassanoff's elaborate analysis of racial beliefs about patrician whites expands on Hoeller's observations. My essay, which follows here, examines the actual history of American Jews in nineteenth century America and contrasts it with the beliefs of Wharton and her circle of friends

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## BOOK REVIEW

Adeline R. Tintner. *Edith Wharton in Context: Essays on Intertextuality*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 263 pages.

Adeline Tintner, the author of eight books on Henry James, has drawn on her formidable knowledge to place Edith Wharton in many different literary contexts. Sixteen of the 29 essays in her book examine the affinities and literary debts linking Wharton and writers of her era, from long-time friends (James and Paul Bourget), to acquaintances (F. Marion Crawford and Ernest Hemingway), to writers whom she knew primarily through their work (George Gissing and Hugh Walpole). Wharton's legacy, the subject of eight essays, includes works by later writers, notably Richard Howard and Louis Auchincloss, who have portrayed characters modeled on Wharton's life and personality and have produced "rewritings" of her fiction. Three essays center on the importance of painters and works of art in the later fiction. Tintner's book is certain to lead even the most widely read scholar to new facts and more detailed knowledge of Wharton's literary relationships.

Not surprisingly, Henry James, whose relationship to Wharton fills the first seven essays, dominates the literary landscape of the book. What most interests Tintner here is the "subtle game played by two intimates"—a game in which the two writers used fiction to respond to each other's work, thus engaging in a "dialogue" or "private correspondence." Tintner traces the genesis of her own book to her identification of Wharton as the Princess and novelist Amy Evans in James's "The Velvet Glove," a late story (1909) in which, according to Tintner, James may be responding to Wharton's representation of him as the Hermit in "The Hermit and the Wild Woman," (1906), in which story Wharton may be defending herself against James's criticism of her. By comparing the descriptions of female characters in *The Finer Grain* (1910) with James's descriptions of Wharton in her letters, Tintner makes a good case for seeing all five stories in James's volume as "fictional analogues" of the complex relationship of the two writers.

Of later recipients and creators of Wharton's legacy, by far the most important to date is Louis Auchincloss, whom Tintner calls the "Balzac of Edith's World," even claiming that his picture of Wharton's New York is often "more accurate" than hers. In the four essays on Auchincloss, Tintner establishes connections between "After Holbein" and a chapter in his novel *The Partners* and reads three of his stories, "The Arbitrator," "The 'Fulfillment' of Grace Eliot," and "They That Have Power to Hurt," as different versions of Wharton's relationship to her husband and to her lover, Morton Fullerton.

Twenty-one of the essays have been previously published, nine of them in *The Edith Wharton Review*. Of the new essays, the most substantial, "Madame de Treymes Corrects Bourget's *Un Divorce*," compares the plots of narratives resolved by the forced surrender of a non-Catholic spouse to the power of the Catholic Church

and its divorce laws. The "correction," Tintner argues, lies in Wharton's rejection of Bourget's position in defense of the law of the Church, which in Wharton's novella forces the protagonist to remain in a loveless marriage or lose custody of her son. Tintner is persuasive in her claim that Bourget's novel, published in 1904, two years before *Madame de Treymes*, is as important a model for Wharton as James's "Madame de Mauves" and *The American*, with which her novella is usually compared.

In this essay and two earlier ones included in the volume, Tintner establishes the importance of Bourget, until then virtually eclipsed by Henry James as a literary influence. She emphasizes the importance of Bourget's example in Wharton's early fiction. Later novels, such as *The Reef* and *The Mother's Recompense*, suggest that in creating the fevered atmosphere of sexual jealousy and thwarted passion, Wharton has more affinity with Bourget than with James.

Among the new essays are source studies of other well-known works. "Edith Wharton and F. Marion Crawford" discovers striking resemblances between the heroine of Crawford's novel *The Heart of Rome* (1903) and Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*. In "Hugh Walpole's *All Souls' Night* and Edith Wharton's "All Souls," Tintner proposes as a source for Wharton's last story one of Walpole's tales, the often anthologized "The Silver Mask," dramatized in the play, *Kind Lady*, about a woman living alone, abandoned by her servants and made captive by criminal intruders. Here, as in other essays, Tintner is more concerned to document parallels than to explore the implications of differences.

Three new essays briefly describe fiction of the 1990s in which Wharton appears—as a person in Carol DeChellis Hill's *Henry James's Midnight Song*; as the author of correspondence in Cathleen Schine's *The Love Letter*; and as the subject of an academic conference in Lev Raphael's *The Edith Wharton Murders*. Tintner writes more fully on *The Rules of Seduction* (1992), in which Daniel Magida recreates the pattern of *The Age of Innocence* to show the effects of social codes on his protagonist Jack Newland, forced to choose between two women, Kate Welland and Ellen Archer. Tintner prophesies the growing prominence of Wharton as a literary icon, as writers and filmmakers continue to appropriate her biography and art.

Inevitably, readers will find some essays more compelling than others. But the volume as a whole offers the rewards and pleasures of Tintner's earlier books: discovery of sources that shed new light on well-known works and suggest directions for new explorations; illumination of the multiple ways that a single element in a text—a painting, an object, a phrase—can generate meaning; and most important, revelation of the extraordinary richness and diversity of experience expressed in the writer's work.

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about Jews. While Kassanoff's essay gives a reading of Lily's racial meaning, Hoeller's and mine give differing readings of Rosedale's role in the novel. Read together, the three essays illuminate each other and the novel in interesting and complicated ways.

[The following article is being reprinted by permission from *Modern Language Studies* 23:2 (Spring 1993):25-36.]

When Edith Wharton received a copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, she thanked the author, saying: "it's enough to make this reader happy to have met your perfect Jew" (emphasis Wharton's), and went on to praise the luncheon scene and the characterization of Meyer Wolfsheim as the parts of the novel that "make me augur still greater things!" (6/18/1925 in Lewis & Lewis, 481). Wolfsheim, of course, was the man looking for a "gonnection," the man who fixed the 1919 World Series and wore cufflinks made of human teeth. Nick describes him as: "A small, flat-nosed Jew...with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril," who eats "with ferocious delicacy" and talks about witnessing the gangland murder of his old friend, Rosy Rosenthal (69-71). In short, Wolfsheim is physically repugnant, socially unacceptable, morally reprehensible, and stinking rich. This, in 1925 at least, is Edith Wharton's "perfect" Jew.

*The House of Mirth*, conceived around 1900 and largely written during 1903-early 1905, presents another socially unacceptable rich Jew: Simon Rosedale. He is one of the suitors for the hand of the heroine, Lily Bart, and his social success offers chiastic contrast to Lily's decline. He is described as having "that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race," and "his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values," and when we first meet him he is unmistakably vulgar and distasteful: "...a small, glossy looking man with a gardenia in his coat," "...a plump, rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac" (16).

Critics generally consider Rosedale, if they consider him at all, either as an outsider (Ammons, Lidoff, Showalter), the embodiment of the American business climate (Westbrook) or of a lower-class society that will inevitably be successful in entering the upper class (Trilling). Often they mention him only in passing, but, interestingly, every critic, with the notable exceptions of Joan Lidoff and Wai-Chee Dimock, in mentioning Rosedale labels him "a Jew" or "Jewish," despite the fact that they never mention any religious practices or habits. Evidently his Jewishness, for the critics as well as the author, has some important key to

his identity and to his role in the novel unrelated to his actual religious behavior.

So what does it mean to Wharton to make Rosedale a Jew? Unlike George Eliot, who studied Jews and Judaism carefully for her *Daniel Deronda*, Wharton is not interested in depicting Jewishness from the inside. Rather she views him very much from the outside, and she expects her reader to have the same association with the term that she does. Therefore, for us to understand the characterization of Rosedale, and hence his role in the novel, we will require a shared understanding with Wharton of the categorization "Jew."

This understanding seems to me both quite crucial and long overdue, for Rosedale is a significant character in the novel. His position in society is a key indicator of what Wharton is trying to say about society, and society is the stated subject of her novel. In August of 1902, Henry James adjured Wharton in the strongest terms to "DO NEW YORK!" (*Letters* 33), something one assumes she was already thinking, as her first notes for the novel are in a notebook dated 1900. Wharton claimed in her memoirs that *The House of Mirth* was a study of "fashionable New York," "in all its flatness and futility," "a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers" whose deeper bearing was its power of destruction. "Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideas" (BG 206-07).

If society is the focus of Wharton's novel, her message about it is not a simple one. Lily Bart, with her fine discriminations in taste and ethics, represents what it has bred at its best, and also what it destroys. But what does Simon Rosedale represent? Surely he is a foil for Lily, and his successes and increasing acceptance into society mirror her failures and rejection. But there is more. I will argue that Wharton uses Rosedale's Jewishness to illuminate economic issues and social hypocrisies in the society that would otherwise remain underground; by being a member of a race reputed to be vulgar and economically savvy, Rosedale can speak about subjects that are taboo to the others. He is, further, something more than a flat stereotype; Wharton's complex feelings of distaste yet sympathy, anti-Semitism yet admiration, create a complicated irony surrounding his characterization. I shall undertake an analysis of his characterization by looking beyond the text at Wharton's and her friends' experience of and attitudes towards Jews and at prevailing attitudes towards race in general around the late nineteenth century. With this information in mind, I shall suggest a fuller reading of the novel and a darker interpretation of Rosedale's presence in it.

By the time Wharton was writing *The House of Mirth*, there were three different Jewish communities living in New York City: the Sephardic Jews, the German Jews, and the Eastern European Jews. The last group, most newly arrived, were then inhabiting the Lower East Side tenements, some of which were owned by Wharton's contemporaries. They were the least Americanized, of

course, and the most alien to the old guard. But the Sephardic Jews, those of Spanish and Portuguese descent, came to this country at the same time as Wharton's own Dutch ancestors, shared similar occupations, and were largely assimilated, even to some degree into the "Old New York" society. Well into the 1890s Hendrickses, Lazaruses, and Nathans (all Jews) belonged to The Union Club, the most exclusive club in the city, to which Joneses, Stevenses, and Schermerhorns (all Wharton's relatives) also belonged.

The second population of Jews to arrive in America, and the one from which Rosedale must have been drawn, were the German Jews, most of whom emigrated between 1837 and the 1880s. One of the earliest, and certainly the most prominent to Wharton's eyes, was August Belmont, who came to New York in early manhood on business for the house of Rothschild (Black). He married a society girl, and, as one New York socialite put it, "gained entrance to New York Society through the social position of his wife, coupled with his own participation in national affairs" (Van Rensselaer 172).

The issue of Belmont's name change illustrates how Anglo-Dutch prejudices colored society's vision of a man's life. It was long believed that Belmont's original name was Schoenberg, and that he changed it himself in order to infiltrate society. Neither is true; such rumors seem to have arisen from society's self-important view that of course a socially ambitious man would want to change his name to fit in with them. Rather his family name, Simon (much less Jewish-sounding), had been officially changed to Belmont in Alzey in 1808 under Napoleon's orders that all Jews take French surnames (Black, Katz). Yet this victimization was seen by society as his desire to become assimilated.

It has been argued that Belmont was the model for Simon Rosedale, but I don't share this opinion. Belmont was already long married into and accepted by "good" society by the time Wharton was born. Though he never converted from Judaism, he was married by a minister and his children were baptized in the Episcopalian church. Further, he came to America already well-schooled in European standards of fine foods, music, art, and aristocratic living and was in fact a force in forming taste rather than having it formed for him, as happens to Rosedale. Wharton herself mentions the Belmonts several times in *A Backward Glance*, and evidently they were among the families she visited both in New York and in Newport; a good friend of hers married one of Belmont's sons.

Rosedale is much more of an outsider than Belmont. He seems to be drawn from the wealthy German Jewish businessmen making fortunes in retailing and investment banking at the end of the century (such now-familiar names as Bamberger, Altman, Bloomingdale, Lehman, Goldman, Sachs, Bache, Schiff, Kuhn, Loeb). Those who were Wall Street investment bankers--bankers who loaned money in return for stock

rather than for a note, like the Yankee commercial bankers--were indeed, like Rosedale, in the position to give "tips." Wharton and her set would not have seen much of them up close, as they maintained their own social lives apart from the "old New York" society. Nevertheless, their paths did cross on occasion, mostly in the political arena, but in others as well. Addie Wolff, for instance, daughter of a Kuhn, Loeb partner, had her debut in 1894 at Sherry's, the very place frequented by Lily Bart and her friends (Birmingham). Wharton's friend Theodore Roosevelt was one of the guests of an 1883 Purim party that took place in several houses in New York City (Glanz 21-22). Otto Kahn became the first Jew on the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera in 1903, until then an all-society Board, and gradually other such Boards accepted Jewish members.

Roosevelt, with whom Wharton dined more than once while writing *The House of Mirth*, and other of Wharton's politically active friends were of necessity involved with the Jews because of the bankers' strong patriotism and financial support of government activities. But rarely would they have met at private parties. A visiting Polish prince, for instance, when he mentioned a weekend he had spent at the Seligman home on the New Jersey shore, was taken aside in the Knickerbocker Club and instructed that, in America, one didn't socialize with Jews after business hours (Birmingham 263-66). As President, Roosevelt denounced overt public anti-Semitism and appointed a Jew, Oscar Straus, to be Secretary of Commerce. But when he went to a luncheon given by the Seligmans where at least half the guests were Jewish, he wrote to his sister that "I felt as if I was personally realizing all of Brooks Adams's gloomiest anticipations of our gold-ridden, capitalist-bestridden, usurer-mastered future" (Dyer 125). Brooks's brother, Henry Adams, a good friend of Wharton's, was notoriously anti-Semitic and complained consistently from the 1860s until his death, from such diverse places as Vienna, Paris, Washington DC, and South Carolina, of being surrounded by Jews.

While Wharton was coming of age, anti-Semitism became more and more visible and public among the upper class of the country. A watershed event was the 1877 incident at Saratoga, New York, where Joseph Seligman and his family were turned away from the Hilton-owned Grand Union Hotel. Though reparations were made and apologies issued, it became more acceptable publicly to deny access to jobs, housing, and privileges to "Hebrews." It was a time of social and financial insecurity on the part of the old guard. They were having to work harder to make their money and to keep their exclusive aristocratic status, and a variety of gestures toward consolidating and enhancing their privileged position were made. In 1887, when Wharton was 25, the *New York Social Register* was first copyrighted, and the only German-Jewish name among the 2000 was Belmont's, though it also contained a number of the

Sephardic Jews. Ward McAllister began talking about "the Four Hundred" most important New Yorkers (just enough to fit into the Astors's ballroom) in the late 1880s, and the Daughters of the American Revolution was founded in 1890. Between 1893-97, America experienced a financial depression that exacerbated both the anti-immigration and the anti-Jewish feelings of the nation. Wharton's friend Senator Henry Cabot Lodge introduced legislation designed deliberately to keep Jews and southern Europeans, "who are the most alien to the great body of the people of the United States" (qtd. in Weiss 133), from entering the country.

Racial ideologies were growing in importance as a way of understanding history, designing political policy, and perhaps reinforcing the wavering sense of superiority of the Anglo-Dutch upper class. Lodge, Adams, and Roosevelt were firm believers in and purveyors of this ideology. According to one historian:

The force of race in history occupied a singularly important place in Roosevelt's broad intellectual outlook. In fact, race provided him with a window on the past through which he could examine the grand principles of historical development. None of human history really meant much, Roosevelt believed, if racial history were not thoroughly understood first. (Dyer 47)

Such men as Lodge, Adams, and Roosevelt—all friends of Wharton whom she was actively visiting during the time she was writing *The House of Mirth*—believed that American democracy derived from the Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic peoples and that the Aryan race was superior to others. Though originally a linguistic differentiation, in the nineteenth century the terms "Aryan" and "Semitic" took on a physical, anthropological meaning, and despite research to the contrary (Fishberg), the Jews began to be considered a separate race. And to be a separate race meant more than just to have certain physical characteristics. Race meant, as Lodge put it:

the moral and intellectual characters, which in their association make the soul of a race, and which represent the product of all its past, the inheritance of all its ancestors, and the motives of its conduct. The men of each race possess an indestructible stock of ideas, traditions, sentiments, modes of thought, an unconscious inheritance from their ancestors, upon which argument has no effect. What makes a race are their mental, and above all, their moral characteristics[...]. (Weiss 134)

Thus the traits of avarice, business astuteness, and social vulgarity were seen as inherent to Jews.

Wharton's own ideas on race probably came from her early readings of Hippolyte Taine and William Lecky, whom she called, along with Darwin and Spencer, "the formative influences of my life" (to Sara Norton 3/16/08 in *Letters* 136). Taine, in his famous introduction to

*History of English Literature*, noted that three sources contributed to man's [sic] moral state: race, surrounding, and epoch ("race, milieu, et temps"):

What we call the race are the innate and hereditary dispositions which, as a rule, are united with the marked differences in the temperaments and structure of the body. They vary with various peoples. There is a natural variety of men, as of oxen and horses, some brave and intelligent, some timid and dependent, some capable of superior conceptions and creations, some reduced to rudimentary ideas and inventions, some more specially fitted to special works, and gifted more richly with particular instincts[...] We have here a distinct force,—so distinct, that amidst the vast deviations which the other two motive forces produce in him, one can recognize it still[...]. (17)

William Lecky, Wharton's other influence, wrote a great deal specifically about the Jews. Patiently and with evident sorrow, he chronicled the various persecutions of the Jews all over the world and throughout time. But in "Israel Among Nations," an 1893 review of Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu's book of that title, while still showing great sympathy and outrage at the persecution of the Jews, he nevertheless embraces certain attitudes about race and stereotypes about Jews that we would today refute. While marking their achievements in many fields, he characterizes the Jews as "shrewd, thrifty, and sober" with a "rare power of judging, influencing, and managing men," and asserts that "great Jewish capitalists largely control the money markets in Europe" (108). He then goes on at great length about the "physiological force and tenacity of the Jewish race-type" (109). Among his other observations, Lecky tells us that although "great is the power of assimilation the Jewish race possesses, the charm and grace of manner seem to have been among the qualities they most slowly and most imperfectly acquire" (114). He discusses their *parvenu* status among the good society of Europe: their "love of the loud, the gaudy, the ostentatious, and the meretricious," and their inability to "master the happy mean between arrogance and obsequiousness" (115).

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, many books and pamphlets with anti-Semitic propaganda were published, far more than in earlier years (Singerman 6-14). These came particularly, though by no means solely, in conjunction with the debate on bimetallism, and charged that the Jews ran the banks of England, France, and the United States, a charge that was never accurate, though certainly there were powerful Jewish financiers.

In popular literature, Jews were represented in stereotyped ways as aggressive and corrupt, frequently usurers and arsonists with names like Burnupsky and Blazenheimer. Wharton's literary friends and

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acquaintances, while somewhat less crude in their depictions, also included Jews in their writing, some in more, some less flattering ways. Henry James, in "Glasses" (1896), has a resort peopled gratuitously by "thousands of chairs and almost as many little Jews... wagg[ing] their big noses" (317). An heiress in his earlier "Impressions of a Cousin" (1883) is defrauded of her inheritance by a mysterious and sinister financier named Caliph, believed by the narrator (although we never know for sure) to be a Jew. Owen Wister, whose family was on close terms with the Whartons, published in 1903 *Philosophy 4*, a novel of undergraduate life at Harvard which contains a Jewish boy subject to ridicule both by his friends and by the narrator. And Henry Adams, in *Democracy*, gives us the Schneidekoupons (coupon-clippers), a surprisingly mild portrayal of a Jewish financier and his wife. Wharton, too, has a Jew in her story, "The Last Asset," about which more later.

Further, Wharton most likely discussed with Henry James his fear of the Eastern European Jews who inhabited New York's Lower East Side. James was making his famous return trip to America while Wharton was writing the novel, and he saw her both at The Mount and in New York City. This was the trip he would write up in *The American Scene* with its famous chapter on the "swarming" of Israel, likening the Jews to fish, squirrels, monkeys, and ants, fearful of their masses, their poverty, their future blight upon the nation and their stain upon the linguistic purity of his sacred English.

Such was the atmosphere in which Wharton was writing *The House of Mirth*. To summarize: Wharton and her set believed that all people belong to a particular race and that this racial inheritance accounted for not just physical attributes, but intellectual, linguistic, moral, and spiritual characteristics as well. (Hence Wharton gives us her own long and detailed pedigree in *A Backward Glance* as a way of explaining how she became what she was.) She and her friends believed Jews to be all of one race, and found them at best distasteful, although, when cleaned up, on an individual basis they could be quite presentable (she was shortly to count among her close friends two non-practicing Jews: the Comtesse Robert de Fitz-James and Bernhard Berenson). But in the main, with their foreign ways, their "natural" bad taste, and their incorrect usage, their suspicious ability to make money quickly and to spend it quickly, Jews were to be at best avoided, at worst abhorred.

Wharton drew on her racial beliefs in writing *The House of Mirth*. She made racial references, not just to Rosedale, but to a number of other characters in the novel, including Gus Trenor, Jack Stepney, Hudson Bart, and Percy Gryce. Lily herself is the product of "inherited tendencies" (311), and, most sadly, finds her deepest impoverishment to come from a rootlessness born

precisely of her having failed to connect to any family place, tradition, or loyalty. In a passage towards the end we have a sense of Wharton's understanding of inheritance:

[...]as [Lily] looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts...In whatever form a slowly accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories or in the conception of the house not built with hands but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (331) (emphasis mine).

All of Lily's friends suffer more or less from this loss of their inheritance because of the "disintegrating influences" (332) of their lives. We remember that what saves Lily from being raped by Gus Trenor are "old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order" (155). Earlier she had felt safe with Gus in Rosedale's opera box because: "With all his faults, Trenor had the safeguard of his traditions and was the less likely to overstep them because they were so purely instinctive" (121) (emphasis mine). To Wharton, all people are the products of their racial inheritance.

So what are we to make of Simon Rosedale? Being a wealthy Jew, it follows he would "naturally" have the necessary skills to make money and the ambition to make his way into high society and also to be congenitally unable to acquire the necessary polish of manners. But is he one of the debasers of society, or one of those debased by it? At first, the reader shares Lily's "intuitive repugnance" (19) for Rosedale. He is both vulgar and dangerous. To marry Rosedale, we must remember, would be an act of miscegenation; to bear his children would be to alter the purity of Lily's lineage. And, despite some good qualities, Rosedale is impure in a variety of ways.

First of all, we note his mangling of the English language. Wharton and James shared a love of language and a consequent disdain for those who misused it. In *A Backward Glance* she spends a great deal of space—seven or eight pages—speaking about "the best usage" of the English language: "Usage, in my childhood," she tells us, "was as authoritative an element in speaking English as tradition was in social conduct" (48). She goes on to speak of the link between good usage and good breeding:

One was polite, considerate of others, careful of the accepted formulas, because such were the

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principles of the well-bred. And probably the regard of my parents for the niceties of speech was a part of their breeding. They treated their language with the same rather ceremonious courtesy as their friends. It would have been "bad manners" to speak "bad" English, and "bad manners" was the supreme offense. (52)

Rosedale, who says such things as "I'm confoundedly gone on you" and "why ain't you straight with me" (186), offends both by the use of bad English and by his ignorance of many of the accepted formulas.

It's not just his language that offends: even more serious is his willingness to discuss with Lily her financial need. "Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible" was, according to Wharton, "one of the first rules of conversations," and one early instilled in her by her mother (BG 57). And yet Lily is both offended and relieved by his frankness. The fact that Rosedale frequently speaks of money leads us, not just to a judgment of him as vulgar, but also to one of his purposes in the novel, that is, speaking of the unspeakable.

Discussion of money by Jews, if one follows the ideas of the times, is only to be expected. According to racial beliefs, all Jews were money-hungry usurers; their "accuracy at appraising values" was a racially inherited ability, as was their ability to trade value for value. Rosedale knows Lily's value and admits his willingness to pay her generously for what she will provide him. Lily and her friends see this as vulgar; so have critics, and so, perhaps, should we. But vulgarity is not the only point; Wharton is using Rosedale to make overt what is being practiced covertly by all the members of society, namely the governance of private life by the exchange theory of economics. Lily is, of course, as several critics (see Westbrook and Dimock) have noted, in the market to sell herself to the highest bidder. After all, Dorset, too, offers Lily financial reward for marriage to him, and Lily ignores Selden to pursue Percy Gryce for Percy's superior material resources. Rosedale, being a Jew, can speak of economics when other society members, whose conduct is governed by economics, nevertheless maintain a willful silence about anything having to do with it.

Wharton knows well how dangerous such a pretense of ignorance can be. Lily is right when, early in the novel, she tells Selden that in order not to think of money one must have a great deal of it. Selden replies laughingly that one "might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breathe" (74), and then dismisses the statement. Nevertheless, without breathing, one dies. So it is without money, a truth Lily's decline poignantly attests. Who better than a Jew, who "naturally" speaks openly of such things, to force the old society to re-examine the hypocrisy of their feigned

indifference to money? In this sense she uses the stereotype of the Jew in order to comment, not on Rosedale's character, but on his surroundings.

Here, as in "The Last Asset" (1904), the Jew takes blame for the avaricious and cruel behavior of the society member. In that story, although the marriage of a young innocent is accomplished by "a superlative stroke of business" (59) on the part of the girl's society mother, the man through whose eyes we see the action sees the situation as the result of her taking up with the Jewish baron, who marks for him "the first stage of his friend's decline" and who contributes to the "mephitic air" surrounding the young girl (69-70). Rosedale, who seems to Lily dangerous, socially ambitious, overly familiar, and too interested in money, is actually less of all of these things than are Lily's so-called friends. Bertha Dorset, for instance, is far more dangerous than Rosedale in the way she almost single-handedly destroys Lily's reputation and hence her ability to earn a living. And why does Bertha do this? To retain her own money and power: precisely the motives ascribed to Rosedale in particular and Jews in general. And as for familiarity, it is Gus Trenor, one of her own set, who imposes on her physically and socially, not Rosedale. It is Trenor, not Rosedale, who exhibits a distinctly ill-bred, sexually charged manner towards Lily in Rosedale's opera box and later comes close to raping her. And Selden, while purporting to love Lily, is always ready to believe the worst of her, while Rosedale knows that the behavior they accuse her of "ain't [her] style" (301). Rosedale acts at once as the scapegoat for and the emblem of the secret identities of society insiders.

Yet, while he might not be as bad as some, Rosedale, too, with his stock-taking eyes, is ill-bred according to society standards. Though he turns out to have a number of good qualities—he is honest, he likes children, and he genuinely cares for Lily—he never loses his essential vulgarity. The irony of his increasing social acceptance as Lily becomes less and less acceptable cuts several ways.

One irony that Wharton does not seem to intend is that of society's hold on Rosedale; how awful to be "mad to know the people who don't want to know" you (86). In this light, society has debased Rosedale as much as it claims itself debased by his presence. One could feel a poignancy at his financial and social success, which might be as empty for him as is David Levinsky's in Abraham Cahan's 1917 novel, particularly since he never gets the woman he loves. But the narrator does not exhibit this kind of sympathy for Rosedale; it seems that Rosedale's inner life was not of interest, or at least of use, to Wharton.

It is more likely that she intended a different kind of irony. If we embrace her view of Jews as

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impossibly vulgar and morally reprehensible (as Lily does, for instance, when she considers marrying him thinking: "he would be kind...kind in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate" [259]), then his successful entry into society is a devastating indictment, particularly in light of Lily's expulsion. His very acceptance deep into the folds of society becomes proof that society is in an irretrievable decline.

Still, as we have seen, this outsider, this representative of a rapacious, predatory, vulgar outside world, is no worse, and may be better, because kindlier and more honest, than anyone inside the sacred society. Wharton knew this. It is no accident that even Selden, the supposed savior of Lily and her counterpart in retaining the refined sensibilities of an earlier age, is known to have had an affair with a married woman, Bertha Dorset, the most reprehensible character in the book. So the ultimate message to be read from Wharton's making her interloper a Jew might be that this society is so frivolous, so irresponsible, so wasteful, cruel, and self-serving, that even a vulgar Jew is better than they are.

This is a very dark reading of Wharton's feelings about Jews. It may or may not be the ultimate one of Rosedale's presence in the novel. One of the indicators of Wharton's accomplishments as a writer is that her portrait of Rosedale goes well beyond stereotype. Instead of simply making Rosedale rich and vulgar, she makes him a real person to us, and she has him change over time. His sins are primarily against taste rather than morality; we never actually see him perform an immoral act. Though he does suggest that Lily commit blackmail, he doesn't carry it out without her. Thus we cannot easily judge or dismiss him. His "racial" characteristics may be used to comment on society, but his humanity, his love for Lily, his growth in social and moral perception, make him a central character in the book, a character in his own right, one whom we wonder about and perhaps care about more than we do the flatter characters, like the Dorsets and Trenors, who populate society. The ambiguity and subtlety of his characterization make it impossible to come to a firm conclusion about him or about Wharton's use of him.

This investigation into the characterization of Simon Rosedale demonstrates the complexity of the use of racial stereotypes, particularly in the period from the 1870s to the 1930s. Critics have frequently unconsciously shared in the stereotyping by calling Rosedale a Jew despite any reference to his religious behavior. The challenge to literary critics, then, is to stop either unconsciously sharing literary stereotypes or glossing over them with labels such as "anti-Semitic," and to open the doors to full conversation on the depiction of Jews and

other ethnic minorities in literary works.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In addition to Hoeller's article discussed above, Christian Riegel argued in 1992 simply that it is an anti-Semitic portrayal.
- <sup>2</sup> Derogatory references to Jews abound in the correspondence of Henry Adams. To cite only a few, all available in W.C. Ford's 1938 collection: To Elizabeth Cameron, 8/10/1901, 8/14/1901; to C.M. Gaskell, 1/23/1894, 7/13/1896: "We are in the hands of the Jews. They can do what they please with our values," 2/19/1914; to Sir Robert Conliffe, 2/17/1896.
- <sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Elsa Nettels for my first thoughts about Taine's influence on Wharton.
- <sup>4</sup> For further documentation of the rise of anti-Semitism in the United States, see Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (1994).
- <sup>5</sup> This idea that Wharton has racialized Lily and her friends is discussed also by Hoeller, and constitutes the subject of Kassinoff's illuminating and dense essay referred to earlier.

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### The Significance of the Sawmill: Technological Determinism in *Ethan Frome*

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Technological determinism, as defined by historian Merritt Roe Smith, is "the belief in technology as a key governing force in society....[It] affirms that changes in technology exert a greater influence on societies and their processes than any other factor."<sup>1</sup> In the late-nineteenth century, this outlook gained an unprecedented acceptance that found its expression in popular art and advertising. Its tenets were embraced so widely that "the belief that in some fundamental sense technological developments determine the course of human events had become dogma by the end of the century."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly then, technological determinism is evident in contemporary literature. Some writers of fiction, like some artists and advertisers of the period, express a belief in technological innovation as an instrument of moral and material progress. One such work that promotes technology as a driving force of culture is *Ethan Frome* (1911) by Edith Wharton. While the novel does not identify technological change as the most significant factor in social change, its depiction of mechanical innovations does suggest a deterministic belief in the progressive power of electricity, railroads, and new management systems. The work further promotes a techno-centric view by positing that a community that is denied access to technological innovations is destined to stagnate. The social atrophy that Wharton constructs as the fate of those rural New England communities by-passed by industrialization is symbolized by her protagonist's water-powered sawmill. Specifically, the associations that she has her narrator draw between the sawmill and Ethan Frome and his lover Mattie Silver foretell the sawmill's obsolescence. The significance of the sawmill lies in its identification in Wharton's mind with primitive mechanization and an

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antiquated source of power.

By the turn of the century, the sawmill was viewed by many as an outdated feature on the industrial landscape. Its technology had been imported to colonial America from the European continent as early as 1623.<sup>3</sup> "The basic type consisted of one or more sash saws, which were pulled down by the action of a water wheel and crank and drawn back up by the force of a sapling used as a spring pole. The log was moved forward by a cog wheel or a weight running over a pulley."<sup>4</sup> The process of producing sawn timber was not always mechanized, but "[b]ecause hauling logs and sawing them into planks by hand with pit saws was heavy physical labor that also required considerable skills, colonists quickly adopted water flow in rivers for sawing and transporting lumber."<sup>5</sup> The waterwheel as a source of power, however, has limited mobility and production capabilities. A waterwheel has to be located adjacent to a river at a drop of sufficient flow. It is unable to generate power in times of drought, flood, or freezing. As a result, by the 1830s the waterwheel was supplanted by the more flexible and reliable power of steam.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent methods for generating and transmitting electricity from coal or from water at hydroelectric plants further decreased the use of the river as a source of power. Water-power technology fell from popularity in industrial circles, and water-powered mills became identified with a by-gone era.<sup>7</sup> In *Ethan Frome*, Harmon Gow, the man who drove the stage in pre-trolley days, suggests that Ethan's sawmill is one example of this technology that belongs to the past. The water-power of his mill, much like the animal power of Harmon's old stagecoach, has been replaced by electrical generation. Harmon articulates Wharton's deterministic point of view when he confides to the narrator, "you know what one of them old water-mills is with nowadays,"<sup>8</sup> a statement that implies Ethan's sawmill is worthless in the modern environment.

Ethan Frome is closely identified with his old watermill through the language that the narrator employs to describe his physical appearance. The words that he chooses to depict Ethan and the mill suggest that they share the same general appearance of decay and convey a sense of their inevitable decline. For instance, the first time that the narrator sees Ethan, he describes him as "the ruin of a man" (3). What was once great and powerful appears "stiffened and grizzled" (3). The narrator can only imagine "how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat upon his strong shoulders before they were bent out of shape" (5) by a debilitating sledding accident twenty-four years before. His "shortened and warped" (4) right side suggests that he is not the productive man he once was. His physical crippling is echoed in the picture the narrator

draws of his mill. Passing the mill on a wintry day, the narrator states that the sawmill "looked exanimate enough, with its idle wheel looming above the black stream dashed with yellow-white spume, and its cluster of sheds sagging under their white load" (14). This lifeless image emphasizes the unproductive state of a decaying structure whose outbuildings, much like Ethan's shoulders, can no longer support the weight they once did. Through this connection, the narrator's diction creates a visual link between the man and his mill that focuses upon their shared lost potential.

In the story that the narrator constructs to explain Ethan's situation, Ethan himself draws a very different connection between his mill and his wife's cousin Mattie. Ethan does not associate Mattie with the inactivity observed by the narrator; he associates her with the mill's more productive past. When Mattie comes to live with the Fromes in Starkfield, Ethan is "struggling under the burden of his barren farm and failing saw-mill" (45), but his mill is generating income. Ethan has orders to fill for a local builder, and he has raised funds to make "necessary repairs to the mill" (99), suggesting that he believes it has a future worthy of capital investment. Ethan appears to take pride in his role as a mill-operator and to find comfort in the physically demanding work of his mill's wood-lot. As the narrator observes, "It was in the early morning stillness, when his muscles were swinging to their familiar task...that Ethan did his clearest thinking" (42). In the narrator's vision, Ethan associates Mattie with this positive aspect of his work. To Ethan, her hair "had the faint woody fragrance of fresh sawdust in the sun" (108), the by-product of his satisfying labor. Other tasks at the mill give Ethan a sense of power that he relishes, and only his social interactions with Mattie come close to replicating the control he feels when transforming the raw materials of the forest into building timbers. After Ethan authoritatively resolves a domestic crisis for Mattie concerning the broken pickle dish, the narrator refers to the power of Ethan's work by noting, "Except when he wits steering a big log down the mountain to his mill he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery" (64). This positive association of Mattie with the mill, however, is an ominous prediction of the mill's declining importance in the nineteenth century.

The link between the sawmill and Mattie emphasizes the decline of the mill's economic potential because Mattie is strongly associated with waning utility. In Starkfield, Ethan's wife is displeased with Mattie's job performance as a housemaid. She frequently finds "oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl's inefficiency" (27). In fact, Zeena plans to engage a new servant because Mattie lacks the strength, coordination, and innate talents necessary for basic housekeeping. Mattie's inability to perform ordinary chores such as scrubbing the kitchen floor and carrying firewood is grounds for her replacement. It renders her unfit for work

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in a rural domestic setting, yet Mattie has also been judged ill-suited for urban work. When she was still living in the city, she attempted to work as a stenographer and book-keeper, and she "spent six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store" (44). These work experiences were a disaster. They caused her health to suffer, as "the bad air and standing all day nearly killed [her]" (115). Complaints about difficult working conditions were common among shopgirls in the late nineteenth century, but their inclusion in the text emphasizes the fact that Mattie is as ill-equipped to compete in the industrial marketplace as she is to work on the farm.<sup>9</sup> An analogy can thus be drawn between Mattie's imminent displacement from life in Starkfield and the mill's. The water-powered sawmill with which she is identified is simply unable to compete in the electrical age.

Although Mattie does not end up leaving the Fromes, the eventual displacement of water-power by electricity is paralleled in Starkfield by the displacement of other traditional systems by technological innovations. The country store is replaced by the new brick grocery; the local stage is replaced by the trolley and the railroad. The narrator has Ethan express the belief that the introduction of these new technologies improves business and travel, yet changes the character of his village and isolates its members in ways that were not previously possible. The introduction of a new management system in one of the two village stores has streamlined business administration, but depersonalized mercantile relations. The ambitious grocer, "whose suppleness and effrontery had given Starkfield its first notion of 'smart' business methods" (24) does not offer the personal service available at the rival establishment. The generic greetings offered at the modern shop marginalize individuals. "Ironic compliment" replaces the "sympathetic questions" of the less efficiently, traditionally managed store where bottles of glue are stored "in a medley of cough-lozenges and corset-laces" (76). Ethan identifies the railway as another potentially marginalizing force. He tells the narrator, "We're kinder side-tracked here now, but there was considerable passing before the railroad was carried through to the Flats" (16). His comment suggests that, although the train has connected the community to a larger world, the new rail line has cut off the personal contacts that existed between travelers and residents. Those who could previously interact with the riders of the stage from their farm-gates are now out of the communication loop. As Marlene Springer has noted, "With brilliant irony, Wharton turns the coming of the

railroad, historically the advent of mobility and expansion, into a catalyst for isolation and despair."<sup>10</sup>

Ethan's own isolation and despair are understandable in a man who has himself been passed over by industrialization. As a young man, "he had taken a year's course at a technical college at Worcester, and dabbled in the laboratory with a friendly professor of physics;" his studies "fed his fancy and made him aware of huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things" (21). He dreamed of joining the emerging profession of civil engineers who were needed "to build the infrastructure in cities, create a transportation network, and provide for the nation's expanding industrial plant." As the narrator states, "He had always wanted to be an engineer, and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and 'fellows doing things.'" (53). Ethan's responsibility for his family farm and mill, however, prevented his pursuit of this line of work. As it result, he speaks with "a note of resentment" (12) regarding a volume of popular science belonging to the narrator that contains descriptions of advancements in the field of bio-chemistry with which he is unfamiliar. Years after his entry into the field of engineering was cut off, Ethan realizes that he has been cut off from even a working knowledge of the technological realm. The fact that Wharton makes her narrator an engineer who has been sent to Starkfield "on a job connected with the big power-house at Corbury Junction" (6) emphasizes Ethan's professional stagnation. She surrounds Ethan with tools constructed to represent a bygone era, while she places the narrator among the newest advances in electrical generation, the very technology that has rendered Ethan's mill obsolete.

The sawmill that appears in *Ethan Frome* is an appropriate icon for the changes that were occurring in the countryside as a result of industrialization in late-nineteenth-century America. Edith Wharton was a gifted chronicler of her surroundings, and she created a realistic setting for her story of Ethan Frome. She recorded not only the natural landscape of the Berkshires, but also its built environment. She based her portrait of rural New England life on the observations she made on frequent driving excursions through the hills surrounding The Mount, her estate near Lenox, Massachusetts. In response to criticism that she did not possess a familiarity with her subject matter, Wharton defended the authenticity of the text's atmosphere. In her autobiography, she explained that *Ethan Frome* was "the result of explorations among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, and sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forbears held those villages against the Indians."<sup>12</sup> She asserted that she has an accurate knowledge of towns such as Starkfield because the novel "was written after [she] had spent ten years in the hill-region where the scene is laid...in those half-deserted

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villages before the coming of motor and telephone."<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, more than an intimacy with the region, these comments convey a belief in technological determinism. Wharton perceived that the persistent use of colonial mechanisms and the lack of access to subsequent innovations were responsible, in part, for the decline of a vital rural existence in New England. From her vantage point at the turn of the century, she clearly viewed the absence of the automobile, the telephone, and like technologies as a primary cause of the static quality of life in places such as Starkfield.

This deterministic vision of technology was dependent on Wharton's own familiarity with technological innovations. Although she acknowledged technology's negative potential to depersonalize human relations, she still deemed the application of technology necessary in the countryside. She believed that in rural communities the adoption of emerging technologies ultimately enhanced modes of production and bolstered rustic economies. Improved methods of communication and transportation had the potential to link isolated regions to urban centers and expose them to the art and culture of the city, counterbalancing the social marginalization that could be caused by these same technologies. If technology did not reach these communities, she believed they were most likely doomed to fail; in all probability, they would suffer the same fate as the isolated hamlets of Starkfield and North Dormer, the setting of *Sumner* (1917), Wharton's other novel set in the Berkshires:

There [North Dormer] lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no "business block;" only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves.<sup>14</sup>

These fictionalized versions of the small communities surrounding The Mount were left to molder, according to Wharton, because they did not have easy access to the kind of inventions that she did in her own life. Although she was not unabashedly enthusiastic about absolutely all forms of technology, Wharton did exhibit interest in many technological innovations: she "was one of the first American women to own and make great use of what she always called a 'motor-car;'" she traveled frequently by train and steamer; and "she grew so dependent on the telephone that she was

shocked when she discovered that the country house she had rented for the summer of 1914 was lacking in that indispensable instrument."<sup>15</sup> Wharton also visited the 1900 International Exposition in Paris that emphasized new modes of energy and installed electric lights and plumbing in her Lenox estate in 1901.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, she was knowledgeable about the technological advances that rendered the power source of Ethan's sawmill outdated.

As Wharton constructs it, the sawmill represents technology that is old-fashioned and inferior. Compared to the complex machines of the contemporary networked city, its simple mechanization is inefficient and powerless, associated with the incompetence of Mattie and the impotence of Ethan. The mill symbolizes, in the frame story of the novel, the antithesis of modernity and progress at the turn of the century. In Wharton's vision, the rural communities that are built around the sawmill are passed over by civilization. Without access to improved modes of transportation and communication, their residents are likely to live silent, static lives. The absence of new technologies in these isolated settlements creates a tangible void for the technological determinist. If technology determines moral and material progress, these places that are denied technology are destined to be backward. Wharton's description of Starkfield documents the social consequences of persisting to employ old systems of production, management, and transportation when new technologies are available. Thus, although it is a symbol that has not attracted much attention in scholarly examinations of *Ethan Frome*, the significance of the sawmill projects a powerful expression of technological determinism in the American literary canon.

#### Notes

- 1 Merritt Roe Smith, "Technological Determinism in American Culture," *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, eds. Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge: MIT P, 1994) 2.
- 2 Smith 7.
- 3 Carroll Pursell, *The Machine in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 22.
- 4 Pursell 23.
- 5 Robert B. Gordon and Patrick M. Malone, *The Texture of Industry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 64.
- 6 Gordon 155.
- 7 For a beautifully illustrated explanation and history of the technology of water-powered mills, please see David Macaulay, *Mill* (Boston: Houghton, 1983).
- 8 Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* (New York: NAL, 1987) 10; future citations will appear in the text.
- 9 Carroll D. Wright, director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor from 1877 to 1892, documents the complaints of working girls, including references to the

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trials of standing all day behind store counters and working in poorly ventilated spaces, in *The Working Girls of Boston* (New York: Arno, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> Marlene Springer, *Ethan Frome: A Nightmare of Need* (New York, Twayne, 1993) 81.

<sup>11</sup> Pursell 101.

<sup>12</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Appleton, 1934) 153-54.

<sup>13</sup> Wharton, *Backward* 296.

<sup>14</sup> Edith Wharton, *Summer* (New York: Collier, 1987) 5.

<sup>15</sup> R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper, 1975) 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis 97, 110.

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### Marriage in *The Glimpses of the Moon*

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It will be remembered that Paolo and Francesca are met by Dante just beyond the fatal gateway, in what might be called the temperate zone of the infernal regions. In the society of dangerously agreeable fellow-sinners they "go forever on the accursed air," telling their beautiful tale to sympathising visitors from above; and as, unlike the majority of mortal lovers, they seem not to dread an eternity together, and as they feel no exaggerated remorse for their sin, their punishment is the mildest in the poet's list of expiations.

French Ways and Their  
Meaning

In January, 1922, eight months before *The Glimpses of the Moon* was published, and at the peak of her literary success, Edith Wharton wrote to a friend from her home at Ste. Claire, Hyeres, that "I am thrilled to the spine, *il y a va de mon avenir*, and I feel as if I were going to get married--to the right man at last!" (Lewis 3) For Wharton, *The Glimpses of the Moon* is an avowal of her faith in the marriage vows, and Nick Lansing is "the right man" because he possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. Nick is Wharton's first male protagonist who acts intellectually mature, marries the woman he loves, and then, emulates the patriarchal ideal of woman's role as nurturer. Although Nick had made a bargain with Susy that if "[...]either of them got the chance to do better he or she should be immediately released" (21) to marry a wealthier mate, Nick thought this absurd because once married, he found "[t]he future without Susy unbearable..." (131). Nick becomes Wharton's first "positive hero" who not only shares her philosophy, as a writer, of integrating art into life, but who shares her need for love and companionship in marriage, and her desire to have a home of her own.

Throughout her writing, Wharton questions not only the institution of marriage and the failures of society but the human beings who generally destroy those unions. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton depicts a marriage that succeeds; and Grace Fulmer, whom Susy emulates, symbolizes her intellectually independent woman. Nick marries Susy because she is his intellectual equal. He admires Susy's "swift intelligence," even though he believes Susy wasted "this exquisite insight" on "[...]reading the thoughts of vulgar people and extracting profit from them..." (184). And although Nick cannot support Susy, he attaches "an increasing value" to her "companionship" (16). When Nick can no longer accept their unconditional dependence on rich friends, and they separate, his desire to save his marriage becomes central to his existence. Nick recognizes that Susy has given him "[...]the best a man can have, and nothing else will ever be worth much to [him]" (134). Thus, Nick grows because he understands that Susy's companionship is vital to his well-being, but, unlike Lawrence Selden, he rejects the prospect of a life misspent.

Obviously, critics have misunderstood Wharton's message because they have thought this novel unpersuasive, and Nick Lansing a fool.<sup>1</sup> Wharton's understanding that a writer's longevity depends on the critics is expressed through the reception of Nick Lansing's writing toward which "[...]the paying public had remained cold...he lived among the kind of people who confuse[d] taste with talent, and are impressed by the most artless attempts at literary expression[...]" (56). But regardless of critical opinion, Wharton continued to define her own philosophy of marriage for her future reading audience. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton uses anthropological

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terminology when she writes that "the value of duration" asserts itself against "the welter of change" (5). Wharton's assertion of the "value of duration" not only disproves the critical statement that she was unable to write on the American idiom and culture, but proves that she spent her lifetime recording [repositing] in fiction and non-fiction the results of "the welter of change" of the social structure of her parents' day. Thus Wharton documented the past for the present, and "for a future generation who may study them with eyes cleared of prejudice" (339). Nick, like Wharton, also feels anxious about his "weaknesses," but he continues to depict the past in his fiction to "develop his theory of Oriental influences in Western art" (63). Perhaps if critics had seen *The Glimpses of the Moon* as the repository of eternal truths and Nick Lansing as her exponent avowing her philosophy of the quality of life and her faith in love and marriage, then Wharton would have received the recognition she deserved for achieving her lifetime goal in writing this novel.

In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton shows how two intelligent people grow morally and spiritually in a marriage that unites two well-suited companions. Wharton succeeds in her quest because she skillfully deconstructs stereotypical gender roles, and it is not ironic that at the end of the novel, Wharton's view of "the poverty, the miserable poverty of any love that lies out-side of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all" (Lewis 317-18) reflects Nick's sentiments. Nick does not want to divorce Susy because he believes they love one another. Nick renews his marriage vows when he entreats Susy to see their relationship as central to their existence. Nick says,

We're married --isn't that all that matters? Oh, I know--I've behaved like a brute: a cursed arrogant ass! ...But that's not the point we're married...Married....Doesn't it mean something to you, something--inexorable? It does to me. I didn't dream it would--in just that way. But all I can say is that I suppose people who don't feel it aren't married--and they'd better separate; much better. As for us--[.] (348-49)

Wharton confronts the ever burning issue of sexual inequality by showing how the influence between men and women in marriage can be complete union of the sexes both mentally and physically, rather than a destructive force which leads to divorce. Here, as in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), Wharton argues that better marriages exist in a

society where women have satisfying emotional relationships with men. She sees the French woman's place in the very heart of society as an inspiration, and it is her belief that the basic element in a good marriage comes from "important relationships between men and women"(102). Although Wharton states that there are no statistics to prove that French marriages are better than any others, she suggests that their idea of marriage and motherhood is built on a "community of tradition of education and, above all, of the parental feeling, [which are] judged to be the sentiments most likely to form a lasting tie between the average man and woman" (102).

In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton explores her idea of marriage, and through Nick and Susy's unique relationship, she portrays a marriage that forms a lasting tie between a man and a woman. It now becomes obvious that Wharton's purpose in writing this novel is to inform her audience of the importance of more constructive relations between the sexes, and that the transformation of society a possibility if two people share these ideals. Nick and Susy misunderstand one another only because they think they must follow the rules defined by rich members of the fast, international set rather than the ones defined by Nat and Grace Fulmer. Before they marry, Nick accidentally meets Susy at the Fulmers, "in the wilds of New Hampshire" where he assumes that a meeting "[...]in such circumstances would be the quickest way to cure them both of their regrets" (18). However, Nick's first impression that the Fulmers' marriage "[...]was an awful object-lesson in what happened to young people who lost their heads;" changes when he sees "that Nat had never been such good company, or Grace so free from care and so full of music; and that, in spite of...the bad food and general crazy discomfort, there was...amusement to be got out of their society" (18). Nick now realizes that Grace and Nat "belong to each other" (336), and that "their cramped and uncomfortable household" (298) constitutes a home because there is a loving family in it.

Nick becomes the vehicle through which Wharton portrays an optimistic vision of marriage once the marriage vows have been spoken. Nick takes responsibility not only for himself, but for Susy as well. Unlike Lawrence Selden and Newland Archer, Nick realizes the importance of having a real home, and he does not seal his mind against ideas, nor his heart against the women he loves. Once married, Nick feels that he now has "[...]some one who was his own particular care, and to whom he was answerable for himself and his actions, as he had never felt himself, answerable to the... indifferent people among whom he had chosen to live" (64). When separated, Nick remains aware "[o]f the special understanding on which their marriage had been based...[although] the idea that he or she might ever

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renounce each other for their mutual good had long since dwindled to the ghost of an old joke" (69). Nick's "intellectual honesty" and his "courage" to see things as they are demonstrates his "mental maturity."<sup>2</sup> Nick sees their marriage in the same way as Susy, who believes that their first month of marriage "their being together...in a comradeship of which both of them had long ago guessed[...]" was more than she had ever imagined (6).

At last Wharton creates a hero who unselfishly places other people's happiness above his own. Nick endorses Wharton's philosophy marriage as a union of companions rather than a union of economic interests.<sup>3</sup> Nick grows when he sees Susy as the woman who inspires him, rather than a reflection of the patriarchal ideal of women in his culture. His changed attitude enables him to understand that Susy is not his exclusively, the "property" he "had chosen" to take "[...]her place in the long line of Lansing women who had been loved, honoured, and probably deceived, by bygone Lansing men" (64). Although Nick

didn't pretend to understand the logic of it... the fact that she was his wife gave purpose and continuity to his scattered impulses, and a mysterious glow of consecration to his task.... [Susy] was some one with whom, by some unheard-of miracle, joys above the joys of friendship were to be tasted, but who, even through these fleeting ecstasies, remained simply and securely his friend. (64-65)

Therefore, when Nick sees Susy holding the Fulmers' youngest child in her arms, he feels "changed and renewed" (319). His vision of Susy transforms as "[...]she stood out from the blackness behind her, and through the veil of the winter night, a thing apart, an unconditioned vision, the eternal image of the woman and the child" (319). The reason Nick feels "changed and renewed" is because his vision of Susy reminds him of Tiepolo's fresco. In a recent essay, Adeline R. Tintner writes that "the subject of Tiepolo's fresco [which] represents the legend of the Transportation of the Holy House of Mary from Palestine to Loreto" is important to the meaning of the novel (22). However, the reader does not know exactly what Nick sees when he visits the church of the Scalzi because as Tintner explains the fresco had been "destroyed by an Austrian bomb in 1915"(23). Therefore, when Nick arrives at the Scalzi Church and sits under the Tiepolo fresco and then "[...]wandered up the nave under the whirl of rose-and-lemon angels in Tiepolo's great vault" (91), he sees Coral Hicks, the homely daughter of a wealthy American, enjoying Tiepolo as well. Both Nick and Coral would like a real home of their own, but both

live nomadic lives. Since Nick and Susy live in borrowed palaces which are lent to them for short periods of time for services rendered, they have become social parasites who are dependent on rich peoples whims. This flaw in their lives, as Tintner points out,

is made clear by having the legend of the rescue of Mary's poor little home in Nazareth dropped into the story's plot. Mary's house, so holy and cherished, although humble, transported by angels as if it were light as air itself, is the unexpressed ideal of a home: lowly but loved. When Susy realizes that she cannot keep her bargain with Nick, ...she learns that life with the Fulmers' children constitutes a home. (23-24)

Thus, once "the crowding vision" of Susy deconstructs, and Susy alone stands before him, "his own Susy...changed..., tempered--older" (320), Nick understands the "compromises and concession" on which they must base their life together (109-10). When Nick sees Susy as "part of the shabby house" (320), he comes full circle. Nick's vision of Susy, like that of the Virgin with the Christ Child against her shoulder, allows him, at last, to see that "nothing mattered except... their love" (105).

Elizabeth Ammons writes that after *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton ends her argument with America during the Progressive Era, "turn[ing] her attention to the present, the 1920s, and wr[iting] novels declaring motherhood woman's best and most fulfilling job in life" (157). Moreover, beginning with *The Glimpses of the Moon* "that woman's duty as a mother must take precedence over her desire for personal freedom" (157). To the contrary, I suggest that Wharton's argument never changes, but heightens as she traces the fortunes of all womankind and exposes the false notion that, for women, civilization is intellectually or morally progressive. For instance, Wharton writes in her guide book, *In Morocco* (1920), that when visiting a Moroccan dignitary's house she became acutely aware of the similarity of the women's appearance, and she observed that except for the vacant expression of their faces this group could have been that "of a Professor's family" (185) in any part of the world. Wharton further notes that the dignitary's wife speaks to her only to ask if she has children. On learning of Wharton's childless state, another woman tells her that "in Islam a woman without children is considered the most unhappy in the world" (185). Wharton agrees, saying "that in the western world also childless women were pitied" (185). Wharton was aware that society saw marriage and motherhood as woman's destiny. She did not merely write *The Glimpses of the Moon* to illustrate marriage and motherhood as Susy's only option, but she confronts these issues through her creation of an intellectually independent woman who is capable of

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having an important relationship with a man as well as other adults.

In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton creates a marriage that seems improbable, and then shows how Nick and Susy work out their problems and form a lasting tie in spite of the odds against them. Although Wharton describes Nick's shock at Susy's new attitude as sparking "a tumult of new hopes and old memories" (321) for him, he sees Susy not only as a mother, but also as the companion he thought he had lost forever. Nick finds Susy transformed because when they had parted, his last glimpse of her "under the lamp-flare" had been of an artificially masked face with "paint and powder" which he thought "was carefully enough adjusted to hide any ravages [of] the scene between them" (129). Even though Nick realizes that "the future without Susy [would be] unbearable," he "could not picture Susy out of her setting of luxury and leisure, [nor could he] picture either of them living such a life as the Nat Fulmers[...]" (131-32). But Nick eventually understands that their marriage depends on a relationship "without conditions...forever" (131). His "unconditioned vision" (319) of Susy indicates that he has moved beyond the assumed male attitude of men towards women, and he sees Susy as his equal. Susan Goodman's argument is similar when she writes that "the images of mother and child...[implies] that the lady and the New Woman are not mutually exclusive" (59). Nick is Wharton's "right man" because he can see beyond the traditional stereotypes of woman as "the nice lady" or the "not nice independent new woman" (59). By understanding Susy's friendship with Grace, Nick now sees the Fulmers as a constructive role model for Susy and himself.

For Wharton, Grace Fulmer combines both the biological and the nurturing mother figure as well as her intellectually independent woman. Grace leaves Susy in charge of her children to travel with Nat because she believes that a good marriage depends on an "important relationship" between husband and wife. Motherhood does not take precedence over her personal desires; her freedom of expression is important to her children's "intelligence [which] had been fed only on things worth caring for" (297). Wharton is being ironic when she describes how "inadequate Grace Fulmer's bringing-up of her increasing tribe had been" because

they had heard in her company nothing trivial or dull: good music, good books and good talk had been their daily food, and if at times they stamped and roared and crashed about like children unblessed by such privileges, at others they shone with the light of poetry and spoke

with the voice of wisdom. (298)

Grace Fulmer, her home, and her inadequacy in her children's upbringing reflect the values Wharton deemed important in her early writings. Grace, like Wharton in *The Decoration of Houses*, not only tries to reconcile the vast division between the separate spheres but creates a space where her small human community of family members enjoy a wholesome quality of life.

Although *The Glimpses of the Moon* is a novel about marriage, and Nick Lansing's "all-encompassing" love for Susy, Susy is Wharton's intellectually independent woman who not only survives on her own, but who is capable of having "important relationships" with others. When Susy suspects that she has lost Nick's love forever, she sees the "[...]unreality of her life, [of being] associated with people like Altringham, [and his] train" (302). Even though Susy feels "rootless and ephemeral" (319), like Lily Bart, she has great spiritual, moral and emotional resources to fall back on. The day Susy seeks out Grace Fulmer, she commits herself by taking charge of the five Fulmer children for three months while Grace assists her husband with his work. In this environment Susy sees that her relationship with Nick would be similar to the Fulmers.' It becomes obvious that Susy does not put the occupation of motherhood over her own personal desires, but she satisfies her own need "[...]of doing something useful and even necessary, and of earning her own keep" (302).

Elizabeth Ammons argues that "enlightened and matured, Susy gets her reward" (161) when Nick returns and sees her transformed," but it is Nick and not Susy who is transformed. When Wharton describes Nick "changed and renewed," she is suggesting that Nick's attitude towards the idea of marriage and the woman he loves has been "changed and renewed." Ammons's argument that "[...]for the first time," Wharton "introduces a fundamental shift in her analysis of female human nature and the relationship between the sexes," by suggesting "marriage, the home, and motherhood" as the answer, is only partly true (162). It could be argued that Wharton finally created a society where women have satisfying relationships with men, as well as with other adults. Nick's "unconditioned vision" of Susy transforms the fixed patriarchal ideal of woman; and he now has the courage to commit himself, unconditionally, to her. Although the happy couple does whirl off, with the five Fulmer children, on a second honeymoon, they do not reconcile their marriage because of the children. When Nick muses over Susy's unconditional devotion to him, he now understands that his love for her goes beyond "the old contrast between the two ways of loving, the man's

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way and the woman's" (364), and he realizes that men and women, given the right circumstances are equally capable of loving unconditionally. Wharton's design drew them consciously, and yet "half unaware" into "the labyrinth" of their marriage and "through some of its thorniest passages" (280). Although both Susy and Nick have gambled with the idea that they were free to take their "chance" and remarry, they respond to the mutual "[...]impulse which had first drawn them together...that deep seated instinctive need that each had of the other" (363).

In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton defies social conventions. She creates her vision of marriage as a harmonious sharing of all in which Susy and Nick, like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, will be remembered as "mortal lovers [who] do not seem to dread an eternity together" (142). Nick is Wharton's first "positive hero" who shares her philosophy, and who rejects a life of emotional and artistic dabbling for love and companionship in marriage.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> R.W.B. Lewis adds to the misunderstanding of Wharton's work (445 and 446).
- <sup>2</sup> In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton writes that "[...]intellectual honesty, the courage to look at things as they are, is the first test of mental maturity" (58).
- <sup>3</sup> Wharton saw the effect of the feminization of culture as a dangerous misconception of reality, and like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the founders of the woman's movement, and writer and lecturer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she believed that happier marriages, and happier homes could be achieved by a union of common interests rather than economic independence.

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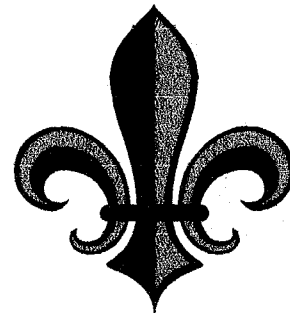
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**John Middlesworth, "The Play and the Plays in *The Reef*"**  
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**Notes and Queries: New Feature**

If you have a brief note, observation, or question about Edith Wharton or her work, please send it to the Editor for possible publication in this new column.

**ERRATUM**

Please note that the Spring 1999 issue of *The Edith Wharton Review* was misnumbered Volume XVI, No. 1. It should have been Volume XV, No. 1.

**Edith Wharton Panels at Washington DC MLA**

Once again, as an Allied Association, The Edith Wharton Society will sponsor two academic sessions at the annual MLA Conference. This year's meeting will be held from December 27 to 30 in Washington DC. An annual business meeting and Society dinner will also be held. Details will follow.

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**Edith Wharton at Newport: 2000**  
**The Sixth Biennial Edith Wharton Society Conference**  
**Salve Regina University, Newport, Rhode Island**  
**June 21 to 25, 2000**  
**Preliminary Program**

**Wednesday, June 21:**

12 noon to 7 PM: Registration, Young Building (Will continue throughout conference for daily registrations)  
6:30 to 7:30 PM Opening Reception with Hot Hors d'oeuvre  
7:30 PM Welcome to conference  
Keynote: Ellie Dwight: "Newport and Beyond: Edith Wharton's Search for Social Values"

**Thursday, June 22:**

9:00 to 10:30 AM Session I  
10:30 to 12 noon Session II  
12 noon to 1 PM Lunch  
1 PM to 1: 45 PM Joan Youndken, Newport Historical Society: "Edith Wharton's Newport"  
2PM Scott Marshall: Update on The Mount  
2:45 PM to 4:15 PM Session III  
4:30 to 5:30 PM Session IV  
6:00 PM to 8PM Dinner on own  
8 PM to 9 PM Dramatic Reading  
9 PM to 10 PM Barbara Becker as Edith Wharton

**Friday, June 23**

9 AM to 10:30 AM Session V  
10:45 AM to 12:15 PM Session VI  
12:30 PM to 2 PM Lunch on own  
2 PM to 6 PM Tours of Newport by reservation  
6 PM to 8 PM Dinner on own  
8 PM Caryn Block Concert: Music Based on Wharton's Poetry

**Saturday, June 24**

9 AM to 10:30 AM Session VII  
10: 45 AM to 12:30 PM Session VIII  
1 PM to 2 PM Lunch on own  
2 PM to 6 PM Tours of Newport by reservation: Cliffwalk; Ocean Drive; Mansions  
6 PM Gala Cocktail Party and Banquet, Ochre Court  
8 PM Plenary Talk: Shari Benstock: "The Imagination for Place"

**Sunday, June 25**

9AM to 10 AM: Panel Discussion: "Teaching Edith Wharton Abroad"  
10:30 AM to 11:30 AM: Panel Discussion: Edith Wharton Society Executive Board, "What's Next in Wharton Studies"

**Note: Complete program available at Edith Wharton Website:**

**Http://www.gonzaga.edu/wharton/overview.htm**

**Link on home page: http://www.gonzaga.edu/wharton/index.html**

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