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Wharton's Borrowing from Crane's Maggie in The Age of Innocence

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One of the best known scenes in Edith Wharton's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—namely, Newland Archer's rendezvous with Ellen Olenska in the Art Museum in Central Park—is borrowed from an episode in Stephen Crane's 1893/1896 novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Both these works of fiction challenge prevailing standards of sexual morality, exposing the hypocrisy of late nineteenth-century demands for female purity, or "innocence." Crane's novella features a lower-class, relatively inarticulate cast of characters, while Wharton focuses on a distinctly upper-class, culturally sophisticated milieu. In

keeping with the length of her book and the fluency of her characters, Wharton extends and elaborates the scene she imitates, but setting, dialogue, and situation all remain recognizable.

That Wharton was familiar with Crane's work is virtually indisputable. Her approach to books was, in her own words, "omnivorous" (*Backward Glance* 65), and biographers have underscored the enormous range and "awesome proportions" of her reading (Lewis 18; Killoran, *Art and Allusion* ix). While the destruction by fire of a large portion of her personal library makes it impossible to reconstruct a complete record of her reading (Killoran, "Wharton's Reading" 368), her familiarity with the writings of American contemporaries such as Sinclair

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BOOK REVIEW

Edith Wharton *The Ghost-Feeler: Stories of Terror and the Supernatural*, Selected and Introduced by Peter Haining, London: Peter Owen, 2002.

A new collection of Wharton short stories is always welcome. A collection of Wharton's ghost stories is especially welcome, to introduce readers to or remind them of Wharton's genius in evoking what she calls the "thermometrical quality" that "sends a cold shiver down one's spine" (*Ghosts* xii).

Given that many readers still may not be familiar with Wharton's skill in scaring us, I wish Haining's collection, *Edith Wharton The Ghost Feeler: Stories of Terror and the Supernatural*, provided a more informative introduction to her ghost stories and a less idiosyncratic selection of them.

Described on the book cover as an "anthologist of supernatural and fantasy fiction," Peter Haining first published this collection in hard cover in 1996. Despite his reference, in his introduction, to Wharton as "a woman who is today regarded by several authorities on ghost fiction as one of the foremost writers of supernatural stories of her time," one gets the sense, in reading the introduction, that Mr. Haining has happened on Edith Wharton's ghost fiction for the first time and has little or no sense of the scholarship available about her work. For commentary on Wharton's fiction Haining turns to one piece of scholarship, Eleanor Dwight's *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life*, published in 1994 (which he refers to as a "recent study"). At other times he refers to comments by "the American critic George D. Meadows"; novelist Anita Brookner; Jack Sullivan, in *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* ("published in 1986"); and Ellery Queen, who republished "A Bottle of Perrier" in his magazine in 1948. Because Haining provides no notes, we don't know the source of the comments by George D. Meadows or Anita Brookner or the name of Ellery Queen's magazine. Haining also quotes from Wharton's *A Backward Glance*, "Life and I," and her "Preface" to *Ghosts*, but he doesn't refer to these sources.

Haining's choice of stories to represent Wharton's supernatural fiction includes: "The Duchess at Prayer" (1901), "The Fullness of Life" (1893), "A Journey" (1899), "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1904), "Afterwards" [sic] (1910), "The Triumph of Night" (1914), "Bewitched" (1926), "A Bottle of Perrier" (1930) and "The Looking Glass" (1935). Haining leaves out 6 of the 11 stories Wharton included in *Ghosts*, published in 1937: "All Souls," "The Eyes," "Kerfol," "Miss Mary Pask," "Mr. Jones," and "Pomegranate Seed." The inclusion of "A Journey" and, especially, "The Fullness of Life" in this collection of *Stories of Terror and the Supernatural* seems odd, given the stories from *Ghosts* that Haining could have chosen instead. "The Journey" describes the ordeal of a young woman whose ill husband dies while on a train journey home to New York; fearful that she and her

husband's body will be put off at the next station, she tells no one of his death. Becoming increasingly delusional with fear about her secret, she begins to see her husband's dead face before her and ends the journey and the story in a dead faint. The woman's experience in "The Journey" is harrowing, but I doubt that most readers would call the story supernatural. Likewise, "The Fullness of Life," rejected by Wharton for inclusion in *Crucial Instances* because of its raw emotion, its "one long shriek," as she describes it in a letter to Edward Burlingame, is a curious choice for Haining's collection (Lewis and Lewis 36). Although the story is told by a dead woman conversing with "the Spirit of Life," its focus on the woman's unfulfilling marriage to a man with "creaking boots" makes it out of place in a collection of ghost stories.

Haining's book exemplifies Barbara White's warning, in her *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction*, that "The collecting of Wharton ghost stories would seem to be a perilous enterprise," since so many of her stories are imbued with a "death-in-life atmosphere and unexplained mysteries" (106). White encourages scholars to broaden the definition of Wharton's ghost stories beyond those stories included in *Ghosts*. If Haining's introduction were more informative his collection might further this broadening, but, alas, Haining provides no explanation for his choices and no new insights about Wharton's ghostly fiction.

Both the experienced reader of Wharton and those new to her work would be better off buying *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, published in paperback by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1985 and reissued in 1997. The collection not only includes all the stories Wharton published in *Ghosts* (except for exchanging "The Looking Glass" for "A Bottle of Perrier"), but also includes Wharton's "Preface" to *Ghosts* and a selection from "Life and I," called here "An Autobiographical Postscript," in which Wharton describes her illness from typhoid fever that marks the beginning of her "state of chronic fear." The Scribner collection is not only more inclusive, it's less expensive as well, and you can enjoy the illustrations of Laszlo Kubinyi.

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BOOK REVIEW

Killoran, Helen. *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*. Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, Suffolk: Camden House, 2001. 184pp. Notes, bibliographies, and index. ISBN 1-57113-101-9. Cloth

The very idea of wading into the ocean of over one hundred years of Wharton criticism would strand many a scholar at the shoreline, gazing out over the nearly one thousand books and articles that have appeared in the MLA Bibliography since 1963 alone. Thus Helen Killoran's exceptionally helpful history of Wharton's critical reception is a gift to both the beginner and the veteran scholar alike. Here one can take advantage of Killoran's vast research and peruse her many bibliographies, revisit debates that are succinctly and carefully presented, and visualize the map of Wharton's critical reception in its entirety. For these reasons alone, this is a book worth owning.

Killoran's project is specific: her book is part of a series, *Literary Criticism in Perspective*, edited by James Hardin, that seeks to "illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself" and to categorize and describe the various social and economic currents that have supported diverse strands of criticism over time. In Killoran's case, this larger goal is incorporated into a reader-friendly, jargon-free history of both Wharton's critics and their schools of thought. As the book is aimed, in Killoran's words, at "the graduate student studying Wharton[...and] for the established critic wishing to add Edith Wharton to another repertoire," it necessarily covers ground already familiar to the Wharton scholar and may be considered simplistic in its presentation of feminist, postmodern, or Marxist thought (137). However, it is not the book's aim to provide a history of literary criticism as a whole; it is to provide an accessible critical context for the massive existing work on six important Wharton texts.

In her preview chapter, designed as the story of Wharton's critical history from 1898 to the present, Killoran synthesizes a daunting amount of material into a compelling and coherent narrative that describes Wharton's journey from lady scribbler to Jamesian apprentice to forgotten literary relic to a writer who "may be the greatest American author of the early twentieth century - the greatest author, not the greatest female author" (xi). Killoran's summaries are useful reminders of how, for example, early Wharton critics focused heavily on such anachronisms as whether or not the novels and short stories had a useful or uplifting moral. And it is still exciting, after nearly thirty years, to revisit the 1968 release of Wharton's papers and the subsequent explosion of invaluable Wharton criticism that emerged from the nexus of R.W.B. Lewis's 1975 *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's 1977 *A Feast of Words: The Triumph*

of *Edith Wharton*, and the burgeoning women's movement of the 1970s. Although she is clear about the important relationship between feminist criticism and Wharton's reappearance on the literary landscape after decades of neglect between 1937 and 1975, Killoran is careful to include moderate voices such as Julie Olin-Ammentorp and Elsa Nettels on Wharton's relationship to feminism and to gender and language itself.

After this overview — which is supplemented, as all chapters are, by an excellent and thorough bibliography — Killoran devotes a chapter each to the novels and short stories that have received the majority of critical attention over the years: *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence*, and the ghost stories. Each chapter is similarly organized, beginning with a summary of the novel's critical history and then touching on major issues of critical debate such as genre; literary influences; language and theory; gender, race and class; allusion; mythological and psychological approaches; and biographical relevance. Each section, each paragraph, is heavy with quotes and Killoran is usually deft in balancing her own translations of arguments with critical evidence. Many concerns reappear in Wharton's critical history and Killoran is particularly effective in addressing two major preoccupations: Wharton's professional "debt" to Henry James, and her "selling out" to mass market popularity in the 1920s.

Killoran states directly that "Wharton became a victim of repetition and association" with James and that he was "her dear friend, but in no way her teacher"; she then devotes a section of several chapters to the evolution, and eventual abandonment, of this tenacious pairing (1). It is exasperating to read quotes from Edward O'Brien (1923) to John Crowe Ransom (1936) to Michael Millgate (1964) that insist that without Henry James, there would have been no Edith Wharton. However, Killoran skillfully puts the matter to bed with the help of Adeline Tinter (1999), who suggests that James and Wharton were consciously borrowing from and quoting each other and thus "playing jokes" on the critics whose wrongheaded opinions they could not shake (130). In discussing Wharton's "neglected fiction," much of it from the 1920s, Killoran rejects the long-held notion that "since [this work] was best-selling fiction, it could not have much literary value" by pointing out that many of Wharton's canonized novels, including *The House of Mirth*, were bestsellers (131). She also suggests that the "drugstore novel" label assigned much of Wharton's later work does not fit with her "professional pride" and that abandoning this prejudice would open many new avenues for further interest in "novels like *The Children and Twilight Sleep*" (133).

True to its goals, *The Critical Reception of Edith*

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Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Upton Sinclair, and F. Scott Fitzgerald is well documented (Lewis 148, 443, 460, 504). It is impossible to imagine her having overlooked the radically experimental, notorious *Maggie*—a book brought out in 1896 by D. Appleton and Company, who were for many years Wharton's own publishers (Lewis 3). *Maggie* was noticed favorably, moreover, by Hamlin Garland (in 1893) and by William Dean Howells (in 1896), giants in the landscape of American letters who reviewed Wharton's own fiction and with whom she established increasingly friendly relations over the years (see, for instance, Lewis 152, 220, 466 or *Backward Glance* 146-47). Thus, even if Wharton did not read the Appleton edition of *Maggie* when it first appeared, she certainly must be supposed to have done so by 1919, when she began writing *The Age of Innocence*.

The history of her family's involvement with the Metropolitan Museum's inauguration and development, which laid the groundwork for Wharton's own lifelong affiliation with it, suggests that Crane's choice of this setting in *Maggie* would without fail have caught her attention.¹ Recognizing Wharton's museum scene as a conscious allusion to Crane's helps, moreover, to explain a discrepancy in her description of the museum's location, i.e., "in the Park" (308). According to the timetable established in *The Age of Innocence*, her characters rendezvous there in the winter of 1875, or 1876 at the latest.² At that point the museum was not located "in the Park," as Archer asserts (308), but in the Douglas Mansion on West 14th Street (Tomkins 44). It moved to Central Park considerably later, in 1880 (Tomkins 15). Given Wharton's on-going familiarity with the place, she is unlikely to have jumbled these facts, even in retrospect. A wish to underscore the correspondence between Crane's scene and her own may have motivated her to place the museum at the location named in his novella.

Both writers bring a pair of characters to the museum to illumine the progression of a courtship: Pete's of *Maggie* Johnson, and Archer's of Ellen Olenska. In each instance, visiting the museum is proposed by the male partner in the couple, who selects the site without regard for any cultural enrichment it might offer. Pete (a bartender) escorts *Maggie* (a worker in a collar and cuff business) to the museum as part of a series of dates designed to win the girl's confidence and lure her into physical intimacy. Having requested and failed to receive "a kiss for takin' yeh teh deh show" on their first night out, he proceeds to invest time and money sufficient to complete his seduction, "ra[ck]ing his brains" to think of different destinations for their outings (24, 26). He finds the process tedious: the series of dates represents what "he has to go through" to reach his goal,

which is frankly exploitative (27). The expeditions hold no intrinsic interest for him, and he expresses particular boredom at the Museum of Art. While *Maggie* is entranced by the exhibits, exclaiming "dis is outa sight," Pete occupies himself with baiting the custodian and "moralizing" irreverently over the mummy cases (26, 27).

More affluent by far than Crane's slum-dwellers, Wharton's protagonists spend an afternoon in this same location. Wharton highlights the vast socioeconomic gulf between her characters and Crane's by recording Archer's reaction to "the delicious details" of Ellen's appearance, noting her rich fur coat and matching hat, "cleverly" decorated with a "heron's wing" (309). Like Crane's Pete, Archer arranges to meet Ellen in the museum for reasons extrinsic to the attractions of the place, i.e., not because he wishes to view the exhibits but because he needs a rendezvous site safe from the observation of family and friends (308). He is not, of course, a young man seeking to seduce and exploit a naive girl, but a married man pursuing an extramarital love affair with a peer, a woman who is herself mature and married. As the museum scene begins, the as yet unconsummated relationship appears to be approaching a climax: Archer has been planning seriously to desert his wife and start a new life with Ellen in some faraway place. Having learned that Ellen has agreed to move to New York to care for her ailing grandmother, however, he speculates that this decision to take up residence in his city means she is tacitly agreeing to become his mistress, perhaps to prevent exactly the kind of "decisive step" he has been contemplating: "she might have felt that, after all, it was better to accept the compromise usual in such cases, and follow the line of least resistance" (308). Going to their meeting, he finds himself besieged by conflicting feelings. If he is relieved not to have to undertake recklessly hurtful action, he is also disappointed because "the game of precautions and prevarications" involved in an on-going adulterous intrigue seems unworthy of his feelings for Ellen (305). He arrives at the museum uncertain whether he wants to press her for clandestine sexual favors in New York or urge her to break entirely from their present lives and run off with him. In either case, however, he is determined to move their relationship away from the Platonic high-mindedness Ellen has up to this point enforced and win her agreement to sexual intimacy.

Stripped of the many differences emanating from contrasts in social class, the situations created by Wharton and Crane appear remarkably similar. In each case, a man is utilizing a visit to the museum to pursue an admittedly sexual agenda that is, as he well knows, unacceptable to the woman involved. (As befits her age and background, Ellen displays awareness of

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Archer's objectives almost before he articulates them, while the inexperienced Maggie remains oblivious to Pete's.) Building upon this commonality in situation, Wharton goes on to create a significant echo in dialogue. In each scene, one character remarks on an exhibit of artefacts, raising questions about the purpose of the archaic objects under scrutiny. "What deh hell [...] Look at all dese little jugs!" Crane's Pete exclaims (27). "Hundred jugs in a row! Ten rows in a case an' 'bout a f'ousand cases! What deh blazes use is dem?" (27) Ellen Olenska's comment on this collection of "little things" is more extensive and more profound by far than Pete's, but at the heart of her observations lie similar musings. "It seems cruel," she sadly reflects, "that after a while nothing matters [...] any more than these little things that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: "Use unknown" (309-10).

While Pete's incredulously dismissive exclamation ("What deh blazes use is dem?") demonstrates his educational and personal limitations, particularly his meagre capacity for appreciating anything beyond his own immediate sphere of concern, Ellen's shows her ability to analyze her own predicament in the context of larger and more impersonal issues. She transforms Pete's scorn into a lament for the transiency of human culture. Our inability to discover the "use" of these relics of a "forgotten people" is tragic; indeed, our bafflement drains the past of much of its power to signify. In the context of her frustrated love for Newland Archer, Ellen's recognition pinpoints an awful paradox about culture and its collective power over the individual. Every culture exacts obedience to its own customs and strictures; individuals must conform to these or suffer heavy consequences. Yet culture is specific to time and place, and therefore susceptible to change and dissolution. Because no collective set of usages endures forever, its complex prescriptions are as evanescent as they are potent. The rules preventing Archer and Ellen from consummating their love "matter" enormously now, but may well cease to be "necessary and important" to future generations (309-10). As Tuttleton puts it, "the scruples of conscience which marked the 1870's are as meaningless to the generation of the 1920's as the archeological antiquities Archer stares at" (70). Thus Wharton's character provides a profoundly provocative answer to the question posed in rudimentary form by Crane's. The collection of artefacts does indeed serve a "cruel" purpose, for it exposes the ultimate meaninglessness of the very social norms now shaping and limiting the characters' destinies.

Just as Ellen's comments are richer and more extensive than Pete's, so Wharton's description of the site

itself is much more detailed. Crane sketches the museum in a few quick phrases: "vaulted rooms," "the treasures," "the mummies" (27-27). Wharton lingers over the scene, naming and describing particulars. Her characters move through the museum knowledgeably, "avoiding the popular 'Wolfe collection'" and seeking instead the room dedicated to the "Cesnola antiquities" for the greater privacy it promises (309). There they examine exhibits housed in "glass cabinets mounted in ebonized wood" (309). The collection itself is described with a specificity appropriate to this pair of highly educated characters: "its glass shelves were crowded with small broken objects--hardly recognizable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles--made of glass, of clay, of discolored bronze and other time-blurred substances" (309). In Wharton's novel the "little jugs" that briefly arrest Pete's attention assume much more precise outlines and textures. Elaborating on possibilities latent in Crane's characters' responses to a collection of artefacts, Wharton makes use of these preserved "fragments" of a bygone civilization to underline the conflict between individual and community which lies at the thematic heart of her novel (309). Readers need not, of course, recognize the source of Wharton's inspiration for the scene in order to appreciate or make sense of it. Those who do recognize her source, however, are invited to make more comprehensive comparisons between the two works. The allusion subtly allies Wharton's work with Crane's, reinforcing the harshness of her social criticism.

Both authors present their female characters as victims of a gender-biased system of societal expectations. Maggie and Ellen are victims of a double standard, condemned for behavior far less culpable than that of the men in their respective social circles. Even as Maggie is reviled by family and neighbors for yielding to Pete's seduction, her brother Jimmie is shown by Crane to be treating other girls exactly as Pete treats Maggie. Already in Chapter Four, well before Pete begins his pursuit of Maggie, readers learn that "two women each in different parts of the city, and entirely unknown to each other, caused him [Jimmie] considerable annoyance by breaking forth, simultaneously, at fateful intervals, into wailings about marriage and support and infants" (16). Later in the narrative, just before Pete tells Maggie "I'm done," "go teh hell," Jimmie rejects the importunities of a girl friend using exactly the same words: "'Yehs makes me tired,'" "go teh hell" (50, 47). Neither Jimmie, nor Pete, nor any the countless other men whose behavior theirs appears to represent, suffers social penalties for this pattern of serial seduction and desertion. Yet Maggie and a similarly "ruined" neighbor girl are considered to have gone "'teh deh bad,'" "'teh deh devil"; they lose their reputations and are driven literally from their homes to

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"deh streets" (32). Their behavior is interpreted as the result of inherent and irremediable evil. "Dat Johnson girl ain't straight," neighbors comment; "anybody what had eyes could see dat dere was somethin wrong wid dat girl" (33).

Wharton likewise illustrates troubling inconsistency between standards for male and female behavior. A number of men in the upper-class New York world of her novel are engaged in extramarital affairs. Julius Beaufort supports a long-term mistress, engaging in more casual adulteries with numerous other women as well. Lawrence Lefferts moves from one short-lived affair to the next, attempting to hide each new liaison from his wife by expressing renewed strictness in his moral judgments of others. "Whenever poor Gertrude Lefferts begins to suspect anything, and he's afraid of trouble, he gets up a fuss of this kind, to show how awfully moral he is" (56). The day of the farewell party for Ellen Olenska (the event at which she is effectively drummed out of New York society), Lefferts spends much of the evening praising "the sentiments that adorn Christian manhood and exalt the sanctity of the home," but later he asks Archer to cover an illicit rendezvous for him by "letting it be understood" that he will be at his club the following evening (337, 341). Even Wharton's protagonist, Newland Archer, has, prior to his own marriage, conducted a two-year affair with another man's wife. Although such behavior is not admired, it is tolerated; these men are received and entertained everywhere. Archer "knew," for example, that "his secret love-affair with poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth had not been too secret to invest him with a becoming air of adventure" (96).

At the same time, however, the mere rumor that Ellen Olenska might have had a love affair with the young man who helped her escape from her scandalously womanizing husband makes her dangerous and suspect. Hence Lawrence Lefferts succeeds in drawing most of the prominent families in town into a well organized boycott of the party at which Ellen is to be welcomed back into New York society. Later, when canny observers notice the growing attraction between Ellen and Archer, it is she, rather than Archer, who is expelled from New York. Ostensibly the guest of honor at elegant and apparently "affectionate" farewell party, she is "a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe," although she has not, in fact, consummated the affair with Archer of which she implicitly stands accused (335, 334). Evoking primitive and brutal imagery, Wharton describes the party-goers as "an armed camp" ready to take violent action to guard the community from the threat Ellen represents (335).

Her expulsion is of course more privileged and more comfortable than Maggie's. Turned out of her

home by mother and brother, Crane's protagonist has no place to go except to *deh street*. At bottom, however, the fates of the two outcasts are similar: the upper-class woman's exile from home is cushioned by wealth but is no less final, and it is based upon similar judgments concerning her unfitness to associate with decent people. Passers-by cringe literally from Maggie, avoiding what they perceive as her taint (51). The cringing from Ellen is more subtle, as when Mrs. Welland refuses to listen to stories of her niece's sufferings during her marriage to a profligate husband: "I don't know any of the details; I only ask not to, as I told poor Ellen when she tried to talk to me about it" (146). Like Maggie's mother sobbing over her dead daughter's baby shoes and wallowing in belated, self-indulgent "forgiveness" (58), Ellen's relatives are happy to suppress their suspicions and criticisms once the object of them has been permanently removed from their midst.

In both cases, the role of environmental conditions and social pressures is emphasized. Raised by an alcoholic mother who is by turns abusive and neglectful, Maggie anticipates a future consisting of tedious, low-paying employment, poverty and filth. In such a context, Pete's appeal is irresistible; she has neither the experience nor the support to penetrate his deceptive self-presentation. As Bergon observes, "Maggie is surely a victim of her environment," including its "human dimension," which encompasses "her own misconceptions about culture and refinement" as well as "the phony morality of those around her" (70). The far more sophisticated Ellen also is maneuvered by self-protective and hypocritical relatives into an untenable position. After the family has successfully prevented her from seeking to divorce her monstrous husband, one aunt wonders aloud what course Ellen's future life is likely to take. Archer is tempted to reply: "what we've all contrived to make it [...]. If you'd all of you rather she should be Beaufort's mistress than some decent fellow's wife you've certainly gone the right way about it" (145). Just as the prospect of ostracism in their poverty-stricken neighborhood prevents Maggie's family from taking her in after Pete abandons her, Ellen's far more prosperous relatives fear the stigma of "a scandalous divorce-suit" (100).

In an ironic twist on Crane's plot, in which an exploitative male seduces and discards a naive girl, it is Ellen who in the course of the museum scene explicitly offers herself to Archer. Not wanting to engage in long-term adultery, and unable to persuade Archer to agree to a policy of permanent renunciation, she proposes a strange compromise: she is willing to consummate their affair if he agrees that they will then part forever. Whether or not they would have been able to keep to this agreement is not discovered; Archer, certainly, realizes that physical intimacy would make it harder, rather than easier, for them to undertake a permanent

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separation. In any case, it is undeniably intriguing to observe a woman offering to a man a time-limited, non-binding sexual encounter. This striking instance of role reversal, which emphasizes Ellen's sexual maturity as well as her ability to take the initiative, distinguishes her obviously from Maggie, who wanders around the museum exhibits in apparent ignorance of Pete's barely contained ardency. Wharton's purpose in creating this pointed contrast is clear: the increased autonomy Ellen enjoys in consequence of her wealth, education, and experience fails finally to free her from paying social penalties levied against deviant female behavior.

In both narratives, a male character serves as the locus of awareness in the author's confrontation with societal norms. On the verge of recognizing the social injustice victimizing his sister, Jimmie Johnson functions as an embryonic Newland Archer. In Jimmie's consciousness only--never in Maggie's--there is dawning acknowledgement of the ethical inconsistencies permeating his social environment. His anger at his sister's having been "ruined" by Pete, a friend he himself first brought to the house, triggers momentary introspection: "It occurred to him to vaguely wonder, for an instant, if some of the women of his acquaintance had brothers" (32). Perhaps, he starts to consider, all girls have families, reputations, value, and thus deserve to be treated honorably. Perhaps, in consequence, it is ethically inconsistent to tempt any woman into a situation one would find unacceptable for one's own sister. Predictably, Jimmie shies away from such conclusions. Inevitably, though, his nascent awareness reminds readers of Newland Archer's far more complexly developed analysis of the concept of "innocence" and of the burdensome expectations this ideal places upon the female sex.

Wharton surely must have derived enjoyment from the covert connection she forged between her story and Crane's by incorporating a scene from Maggie in her novel--especially since the world of understatement and indirection inhabited by her characters seems, on the surface, very distant from the violence and crudeness so explicitly rendered in the history of Maggie Johnson. The reading public scarcely would have been inclined to associate Crane's book, excoriated by critics for its unsavory excesses, with the atmosphere of refined gentility permeating Wharton's novel.³ Certainly those awarding the Pulitzer Prize for 1920 overlooked the rebellious edge to Wharton's social comment (in particular, her uncompromising scrutiny of gender issues) when they rejected the more blatantly irreverent *Main Street* for the prize in favor of *The Age of Innocence*. Borrowing an episode from *Maggie*, Wharton provides indirect yet unmistakable evidence that she intended her own portrait of late nineteenth-

century urban life to be as radical as Crane's. She is completing, at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, his exposé. Together, their works illustrate the vicious dishonesty of societal demands to which women of the time, rich and poor alike, were subjected.

Notes

¹ Wharton's family supported the museum from its inception. She refers, for instance, to her "uncle Fred Rhinelander's ambitious dream of a Museum of Art in the Central Park" ("A Little Girl's New York" 282). Her uncle was elected to the board of museum trustees not long after its incorporation in 1870, and he served as president of that board from 1902 to 1904 (Tomkins 91). Wharton was in addition personally acquainted with Edward Robinson, who assumed directorship of the Metropolitan in 1910 (*Backward Glance* 156-58; Lewis 147; Tomkins 103).

² Ellen Olenska arrives in New York in January some time in "the early seventies," as the opening line of the novel announces (3). A reference to *Middlemarch* (1871-72) as one of the new books from London that Archer receives this same winter makes still more precise dating possible (139). Unless the better part of year passes between publication of Eliot's novel and Archer's receipt of it, Ellen's return to New York occurs early in 1873. Archer specifically notes a lapse of two years between Ellen's initial appearance at the New York opera house and his rendezvous with her at the Museum of Art (320), which therefore takes place in 1875 or, possibly, in 1876.

³ See, for example, contemporary reviews published in the *New York Tribune*, in *The Illustrated American*, and in *The Edinburgh Review* (rpt. in Gullason 149-50, 152-53, 160).

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Edith Wharton's *Lily Bart* and the Subject of Agency

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Late nineteenth- early twentieth-century views of the self were significantly influenced by psychoanalytic theories of the human subject as realist writers made full use of the explanation of subjectivity psychology offered in order to explore the forces that divide people from themselves and from each other. As Edwin Cady states, "Howells noticed in 1903, when he was writing a novel Freudian in everything but specifically Viennese terminology, that all the realists had been turning to psychology" (13). Depictions of the gendered and socialized subject during this literary period often rest upon an opposition between conscious "surfaces" and unconscious "depths," between ordinary experience and a hidden realm of mental life of which we are generally unaware.¹ Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) has been read primarily as a critique of early modern society and culture rather than as a work of psychological realism. Critics have only recently begun to uncover ways in which the novel reflects the realist period's interest in psychology's theoretical model of the self. The divided self is explored in *The House of Mirth* through the character of Lily Bart, whose efforts to fix and control her identity fail as her resolute purpose and grim determination to become the self she pursues are just as resolutely undermined by her insistent

dissatisfaction with and lack of belief in that self². It is this inveterate division that gives Lily Bart's character a complexity that makes the novel more than a critique of American materialism

The House of Mirth shows the individual as identified within a value system that is created by the persons that live within and sustain it, a system divided by clear veneers and hidden complexities. Critics have long established the link between a material culture and the gendered subject—Lily Bart claims an identity only insofar as she becomes an object of specular fascination and desire as she plays a role determined in the service of a material culture. But it is also important to notice that Lily herself participates in this system by way of her own, sometimes hidden desires.³ Her active participation in the culture within which she is exploited suggests that her role is an active and complicit one. Her bold endeavors to be the person she wants to be are underwritten by her need to bring personal fantasy and collective fantasy into alignment. However, both the personal and the collective forces are ultimately tied in the novel to inherent divisions in Lily's own consciousness—the way she herself is torn between a desire constructed in part by the collective and in part by something inherent to Lily's own private sensibility. In this sense, then, the novel's vision is not so much a political statement as it is a philosophical one. *The House of Mirth's* view of what it means to be human, while tied in important ways to gender, is ultimately about the irrevocably divided human condition as it was understood within the prevailing worldview of turn-of-the-century thinkers.

J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis write, "In Freud's writings the concept of identification comes to have the central importance which makes it, not simply one psychical mechanism among others, but the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted" (206). Freud defines identification as a defense set up in response to a division within mental life. Identification, as Freud presents it in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, is an imaginary process whereby one internalizes the image of the other as "self," and denies its "otherness" (vol. 18, 105). This includes identifying with one's own outward appearance (I am the reflection I see in the mirror), as well as with the outward appearance of others (I am a coherent self just like the others I see). Although the primary role of identification is to offer the self a coherent identity via a bodily image, its continuing role in individual life is tied to socialization and conformity—what Lacan has called submitting to the Law of the Father—according to an ego ideal. According to Freud, social connections are based on identifications with other people on the basis of having the same ego ideal (*The Ego and the Id* 33).

In Wharton's novel individuals look for self-

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definition through a series of identifications tied to an ego-ideal. The novel's heroine Lily Bart looks to a fixed self-image and an allegiance to an established social class to forge a coherent sense of self, yet these identifications are often placed in conflict. Her primary identification created by way of a mirror image is a complex and unstable formation. *The House of Mirth* uses a series of mirror scenes to manifest the tenuous and fragile power of the identification of self with self-image. Lily continually negotiates with materiality in her struggle to acquire a stable autonomous self. The beauty she sees reflected in her mirror at times provides her with a satisfying sense of permanence because "her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence" (65). Yet at other moments, her reflection is a reminder of her dependence upon the gaze of the "other" and capable of "interpreting" her physical appearance within a system of signification Lily is unable to control:

She rose, and walking across the floor stood gazing at herself for a long time in the brightly-lit mirror above the mantelpiece [...] she looked old; and when a girl looks old to herself, how does she look to other people? (177)

The hollow, pale, and lined face Lily sometimes meets in the mirror undercuts the image of female power around which she coalesces under the public gaze. When beauty and desirability are alienated in her mirrored reflection by the signs of aging and death, she is threatened by feelings of fragmentation and disintegration. Wharton continues the link between the construction of self through identification with an ego ideal when Lily's death is represented by "the blank surface of the toilet-mirror" (303) in her room in the boarding-house, suggesting the link between the self and identification with an other.

Lily's self-reflection is also mirrored for her in the eyes of others. She frequently struggles to maintain a coherent sense of self by incorporating this reflected image into her sense of self-identity, yet self-identity and reflected identity are often at odds. Some of her least anxious moments are those when the identity she attempts to project and the "interpretation" of that identity reflected in the eye of others are the same. These moments give her the sense of a unified, stable self because the self and the ideal ego seamlessly correspond, such as when "Mrs. Bry's admiration was a mirror in which Lily's self-complacency recovered its lost outline" (120), or when "the insistency of Trenor's gaze merged itself in the general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the centre" (123).

In Lily Bart's search for a coherent self she explores a range of imagos through identification with

others--what Freud defines as the mechanism of seeing others as "models" for molding one's own ego. Through identification with others, Freud claims, one recognizes "the possibility or desire of putting oneself in the same situation" as another (*Group Psychology* 49). The process of identification with others is always an ambivalent one in Wharton's text; the *difference* between self and other insistently intrudes as Lily's identification with others is undermined in various ways. We see this when Lily attempts to find a coherent self by identifying with the women she comes in contact with, a process that, for Lily, is always attenuated by signifiers of entrapment and blocked desire associated with her view of them. Her identification with Gerty, for example, becomes threatening once Lily's change of circumstance makes her too much like Gerty. She realizes that "the restrictions of Gerty's life, which had once had the charm of contrast, now reminded her too painfully of the limits to which her own existence was shrinking" (248). Although Gerty's poverty and plain looks are the most apparent anathemas to Lily's ideal self, Lily also refuses to see her own likeness in the women whose conventional identities are marked by signifiers more socially desirable. The Misses Silverton appear to Lily as "two colourless shrinking victims" (249), Mrs. Peniston appears "too passive" (56), and Miss Van Osburgh's face reminds Lily of "an empty plate held up to be filled" (64). Mrs. Hatch appears to be "floating in the void" and, though she has beautiful eyes, they seem to express only the desire "to be taught how to be 'lovely'" (259). The "band of liberated work-women" at Miss Hanes's appear only "unpolished and promiscuous" to Lily (268). Her sense of being both like (a woman), and unlike the women she meets destabilizes her sense of self, and keeps her identity formation in flux.

Rather than simply a victim of the consumer society of which she is a part, Lily's agency can be seen at those time when she fashions potential idealized self-projections. At these moments she becomes an object for her own subjective viewing. Lily frequently casts herself in various dramatic roles or types through day-dreams or in response to a particular gaze. On the terrace at the Bry's with Selden, for example, Lily acts the role of the romantic heroine. At Gerty's, after avoiding Gus Trenor's sexual advances, Lily casts herself as the fallen woman: "But I am bad--a bad girl" (165). She often fantasizes scenes of herself as the wealthy social adept, when "[s]he would be able to arrange her life as she pleased [...]. She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset" (65), or as a married woman, where her "preference would [be] an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or, for second choice, an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and an hereditary office in the Vatican" (53). She casts

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herself in the role of philanthropist when she "think[s] 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" (53), and as an intellectual "vaguely touched by the names and scenes amid which she moved [...] with a thrill of the nerves that confirmed her belief in her intellectual superiority" (190), and even as an aesthetic object: "The gratification of being welcomed in high company, and of making her own ascendancy felt there, so that she found herself figuring once more as the 'beautiful Miss Bart'" (190). In all of these roles, we see Lily's attempts to affirm the self through imagined identities built within an ideological and cultural context that allows them to take a coherent shape.

One part of this text's depiction of the self borrows on the traditional role of the double, and the novel establishes a number of doubles for Lily. Concerning the double in literature, Doris Eder writes, "Just as the twentieth century has split the atom, it has fragmented the individual[...]. Contemporary interest in the uncertainty, fragility, and complexity of the self, in questions of identity, is nowhere better exemplified than in literature of the double" (604). Indeed, the self that Lily sees reflected in mirrors constitutes a form of doubling. Otto Rank's 1914 study on the double argues that one of its functions is to defend one's self against the destruction of the ego, as the double may work as a denial of death. However, a double can also reverse itself, he tells us, and become a reminder or foreshadowing of death, as the difference between self and other threatens to invade consciousness. Scenes of Lily looking in a mirror reflect both ends of the spectrum, from her appearance as whole or ideal and a defensive fortification against dissolution of self, to her appearance as "other" and disintegrating, the failure of that defense and the loss of a coherent sense of self.

Other instances of doubling in the novel work in the same ambivalent way. Lily's first encounter with the scrub woman Mrs. Haffen on the stairs of Selden's townhouse takes on an importance for Lily that is hard to understand without recognizing that Mrs. Haffen is a double for Lily. These two characters confront one another three times in the book, and each time the meeting carries a sense of the uncanny for Lily. The novel associates these two characters in several ways. Just like Mrs. Haffen, Lily sees herself as endlessly battling poverty; Mrs. Haffen eventually tells Lily that she is forced to extort money from Lily because Mr. Haffen's loss of a job has brought poverty upon them: "I brought 'em [Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden] to you to sell, because I ain't got no other way of raising money, and if we don't pay our rent by tomorrow night we'll be put out" (113). Their first meeting on the steps outside Selden's rooms is a very

curious moment for we get the distinct impression that Lily overreacts to the presence of the scrubwoman. As Lily goes by her, we read:

The woman, without answering, pushed her pail aside, and continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture? Half way down the next flight, she smiled to think that a charwoman's stare should so perturb her. (34)

Lily is disturbed, even though she quickly puts her marked response aside, yet why does Wharton include such a scene? Freud tells us in his essay "The Uncanny" that at a later stage of the ego's development the idea of the double receives additional meaning:

A special agency is slowly formed [in the ego] which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing the self and of exercising a censorship within the mind, and which we become aware of as our "conscience." In the pathological case of delusions of being watched, this mental agency becomes isolated, dissociated from the ego, and discernible to the physician's eye. The fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object--the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation--renders it possible to invest the old idea of a "double" with a new meaning[...] (235)

Lily's internalized sense of guilt is identified with the gaze of Mrs. Haffen. The irony is telling in that it points out (as frequently happens in this novel) that women police themselves, and in fact unconsciously perpetrate the very systems which imprison them. Freud's idea of the double eventually becomes termed the "superego," the agency that derives its functions from "the influences of parents, educators, and social environment--from an identification with some of these model figures" (*Intro Lectures* 533).⁴ Lily is constituted in part by the internalized structures of social conventions that form what Freud terms the super-ego.⁵ These structures exert a powerful influence on Lily's subjectivity, and may in fact be the means whereby agency is most severely handicapped.

Lily is clearly a self divided by guilt--a part of her self standing in opposition to another part-- at such moments when "even to her own conscience she must trump up a semblance of defence" (88). Unable to find a cohesive identity within the social scripts she has access to, she is unable to conform, and her super-ego is ultimately set in opposition to her ego. For example, in Lily's story of her past, as she tries to establish an identity through history and memory, guilt predominates. She

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identifies with both her father and her mother as ego ideals, yet these two characters are clearly set in opposition to one another. If we recall that Freud writes in *The Ego and the Id* that there can be conflicts in the ego between the various identifications it has come to adopt, we can see that this is another strategy of self-construction that divides Lily against herself. We read of her feelings of responsibility for the death of her father due to the economic ruin Lily feels she helped to bring on: "The previous year she had made a dazzling debut fringed by a heavy thunder-cloud of bills. The light of the debut still lingered on the horizon, but the cloud had thickened; and suddenly it broke" (49). Yet she also identifies with her mother's gaze, one that relies on Lily's beauty for the means of living. Lily's story about her self is one of having, appearing to have, and not having, a story of loss and guilt she clearly internalizes in her self-image and bases in part upon her identification with her mother. Her mother has taught her to understand her great potential for success or failure in terms of her physical beauty: "Only one thought consoled [Mrs. Bart], and that was the contemplation of Lily's beauty[...]. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (52). When Lily is unable or unwilling to marry for money, her mother's gaze functions much as Mrs. Haffen's does on the stairs of the Benedick, setting Lily's super-ego in opposition to her ego: "Her ambitions had shrunk gradually in the desiccating air of failure. But why had she failed? Was it her fault or that of destiny?" (47). In identifying with her mother, Lily feels that her attempts to define herself according to society's dictates have failed, and have at the same time contributed to her father's death. Hence, her identification with her parents is psychologically significant for her as it divides her against herself and makes one part of her seemingly responsible for the destruction of the other. Deep feelings of guilt are the result, and these are an important part of the psychological profile of Lily Bart.

Although the gaze of a particular person is often the catalyst for Lily's sense of guilt, the gaze is also present in the text as both wholly imaginary and an inherent part of subjective life. The narrative often shows the gaze as a disembodied force that powerfully divides the self. When Lily is nearly raped by Gus Trenor she feels shame and embarrassment, a subjective response brought on by the gaze that establishes her conduct as deviant. She has violated social convention by taking money from Trenor: "But I am bad—a bad girl—all my thoughts are bad [...] I've sunk lower than the lowest!" (166-7). Yet we know, as does Lily, that Trenor has duped her into coming to the house alone, needing trickery when a more straightforward demand for "payment" does not work. In spite of this,

self-incrimination is Lily's response. Her guilt over inadvertently meeting Trenor in compromising circumstances seems to stem from her idea that she carelessly misread the understood social script regarding her role with Trenor, and the acceptable conditions under which money may change hands between a man and a woman.

Lily also feels guilt regarding her relations with Selden, yet the reader knows that the failure of the relationship is due to his own limitations as much as to hers. Yet for Lily his gaze is powerful in dividing her against herself: "Once—twice—you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward" (287). Clearly this novel is interested in the power of the gaze of the other in the formation of the self, as the narrative depicts a space for the reader to both recognize the power of the gaze over Lily and appreciate its arbitrary authority. The further Lily moves from a socially sanctioned identity, the greater her awareness of the gaze dominates her conscious life. Her sense of transgression and guilt become strong enough to allow the super-ego to dominate, curtailing the id's release in sleep and dreams; her wakefulness is induced by her fantasies of avenging furies around her bed at night, and her sense that "everything stands by the bed and stares" (164). Her understanding of her identity takes shape in patterns of loss, and in a psychological determinism that she is unable to avoid. Her struggle with ambivalence and guilt reflects the failure of her attempts to push toward a different kind of self, one (impossibly) outside of the social determinants of the gendered self. This struggle moves the realist mode into the fantastic and uncanny realm of daydream and nightmare.

Much of the story tells of Lily's attempts to approximate an ideal self. Yet her project, the construction of self, is doomed in part by the fact that she seems to have two images in mind, and to be torn between playing two different roles which are powerfully opposed. The book's depiction of the market commodification of selfhood involves Lily in a theatricality built on the picture and the spectacle, a self in which desire is expressed through concealment and artifice designed to appear as the object of the other's desire. Yet we also see Lily experimenting with an identity directly opposed to this one, an anti-self⁶ that powerfully divides self-identity, and it functions much like a double. Lily's anti-self seeks to identify with a non-material reality that imitates the idealized internal self of romance.⁷ While this identity works to move beyond the artifice of theater, it is a self which is just as dependant in its own way on an artificiality that undermines this self's ability to cohere. The marketplace self is disparaged as empty and hollow; the romantic self is out of place and unrecognized in the modern world, and seemingly unable to exist. Lily as a commodified object is most

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purely evident in the tableau, when self and self-image seem completely united: "Lily had not an instant's doubt as to the meaning of the murmur greeting her appearance. No other tableau had been received with that precise note of approval: it had obviously been called forth by herself, and not by the picture she impersonated" (140). The alternate self coheres around Lily's sense of transcendence during moments of reflection when she resolutely rejects the trappings and values of the world she lives in for something "higher" and "freer":

There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. She could not herself have explained the sense of buoyancy which seemed to lift and swing her above the sun-suffused world at her feet. (78)

The entire effect of the novel turns on the discord between these two selves, as neither of Lily's "scripts" confer wholeness.

Lily is not able to firmly establish an identity with either the self or the anti-self. They exist in tension throughout the novel, and Lily moves from one sense of self to the other unable to erase one and thereby allow the other to cohere. Carol Sapora has noted that Wharton privileges the private self (what I am calling the anti-self), and allows the public self to play the dominant role in the story as a way to level a masked critique of society (378). It is true that Lily turns to her anti-self as she refuses the implications of her public self. She (and Gerty, who is herself isolated from the social eye which Lily courts) thinks of this self as her "real self," and looks to it as an identity that will give her some power over the fragmented and unempowered social self. It is her anti-self, for example, that walks out to meet Selden rather than go to church, thereby losing the marriage proposal of Percy Gryce. It is the anti-self that is responsible for Lily's being thirty and still single. However, Lily's anti-self is also undermined in the narrative, and can only exist very tenuously as it finds little support in the eye of others. Only in Selden's and Gerty's eye is Lily able to see this self recognized, and the narrative voice gives plenty of evidence to suggest that neither Selden nor Gerty are able to maintain the mirroring reflection for long. Lily's polar self is always associated, too, with a non-earthly or transcendent realm, suggesting its association with fantasy and the unconscious.

Selden's gaze is the vehicle Wharton often uses

to explore Lily's anti-self. The scene on the hillside at Bellomont with Selden is the first full dramatization of Lily's experiment with this identity, although the reader is given evidence of its existence in learning of Lily's broken engagements to marry. Scopophilic desire determines the reality Lily and Selden find on the hillside. It takes the form of romantic love, each seeing their own completion in the eye of the other: "he stood facing her with his eyes on hers. The soft isolation of the falling day enveloped them: they seemed lifted into a finer air. All the exquisite influences of the hour trembled in their veins, and drew them to each other as the loosened leaves were drawn to the earth" (86). Yet the moment is tenuous, and the promise carried in their view of one another is undermined by the scotoma or lack in visibility. It enters the narrative symbolically when "a black object rushed across their vision," startling Lily "from her attitude of absorption" (86) and reminding her of the imminent return of her friends and the identity and reality she has only temporarily left behind. The anti-self is also clearly linked to transcendence and the death drive in the novel. It is the anti-self that Lily tries to leave with Selden, and then finally takes with her the night of her death ("She understood now that she could not go forth and leave her old self with him [...] it must still continue to be hers" (288)). Although Lily determines that it is this self that has allowed her "save herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life" (286), she also feels it is a "poor little anguished self" that can find nowhere "to take refuge" (299). The novel subtly associates this self with an impossible, transcendent space not of this world. It is the self that prevents Lily from using Bertha's letters to re-establish her place in society and resume her commodified public self. The more Lily identifies with this identity, the farther away she moves from her identity within society, and the closer she moves towards death.

In part, Lily's two selves may be a reflection of the novel's inability to envision a material culture that could sustain the gaze that Lily's private self would necessitate.⁸ Lily's decision not to live is depicted in the text as an unconscious one, "She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely--the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation" (298). Yet Lily is clearly motivated towards death, represented in the text as "darkness," "passiveness," "the dim abysses of unconsciousness" (299). It is significant that the narrative links Lily's anti-self to the death drive. Death's victory is signaled by Lily's "sense of complete subjugation," to the power of the drug, and the reference here to a symbolic death of Lily's "real" self is underscored with the connotations of "subjugation," as well as with the narrator's words that her move toward death allows Lily to return "to her normal view of life" (300), which I take as meaning the economy of specularly which finally wins out in the novel by imposing an outward and purely

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iconic identity for Lily. The socially coherent self is ritualized in its most extreme version as Lily lies frozen in death, and it is at this point that Selden's perceptions take over the narrative gaze to realign Lily's identity within the specular economy.

Lily's death is prefigured in the field of vision. Once she loses the eye of the other, and those marks whereby she enthralled the gaze—her clothing, her sumptuous settings, etc.—she seems to lose her self, and is unable to transfer her imaginary identification to another and much different specular image. In the face of her sense of fragmentation and dissolution, Lily's sense of self struggles to cohere around the material objects with which she has identified, "to keep herself visibly identified with them, as long as the illusion could be maintained" (253). Identity and materiality are so closely entwined that, although Lily is "sick to death" of the association, "the thought of giving it all up nearly kills" her, and the possibility of its dissolution only leaves her to wonder "how on earth [she is] to keep [herself] alive" (251). Once Lily loses her social standing, her sense of self is fundamentally threatened by the absence of the returning gaze of the other in which her identity looks for confirmation. After Lily moves into the boarding house and is completely removed from all of the material associations of her old life, she struggles most to find someone's eye that can act as a mirror to show her who she is. She is no longer recognized as the self she once was. She feels isolated, and "unsphered in a void of social non-existence" in which "society [does] not turn away from her, it simply drift[s] by, preoccupied and inattentive" (247). Just before her death, while sitting in a restaurant, "her eyes [seek] the faces about her, craving a responsive glance, some sign of an intuition of her trouble" (282), a desire that remains unfulfilled.

As Lily moves closer and closer toward self-destruction and psychic disintegration, her search for coherence as a self is depicted as fundamentally dependent upon the gaze of the other. Lily's death is prefigured in her sense of the absence of the other; her sense of not being seen parallels her physical and psychological dissolution. Lacan writes that the gaze is "the subject sustaining himself in a function of desire" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 85), and we can see the increasing fragmentation of Lily's sense of self in the withdrawal of the sustaining gaze of the other from her subjective life. Wharton thereby signifies the dissolution of intersubjective desire that is the very basis of subjectivity according to both Freud and Lacan. The paralyzing and destructive gaze of the superego replaces the confirming gaze of the other in Lily's fantasies. She comes to sustain herself through a gaze

that determines her desire as a desire for punishment and death.

The way we see and are seen by each other, Wharton suggests, determines our reality, and in *The House of Mirth* she works within this assumption to show the power of society's gaze in determining the life of its members. All of us, her novel shows, are determined by our existence in a social dynamic through our relations with others. Yet subjectivity in this text is founded upon lack and desire, and upon a search for wholeness that, while it may take distinctly gendered forms, becomes the paradigmatic basis for human life.

Notes

¹ Freud's first published work, titled *The Interpretation of Dreams*, appeared in 1899 (publication date is 1900). With this text Freud begins a long career of codifying some of the systems of modern thinking, yet his ontological interests and assumptions reflect those of his time, and find accord in the work of a number of his contemporaries. Research documents that by 1900 theories of the unconscious were already being presented by psychologists such as Eduard von Hartmann. Peter Gay writes that "certainly, Freud's ideas about the unconscious were in the air in the nineteenth century and had already assumed some sophisticated guises" (366).

² While many critics discuss Lily as a commodified object rather than a subject, the novel's success is due in part to its presentation of a heroine who is both victimized by, and culpable in, the events that lead to the novel's tragic center. As Gary Totten makes clear, Lily Bart both sees and is seen, and hence retains a certain active role in constructing a self within the power dynamics of the gaze.

³ Critics continue to debate about Wharton's viewpoint when it comes to her female characters, some finding them shallow and self-destructive, and others claiming they are martyrs defeated by a masculinist dominant structure that seeks to erase them. Ever since Percy Lubbock's 1947 memoir *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, many have found in Wharton's work a hostility toward her female characters. In part because of this early assessment, as Susan Goodman points out, Wharton has for a long time now been characterized as a woman who did not really care for women (2), one who preferred to be seen as a "self-made man" (Lubbock 11). Others, however, find Wharton's work distinctly feminist and committed to women's causes. Recently, critics have argued for the importance of recognizing both sides to be equally there in tension. Ammons, for example, argues that the presence of ambiguity in Wharton's novels can be understood "as the author's self-defensive attempt to secure her status as an artist in

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a male-dominated world by separating herself from 'feminine' fiction—that is, allegedly soft, second-rate work—and from other women" ("Gender" 276). Mary Marchand writes that the ambiguity is a result of the tension Wharton herself felt as she responded to the issue of feminist debates of her day even as she maintained her "rival affiliations as an elite cultural critic and as a woman writer with high art ambitions" (370). Susan Goodman points out that, in spite of Wharton's allegiance to a cultural (male) elite, she "never wholly divorced herself from a female literary tradition" (Goodman 2). I would add that ambiguity is a powerful component of *The House of Mirth* because it engages the reader in a world as complicated as the one we occupy, rather than an untangled one in which judgment is easy.

⁴ Freud relates the critical function of the superego to the Oedipal complex. Freud states, in "The Ego and the Id," (Sec. III) that it is formed when the desire of the daughter for her father or the son for his mother is repressed in the unconscious. The superego defends against the emergence of that desire into conscious thought, and in fact the strength of the superego is in proportion to the strength of the repressed desire. It is interesting that the scrubwoman's gaze is felt upon leaving Selden's apartments, and then later in connection with his affair with Bertha, given the fact that Lily is most drawn to attract Selden's gaze, and that she associates him with memories of her father (an intellectual drawn to books, quiet, apparently the opposite in many ways of the materialist world he lives in). Lily's way of showing herself—her exhibitionism, in fact—can also be related to the oedipal complex and the desire of the girl to attract the desire of the father. Freud tells us that exhibitionism is always, at bottom, the desire for the parent whose love the child had to forego. This also helps explain Lily's nightmares of avenging Furies, and that "everything stands by the bed and stares" (164). Greek mythology tells us that the Furies represent the old social order of family vendetta, linking Lily's sense of guilt to the death of a parent. This could concern the wished-for death of her mother, or the idea that she is responsible for her father's death, which her memory suggests (her coming out party amassed the debts that finally destroyed him financially, leading to his illness and death)

⁵ The narrative form itself seems to be caught in the gaze of social convention. The uncanny return of the scrubwoman, for no apparent reason, gives this suggestion, as does the narrative's resort, in the end, to the model of the domestic romance and Lily's seeming embrace of the role of model wife and mother.

⁶ For an interesting discussion of this psychological concept see Peter du Preez, *The Politics of Identity*.

⁷ For a discussion of the presence of romanticism in Wharton's work see Hildegard Hoeller.

⁸ What Elizabeth Ammon calls Wharton's "argument with America"

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"All Souls": Edith Wharton's Homage to "The Jolly Corner"

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"Edith Wharton's ghost stories certainly do--and will--endure," so promises Helen Killoran in *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton* (121). There is little critical argument that one of the most enduring of the Pulitzer Prize winner's ghost stories is the concisely titled "All Souls'," published posthumously in 1937, the same year as Wharton's death from a stroke. This short work--the author's final published tale--has been roundly praised for its wonderfully rich description as well as for its subtle Freudian exploration of the psychological turmoil that engulfs an aging widow in rural Connecticut when she faces a terrifying encounter in an empty, echoing house during a silent and all-enveloping New England snowstorm.

Carefully paced and wonderfully understated, bereft of clanking chains, howling apparitions, and headless corpses, this subdued supernatural tale has been compared by Adeline Tintner with Sir Hugh Walpole's classic horror tale "The Silver Mask." In *Edith Wharton in Context: Essays on Intertextuality*, Tintner claims that these two superbly crafted ghost stories "share clear-cut characteristics," and she further points out that Wharton's title for her last tale is derived--in deep admiration--from *All Souls' Night*, Walpole's 1933 collection of supernatural stories (4). In "The Silver Mask," a rich, aging spinster is locked away in an attic room--for her own good, so say her handlers--where she will spend the remainder of her days in maddening solitude, while her captors, skilled thieves all, enjoy spending the woman's fortune. On the other hand, Donald Burleson sees in "All Souls'" a subtle feminine version of a dark, Hawthorne-style journey into self-knowledge, as in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" or "Young Goodman Brown" (12-16). But Annette Zilversmit believes that Wharton's final tale is clearly a throwback to one of her earlier and darker novels--*Ethan Frome*--and that the protagonist in "Souls'" is merely a feminine version of the forlorn title character, arguing that, in essence, "Wharton's last heroine becomes his [Frome's] female soul-mate, the repressed and controlled woman" (317). However, there is another dark and brooding tale to which "All Souls'" bears a remarkable resemblance and offers a number of intriguing intertextualities. In her final tale, Edith Wharton closely parallels the main theme

found in "The Jolly Corner," one of Henry James's most admired short stories: namely, that the implacable passing of time demands growth and change of those who would endure.

First published in *The English Review* in 1908, "The Jolly Corner" has been praised by Clifton Fadiman as "a fascinating and multi-leveled ghost story" (644). It was one of the last tales Henry James wrote, and, insists Fadiman, it was "surely one of the most difficult" (641). In this somber, meticulous narrative that quietly plumbs "the caverns and weirs of abnormal psychology, especially the condition of obsession," Spencer Brydon, the elegant and cultured protagonist, is a wealthy fifty-six-year-old American expatriate who, as the story opens, has just returned to his native New York City after an unbroken absence of thirty-three years (Hocks 5). During that lengthy truancy, he has lived a sophisticated and affluent lifestyle in faraway Europe and has kept only marginally abreast of the many changes that have occurred back in the bustling land of his birth.

While living on the other side of the Atlantic, Brydon has not been working and supporting himself. Rather, as the inheritor of two grand brownstones in lower Manhattan, he has lived quite handsomely while abroad by renting out his elegant old mansions at exorbitant rates. Thus, he has spent the majority of his life as a member of the European leisure class, the elite, the soft and moneyed gentry. For over three decades, Brydon has played the carefree bon vivant, has been a pressed and creased aristocrat whose only concerns were of suppers and soirees, concerts and cotillions. Obsessed with nothing more important than the latest fashion trends or the finest theater boxes, Brydon has made no actual money with his own hands, has built nothing, has created nothing, has invented nothing. His only labor has been to endorse bank drafts, deposit rental checks, and stroll the shady boulevards of European capitals. By living in a rigidly structured and therefore safe Old World environment, he has never taken risks or explored the possibilities of self. So now, in late middle age, he is foppish and fussy, grown thick around the middle, and he is sliding inexorably into a lazy, cynical, Oscar Wilde-type decadence.

Brydon's return to New York City at the turn of the century, however, changes him completely, albeit not without much pain and suffering on his part--both physical and spiritual. Complaining that everything he encounters in the teeming, bustling streets of Manhattan is "somehow a surprise," Brydon soon comes to realize that in order to fit in with the loud, dynamic, expanding, and immodest America he discovers upon his repatriation, he must change and evolve--must adapt or be swept callously aside by the cresting wave of a new century and a new way of life (James 603). In short,

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"The Jolly Corner" is about an Old World man who must carve out his place in the New World order in which he finds himself so suddenly and stunningly immersed. To Brydon's great credit, after much initial trepidation and self-doubt, he does precisely that. When he actively participates in the remodeling of one of his spacious brownstones, his European softness and Old World reticence recede as he gets his hands dirty while bounding around the construction site, issuing orders to the workmen, and facing his fears of inadequacy head-on. To his own amazement and delight, Brydon soon discovers "in a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated [...] a capacity for business and a sense for construction. [...] These virtues, so common all round him now, had been dormant in his own organism [...]" (605). In essence, he reconstructs not just his rental property, but his very psyche, his sense of personal self.

The climax of Brydon's inner struggle to adapt, to dovetail a place for himself in the unfamiliar world that greets him after his long absence, occurs in his other brownstone—the now vacant house in which Brydon was born and raised—located on "the jolly corner" of the block (James 604). On a cold and lonely November night, while exploring the dark upper floors of this memory-laden house, he encounters, face-to-face, a grotesque *doppelgänger* figure, the frightening gray apparition of what he would have become had he stayed in New York City for those lost thirty-three years and lived a completely different life—that is to say, an American life—and faced the horrors of Civil War, the hardships of Reconstruction, and the profound excesses of the infamous Gilded Age. After the chilling nighttime encounter with his intimidating spectral double (who proves to be a smirking, ruthless, and disfigured multi-millionaire robber baron), Brydon finally accepts the life that he has chosen, and, according to most interpretations of the ending, he assimilates his aggressive other self, becomes reconciled with what he might have been, and so moves on to create a comfortable niche for himself in the new New York. No longer obsessed with how he might have turned out or what he might have accomplished had he not expatriated himself as a young man, he is finally able to deal with the hovering phantom of what Millicent Bell calls "the rival reality of the un-lived life"—as personified by his ghostly double in the dark (27). In the end, Spencer Brydon changes to suit the times as "his divided self is reintegrated with" his new American persona (Hocks 80), and he finally comes to terms with "a new altered conception of himself [...]" (Tintner 199).

If "The Jolly Corner" is, as Richard Hocks declares, about one man's dark and solitary journey through the "caverns and weirs" of psychological obsession, then Edith Wharton's quietly chilling "All

Souls'" is a companion narrative about one woman's solitary nighttime sojourn through "the dark depths of the self as they are experienced by the female protagonist," Sara Clayburn, a proud and stern widow, a cultured, refined, and sophisticated doyenne of northeastern blue blood society (Fedorko 157). Sara is independently wealthy, but, as in Spencer Brydon's case, it is from inherited property. Thus, both socialites are rich only through the deaths of those near them, Brydon as the last surviving member of his family, Sara through the death of her husband. Although female and not an expatriate, Sara is very much a Jamesian-style protagonist. Like Spencer Brydon, she is in late middle age and comes from old-moneyed, Colonial New England stock. Her mansion is not a huge brownstone in Manhattan but a sprawling old estate house that commands a panoramic view of the countryside from an isolated hilltop in rural Connecticut: there, Sara's "orderly household, with its internal bells, precise schedule and large staff [...] shows vestiges of an earlier opulent age" (Wright 6). From her grand and lofty perch—secure amid massive furniture, sumptuous carpets, rich draperies, soaring ceilings, and sweeping vistas—Sara Clayburn plays the haughty chatelaine to her five servants: a chauffeur, a butler, a gardener, a personal maid, and a housemaid.

Sara's days are spent in the sundry pastimes of a leisure-class woman of her era; she writes letters, takes long walks, visits friends in her social orbit, and waits to be pampered by her loyal and obedient servants, who are treated as "inherited pieces of property whose only purpose is to service her every need" (Fedorko 159). In short, she—like the born-to-privilege Spencer Brydon a generation before her—lives a very soft and rarified Old World lifestyle. As America moves into the post-World War I era, Sara's calm and elegant world has not changed, has not altered, has not diminished. Oblivious to all that is going on in the outside world, she remains the grand dame of the ancestral manor on the mount and has not yet been impacted by the social, political, and cultural upheavals that are loose in the nation. However, Sara's comfortable situation will shortly change—in a most abrupt and horrifying way—as she faces a challenge to an elegant existence that is "seemingly protected by wealth, taste, and servants" (Tintner 142).

On the afternoon of "the last day of October," Sara, ever "an energetic walker," goes out for a bracing "three or four" mile stroll during a lull in the stabbing wind and "driving sleet" of the harsh Connecticut autumn (Wharton 278). Upon her return at dusk, she enters her own front gate and is surprised to encounter a strange woman walking a parallel course uphill towards Whitegates, the name of Sara's majestic hilltop home. Sara does not know the woman and is puzzled by her

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sudden appearance—miles away from the nearest town—as well as by her lack of common civility. When Sara asks the mysterious stranger why she is headed up the walkway to Whitegates, the woman answers curtly, "Only to see one of the girls" (278). Although deeply troubled by this taciturn and sibylline trespasser who does not know the social mores of polite Connecticut society, Sara soon forgets about the bizarre encounter when she slips on a frozen puddle, fractures her ankle, and is rendered "suddenly helpless" (279). The sharp pain causes her to put out of mind the "middle-aged, plain, and rather pale" figure she has dimly encountered in the deepening autumn twilight when it is "almost [too] dark" to see (278).

As night falls and a sudden snowstorm blankets Whitegates in a cold, muffling embrace, Sara takes to her sickbed, amid the patient ministering of Agnes, her loyal personal maid. After a house call from her old family practitioner, Sara falls asleep only to awaken a short time later, the pain in her ankle causing too much discomfort for slumber: "Sleep, once it had gone, would not return, and the long black hours moved more and more slowly" (Wharton 280). This rare bout of insomnia—combined with her "quick imperious nature" (279) and "a certain impatience" (282)—will not allow her to rest. So she arises and begins to explore, only to discover, to her shock and dismay, that the cavernous old house is deserted. Sara is totally alone in the shadowy, empty, echoing mansion. Once such a warm, familiar, and intimate place, her "well-ordered house" (284) has suddenly and inexplicably become "full of ominous corners" (286) and is as cold and quiet as "a sepulcher" (293). A powerful sense of "abandonment takes over the whole story" when, compounding her mounting fear, Sara discovers that the electricity has been shut off (Balestra 19).

In the meantime, the heavy New England snow continues to fall, "muffling the outer world in layers on layers of thick white velvet, and intensifying the silence within" the eerie, old mansion (Wharton 283). After exploring every room, hallway, corner, and niche of the house, Sara—limping and badly shaken—finally returns to the welcoming warmth of her own bedroom. The next morning, the old house remains silent and deserted, so she must spend the entire day in desolate, oppressive solitude. The next evening, her ankle still throbbing, Sara must put herself to bed without assistance, something she is not used to doing and certainly does not enjoy. When she awakens the following morning, however, everything is back to normal. The always punctual Agnes is rattling around in the kitchen preparing a hearty breakfast for her mistress, and all the other servants are bustling about and faithfully addressing their usual

household duties. Sara, of course, is utterly dumbfounded. She believes there is some grand and sinister conspiracy at the bottom of these strange events. However, when Agnes adamantly declares that she and the others were at their proper stations, were not absent at all, much less for thirty-six straight hours, and furthermore they know nothing about a strange female visitor, Sara finally gives up on trying to solve the mystery; she forces it to the back of her structured, disciplined, controlled mind and returns to her normal upper crust lifestyle. However, just like her Biblical namesake (who, after a life-altering encounter with the inexplicable, had to change her name from "Sara" to "Sarah"), this American Sara must become something else after her strange encounter with those vague and "dreadful things [...] associated with darkness" (Wharton 283).

And eventually she does. One year later—on the first anniversary of her sighting of the strange woman—the feminine *doppelgänger* once again appears from out of nowhere: "And as I got near the gate," explains Sara, "there was the woman coming in. [...] By that time it had got quite dark, as if a sudden storm was sweeping up over the sky, so that though she was so near to me I could hardly see her [...] and when I followed her she wasn't there" (Wharton 297-98). Realizing that this is the same ominous harbinger of horror once again stalking slowly and deliberately up the walkway, Sara flees Whitegates in a panic, hires a car and driver, then journeys five and a quarter hours to the cozy safety of her cousin's apartment in New York City. After the frightful night of what Annette Zilversmit describes as a "hobbled pilgrimage," Sara, like Spencer Brydon before her, changes her very existence (323). Whereas Brydon adapts to the new America by remodeling one of his brownstones while preparing to demolish the other in order to rebuild something more suitable for a changing New York City skyline, Sara eventually alters her staid existence by moving far away from her grand hilltop aerie and declaring "I shall never go back to Whitegates again" (299).

In an increasingly modern America—swelling with small "d" democrats and hordes of the expanding middle class—there is no longer a place for a haughty chatelaine on a faraway hilltop, except perhaps in moody Gothic novels set somewhere in the Old World. Even though she had sworn early on that she would never live "in a bird-cage flat in one of those new skyscrapers in Lexington Avenue," by the end of the story, Sara becomes a willing urban apartment dweller (Wharton 276): Her power and floor space thus reduced, she is now, like Spencer Brydon, much more in step with the increasingly overcrowded and impatient America in which she finds herself. Like Brydon—who gives up his grand jolly corner home to the demolitionists—Sara's

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"home is destroyed for her as a place of security" after her terrifying "contact with evil" (Tintner 141). The aging widow "is entering a new world [...] an inner world of her essential self" (Fedorko 160).

In folklore, the *doppelgänger* of a living person need not be—and in fact rarely is—a perfect double of the one who sees the ominous figure whose appearance almost always signals that some terrifying event is imminent. In *A Psychological Study of the Double in Literature*, Robert Rogers explains that "Despite occasional surface" differences, the traditional *doppelgänger* "is always, in some basic way, an opposing self" (62). Such a wraith or spirit is usually dim, diaphanous, ill-defined, vaporous, in some ways hauntingly familiar, yet not quite identifiable, as in Poe's "William Wilson" or Conrad's "The Secret Sharer." When Spencer Brydon—after many nights of exploring by candlelight the upper floors of his doomed old home—is finally confronted by his shadowy, ghostly "other," the dimly seen being looks strangely like him, but is somehow foreign, different, imprecise. The spectral Brydon, for example, wears a full pince-nez, whereas the flesh-and-blood Brydon sports only a stylish monocle. Also, the ghostly Brydon has lost two fingers on one hand, symbolizing the price paid for his ruthless Gilded Age profiteering. In contrast, the real Brydon still possesses all of his digits. The *doppelgänger* figure has a ravaged and repellent countenance, so much so that as the shadow man moves menacingly toward him, Brydon declares that the face of his *doppelgänger* is "the face of a stranger [...] evil, odious, blatant, vulgar [...]" (James 635).

Similarly, on both occasions when Sara Clayburn encounters the singular woman stalking up the driveway to Whitegates, Sara sees her only dimly in the gloaming—never clearly enough to make a concrete identification. Sara vaguely describes the figure as "middle-aged, plain and rather pale," wrapped in heavy layers of cold-weather clothing (Wharton 278). By the end of the story, Sara herself is depicted in tellingly similar terms: she is "wrapped in a fur cloak, with a hat drawn down over her forehead, and a face so pale and haggard that [...] something dreadful must have happened to her" (296). Just as in Brydon's case, a perfectly matching "other" is not necessary for the encounter to change the seer's life forever. Much like the pale rider of Revelation ("and Hell followed with him"), this strange female visitor trails something horrific and supernatural at her back. In essence, she represents what Edith Wharton herself chillingly described as "some dark undefinable menace, forever [...] lurking, and threatening" (Postscript 302), the walking embodiment of "that strange something undreamt of in the philosophy of Horatio" (Preface 11).

Another point of comparison between the two

tales is that both fail to explain conclusively the true nature of the uncanny events described by their respective protagonists. Spencer Brydon's claim of meeting and wrestling with his cruel and remorseless capitalist "other," for example, is never independently corroborated by another witness. The morning after the event, Alice Staverton, Brydon's loyal female confidant in the story, immediately believes his wild claim, adding that she has seen his ghastly double in her dreams, but this is hardly concrete support for such a fantastic tale. Brydon's otherworldly encounter in the gloomy old mansion could be nothing more than a simple trick of light and shadow or, as Mary Shelley might have explained it, "a waking nightmare." In short, he provides no proof whatsoever of his *doppelgänger* encounter, no physical evidence or outside verification. Brydon is clearly shaken the morning after his ordeal, and, real event or not, his life is forever altered, remodeled, but his claim of spiritual wrestling in the dark like some New York Jacob could be merely the fruit of an overactive imagination spurred on by darkness, November weather, and the squeaks and groans of a foreboding old mansion.

Likewise in "All Souls'," since there is not "a single witness of what happened except Sara Clayburn herself," the frightened widow can provide no independent corroboration of her fantastic claim to have been deserted on a freezing autumn night by her five servants for a day and a half of deafening silence and maddening solitude (Wharton 275). When Sara accuses Agnes and the other servants of abandoning her—crippled and helpless—at Whitegates, they adamantly deny their employer's bizarre allegations. An indignant Agnes declares, "The electricity cut off? [...] I tried [it] before I left you last night, madam, because if there'd been anything wrong with it I'd have come and slept in the dressing room sooner than leave you here alone" (292). So, in essence, it is Sara's word against that of her five employees, and even she begins to have nagging doubts about the concreteness of her experience. Sara's city-dwelling cousin believes the tale even though Sara produces no evidence, no proof, no witnesses. The urbanite cousin, who is dismissive of the supernatural but betrays a mild belief in it, seeks to understand Sara's strange tale by explaining, in some plausible and acceptable way, exactly what might have transpired in the old mansion on that cold, dreadful night. The cousin postulates that the strange woman may have been a witch or demon come to "summon Agnes and her fellow servants to a midnight 'Coven'" somewhere deep in the Connecticut woods (300). The cousin further suggests that since Agnes, Sara's personal maid, hails "from the isle of Skye" and is surely a superstitious Celt, she undoubtedly has knowledge of witchcraft and probably played some role in the

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mysterious disappearance of the household staff (299). Such a scenario would explain all of the events on Sara's night of dark shadows, but it is all nothing more than whimsical speculation, a quaint little addendum to provide a capstone of coherence to Sara's incredulous and dreamlike story. The cousin remains uncritical and incurious, accepting at face value that Sara is telling what she believes is Gospel about the entire episode. Thus, at the conclusion of both "The Jolly Corner" and "All Souls," there is no concrete proof of any supernatural occurrence whatsoever—just two stunned and very changed protagonists.

Finally, among the many similarities already mentioned, there is one that is perhaps the most intriguing of all: both stories are richly autobiographical, revealing much about their aging authors in the conflicts, worries, doubts, and uncertainties of the two aristocratic main characters. As Adeline Tintner and a host of others have pointed out, in the elegant Spencer Brydon, Henry James personifies the aging and regretful expatriate who dreams of what he might have achieved had he lived an aggressive and open American life as opposed to a more cultured—but more circumscribed—European existence. Sixty-five years old when he composed "The Jolly Corner" and with but a few more years to live, James, looking back on the paths he had chosen in life, never knew what it was to be an industrial magnate, a railroad tycoon, a soldier, a rancher, or a frontiersman. His exploring, adventuring, and risk-taking were limited by the walls of tidy Victorian drawing rooms and the trimmed borders of formal English gardens.

When Edith Wharton finished "All Souls," she was seventy-five, and her final tale clearly reveals some of her own concerns about the rapidly changing nature of her birth country. In "Edith Wharton's Ghost Tales Reconsidered," Margaret B. McDowell writes that perhaps "the most common theme running through Wharton's late ghost stories is her warning not to forfeit the sanctity of one's still developing soul through worship of one's past, through nostalgia for a vanished society, or through grief for those who have died" (295). In the aging and increasingly isolated Sara Clayburn, Wharton captures "the manifold expressions of human nature during a period in which the customs of the country were in flux, the 'West' was in decline, and a generation was 'lost' among the ruins of the 'Great War'" (Colquitt xii). As Sara tries to maintain the traditional lifestyle she has known and loved, she dreads, among many other concerns, outliving her connections with others. In short, the greatest horror imaginable to Sara is an empty house—without people, without light, without sound. She can bear the loss of her husband because she still has friends and servants, but as she approaches old age, she knows that friends and relations will inevitably die off,

and servants will retire or move away. Then she will be left horribly alone in the cold and empty shell of Whitegates, trembling in terror when the perfect silence is occasionally broken by some ominous bump in the attic or cellar or pantry. According to Margaret McDowell, "Sara Clayburn is, in part, the author's self-portrait," for, in her later years, Wharton clearly shared some of her last heroine's fears as she, too, began to lose those who were dear to her, forcing her to face the many uncertainties wrought by the immutable passing of time (309). It is no accident then that so many of Wharton's female protagonists—especially the later ones—"seem to come from 'vanished' worlds like Atlantis, Troy, or old New York [...]" (Colquitt xiv).

When the defeated British army surrendered to the upstart American forces at Yorktown in 1781, the British commander, in a last gesture of bitter irony, ordered his band to play a popular tune of the day called "The World Turned Upside Down." The British general well appreciated that the political landscape of the world—once so static, so structured, and so European—was changing forever. Several generations later, as an exhausted America began to look for a new beginning after the incredible horror and carnage of World War I, only to be beaten down by the Great Depression and all of the assorted tumult of the 1920s and early 1930s, Edith Wharton—as Henry James had done just a few years earlier—captured in a vividly realized protagonist some of the crushing angst of the displaced elites trying desperately to find shelter in a world that had outgrown them. In Sara Clayburn, the terrified-of-aging widow with the grand country estate and five dotting servants to address her every whim, Wharton personifies the passing of an era and chronicles the quiet death of a more dignified and rarified age, a time when wealth, privilege, and tradition ruled the day. In the brave, new, and cluttered America, both Sara Clayburn and Spencer Brydon must sink or swim, adapt or perish, change or be forever left behind as quaint anachronisms. At the conclusion of "All Souls," ensconced in a much smaller but nevertheless comfortable abode, Sara manages to endure with dignity the disconcerting whirlwind of social change. Without her five servants but with a caring, devoted, and trustworthy cousin to help her, she does find her safe new place—her cozy if diminished niche—in a world turned upside down. Although clearly not as well adapted to a new nation as was Spencer Brydon before her, she remains, at bottom, an American, albeit a much altered one than she was before her jarring encounter with the intimidating "it" of implacable change.

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Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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As early as 1896, Joseph Conrad had been writing to Henry James (there are six extant letters from Conrad to James). On December 24, 1912, Conrad

initiated correspondence with Edith Wharton. While the Wharton/Conrad correspondence lasted for several years, only two letters written by Conrad to Wharton have survived, the 1912 letter just mentioned and an October 1, 1917 letter. Critic Frederick Karl characterizes the opening of that first Conrad letter (1912) as one that begins with Conrad's "usual, perfunctory praise of a fellow writer [before] he proceeds to the main content of the letter, his feelings about a possible French translation of 'The Secret Sharer'" (Karl, *Library Gazette*, 149).

Wharton did not find Conrad's comments to be perfunctory. She believed in the sincerity of his praise of her work. Shortly after receiving Conrad's complimentary letter, she read "The Secret Sharer," which she admired so fully that, as was her habit with writers she respected, she immediately read much, if not all, that Conrad had published to date. During this early reading of his writing, Wharton wrote to Conrad, thus initiating, on her end, a literary fellowship that became long-term, if intermittent. Wharton remained faithful in her ongoing reading of Conrad's work; however, Conrad's subsequent reading of Wharton's writing seems to have been restricted to those works of hers which Wharton sent directly to him.

When *Summer* was published, Wharton sent Conrad a copy of it; and, on October 1, 1917, Joseph Conrad wrote back to her in a letter filled with praise for the novel. Wharton scholars, understandably, take Conrad's 1917 letter at face value and cite *Summer* as Conrad's favorite Wharton work. However, Frederick Karl argues that while "Conrad gives high praise to the novel, [...] his praise is of that mechanical kind which he handed out to friends whenever they sent him a new book. The previous month he had written almost the same words to John Galsworthy about his book *Beyond*" (150). Karl's argument includes passages from Conrad's September 3, 1917 letter to Galsworthy in which the words he uses words in praise of *Beyond* are conspicuously similar to the words that Conrad wrote to Wharton, less than a month later, in praise of *Summer*. In structuring his argument, Karl's point is simply that we cannot know for certain just what Conrad thought of Wharton's latest novel.

While, it was Conrad's habit to issue "mechanical praise" to his friends for their literary efforts, if we read the October 1 letter dislodged from Conrad's past epistolary practices and from his Galsworthy letter, Conrad's letter to Wharton does certainly suggest that he considered *Summer* to be her strongest work—a "toujours en beauté." Arguably, in *Summer*'s unrelenting portrayal of life's underbelly, in its dark complexities of personhood, in its shift between civilized and primal setting, and in its cultural, political, and sexual imperialism, *Summer* could be considered Wharton's most Conradian work and one, for which, Conrad's open praise seems, indeed, very credible.

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Perhaps Wharton recognized something of her own literary proclivity manifested in Conrad's work. This proclivity is most apparent, however, not in *Summer*, but in *Ethan Frome* and in its affinities with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In 1912, just a year after she had written *Ethan Frome*, Wharton read, full-clothed, Conrad's work—including *Heart of Darkness*—and responded to his writing with admiration. Arguably, in Conrad's work, highly regarded by Henry James, Wharton saw features of her own current writing propensities validated. One can not help but wonder if the literary affinities existing between the two works were recognized by Conrad, also, and became one, of several motivating factors for his initial letter to Edith Wharton.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, like Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, explores masculine potency in disintegration, internal collapse, and moral ambiguity. Both works probe the ethical implications of extreme adherence to duty (duty to the ivory corporation or to the family); both subtly question whether this apparent duty provides a pretext for god-like control over the lives of others; and both works examine the complicity in human destruction that results from extreme self-reliance (Kurtz's and Frome's). *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* are concerned with the same essential epistemological question, i.e., the knowability of being, as both works' narrators attempt to understand the complexities and ambiguities of the men who compel their attention and drive their narrations. Both works adopt the same modernist sense of ambiguity, and both actuate the same specific modernistic literary conventions.

The two works, *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome*, are structured around the fragmented, non-chronological forms that mark literary modernism. The ordered, stable view of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, in which narrations lead to discernable meaning, is displaced in these two novellas by narrations which end in confusion and mystification. The story-teller, himself, is troubled—disquieted and confounded—by the meaning of his own tale. In *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome*, the narrators try, throughout their stories, to figure out the meaning, value, and even the accuracy of the tale they are telling us. In both works, the modernist's pessimistic vision emerges of the abysmal, moral ailments that lie beneath social surfaces, as does the modern despair that often results from unstable signification and moral uncertainty. Traditional logical exposition of narration is replaced by fragments of information, by a collage of impressions and circumstances collected as Marlow journeys up the Congo and the Frome engineer moves among the residents Starkfield. In a modernist way, the reader is challenged to reestablish a coherence of meaning from the fragmentary forms delivered by each narrator, who

juxtaposes data and impressions, facts and mythologies, and one stable narration assembled from the unstable integration of multiple points of views.

The narratological structure of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* is that of a frame-story with a mediating narrator. In each work the mediating narrator is simultaneously present and not present in the story. Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* are told in first-person-retrospect by narrators who are professional men (an engineer in *Ethan Frome* and a company man, Marlow, whose story is recounted verbatim by another "Company" man in *Heart of Darkness*). Both men base their narrations on the little that they have seen themselves and on what they have been told, and both begin their narratives with the intimation that they have been altered by the experience that they are about to narrate. *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* are both structured around a hazy, rather nebulous character (Kurtz and Frome, respectively).¹ It becomes the structuring function of the narration to piece together, bit by bit, information gleaned about them.

In the attempt to find order in the confusion of information and throughout the turmoil of the journey, both narrators retain the hope that Kurtz or Frome will provide a clue to a universe with meaning, lay open something revelatory and profound. Instead, throughout the journey, each narrator is confronted by signs which grow more and more unrecognizable, ultimately because the signs reflect their own anxieties more than anything else. Persisting in getting at the meaning of things, both narrators only find more and more mysteries, where they want explanations and sure and verifiable revelations. Each narration is told in retrospect, with an undefined lapse of time having occurred between the experience and its narration, creating the impression that the narrator has been over the tale again and again, has gone over all the varying subjective accounts that he has assembled in his attempt to find the moral and philosophical significance of his story.

In their methods of structuring the narration and in the unstable, uncertainty of meaning that is yielded, both *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* conform to the essential conventions of modernism. While *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* are realistic in their rendering of detail and romantic in their impulse to locate meaning in the individual's primacy of vision, these novellas are neither realistic nor romantic. Wharton's and Conrad's narrators are like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, in that they seize our attention with storytelling skills that recount their descent into darkness and desolation. However, more in keeping with Modernism than Coleridge's Romanticism, neither narrator has a specific lesson or even a stable apprehension of meaning that he is attempting to teach.

Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Ethan Frome* begin

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and end in a circumscribed space (aboard the yawl, *Nellie*, in *Heart of Darkness* and within the confining boundaries of Starkfield in *Ethan Frome*). The opening scene of each work is an internal and contemplative moment, a sadly-intoned soliloquy of sorts. *Ethan Frome* begins: "I had the story bit by bit from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story." *Heart of Darkness* begins with the meditation: "The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unsustained light." In both stories, the calm and orderly serenity outside provides an effective contrast to the tumultuous chaos about to be narrated.

Both works shift at this point from the meditative to the expository as the narrator explains the details of the circumstances which led him into contact with Kurtz and Frome, respectively. The manner in which each text manipulates this shift is, arguably, similar: it does so through narration and lighting. Both works take us to a world, initially brightly lit, yet, growingly dark, a strange world where distorted--destroyed and destructive--figures live in a deceiving world of light. Each work moves from light to the literal and figurative darkness of its conclusion.

Both works begin with a description of the job-related journey which brought the unwitting narrator to his portentous location, i.e. the Congo and Starkfield. The literal journey becomes a leitmotif for the spiritual journey that each of the two narrators experience; and each journey, to varying degrees, becomes a very strange quest, a gradual initiation into the dark world of enigma, embodied in the enigmatic characters of Kurtz and Frome, both of whom are shrouded in legend. Both Kurtz and Frome are perceived by the narrators to be striking figures--vastly isolated and exorbitantly self-reliant. They share a moral ambiguity, although Frome's moral character is far more complex, equivocal, and ambiguous than is Kurtz's. Kurtz and Frome hold a preeminent, charismatic attraction for the narrators, who are fascinated by their isolationism, courage, unconventionalism, intelligence, and self-reliance.

In their dawning awareness, the narrators discover that Kurtz's and Frome's much-admired trait of self-reliance has a strong component of self-absorption and their highly valued quality of self-sufficiency renders the best interest of others negligible to them. Kurtz's demonstration of this is far more overt than is Frome's, as Kurtz is willing to go to any lengths, even willing to *exterminate the brutes*, in his rapacious drive to material power. Conrad and Wharton make us see the human destruction resulting from close contact with and reliance upon Kurtz and Frome. Both Kurtz and Frome, once highly regarded, have participated--arguably

authorized--the sacrifice of human life. Revered as a man/god by the natives, Kurtz has literally sacrificed human life in furtherance of his private mission. Frome, respected by the natives of Starkfield for his outward moral rectitude, has, arguably, sacrificed both Zenobia's and Mattie's future in furtherance of his own emotional needs. There is an understandable--and dangerous--temptation to valorize Ethan, to sentimentalize him as the long-suffering stanchion of New England ethical values. Readers may see Frome this way since both Zenobia and Mattie do. Frome's silent *heroic need* becomes his cardinal attraction to both women, but in viewing Frome this way, Mattie and Zenobia overestimate their capacity to help him and underestimate his destructive potency. Consistent with Edith Wharton's gift of prodigious subtlety, Ethan Frome's destructiveness is kept far more vague than Kurtz's, so subtle as to be difficult to notice. However, in single-minded adherence to his own emotional wants, Frome consciously sabotages Mattie's early healthy romantic future with Denis Eady; and, as the young Mattie Silver was much like the young Zenobia Pierce, both women's vitality and youthful possibilities become annihilated by their prolonged association with Frome and the controlling force of his silence.

Both Kurtz and Frome are controlling of the human lives in their immediate surroundings, and they keep those surroundings insular and sequestered from the larger world outside. Kurtz and Frome both use language to control. Kurtz does so through his extraordinary "ability to talk, his words -- the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating" articulate voice. Frome does so by withholding words, by remaining silent, mute. Both exude a deepening tone of authority--even, perhaps, a metaphysical authority.

Both narrators journey, with ever-growing curiosity, into the very the center of a human heart, with all the chilling discoveries that such an inquiry reveals. The journey in each work is also a personal, psychological quest, as both narrators, in their groping toward an understanding of Kurtz and Frome, are essentially confronting their own most deeply-rooted fears of self: acute isolation, professional and personal failure, moral uncertainty, and spiritual demise. Nothing that Conrad's Marlow or Wharton's engineer previously knew or had gone through could have prepared him for his confrontation with the very heart of darkness, literalized in Conrad's work by Kurtz's "inner station" and in Wharton's by Frome's house interior.

In both texts, the approach to this in-most zone happens in a situation of limited visibility, the "blind whiteness" of a thick fog in Conrad's work and the thick whiteness of a snowstorm in Wharton's novel. Each experience involves passing through a gate and crossing the threshold into the home of the enigmatic Kurtz or Frome. In each text the house represents the inner

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depths of darkness and the approach to it is filled with trepidation and fraught with images of terror: the narrator of *Ethan Frome* describes the final sleigh ride with Ethan in terms of the "ghostly landmark[s] that sprang up to warn us" while the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* describes the ghostly human heads on poles, shrunken and dried and pointed, in ghostly homage, to face Kurtz's house.

As we read these two narrative moments, we experience a vision that compels our attention and at the same time appalls. Like the narrators, we look, full face, at human failure, a failure made more compelling because it is the failure of men—Kurtz and Frome—invested with potential greatness. We witness the dark ambiguity of Being. In the inner depth of Kurtz's station and Frome's home, we confront the nightmare of conduct pushed to ambiguous human limits. Both Kurtz and Frome are rootless idealists, arguably good men, once, who made an ever-growing series of very bad decisions.

Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Ethan Frome* offers a portrait of character, and, as in Conrad's work, the subject of Wharton's work shifts. *Ethan Frome* is apparently a portrait of Ethan himself, much in the same way as the subject of *Heart of Darkness* is apparently a study of Kurtz. However, the subject of each work transforms; and *Ethan Frome*, like *Heart of Darkness* can be read as the narrator's story, a verbal portrait of the narrator's questions, fears, and frustrations. The narrator may think he is telling us Frome's or Kurtz's story, but, in the modernist process of doing so, he reveals far more about his own psychology than we may suppose he meant to do.

In *Ethan Frome*, Wharton, like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, seems to be saying that the mystery of another's Being is an inexorable component of human ontology. We can never fully understand another or, perhaps, be fully understood ourselves. In the end, Wharton's narrator, like Conrad's, realizes a further complication: that experiences can happen—in places as exotic as the Congo or as pedestrian as Starkfield, Massachusetts—and these events can radically alter the essential nature of a person. As much as we might persist in the work of understanding what occurred as a result of these experiences, what nature of transformation took place, we simply may never be able to get to the bottom of such ontological matters.

Like Kurtz, Ethan Frome remains isolated and enigmatic from the beginning of the tale to the end. The narrator, in contrast, undergoes a significant change, so significant that he feels compelled to narrate the experience to us. The mysterious Kurtz and Frome, in their failed grandeur and desolate solitude, usher the narrators into a vision of the horror of a misspent life. In

piecing together the story of Ethan Frome and Kurtz, men who are unknowable and impenetrably remote, both narrators attempt to understand the essential questions that ironically frustrate and eclipse our efforts at answers. Kurtz gradually embodies for Marlow and Frome for Wharton's engineer the modernist's problem of meaning.

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Notes

- ¹The most cogent criticism that can be leveled against *Heart of Darkness* can also be said of *Ethan Frome*: How much of the ambiguity surrounding Frome and Kurtz is a function of art and how much is a function the writer's evasion of that which is most difficult to render?

A "Better English": Edith Wharton on Language in Fiction

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Edith Wharton often plays games with her characters' names, with archetypal figures and conventional plots, and with the expectations of her readers. While she is adept at gently mocking, criticizing, reversing, and remaking conventions, her most powerful criticism of life is in her portrayal of the state of the English language. Wharton's characters agonize over the use and abuse of English, over the impossibility of expressing reality in language, and over the inadequacy of language as a means of communication. In "New Year's Day," "The Spark," and *The Mother's Recompense* language is seen by characters as problematic, ambiguous, and corrupt, and in *Ethan Frome* and *The House of Mirth* it is inexpressible. Wharton is clearly concerned with the question of how effective language can be in communicating ideas and emotions, the problem of how to use language to get at truth. As Penelope Vita-Finzi argues, Wharton's criticism of the state of modern English is related to her conviction that "Art and civilization are founded on traditional order and standards" (19): in her writing Wharton laments the decline of these standards.¹ This paper looks at examples from her novels and novellas in order to show

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that although her characters worry about the instability and disorderliness of language, Wharton knows and demonstrates that language can be precise. She records modern concerns about the problems of language, but simultaneously her own clear style upholds high standards and affirms the power of language.

In "New Year's Day" (1924), Wharton begins with one woman's concise definition of Lizzie Hazeldean—"She was bad [...] always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel" (491)—and thus for most of the story it is easy to believe that Lizzie is simply an adulteress. When she finally confesses to Henry Prest the reasons for their affair, telling him that "You thought I was a lovelorn mistress; and I was only an expensive prostitute" (532), he is shocked at her language and her honesty. Lizzie has transgressed the laws of social language: there are things that can be said and things that cannot. "Mistress! Prostitute! Such words were banned. No one reprov'd coarseness of language in women more than Henry Prest" (532). Proper language is one of the most important parts of social behaviour; it defines characters and class.² When Lizzie Hazeldean eventually becomes, in the words of Hubert Wesson, "the jolliest woman I know" (539), she entertains a circle of young people that includes ladies who are "still, though precariously, within the social pale" and who yearn "for such unlawful joys as cigarettes [and] plain speaking" (541). Straightforward language rarely has a place in society: social grace consists not in speaking out, but in finding the right things to say at the right moment—as Lizzie often wonders in difficult situations, "Now, what would be the *natural* thing for me to say?" (507). As Elsa Nettels suggests, "For Edith Wharton, the crippling vice of old New York society was the code which forbade talk of the unpleasant and the scandalous and elevated equivocation to a moral duty" (89).

Yet while the characters in "New Year's Day" struggle with appropriate and inappropriate social language, Wharton meticulously constructs a story in which it is easy for the reader at first to believe the rumours and assumptions of society, only to be shocked later by Lizzie Hazeldean's revelation that she had the affair not for love but for money. The phrase "She was bad [...] always" therefore takes on a more complex meaning, as Lizzie has sought the money not as an end in itself, but as a way to keep her dying husband from worrying. Her behaviour may have been immoral, yet, paradoxically, she acted out of love for her husband, and therefore it would be difficult to judge her simply as having been *always* bad. In plainly telling Henry Prest what her motivation was, Lizzie is honest, and honesty, far from being an "unlawful joy," is virtuous. Carefully concealing the real scandal of the affair until the right

moment in the story, Wharton knows what language to use to veil and unveil the truth. In her descriptions of Lizzie's relations with her husband, Wharton betrays no sign of the real motivation for the affair, thus showing her control over literature, language, and the reader.

Wharton's character Hayley Delane in "The Spark" (1924) feels helpless at controlling language. He has an idea of what correct English is—because "both my parents were martinets on grammar" (466)—but in writing business letters he is constantly aware of the gap between thought and expression: "he knew what he wanted to say; his sense of the proper use of words was clear and prompt," but "in his mind there was a gulf fixed between speaking and writing the language" (465). Delane can correct the language of others—"He would put his finger at once on these laborious inaccuracies, growling: 'For God's sake, translate it into English—'" (465); however, when it comes to transcribing his own thoughts, he is incapable of writing plainly. While he complains about the necessity of translating the complicated style of other writers, he is forced to translate his own clear speech into unintelligible writing. Thus, "Your letter of the blankth came yesterday, and after thinking over what you propose I don't like the looks of it" (465) becomes "I am in receipt of your communication of the 30th ultimo, and regret to be compelled to inform you in reply that, after mature consideration of the proposals therein contained, I find myself unable to pronounce a favourable judgement upon the same" (465-66). Delane believes that language is corrupt, but that it is almost impossible to use a "better English" (465). Wharton, in describing Delane's dilemma, has fun with the corrupt and complicated modern English style, referring to the "laborious inaccuracies" and "the hazy verbiage with which American primary culture was already corrupting our speech" (465) instead of simply "mistakes" and "corrupt language." She pokes fun at society's problem with clear language by using the words of "hazy verbiage" itself to criticize the problem.

Society's concern with language appears again in *The Mother's Recompense* (1925). Kate Clephane's sister-in-law, Enid Drover expresses disapproval of Kate's use of the word "female": "'Female—' she murmured—'is that word being used again? I never thought it very nice to apply it to women, did you? I suppose I'm old-fashioned. Nothing shocks the young people nowadays—not even the Bible'" (613).³ New York society is concerned with proper language and decorum, moreso than with directness and honesty, just as Kate's circle of friends on the Riviera believes it more important to sound good than to be good. For them it is "vaguely exhilarating to lie and definitely fatiguing to be truthful" (568) because "In most of their lives there

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were episodes to be bridged over by verbal acrobatics, and they were all accustomed to taking each other's fibs at their face-value" (757). The Rector, Mr. Merriman, can get away with "talking cheerful slang in a pulpit voice" (569), which indicates that the tone is more important than the words, and that society accepts what sounds pleasing rather than what is true. Even more extreme is the attitude of Lilla Gates, who says, "I hate talking. I only like noises that don't mean anything" (595). For Mrs. Drover, socially acceptable vocabulary is problematic; for Kate's friends, language is useful only to help maintain false appearances; for Mr. Merriman, words are subservient to tone; for Lilla, language means nothing. For Kate, love destroys language: when she encounters Chris in New York, she is "a little less sure of her speech than of her thoughts" and remembers "how sometimes the smile in his eyes used to break up her words into little meaningless splinters that she could never put together again till he was gone" (619). The character in *The Mother's Recompense* who represents the ultimate failure of language to express meaning is Kate's daughter Anne, who "had inherited from her father a certain heaviness of pen, an inability to convey on paper shades of meaning or of feeling, and having said: 'Isn't it splendid about Lilla?' had evidently exhausted the subject, or rather her power of developing it" (645).

Wharton, on the other hand, retains her power of conveying shades of meaning and feeling. She dispenses with the impossible Lilla by describing "the green glitter of her earrings, which suggested to Kate Clephane the poisonous antennae of some giant insect" (614), and she captures the generic youth of society by describing a young man whose "fresh blunt face was as inexpressive as a foot-ball; he might have been made by a manufacturer of sporting goods" (604). In a concise summation of the whole novel, Wharton describes Kate's speculation that she "might live out the rest of her days in peace between Anne and Anne's husband" (606; italics added). *The Mother's Recompense* records a variety of modern preoccupations about difficulties with language, all expressed in Wharton's powerful and inimitable style.⁴

While "New Year's Day," "The Spark," and *The Mother's Recompense* encompass a range of society's attitudes toward the problem of expression in language, *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The House of Mirth* (1905) focus on the impossibility of communicating with a beloved through language. Ethan and Mattie cannot find the words to express their love or their desire to escape, and thus they are trapped not only by circumstances but also by their inability to communicate clearly with each other. Walking home with Mattie and attempting to discuss the possibility of her marrying and leaving the Frome farm, Ethan "struggled for the all-expressive word, and again,

his arm in hers, found only a deep 'Come along'" (87). When Zeena is away Ethan is almost able to express his feelings to Mattie: "Ethan, a moment earlier, had felt himself on the brink of eloquence, but the mention of Zeena had paralysed him" (104). Although Ethan and Mattie cannot speak freely with each other, they communicate in looks and gestures, and when Ethan, after receiving Mattie's note—"Don't trouble, Ethan" (129)—ponders the prospect of communicating with her only on paper, he is devastated. "For the life of her smile, the warmth of her voice, only cold paper and dead words!" (129).

At the end of the novella, both Ethan and Mattie are left without words. It is the people of Starkfield who interpret their story for them, and it is Mrs. Hale who almost reveals Mattie's words after the accident: "'all of a sudden she woke up just like herself, and looked straight at me out of her big eyes, and said [...]"—but Mrs. Hale never tells what Mattie said (154). Wharton's characters may not be able to find the words, but she herself finds the right words and phrases for them. At the height of Ethan's happiness she describes him as being "suffocated with the sense of well-being" (103), just as he has been suffocated by his marriage and will be suffocated by his future situation. And the description of Mattie's face when she sees Ethan is that is "always looked like a window that has caught the sunset" (79), as if to say that their love is both beautiful and dying.

Wharton's main characters in *The House of Mirth* are also concerned with expressing love before dying. Selden sees the emptiness of the life Lily has chosen—"the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dulness of the talk [...] the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance" (225)—but he cannot speak or act to help her escape either society or death. Lily understands the necessary "tissue of social falsehoods" (269) and is well-versed in the language of [...] omissions" (239), but is unable to get past the intricacies of society's language in order to reach Selden and love.⁵ After feeling throughout the novel that though they understand each other they cannot communicate, at the very end they both believe they have found the "all-expressive word" (*House of Mirth* 87). Unfortunately, it is too late for the magical word to bring them together: Lily thinks of it as she is dying, and Selden thinks of it after her death. Lily believes she has found the word "that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought—she was afraid of not remembering it when she woke; and if she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well" (341). Hours later, Selden rushes to Lily because "he had found the word

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he meant to say to her, and it could not wait another moment to be said. It was strange that it had not come to his lips sooner" (342). But the mysterious word is never spoken; it is too late.

Language fails Lily and Selden, and it is only after Lily's death that "in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (347). Wharton's words, however, make her meaning clear. She describes Selden's perception of Lily as that "She was on the edge of something—that was the impression left with him. He seemed to see her poised on the brink of a chasm, with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing her" (200-01). Later, when Lily's social decline is in progress, Wharton says, in a brilliant metaphor, that "Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung" (290). And in a most telling phrase, Wharton has Selden decide of Lily that "yes, she was matchless—it was the one word for her" (225). Lily can find no match because she and Selden do not have the words to bring them together until it is too late.

Words are often either problematic or nonexistent for Edith Wharton's characters. The problem of clear and expressive language arises again and again for characters in her novels and novellas, but not in her own writing. Society dictates what is proper and improper language; characters agonize over expressing themselves on paper, manipulate language to disguise truth, or deny the power of language; and lovers miss chances for happiness at least partly because they cannot communicate their feelings to each other. From the elaborate falsehoods of society to the simple lack of words between Mattie and Ethan, language can be a serious problem. But Mattie and Ethan struggle with many additional obstacles, whereas for Lily and Selden language is the major barrier: it is the unsaid words, the silent declarations, and the belated all-expressive word that conspire to keep them apart. Lily and Selden allow themselves to be victimized by a social language that decrees they must not speak openly. When they finally realize the necessity and possibility of communicating clearly with each other, it is too late. Wharton raises the issues of social standards of decorous language, the difficulties of expression through words, and the impossibility of true communication only to argue, through the clarity of her own writing style, against the idea that language is unstable and disorderly. Her precise words and eloquent phrases sparkle with originality and brilliance. As Ian Robinson has said of Thomas Cranmer, "Like all artists of language he meant what he said and achieved his most secure meaning in the work itself" (48).

Like any great artist, Edith Wharton means what she says: she knows that language can transcend social proprieties, express thought precisely, and communicate clearly, and even while addressing modern concerns about the instability of language she subtly criticizes these concerns and ultimately affirms the power of language.

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Notes

- ¹ Vita-Finzi writes that "Above all, Edith Wharton disliked anarchy in language and literature," and says that for Wharton "America epitomizes this lack of order" (19). Citing *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919), she points to Wharton's harsh criticism that "The lover of English need only note what that rich language has shrunk to on the lips, and in the literature, of the heterogeneous millions of American citizens who, without uniformity of tradition or recognised guidance, are being suffered to work their many wills upon it" (qtd. in Vita-Finzi 19). As Candace Waid writes, "Wharton was taught to keep Americanisms at a distance," and "she shared [Henry] James's worry that the English language was becoming soiled by careless, everyday usage" (6).

(Continued from page 26)

² See David A. Godfrey's article "'The full and elaborate vocabulary of evasion': The Language of Cowardice in Edith Wharton's *Old New York*" for further analysis of society's rules of omission (*Midwest Quarterly* 30.1 [1988]: 27-44).

³ See Nettels 22-23 for a description of the debate over the word "female."

⁴ In Lynne Tillman's words, "Wharton selected her words with a scalpel" (133). Tillman writes that in Wharton's writing, "One may be stopped dead by some piece of psychological astuteness, a blunt idea, by brutal clarity, or staggered by an almost excessive, because perfect, image" (134).

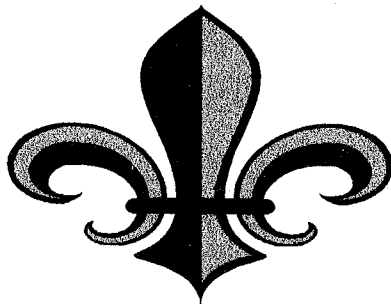
⁵ For a detailed discussion of the relation of language and social decorum in the novel, see Louise K. Barnett's article "Language, Gender, and Society in *The House of Mirth*" (*Connecticut Review* 11.2 [1989]: 54-63)

BOOK REVIEW

(Continued from page 3)

Wharton traces the major strands of Wharton's critical history, and this is where the curious reader might want more. The last chapter, which summarizes the arguments presented and offers ideas for further research, is sparse on some of the more interesting new work being done on Wharton. There is almost no mention of topics that are gaining much attention in the Wharton critical universe, such as film, material culture, and other interdisciplinary investigations. That said, *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton* is an invaluable basic resource for students, for teaching, and for scholarly reference. It is an organizational and bibliographic wonder.

Edie Thornton
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater



AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION MEETING May 22-25, 2003 Cambridge, MA Edith Wharton Society Sessions

Session I: Thursday, May 22, 8:00-8:50 a.m.

A. BUSINESS MEETING: Edith Wharton Society,
Executive Boardroom 201

Session VII: Thursday, May 22, 3:30-4:50 p.m.

G. EDITH WHARTON AND WORK, Paul Revere A
Chair: Donna M. Campbell, Gonzaga University
and the Edith Wharton Society

1. "Working in the Self: Edith Wharton's Alchemy of Publicity," Lorna Brittan, Princeton University
2. "The Machine in the Home: Labor and Technology in Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*," Gary Totten, Concordia College
3. "Wharton and the Work of World War I," Julie Olin-Ammentorp, LeMoyne College

Session XVII Friday, May 23, 2:00-3:20 p.m.

A. WHARTON AND FILM, Crispus Attucks
Chair: Edie Thornton, University of Wisconsin,
Whitewater and the Edith Wharton Society

1. "Screening Edith Wharton: The Place of the Literary in the New 'Nobrow' Culture," Mark Eaton, Azusa Pacific University
2. "Staging and Screening the Self: Wharton's Resistance to Acting in *The Reef* and *Twilight Sleep*," Meredith Goldsmith, Whitman College
3. "Self-Interested Women: The Erasure of Women's Friendship in Terence Davies' Film Adaptation of *The House of Mirth*," Phoebe Jackson, William Paterson University

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