

who have argued for the importance of the love plot include Katz, p. 164; Dillingham, pp. 200–201; McElrath, Chapter 7.

²⁰ Charles Child Walcott, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 153–54.

²¹ William Dean Howells, "The Last Work of Frank Norris," *Harper's Weekly*, 47 (March 14, 1903), 433; Marchand, pp. 35, 86, 85; Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (New York: Haskell House, 1973), pp. 167, 173 (see also, in Chapter 3, Pizer's discussion of the "masculine-feminine ethic" of *Blix, A Man's Woman*, and *Moran of the Lady Letty*); Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 215, 216, 224. Significantly, an important essay on a landmark naturalist novel also ridicules the "mellifluous drivel" of the sentimental elements; see Sandy Petrey, "The Language of Realism, The Language of False Consciousness: A Reading of *Sister Carrie*," *Novel*, 10, no. 2 (1977), 101–13.

²² H. L. Mencken, "A Novel of the First Rank" (1911); repr. in *Critical Essays on Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Donald Pizer (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), p. 211; Thomas Beer, *The Mauve Decade* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 99. On Norris's opposition to sentimentalism, see especially "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (*Responsibilities*, pp. 279–82), where he distinguishes between romance and sentimentality. Norris does, however, uphold *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an exemplary novel, although he seems to misread Stowe's intent (*Responsibilities*, p. 205). On the polarization of nineteenth century men's and women's novels see, for example, Susan K. Harris, *Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 114, who finds realist and sentimental novels as much at odds as men and women. Nina Baym, however, in "The Rise of the Woman Author" (in Elliot, *Columbia Literary History of America*), disputes the alleged distance between the rhetoric of sentimentalism and realism, finding in the former "a practice if not a theory of literary realism" (p. 292).

²³ Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 90; Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 276.

²⁴ T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), p. 19.

²⁵ Robert L. Heilbroner and Lester C. Thurow, *Economics Explained* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 28.

²⁶ Pizer, *Novels*, p. 142.

²⁷ Joseph McElrath, "Frank Norris: A Biographical Essay," *ALR*, 11 (1978), 224, 228; Walker, p. 148.

EDITH WHARTON AND THE "AUTHORESSES": THE CRITIQUE OF LOCAL COLOR IN WHARTON'S EARLY FICTION

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Edith Wharton's impatience with what she called the "rose and lavender pages" of the New England local color "authoresses" reverberates throughout her autobiography and informs such novels as *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*. In *A Backward Glance* she explains that *Ethan Frome* arose from her desire "to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life . . . utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett."¹ The genre of women's local color fiction that Wharton thus disdained was in one sense, as Josephine Donovan has suggested, the culmination of a coherent feminine literary tradition whose practitioners had effectively seized the margins of realistic discourse and, within their self-imposed limitations of form and subject, transformed their position into one of strength.² Wharton, however, was determined to expose the genre's weaknesses rather than to capitalize upon its strengths.³ At the outset of her career, the 1890s backlash against local color and "genteel" fiction showed Wharton that to be taken seriously, she would have to repudiate the local colorists.

What needs to be recognized is the degree to which Wharton, as an ambitious woman writer responding to the 1890s transition between local color and naturalism, effected this repudiation very early in her career, well before challenging the tradition in regional novels such as *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* or assuming the persona of the secure literary *grande dame* of *A Backward Glance*. In both "Mrs. Manstey's View," her first published story (*Scribner's Magazine*, 1891), and *Bunner Sisters* (written circa 1891; published 1916 in *Xingu*), Wharton interfuses the city landscapes of naturalism with the potent iconography and themes of local color, providing a chilling commentary upon the limitations of local color fiction in a naturalistic world that encroaches upon and threatens its ideals.

The literary climate surrounding these two early stories is perhaps best exemplified in the era's great literary magazines. Finding a receptive audience in the readers of *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The Century*, and

Scribner's, local color fiction flourished beside the mainstream realism of William Dean Howells; and Howells' editorship first of the *Atlantic* and then of *Harper's* ensured the steady encouragement of both movements. So popular did this form become that by 1894 Hamlin Garland's hunderous defense of the genre in *Crumbling Idols* seemed to contemporary reviewers little more than literary grandstanding, its "fundamental ideas," according to *Atlantic* reviewer Charles Miner Thompson, being "so sound as to appear tame."⁴ Writing in the same volume of the *Atlantic*, Paul Shorey noted in passing that local color fiction was "the most popular form of literature today" and contained "the most promise for the immediate future."⁵ Local color fiction sought to memorialize the rapidly disappearing folkways of the nation's more isolated regions. As practiced by Wharton's "predecessors," the New England writers Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, local color fiction explored the lives of those who remained behind in the dying villages during the nineteenth-century's social cataclysms—the decline of shipping, the coming of railroads, the Civil War.⁶ Despite Ann Douglas's characterization of local color as a "literature of impoverishment," women's local color fiction frequently affirms both the affectional ties of a strong community and the small quotidian satisfactions of upholding traditions and preserving dignity against a background of loss and an increasingly hostile outside world.⁷

By 1896, ironically the year of Jewett's local color masterpiece *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the genre itself was under attack. Charles Dudley Warner's May 1896 column in *Harper's* presents a dismissive but succinct account of the movement's rise and fall. Claiming that "we do not hear much now of 'local color,'" Warner hypothesizes that "so much color was produced that the market broke down," an oversupply he blames on shoddy workmanship:

The author had only to go to the "locality" that he intended to attack and immortalize . . . in order to pick up the style of profanity there current, the dialect, if any existed; if not, to work up one from slovenly and ungrammatical speech, procure some "views" of landscape and of costume, strike the kind of landscape necessary to the atmosphere of the story . . . and the thing was done.⁸

More ominously, James Lane Allen warned in the October 1897 *Atlantic* essay "Two Principles in Recent American Fiction" that the genre and its underlying "Feminine Principle" had nearly led American

literature and, by implication, the American public influenced by that literature, into "effeminacy and degeneracy." His solution was the "approaching supremacy" of the "Masculine Principle," a "more masculine, more passionate, and more virile" literature of "Strength, Massiveness, [and] Instinctive Action" that would become naturalism.⁹ Allen's essay shows the influence of the age's "masculinity crisis"; as Michael Davitt Bell points out in *The Problem of American Realism*, "a prominent function of claiming to be a realist or a naturalist in this period was to provide assurance to one's society and oneself that one was a 'real' man rather than an effeminate 'artist.'"¹⁰ As naturalistic writers such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser accepted the challenge that Allen had posed, local color fiction fell into disrepute, left to languish for most of the twentieth century under the witheringly dismissive adjectives applied by Allen and others: "small," "tactful," "limited," "refined"—in a word, feminine. Adopting the attributes of the "masculine principle," then, became a means simultaneously of differentiating oneself from the limitations of local color fiction and of announcing one's serious intentions as a writer.

Viewed within this context, "Mrs. Manstey's View" and *Bunner Sisters* stand as Wharton's effort not only to test herself in the modes of fiction current at the time, but to test those modes against her own standards of what fiction should be. In an undated fragment from her unpublished papers, Wharton articulated a surprisingly naturalistic view of the value of poverty as a subject: "to the student of human nature, poverty is a powerful lens, revealing minute particles of character imperceptible to the prosperous eye. Wealth keeps us at arm's length from life, poverty thrusts us into stifling propinquity with it."¹¹ More significant than this choice of subject, however, is the attempt to explore the possibilities and dangers of this genre for the woman artist who, like Wharton herself during this period, risked being caught in the historical shift between local color and naturalism.

Appearing in *Scribner's* magazine in July 1891,¹² "Mrs. Manstey's View" tells of an elderly widow, bereft of her family by death and distance, whose sole pleasures in life are tending her diminished window garden of "an ivy and a succession of unwholesome-looking bulbs"¹³ and watching the limited landscape that can be seen from the window of her room.¹⁴ Wharton uses the window garden and other vegetation effectively in the story: the magnolia is the story's emblem of the view's fragility and beauty, and a "neglected syringa, which persisted in

growing in spite of the countless obstacles opposed to its welfare" (p. 118) suggests Mrs. Manstey. Within the safe confines of her room, she lives her life vicariously, walled off by the glass of her window from the people and gardens she watches with such delight. When her view is threatened by the building of an addition, Mrs. Manstey tries and fails to defend her territory, at first peacefully, by paying to have the project stopped, and ultimately violently, by setting fire to the addition. Ironically, her one act of real force in the story leads to pneumonia and her subsequent death. Although she dies triumphant, believing that she has stopped the addition, on the day of her death "the building of the extension was resumed" (p. 122), certifying the futility of her efforts.

In contrast to earlier critics such as R. W. B. Lewis, who describes the story as "a nice little tale about an elderly widow,"¹⁵ Barbara A. White sees Mrs. Manstey as "a stand-in for Jewett and Freeman at a loss in the new world" and reads it as "the story of a female artist" who struggles with the "impossibility" of her role.¹⁶ Qualifiers flank Wharton's description of Mrs. Manstey as an artist—she is "perhaps" one "at heart"—but in attitude, sensibility, and domestic subject matter, she is indeed a local color artist, knitting away as she "creates" her vision of life. As a local colorist, she works within specific limitations and is "sensible of many changes of color unnoticed by the average eye" (p. 118). She also practices rigid selectivity in the pictures she both composes and views from the frame of her bow-window, in part because "hers was the happy faculty of dwelling on the pleasanter side of the prospect before her" (p. 118). After all, "the view surrounded and shaped her life as the sea does a lonely island" (p. 118), much as it shapes poor Joanna's life in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Further, the enclosed gardens she watches are what Gwen Nagel describes as the characteristic New England garden in Jewett's fiction: "small tidy plots, confined by fences, associated with the past and not the future, and lovingly cultivated by women."¹⁷

To read "Mrs. Manstey's View" as simply a local color parable about the artist's role, however, would be to ignore Wharton's pointed critique of the genre's limitations and the distance she creates between its conventions and her own narrator.¹⁸ For one thing, the tone here is tentative, the prose and authorial stance distanced from the feelings of the character whose deficiencies of vision Wharton's narrator does not share. The narrator sees, as Mrs. Manstey will not until forced to do so, the landscape of naturalism that threatens her view: the "street where the ash-barrels lingered late on the sidewalk and the gaps in the

pavement would have staggered a Quintus Curtius" (p. 117).¹⁹ As if to reinforce this clash of genres, Wharton introduces a "coarse fellow with a bloated face," reminiscent of Frank Norris's naturalistic "Brute," who picks Mrs. Manstey's beloved magnolia blossom and throws it to the ground (p. 121).²⁰ Nor in composing her work of art does the narrator ignore, as does Mrs. Manstey, the "untidiness" and "disorder" of broken barrels and empty bottles that litter the yards. Describing the restricted life of her elderly female character, Wharton employs both the sympathy and the respect of a Sarah Orne Jewett; but, unlike Jewett's, her classical allusions here are ironic, and her language is studded with uncertain phrases and half-heartedly presented alternatives that distance the narrator from her character: "Mrs. Manstey, perhaps, might have joined her daughter" (p. 117); "It was, perhaps, this tenderness" (p. 117); "Perhaps at heart Mrs. Manstey was an artist" (p. 118); "She might move" (p. 119). The self-conscious tentativeness of the repeated "perhaps" suggests the narrator's consideration, if not endorsement, of other possibilities for Mrs. Manstey, an open acceptance of change that distinguishes narrator from character. It is fitting that Mrs. Manstey's failure of vision parallels her final failure to communicate: she cannot express her dying wish to have the bow-window—her frame on the world—opened. Taking the local colorists' interest in quotidian detail to a disastrously mistaken extreme, Mrs. Manstey has sealed herself into the self-consuming and self-absorbed frame of her art.²¹

Its skeptical look at triumph through persistence, satisfaction through endurance, and strength in limitation marks "Mrs. Manstey's View" as a veiled critique of those local colorists whose "view" is as selective, enclosed, and circumscribed as that of the artist Mrs. Manstey. The rigid restrictions that give Mrs. Manstey's art its beauty also constrain her life and negate her ability to accept change. Because the subject of her art is both dynamic and evanescent, she can neither control nor preserve it, only maintain the illusion of control provided by the frame of the window and the barrier of the glass. Her room thus becomes simultaneously the "room of one's own" necessary for women artists and a self-created prison where she must, like so many local color characters, make the best life she can from the materials available to her. The voyeuristic overtones of her art suggest that she has lost the capacity for meaningful intervention in the world she sees but will not join. She becomes a symbol of the sort of artist that Wharton was determined not to be.

Bunner Sisters, according to Edmund Wilson an “undeservedly neglected” short novel,²² explores the same fictional terrain between local color and naturalism as “Mrs. Manstey’s View.” Written in 1891–92, *Bunner Sisters* remained unpublished until its inclusion in *Xingu* (1916), although the story was reportedly a favorite of Wharton’s.²³ Like *The Age of Innocence*, the story is set in the 1870s, “when society applauded Christine Nilsson at the Academy of Music,” but the New York of Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner is worlds away from the fashionable purviews of Newland Archer and May Welland.²⁴ “Bunner Sisters” is the name of the sisters’ “very small shop, in a shabby basement, in a side-street already doomed to decline” (p. 187), a street of rooming houses like Mrs. Manstey’s and small businesses not unlike the Polk Street of *McTeague*. Wharton provides the traditional naturalistic catalogue of squalor in describing the street:

The middle of the street was full of irregular depressions, well adapted to retain the long swirls of dust and straw and twisted paper that the wind drove up and down its sad untended length; and toward the end of the day, when traffic had been active, the fissured pavement formed a mosaic of coloured hand-bills, lids of tomato-cans, old shoes, cigar-stumps and banana skins, cemented together by a layer of mud, or veiled in a powdering dust, as the state of the weather determined (p. 188).

In the midst of this “depressing waste,” the storefront of Bunner Sisters stands out as an oasis of order, although, ominously, the evident care and cleanliness with which the store has been kept cannot save it from the general decline of the street.

Despite the urban landscape, the Bunner sisters initially live a life straight out of local color fiction. In contrast to the lavish, chaotic profusion of discarded objects outside, their window display is almost excessively ordered and unchanging, having “the undefinable greyish tinge of objects long preserved in the show-case of a museum” (p. 188), perhaps suggesting the place of the literary tradition that the sisters represent. Other local color elements abound: the interior of the store is also neat, sparsely furnished, and orderly even to the “two tea-cups, two plates, a sugar-bowl and a piece of pie” (p. 189) that constitute the rural birthday feast Ann Eliza prepares for Evelina. Although both women are presumably under forty, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner display prematurely elderly habits, including a fussiness over trifles and a

preference for the “monastic quiet of the shop” over the “tumult of the streets” (p. 193), traits that recall Freeman’s Louisa Ellis of “A New England Nun.” In addition, both sisters speak a kind of generalized country dialect, complete with dropped syllables (“s’posin’”) and rural pronunciations (“You hadn’t oughter say that. . . . Set down”). In defiance of the current fashion shown by the “lady with the puffed sleeves,” Ann Eliza wears as her best dress the same sort of respectable but rusty “double-dyed and triple-turned . . . sacramental black silk” (p. 189) that Freeman celebrates in “A Gala Dress.”²⁵ Their attitude, too, reflects the sort of resignation common to local color figures. Like the two sisters in Freeman’s “A Mistaken Charity,” who were “happy and contented, with [a] negative kind of happiness and contentment,” the Bunner sisters live a life of muted satisfaction.²⁶

The closeness of their companionship within this tiny local color community also manifests itself in the traditional activities of sewing and storytelling. Ann Eliza’s experiences in the city only become real or relevant to her when they are transformed into a means of cementing her relationship with Evelina:

Certain sights and sounds would detach themselves from the torrent along which she had been swept, and she would devote the rest of the day to a mental reconstruction of the different episodes of her walk, till finally it took shape in her thought as a consecutive and highly-coloured experience, from which, for weeks afterwards, she would detach some fragmentary recollection in the course of her long dialogues with her sister (p. 194).

The “mental reconstruction,” the shaping and polishing of mundane events into a suitable narrative, and the telling of the story in the process of “long dialogues” recall, for example, the narrative structure of Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, “On the Walpole Road,” and “Miss Tempy’s Watchers.” These small, carefully selected true episodes from which Ann Eliza creates her stories are a far cry from those of the histrionic dressmaker Miss Mellins, who “was always having or hearing of amazing adventures” (p. 205). Miss Mellins “derive[s] her chief mental nourishment from the *Police Gazette* and *Fireside Weekly*” (p. 205), and thus her tales are full of prophecy, poisonings, and sudden madness. She occupies a privileged position—“the title-role in blood-curdling drama had long been her recognized right” (p. 205)—and her stories, like her “turns” of hysterical illness, supply a necessary element of

excitement to the circumscribed lives of the sisters and their neighbors. Within such demonstrably safe surroundings, Miss Mellins' lurid tales appear to have a comfortable air of unreality; yet one tale she tells, that of a bride whose husband "took to drink" and who "never was the same woman after her fust baby" (p. 205) foretells chillingly the fate of Evelina when she leaves the enclosed world of the shop. Surrounded by the small, supportive community of women who live in the neighborhood, supported by their few regular customers, including a mysterious and fashionable stand-in for Wharton, a "lady with the puffed sleeves,"²⁷ the Bunner sisters contrive to make of their life together a thing perfect of its kind.

The major portion of the story chronicles the destruction of this peaceful local color existence, a process that provides the sisters with a bitter initiation into the naturalistic "real life" beyond the threshold of their shop, and, for the more self-aware Ann Eliza, a harsh reassessment of the values she holds dear.²⁸ It is Ann Eliza who unwittingly initiates the process of destruction. With characteristic self-denial, she goes without a new pair of shoes in order to get Evelina a birthday present; the "loud staccato tick" of the clock (p. 195) she buys signals not only the intrusion of Herman Ramy, the clock repairman for whose intentions they compete, but of present time itself, thus ending their existence as characters in the undifferentiated time of local color fiction. Mr. Ramy's appearance also marks Ann Eliza's growing discontent with the modest satisfactions she has previously enjoyed: "All the small daily happenings which had once sufficed to fill the hours now appeared to her in their deadly insignificance; and for the first time in her long years of drudgery she rebelled at the dullness of her life" (p. 197). When her self-centered younger sister Evelina—she of the "elaborately crinkled hair" (p. 197)—meets and unofficially claims Mr. Ramy as her own, Ann Eliza, "well-trained in the arts of renunciation" (p. 199), removes herself from the competition, but a rift has opened between the sisters. Just as their harmony is disturbed by the thoughts that they no longer are free to articulate, the stability of their synergistic roles of storyteller and audience is disrupted by the tales Mr. Ramy tells and the poems he reads. A German immigrant who has lived in St. Louis, Mr. Ramy reads a longfellow to the sisters and introduces them to the larger world. Traveling on an endless series of jolting streetcars and crowded ferryboats, they experience as marvelous the ordinary places he shows them: Central Park, a stereopticon show, the dingy rural suburbs of Hoboken. The sisters' community and its rituals have been breached by this

representative from the threatening world beyond their shop.

The communication between the sisters is further strained when Mr. Ramy proposes to the "wrong sister" Ann Eliza, a situation that parodies, according to Elizabeth Ammons, "Howells' subplot in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*."²⁹ Having already consecrated herself to her sister's happiness and embraced "the chill joy of renunciation" (p. 207), much as Freeman's Eunice Fairweather does in "A Moral Exigency," Ann Eliza of course refuses him, but her purposeful withdrawal from romance allows her to see more clearly Evelina's vanity and selfishness. Ann Eliza begins to withhold her true self but continues to display an overpowering maternal protectiveness that expresses itself through self-denying acts, such as giving Evelina, at Mr. Ramy's request, all of the sisters' savings. Cash, not affectionate explanation, is now the medium of communication between the sisters; naturalistic economic exchange has replaced local color talk. After Evelina's wedding, the strained communication between the sisters comes to a virtual halt as Ann Eliza's storytelling ability, and consequently her ability to stay connected with the community, deserts her: "the 'talking over' on which [the neighbors] had evidently counted was Dead Sea fruit on her lips" (p. 232). She receives an inscrutably vague letter from Evelina, one whose cliché-riddled, comically ornate public discourse is but a poor substitute for the homely clarity of the natural, private talk that the sisters share.³⁰ Not surprisingly, Ann Eliza "emerge[s] impressed but unenlightened from the labyrinth of Evelina's eloquence" (p. 234). The physical distance between them is cemented by obfuscatory language that is worse than silence.

From the comic misunderstandings of romance, *Bunner Sisters* descends into melodrama and, finally, into the naturalistic world of the streets. Stories of unpleasant reality replace the pleasantly melodramatic stories of Miss Mellins: surrounded at Tiffany's by ticking clocks suggestive of her time-dominated post-lapsarian state, Ann Eliza learns of Mr. Ramy's drug problem; returning to the shop after her marriage, Evelina "pile[s] up, detail by detail, her dreary narrative" (p. 251) of her child's birth and death, of Ramy's abuse and abandonment, and of begging in the streets, a tale quite unlike the uneventful happenings she used to report. Like the naturalistic "brute" who crushes Mrs. Manstey's magnolia blossom underfoot, Mr. Ramy is thus identified as a disruptive, threatening emissary from the world of naturalism, and Evelina has moved from her sister's local color world to a naturalistic one. This dose of unpleasant reality ironically turns Ann Eliza back into

a storyteller, this time as a creator of false rather than true stories. Miss Mellins had invented lurid stories of the city and brought some controlled excitement into their safe environment; now Ann Eliza must invent stories of safety to conceal the terrifying reality of their plight. Knowing at last the "truth" of life as it is lived outside the shop, she must use her fictive arts to conceal Evelina's situation, just as she had once used similar arts to conceal the breach between her feelings and her actions when Evelina fell in love with Mr. Ramy.

The concluding sections of *Bunner Sisters* emphasize the completeness of the sisters' assimilation into the naturalistic world of "real life" and the utter hopelessness of their plight. As Evelina reveals her final betrayal—conversion to Roman Catholicism—Ann Eliza barely protests, for the faith that had early caused her to kneel in fervent prayer has given way to the belief that "if he was not good he was not God, and here was only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sisters" (p. 254). The dissociation of time from faith that had begun when Ann Eliza gauged time by the nickel clock instead of the church tower is completed when she denies that either time or faith has a place in her life: she saw the church tower with the dial that had marked the hours for the sisters before [she] had bought the nickel clock. She looked at it all as though it had been the scene of some unknown life" (p. 262). Her refusal is ironic, however, for she has moved into the clock-metered biological time of naturalistic fiction, where the natural processes of decay chip away at the advantages of youth and strength. Having lost her savings, her shop, her faith, and her sister, she plunges into the indifferent "great thoroughfare" of the city and asks about a position as a saleslady, only to be told that the stores "want a bright girl . . . not over thirty, anyhow; and nice-looking" (p. 263). Like Mrs. Manstey, whose movement beyond the "frame" of her bow window costs her her life, Ann Eliza, bereft of the safe "frame" of her shop window, faces the dangers of the city alone. She looks for a replacement refuge, "another shop window with a sign on it," in much the same way that Carrie Meeber and Susan Lenox were to do. But unlike Carrie and Susan, she is neither eighteen years old nor beautiful; in a world that favors those who are young, male, prosperous, and well-connected, she remains a local color heroine—old, female, poor, and alone. It reverses the happy ending of the heroine starting fresh, marking instead, as Edmund Wilson comments, "the grimmest moment of Edith Wharton's darkest years."³¹

Bunner Sisters, like "Mrs. Manstey's View," calls into question some of the most seriously held beliefs of local color fiction: the critique of

limited perspective and subject matter in "Mrs. Manstey's View" gives way here to a persistent attempt to refute the power of renunciation. Ann Eliza sacrifices everything for her sister, giving up Mr. Ramy, her savings, her shop, and her relationship with Evelina itself. Her reward for all this is Evelina's self-pity, selfishness, simpering vanity, and peevish demands for yet more sacrifice, for Ann Eliza, like Ethan Frome, is "tied to an inferior partner."³² In addition, she must face the possibility that she is, as Evelina hints, somehow to blame; after all, she did bring the clock home and help the courtship along. Part of Ann Eliza's education is learning to confront, as she now does, that Howellsian dilemma, "the awful problem of the inutility of self-sacrifice":

Hitherto she had never thought of questioning the inherited principles which had guided her life. Self-effacement for the good of others had always seemed to her both natural and necessary; but then she had taken it for granted that it implied the securing of that good. Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not ensure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered; and her familiar heaven was unpeopled (p. 254).

Ammons objects that "there have been no 'gifts of life' to surrender, much less transmit,"³³ but if one can accept the local color notion that the "silvery twilight hue which sometimes ends a day of storm" (p. 188) or, less poetically, the small daily pleasures of the sisters represent a satisfying life, then Ann Eliza's turn of phrase must be accepted as legitimate. Both Mrs. Manstey and Ann Eliza make tremendous sacrifices to preserve something they value, and in neither case does the action have any meaning. Both risk everything they have, and lose.

The evidence of Wharton's repudiation of, and by extension her deep engagement with, local color and naturalism can be found in many of her writings. It underlies the irritated references to naturalism in her correspondence, and it exists in the earnest and atypical explanations of her work that she offers in the Introduction to *Ethan Frome* and in *A Backward Glance*. Even more convincing is the fictional representation of this struggle for autonomy. "Mrs. Manstey's View" offers a picture of a woman artist so hampered by the limitations of her art, and so dependent upon others for preserving its conditions, that she can ultimately maintain her sense of artistic integrity only through a violent action that leads to her death. The story suggests both Wharton's fear

of entrapment within an unnecessarily limited tradition and her apprehension that a radical break could destroy her promising career; as Wharton probably recognized, the familiar local color elements of "Mrs. Manstey's View" may have helped this first story of hers to be published.

Bunner Sisters, Wharton's most overt exploration of naturalism and local color fiction, deserves to be better known than it is, not only because of its considerable literary merit, but because it provides in miniature an account of the literary shift from local color to naturalism from the standpoint of a woman writer who prepared herself to meet the challenge. Versed in the self-sacrificing ethos of local color fiction, Ann Eliza Bunner interprets the world with a deadly innocence and a willful insistence on what Wharton saw as its rosy light of romance, and she pays for her misreading in her naturalistically conceived fate. Wharton's strategy, in these early works as in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, was to engage, transform, and finally dismiss both genres within her own highly conscious fiction. Determined not to emulate her hapless creature Ann Eliza Bunner, Wharton took care not to be stuck in what she saw as the timeless, self-sacrificing confines of local color fiction until changing literary fashions should figuratively throw her out onto the littered naturalistic streets.

Notes

¹ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 293.

² Josephine Donovan's *Local Color: A Woman's Tradition* (New York: Felix Ingar, 1983) and *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1988) take this approach, which here provides a way of conceptualizing Wharton's antipathy for the movement. For other feminist approaches, see Millicent Bell's "Female Regional Writing: An American Tradition," *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 1 (1986), 469-80 for the local colorists' use of dialect as the language of marginality; Elizabeth Ammons' Introduction to Rose Terry Cooke's *How Celia Changed Her Mind and Other Stories* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1986) for the use of the sketch as a local color form; and Alice Hall Petry's "Universal and Particular: The Local-Color Phenomenon Reconsidered," *ALR*, 12 (1979), 111-26, for the use of the quotidian; and Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse's Introduction to *American Women Regionalists 1850-1910* (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. xi-xx.

³ Candace Waid provides a thorough and convincing analysis of Wharton's debt in *Summer* to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's story "Old Woman Magoun" in

Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 87-125.

⁴ Charles Miner Thompson, "New Figures in Literature and Art: Hamlin Garland," *Atlantic*, 76 (December 1895), 840.

⁵ Paul Shorey, "Present Conditions of Literary Production," *Atlantic*, 78 (1896), 170.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of regional fiction that goes far beyond the severely limited version presented here, see Richard H. Brodhead's chapters "The Reading of Regions" and "Jewett, Regionalism, and Writing as Women's Work," in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁷ Ann Douglas (Wood), "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914," *Women's Studies*, 1 (1972), 3-45.

⁸ Charles Dudley Warner, "Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 92 (May 1896), 961.

⁹ James Lane Allen, "Two Principles in Recent American Fiction," *Atlantic*, 80 (October 1897), 439.

¹⁰ Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 6.

¹¹ Quoted by Millicent Bell in *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 293. June Howard's model of spectatorship and the threat of proletarianization in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985) informs my argument here.

¹² Sarah Orne Jewett's "A Little Captive Maid," Octave Thanet's "A Recognition," and two stories by Thomas Nelson Page appeared in the same volume. The same approximate period of the summer and fall of 1891 reveals the similar content of other major literary journals: *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, for example, featured Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Failure of David Berry," travel writing by Constance Fenimore Woolson, and novels by William Dean Howells and "Charles Egbert Craddock" (Mary N. Murfree); and *The Century* contained a novel by Edward Eggleston, a story by Hamlin Garland, and poetry by Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman).

¹³ Edith Wharton, "Mrs. Manstey's View," *Scribner's Magazine*, 10 (1891), 117. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

¹⁴ In *A Feast of Words* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes that "Mrs. Manstey is revealed to us in a series of reductions" (p. 65), a term that recalls Ann Douglas's characterization of local color as a "literature of impoverishment." Most recent critics, however, would disagree with Douglas's

generally negative view of local color fiction.

¹⁵ R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 61.

¹⁶ Barbara A. White, *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1991), p. 33.

¹⁷ Gwen Nagel, "'This prim corner of land where she was queen': Sarah Orne Jewett's New England Gardens," *Colby Library Quarterly*, 22 (March 1986), 43.

¹⁸ Examples of such stories would include Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A Poetess" and "A Village Singer" and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

¹⁹ Wharton exaggerates the size of the hole by referring to the "pond" of Curtius in the Roman Forum. According to the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, upon hearing that the great cleft in the Roman forum would not close unless the "chief strength of Rome" was thrown into it, Curtius "rode fully armed into the cleft" (p. 163).

²⁰ In Norris's early sketch "Brute," the eponymous main character shows his appreciation of beauty by solemnly eating a flower that he admires. Wharton's brute does not even display this amount of sensitivity to beauty.

²¹ Wharton's use of "framing" here anticipates her much more extensive use of it in later works. For a discussion of this device in *Summer*, see Jean Frantz Blackall's "Charity at the Window: Narrative Technique in Edith Wharton's *Summer*," in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 115-26.

²² Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," *The Wound and the Bow* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1941), p. 204.

²³ Elizabeth Ammons reports this in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 13.

²⁴ Edith Wharton, *Bunner Sisters*, in *Xingu* (1916), repr. in *The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, ed. and introd. Wayne Andrews (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 187. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

²⁵ In "A Gala Dress" (1891), the two elderly Babcock sisters share a single black silk dress between them, laboriously resewing the trimmings after each wearing to preserve the illusion that they each own a dress. Their gesture does not escape their spiteful neighbor, Matilda Jennings. After Emily steps on some firecrackers and ruins the flounce, the sisters refuse to go out together, allowing tales of their estrangement to spread rather than admit their poverty. The situation is resolved when an aunt dies, leaving them two black silks; they generously give the old dress to Matilda, whose jealousy has caused her to try to expose their ruse.

²⁶ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "A Mistaken Charity," repr. in *Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New York: Norton, 1983), p. 44.

²⁷ In *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), after noting that R. W. B. Lewis identifies Wharton as the mysterious shopper, Amy Kaplan provides a valuable insight into her role: "the writer and the reader, in the role of shoppers, are implicated in the forces that dispossess the sister and expose her to the streets. By framing the story with shop windows, Wharton implicitly adapts and critiques the class tourism and voyeurism which is presented by her contemporary male naturalists as scientific objective investigation" (p. 84). Kaplan emphasizes the vulnerability visited upon the sisters by this framed exposure, but, like Mrs. Manstey's bow-window, it also functions metaphorically as a (false) mode of protection, enclosing, protecting, and preserving the sisters from the naturalistic chaos of the street.

²⁸ Elements of this plot occur in some local color stories. The story also bears a striking resemblance to Arnold Bennett's naturalistic novel *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908).

²⁹ Ammons, p. 13.

³⁰ In *After the Fall*, Josephine Donovan says that this "inappropriately Johnsonian rhetoric" causes the sisters to lose contact "as they engage in patriarchal stylistics" (p. 45). Although she comments that "Wharton's own style [in her earliest work] was much more in the tradition of her New England local-color 'predecessors,' Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman" (p. 45), her discussion of both "Mrs. Manstey's View" and *Bunner Sisters* focuses more on Wharton's explorations of the Demeter-Persephone myth than on specific local color connections.

³¹ Wilson, p. 204.

³² Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1961), p. 126.

³³ Ammons, p. 14.