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CONFERENCE NEWS

EDITH WHARTON AT YALE

A Conference In Honor of R.W.B. Lewis

The bi-annual all Wharton conference will be held in New Haven April 28-30. The opening event will be a plenary session with Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Sharon Benstock and it will end with a plenary panel chaired by Alfred Bendixen. Seventy five participants will offer various papers and panels. Brochures are being sent to Wharton Society members. More information can be had from the conference directors: Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman and Candace Waid.

ALA MEETS IN BALTIMORE – MAY 27-30

The American Literature Association will hold its annual conference in Baltimore over the Memorial Day weekend. The association is primarily devoted to societies of individual authors. More information can be obtained from its executive director, Alfred Bendixen, California State University, Los Angeles, Department of English, Los Angeles, CA 90032. Two sessions on Wharton will be held.

Travel in Edith Wharton, Mary Suzanne Schriber, Northern Illinois University, moderator.

1. "Garden Plans and 'Dabby Sketches': Edith Wharton and The Illustrated Travel Book," Sarah Bird Wright, College of William and Mary.
2. "*Fighting France* as a Travel Narrative: Edith Wharton's Journey to the Front Line," Elaine Roberts, Northern Illinois University.
3. "Edith Wharton in Morocco: Europe's Limit and the Boundaries of Design," Brian Edwards, Yale University.

Tropes of Illness and Disability, Sandra Hayes, Notre Dame University, Moderator.

1. "Paralysis and Literalization in *The Fruit of the Tree,"* Ellen DuPree, University of Nevada.
2. "So Long: Artists' Fantasies of Spousal Illness in Edith Wharton's Fiction," Stanley Solomon, Fashion Inst. of Tech.
3. "Justice to Zeena Frome: Hysteria and the Tragic Script of Chronic Illness," Kristen Lauer, Fordham University.
4. "The Issue of Typhoid in 'The Other Two'," Gerald M. Sweeney, Univ. of Akron.

EDITH WHARTON AT THE MLA IN CHICAGO

Two sessions on Wharton are being planned for the annual MLA 1995 Convention meeting in Chicago, December 27-30. Titles and organizers are: "Edith Wharton and Modernism" with Carole Shaffer-Koros and "Edith Wharton and Film," with Augusta Rohrbach.

Edith Wharton's Gift to Nella Larsen: *The House of Mirth* and *Quicksand*

Meredith Goldsmith

The only explicit reference to Edith Wharton in Harlem Renaissance fiction comes from the disparaging voice of Byron Kasson, the New Negro protagonist of Carl Van Vechten's infamous best-seller, *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Kasson, a would-be novelist, bemoans his inability to find artistic material in black Harlem. When a white colleague urges him to turn his attention to Harlem's haute bourgeoisie, he snidely compares the salon world of the Talented Tenth to that of "an Edith Wharton novel." Wharton's plots, according to Van Vechten, are hackneyed, predictable, familiar enough to be dismissed in a sentence. Despite Van Vechten's dismissal of what I want to call "the Whartonian plot," his protege, Harlem Renaissance novelist Nella Larsen, was much less disparaging. Her 1928 novella *Quicksand* draws heavily on the same plot Van Vechten attacks, that of a heroine struggling with conventions of class and gender to arrive at individual and artistic agency, exploring the possibilities and limitations of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood.

Hazel Carby and Barbara Christian's studies of the evolution of African-American women's fiction attest to Larsen's abilities to confound not only categories of race and class but also traceable lines of literary affiliation. Both Carby and Christian read *Quicksand* as a break with its immediate predecessors – the novels of Pauline Hopkins and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Carby places Larsen at the beginning of a modern African-American feminist canon that privileges an "urban confrontation of race, class, and sexuality" over what she sees as Zora Neale Hurston's valorization of the rural folk or Jessie Fauset's enthusiastic support for the black middle class. I would argue, however, that placing Larsen at the beginning of the urban black feminist canon Carby describes (specifically Anne Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Dorothy West) does both Larsen and her counterparts a disservice – Larsen's disdain for urban (or rural) working-class blacks obviates such comparisons. Like her heroine, Helga Crane, Larsen seems uncomfortable in whichever tradition she is situated.

As Mary Dearborn suggests in her study of ethnic women's fiction, the mulatta literalizes the process of genealogy and radically questions the idea of origins. Similarly, Larsen's writing, a seeming anomaly in terms of both style and subject, demands an interrogation of its literary antecedents. In the same way that Helga Crane rejects the black middle-class identity thrust upon her by the Harlem elite and rural Southern blacks, and the exotic persona imposed upon by her white Danish kin, Larsen refuses to occupy a safe place within either an African-American or an American feminine canon. In effect, the literary traditions busily building themselves up around her bear an uncanny resemblance to "quicksand."

I want to argue that *Quicksand* functions as a critical rereading of the Whartonian plot, specifically that of *The House of Mirth*. While I am not arguing for (nor can I prove) intentionality on Larsen's part, it is my belief that Larsen manipulates the conventions of this plot to inscribe her work within a feminine literary tradition that problematizes class and racial categories. The intertextual relation between Wharton and Larsen resembles what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have coined the "ambivalent affiliation complex" (175-181) which suggests an

enabling way to open up the categories of race and class that might otherwise work against a comparative or intertextual reading of Larsen and Wharton. In doing so, I want to adapt Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's model of black female subjectivity that addresses, in her words, a "subject 'racialized' in the experiencing of gender" (19). Larsen and Wharton's commonality lies in their creation of subjects who are racialized through the experiences of both gender and class. Lily Bart's rapid descent down the social ladder brings her to an uncomfortable association with the Jewish Simon Rosedale. Like Rosedale's Jewishness, Lily's difference is framed in terms of race rather than class; by the final section of the novel, it becomes clear that neither marriage nor productive labor can assimilate either of them to the dominant order. In contrast, Helga Crane's tenuous relationship to the social order inheres in both race and class: she becomes an object of white desire because of her color (the white Danish elite convinces her to play the exotic, suppressing her urbane sophistication), and an object of black desire on the basis of her ostensible class position, the "air of good breeding" that characterizes her behavior (the black Harlem elite and the staff of the black college where she teaches encourage her to suppress her "racial love of gorgeousness"). The readings I offer here – focusing on the narrative trajectories of artistic agency and motherhood – demonstrate that Larsen exaggerates and literalizes what Wharton leaves largely unsaid.

Helga's middle-class sensibilities and her artistic energies come into conflict as her Danish relatives encourage her to take advantage of her exotic appearance, encouraging her to dress in flamboyant clothing and jewelry. Helga's failure to realize her artistic capabilities forms an ironic counterpoint to Lily Bart's triumphant moment in the *tableau vivant*. Each viewer seizes on one aspect of Lily's self-presentation, failing to see it in its entirety: Selden reads the moment psychologically, as an attempt to convey the "real Lily Bart," while Ned Van Alstyne sees it erotically, as evidence of Lily's desire to show her physical perfection. Jack Stepney, Lily's cousin, reduces her performance to a piece of economic self-promotion, the behavior of a woman "up at auction" (*HOM*, 211). Rosedale, ironically perhaps the most perceptive reader of the event, pledges that "if he could get Paul Morpeth [the artist who directs the tableaux], to paint her like that, the picture'd appreciate a hundred percent in ten years" (*HOM*, 210). The only viewer who does not attempt to psychologize Lily, Rosedale sees the portrait, rather than Lily, solely in terms of its future value.

The brilliance of Lily's performance lies in its multivalence – in her performance, as in her life, she is a floating signifier, producing different meanings in different readers. The failure of Lily's performance, or of Lily herself as performer, lies in her inability to anticipate these readings in her audience. In contrast, Axel Olsen's portrait of Helga Crane produces a monolithic reading of its subject. In Olsen's view, the portrait, which Helga terms a distortion, becomes "the real Helga Crane"; he addresses an ambiguously described proposal (Larsen leaves unclear whether it is for marriage or, in Helga's words, "something easier" [*Q*, 84]). As the portrait ironically acquires dimensionality for Olsen, Helga is reduced to a two-dimensional visual signifier, the frozen, "unhearing" body of the *tableau vivant*. Although Olsen seems to recapitulate Rosedale's interests in reducing Helga to a portrait, these moves are in fact quite different. In emphasizing that it is the "picture" whose value would appreciate, Wharton removes Lily from Rosedale's connoisseurial gaze. What Olsen envisions, more insidiously, is that the representation captures the "real," Helga Crane, and that it is the subject of the portrait who must imitate the representation.

The differences between the reactions to the portrait and those to the *tableau* suggest that for Larsen, the doubled dispossession of black women overrides the unconscious auto-erotic pleasure Lily Bart gains from showing her body. Helga's reaction to the portrait and its success betray the consequences of being reduced to an aesthetic object – "[i]t wasn't . . . herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (*Q*, 89). The painting is housed "on the line at an annual exhibition," where "collectors, artists, and critics" are "unanimous in their praise" (*Q*, 89) – unlike Lily's performance in the *tableau vivant*, it is quite literally "up at auction." Despite Lily's increasing liminality in the society world, she is still, at the moment of the tableau, an insider; her triumphant performance reannounces her centrality. In contrast, Helga Crane's color and single status necessitate her alienation from Danish culture. Publicizing her sensuality to a universally white audience ensures that her "realness," her intention, will be distorted. The painting fixes Helga's ambivalence, reduces her to a sign with only one reading.

Ironically, the only spectator who shares Helga's view of the portrait is the Danish maid, Marie, who considers

it "bad, wicked"; the maid and the exotic mulatta, despite their racial and class differences, share similar positions with respect to the elite Danish culture of Helga's white relatives. Ironically bound by Helga's privilege on one hand and Marie's disenfranchisement on the other, they assure the white Danish elite of its own authority. Their common reactions signify Helga's inability to suppress her racial identity. Her American color consciousness, a custom her Danish relatives urge her to put behind her, identifies her more strongly with the maid (to whose position she would be relegated in America but for her education) than with her own kin.

Larsen subtly, but swiftly moves past the possibility of bonds between women whose racial and class backgrounds differ. In the Nettie Struther episode, Wharton similarly flirts with the possibility of female friendship across class lines. Nettie Struther provides Lily Bart with a brief fantasy of maternal domesticity, previously awakened only by Lily's glimpse of a fireside moment between Simon Rosedale and Carry Fisher's child. Wharton and Lily sentimentalize Nettie Struther's maternity; the girl's anemic pallor transforms into an "irradiated" gaze as she holds her baby. Lily fails to realize that Nettie's shabbiness and pallor might not be solely attributable to her work, but might also represent the effects of child-rearing in poverty, a condition with which Helga Crane will become all too familiar.

Lily's final thought before drifting off into her final night's sleep, is of course, that "she ought to keep awake on account of the baby." In what seems an ironic commentary on Lily's last moment, Freud notes that female suicides often represent repressed desires for pregnancy (*SE, XVIII,* 162ff). Helga Crane's multiple childbirths and their aftermath pose a corrective to both Lily Bart's maternal fantasy and the Freudian reading of suicide as sublimated maternal desire. Perhaps Larsen's most critical revision of the Whartonian plot is the translation of motherhood from rosy blur to painful, dulling reality. Before Helga's pregnancies begin, she professes a view of motherhood as maudlin as Lily's: "the smallest, dirtiest, brown child . . . was an emblem to her of the wonder of life, God's love, and goodness" (*Q,* 121). Savagely ironic in view of Helga's previously keen aesthetic sense and cynicism toward religion, such optimism vanishes when Helga's pregnancies begin. Larsen bluntly undermines Helga's sentimentalization of rural motherhood: "the children," she writes, "used her up" (*Q,* 123).

What for most of *The House of Mirth* remains hypothetical becomes fact in *Quicksand.* Helga Crane almost dies giving birth to her fourth child – the novel ends with her almost certain death as she begins to give birth to the fifth. The children do, in fact, use her up. Nettie Struther's narrative function, simultaneously rescuing Lily while hastening her on to her death, obliterates Wharton's chances of exploring her character or her circumstances. Earlier, even when Lily Bart fears that she is perceived as a prostitute – "I've taken what they take, and not paid as they pay" – she retains her authority despite Gus's demands for compensation. Meanwhile, Helga is "accosted" by a man on her first day in Chicago, informed she "has the soul of a prostitute" by Olsen, called a "Jezebel" by the female parishioners in a Harlem church. In New York, she is literally "tossed into the gutter." Lily Bart's death prevents her from realizing "the intense clearness of her vision" of the consequences of her projected failure to repay her debt to Trenor; perhaps it saves Wharton from having to envision what would happen next, if Lily were to slide even deeper into poverty. Despite Lily's idealization of Nettie Struther's existence, for Lily Bart to become a Nettie Struther would

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Thwarted Escapes: *Ethan Frome* and Jean Stafford's "A Country Love Story"

Elsa Nettels

Jean Stafford, in her essay "Truth in Fiction" (1966), suggests that her reading of Edith Wharton's novels had a profound influence on her own writing during a critical period in her life, the winter of 1948-49. At that time, Stafford had published two well-received novels, *Boston Adventure* and *The Mountain Lion,* and was living alone in New York struggling in vain to write a third novel, to be titled 'In the Snowfall.' To escape the noise in her apartment building, she recalls, she went to the New York Public Library to write. "In the quiet there I would come to terms with my book. But I tended to come to terms with the books Edith Wharton had written rather than with the one I had not" (4562). Shortly afterwards she put aside her own novel, which she never finished.

Stafford does not say which novels of Wharton she read, or what moved her to read them, or what effects, if any, her reading had on her decision to abandon her own work. But one may surmise that she turned to Edith Wharton's fiction because she felt affinities with her predecessor. Indeed, reviewers of Stafford's novels identified her with both James and Wharton. For instance, Richard Hayes found in *The Catherine Wheel* (1952) "the oppressive concern with elegance and *decor* which afflicts even the best of Edith Wharton's fiction" but concluded that "like Mrs. Wharton, Miss Stafford has written a novel to compel the imagination and nourish the mind" (404-405). Another reviewer of *The Catherine Wheel,* John McAleer, declared Jean Stafford "properly linked" with Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Wharton (113).

Henry James was always Stafford's idol, but of the four writers, Edith Wharton is the one with whom Stafford has the most in common. The resemblances between them are especially notable in their short fiction. Characters rendered powerless by the roles they feel they must play, women seeking escape from marriages that threaten to destroy them, the vacuity and cruelty of fashionable society made significant only by the value of what it destroys – these themes so prominent in Wharton's fiction are developed as powerfully by Jean Stafford as by any other of Wharton's successors. Wharton's narrative techniques were congenial to Stafford as well: the transformation of objects and settings into symbolic representations of mental states; the critical exposure of a pleasure-loving society by dialogue which engulfs and isolates its victims; the ironic turns of plot culminating in revelations of truth long unsuspected or unacknowledged but implicit in the opening paragraphs.

The legacy received by Jean Stafford is illuminated by comparison of Wharton's most famous work, *Ethan Frome,* with one of Stafford's best known stories, "A Country Love Story," first published in *The New Yorker* (1950) and reprinted in seven anthologies. (Only "In the Zoo," anthologized nine times, has been reprinted more often.)

Like *Ethan Frome,* which could well bear Stafford's ironic title, "A Country Love Story" portrays the disintegration of a marriage undermined by the illness that one character exploits to dominate the other. In Stafford's story, a young woman May and her husband Daniel, an historian old enough to be her father, buy an abandoned farmhouse in a remote part of New England. Daniel is recovering from tuberculosis, which confined him in a sanatarium for a year. His doctor, overruling

May's objections, has insisted that Daniel must have continued rest and solitude, away from the stimulation of university politics and city life. (May's resistance to this move recalls the famous protests of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf against enforced isolation mandated by male doctors.)

During the summer months Daniel and May take walks together and make plans to renovate their house. As winter approaches, they gradually withdraw from each other, as if the cold had numbed their energies. As in *Ethan Frome,* the first sign of trouble is the dwindling of conversation. May begins to feel that "they were silent too much of the time," "too bemused with country solitude to talk" (134). As she watches her husband, lost "in his private musings," she wonders "what it was that had stilled [their] tongues" (134). The house that once represented the new life they would make together now menaces her, "somehow enveloping her as if it were their common enemy, maliciously bent on bringing them to disaster" (138).

As Daniel, a modern Casaubon, repeatedly refuses his wife's company and sequesters himself in his study, each becomes resentful of the other's mental state – May of Daniel's selfish absorption in his work; Daniel of his wife's expressions of loneliness. Like Wharton's Zenobia, May feels herself disregarded, shut out from the vital sources of her husband's life. "Scholarship and illness had usurped her place" (138). Like Ethan Frome, she finds her escape from life-destroying solitude in visions of love with another person, which create in her "a certain stirring of life" (140), such as Ethan feels when Mattie Silver enters the household.

Stafford's story represents the consciousness of the wife, May; Wharton's narrator renders his vision of Ethan's experience, but the similarities in the situations are numerous: the isolation of husband and wife in a lonely New England farmhouse in winter; the deterioration of the marriage, marked by growing intensities of silence in which feelings of hostility, suspicion, and frustration gather strength; the power of objects, notably a sled and a sleigh, to induce futile longing for escape. Both May and Ethan Frome allow themselves to be entrapped by marriage partners who directly or by innuendo accuse them of faithlessness. Both May and Ethan, in a moment of clarifying vision that comes in the depths of the night, realize that they are doomed. As Ethan Frome sees himself "a prisoner of life," forever chained to his ailing wife (134), so May finally sees her husband with paralyzing clarity: "He is old! He is ill!" (144), and knows that "no change would come" (145).

The most telling difference between the two stories is that in "A Country Love Story" there is no character to correspond to Mattie Silver. The lover to whom May turns in frustrated longing is only an illusion, the creation of her morbid imagination. What produces the "stirring of life" is only a phantom with whom she carries on imaginary conversations. Scenes of spring walks and summer picnics exist only in her haunted mind. Her awareness that she is sliding into madness only intensifies her need to feel the reality of the imagined lover: she "depended wholly on his companionship" (141). "When she was alone, she felt her lover's presence protecting her" (142).

In both stories, the figure of the beloved is a kind of double of the marriage partner. The lover May envisions is an hallucinatory image of a young man destined to her husband's illness. "He was younger than she had imagined him to be and he seemed rather frail, for there was a delicate pallor on his high, intelligent forehead and there was an invalid's langour in his whole attitude" (144). Mattie Silver is not a phantom; she survives the attempted suicide to grow old and querulous and witch-like, like Zenobia. Ethan's repeated cry to Mattie as she prepares to leave the farm – "'You can't go, Matt! I won't let you!'" (120, 123) – comes true in a way he could never have imagined. May's visionary lover, whom she sees for the last time, sitting on the old sleigh never moved from the front of their house, vanishes forever, and she knows that "she would never see her lover again" (145).

This difference not only separates two stories but illuminates a difference between two generations of writers. Unlike Stafford's characters, Wharton's protagonists do not evade the realities of their situations through madness but suffer them in full consciousness to the end, like Gracie in "The Bolted Door," who is tormented by a sense of "his fixed identity, of his irreducible, inexpugnable *selfness,*" imprisoned in "the iron circle of consciousness" (II, 23). Wharton's characters who have visions expressive of neurotic fears and obsessions appear in the ghostly tales where the possibility always exists that the visionary experience may be supernatural in origin. (For instance, the red-rimmed eyes that peer at Culwin in the darkness of "The Eyes" could be the hallucination of a deranged mind but seem to materialize in the world outside himself.)

Unlike Wharton, Stafford denominated none of her stories "ghostly tales." Delusions and hallucinations and

fixations originate in the minds of the characters who people the natural everyday world of her fiction. May in "A Country Love Story" is but one of many Stafford characters who escape "the iron circle of consciousness" in phantasy and delusion. Among them are a compulsive eater who phantasizes her younger, thinner self as a twin sister who died ("The Echo and the Nemesis"), a woman who becomes deaf to shut out the hectoring voice of her financée ("Beatrice Trueblood's Story"), women suffering from depression and psychosomatic illness ("An Influx of Poets," "The Warlock," "Children Are Bored on Sunday"). According to William Peden, "the smell of the sickroom permeates some of the most memorable stories of Jean Stafford" (83). It was Stafford's fiction that prompted his observation that in the middle decades of the twentieth century "the twilight half-world of the mentally ill" became an important subject for an increasing number of fiction writers (69-70).

The "smell of the sickroom" is not absent from the fiction of Edith Wharton. One thinks of Bessie Amherst lying in morphine-induced stupor in *The Fruit of the Tree;* the stricken husband in "The Journey" who dies on the train carrying him and his wife to New York; Zenobia Frome, whose illnesses become her all-consuming occupation. But in Wharton's work, illness never signals an escape from action; illness drives the plot, often moving characters to acts they otherwise would never have comtemplated.

Jean Stafford herself identified Edith Wharton with an earlier generation, but she did so in a startling way. In a sharply ironic story "The Captain's Gift" (1946), Stafford portrays the disillusionment of an elderly widow, Mrs. Ramsey, who lives in a once fashionable square in New York, wears black taffeta dresses of her mother's era, and preserves the rituals of a vanished world, making her house an "ivory tower," "impregnable to the ill-smelling, rude-sounding, and squalid-looking world which . . .now surrounds her" (439). Her grandsons are in the army fighting the Axis powers in Europe, but she has no comprehension of the war. "She speaks of Germany and Japan as if they were still nothing more than two foreign countries of which she has affectionate memories . . . If someone speaks of the mistakes of Versailles, she quite genuinely believes he refers to the way the flower beds are laid out in the palace gardens" (441). She has "refused to acknowledge the death of the past" (439), but she "remains altogether charming," gracious mistress of a wit "bright and Edwardian" (440). In short, she is an "innocent child of seventy-five" (440); to the younger generation, "she is their link with the courtly past, she is Mrs. Wharton at first hand" (442).

The reader is astonished that Stafford could identify "an innocent child of seventy-five" with Edith Wharton the novelist, who in her seventies was writing *The Buccaneers* and completed several of her greatest stories, including "Roman Fever," "Pomegranate Seed," and "All Souls'." Far from being oblivious of European politics in the 1930s, she was, in R.W.B. Lewis's words, "more alert than ever to the changing world around her, and the major dramas of the day" (504). She listened to Hitler's speeches on the wireless, appalled by the spread of fascist tyranny in what she called "this angry sombre world" (Lewis, 505). She created the ironies in "Roman Fever," in which the two mothers know nothing of the government served by "those young Italian aviators" entertaining their daughters and think that, unlike the city of their own youth, Mussolini's Rome poses "no more dangers than the middle of Main Street" (II, 834, 837).

Intentionally or not, in "The Captain's Gift" Stafford created a caricature of a pervasive idea of Edith Wharton as the *grande dame* encased in privilege, frozen in the past, cut off from the lives of her contemporaries outside the walls of her protected world. Wharton herself acknowledged her pained awareness of the popular view in letters to younger writers who sent her their books.

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Edith Wharton's Gardens as a Legacy to Alice Walker

Mia Manzulli

Elaine Showalter has suggested that Edith Wharton belonged to the:

> countertradition of women writers who were torn between the literary world of their fathers and the wordless sensual world of their mothers. These two lines of inheritance are generally represented in the literary history of American women writers by the spatial images of the father's library and the mother's garden.[1]

At first glance, Alice Walker would seem to have little in common with Wharton or this countertradition: her father did not have a library. Yet with another look, or a "backward glance," it is evident that Wharton and Walker share limited access to *a* father's library – the canon – which in turn leads them into the garden. I would like to suggest that Wharton revises the construct of the mother's garden: she considers the garden a place of work and *words,* not a "wordless, sensual world." Walker then inherits that garden as a space for female creativity. The garden thus become a shared "cultural symbol"[2] for both black and white women writers who, according to Walker, are "writing one immense story."[3]

In *A Backward Glance,* Wharton recalls that she spent a great deal of her childhood in her father's library where she roamed freely, reading "the wide expanse of the classics, English, French, and German," including history, poetry and philosophy.[4] As if in anticipation of future scrutiny, Wharton carefully remarks: "Nowadays a reader might see only the *lacunae* of the little library in which my mind was formed; but, small as it was, it included most of the essentials" (66). Notably missing from her reading, however, was contemporary fiction; Lucretia Jones required her daughter to ask permission before reading any novels and almost always refused it. Although in her later years Wharton is able to claim, "At all events, of the many prohibitions imposed on me . . . there is none for which I am more grateful than this . . . By denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish my mother threw me back on the great classics" (65), her access to literature was undeniably limited. Furthermore, when Edith Jones was seventeen, her parents "decided that [she] spent too much time reading" and that she was to make her debut "a year before the accepted age" (77). Wharton then shelved her early literary ambitions among the volumes in her father's library.

Alice Walker's father didn't possess a "gentleman's library," but for Walker, the "father's library" is the canon, the writers traditionally taught to college students in the 1960s. In fact, Walker's college library was not so different from that of George Jones, Wharton's father. These "father's libraries," while offering the classics, denied their readers access to certain writers. After her graduation from Sarah Lawrence, Walker "began to realize that [her] lessons . . . had left crucial areas empty, and had, in fact, contributed to a blind spot in [her] education" (131). What she realized was that she had not studied Richard Wright or W.E.B. Dubois; that the anthology of verse she studied was edited by a Sarah Lawrence professor who "had not thought to include a single poem by a black poet" (131). And so:

I began to feel that subtly and without intent

> or malice, I had been miseducated. For where my duty as a black poet, writer, and teacher would take me, people would have little need of Keats and Byron or even Robert Frost, but much need of Hughes, Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. (132).

Given the limitations of the father's library it would seem only natural that Wharton and Walker search for an alternative space. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out that:

> . . . though Wharton never allowed herself to imagine utopian alternatives, she did seek to circumvent [patriarchal] laws in a number of devious ways: in life, through the energetic decoration of (her own) houses; . . . and through hints at an untellable tale of female power and guarded allusions to the alien language in which it would have to be told.[5]

I would add that Wharton's embrace of the garden is another such circumvention; the garden acts as an alternative space to the laws of the father's library.

In Showalter's paradigm, the female artist must choose between the library and the garden. What complicates Wharton's position for Showalter is that this writer did not "have the childhood alternative of her mother's garden — a space of sensuality, warmth, and openness" (37). While I agree that Wharton did not have a *mother's* garden (unlike Alice Walker, as will become evident), she nonetheless established a relationship to the land at an early age. The chapter of *A Backward Glance* in which Wharton recalls her father's library, also reveals her "secret sensitiveness to the landscape," a communion with the land that leads her away from the library and into the garden (54).

The importance of the garden to Wharton as writer is further illustrated when one considers the planning of The Mount, her home in Lenox. The planting of her garden was, of course, a laborious task, the planning and creation largely taking place between 1903 and 1905. Although Wharton did consult her niece, noted landscape architect Beatrix Jones, "it is strongly assumed that she was primarily her own landscape designer, drawing on accumlated knowledge."[6] In addition, she carefully planned the layout of her home to take advantage of the exquisite garden views. Wharton considered her landscaping, like that she was discussing at length in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens,* as an extension of the interiors. Her bedroom, where she would spend mornings writing *The House of Mirth,* looked out at the principal flower garden. There *was* a library, "with tapestries and a surprisingly small desk — at which, however, Edith Wharton wrote nothing but letters."[7]

That Wharton found in the garden an alternative space to the library, despite lacking a *mother's* garden, suggests that she does not belong in the "countertradition" defined by Showalter. Rather, Wharton redefines that garden itself, from a "space of sensuality, warmth, and openness" (Showalter, 37) to one which also demands attention and work. In a letter to W. Morton Fullerton on July 3, 1911, Wharton writes: "Decidedly, I'm a better landscape gardener than novelist, and this place [The Mount], every line of which is my own work, far surpasses the House of Mirth" (*Letters,* 242). In the same letter she tells Fullerton about her treasured head gardener, Thomas Reynolds:

> He *couldn't* miss the first long walk with me yesterday afternoon, the going over every detail, the instant noting, on my part, of all he had done in my absence, the visit to every individual tree, shrub, creeper, fern, 'flower in the crannied wall' — every tiniest little bulb and root that we had planted together! (*Letters,* 242)

Wharton's collaboration with Reynolds in the actual planting of her gardens distinguished her from most women in her social class.

Alice Walker, I would argue, comes to recognize her mother's garden — and her own — as meeting Wharton's terms.

If Walker had limited access to the father's library then her mother and grandmother before her had even less. In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker writes: "To be an artist and a black women, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it" (237). The black women artists of whom she speaks are not allowed into the library. Left outside of the dominant culture, they turn instead to the land around them. And, as Walker finds, creativity can lie in the planting of "ambitious gardens." She fondly remembers that "my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in" (241).

While Walker's memories of her mother's garden would seem to fit Showalter's model, in fact that garden more closely resembles Wharton's. Gardening, for Walker's mother, was work, creative work. Before a long, hard day in the cotton fields, she "watered her flowers, chop-

ped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses. . . until night came and it was too dark to see" (241). Walker remembers that "whatever rocky soil [her mother] landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity..." (241). This garden is a legacy for Walker; in it she can see the origins and potential of her own creativity: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (243). Her writing then is linked to the garden as something she must work on and cultivate.

Like Wharton, Walker also needs the garden to write. In her essay, "Writing the Color Purple," Walker tells of her difficulty in hearing her characters' voices as she tries to write in Brooklyn: "Three months earlier I had bought a tiny house on a Brooklyn street, assuming – because my desk overlooked the street and a maple tree in the yard, representing garden and view – I would be able to write. I was not." Clearly the maple tree is not enough of a garden, so she decides to leave the city altogether, eventually settling in northern California. There, she "explored the redwood forests all around . . . lay out in the meadow, picked apples, talked (yes, of course) to trees" and was finally able to write *The Color Purple* (356). If Walker's garden is not the carefully laid-out, formal garden of Edith Wharton, it is no less a metaphor for her creative process. Her approach to narrative is to see it as something that "grows" – under the right conditions.

Given the relationship of the garden to the writing of fiction, the gardens *in* fiction became significant. Often absent from the novels of Wharton are gardeners; as has been frequently noted, Wharton did not often endow her female characters with the inclination to create, writing and gardening both falling under the rubric.[8] Yet there is a way in which the garden remains a place of work. In *The House of Mirth* Carrie Fisher remarks:

> That's Lily all over, you know; she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic.[9].

Indeed, Lily Bart's relationship to the garden is worth noting in the context of both Showalter's paradigm and my suggestion that Wharton revised that model by seeing the garden as a place of work.

Candace Waid has argued that to "understand *The House of Mirth* we must understand Lily Bart as a writer . . . [she] is the only character in *The House of Mirth* who is shown in the act of writing."[11] She also points to the fact that the men Lily involves herself with in the beginning of the novel – Percy Gryce and Lawrence Selden – are related to books and libraries. What is of futher note is Wharton's shifting of scenes from libraries to gardens. After Selden meets Lily in the train station in the novel's opening scene, he takes her to his apartment for tea where they sit in his "small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books . . . a littered desk and . . . a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony" (7). Almost immediately Wharton shows the two alternatives of the library and the garden.

Lily departs from Selden's library for Bellomont, encountering Percy Gryce en route. Gryce's presence transforms the train into a library of sorts; Lily's inquiry into his collection of Americana leads Wharton to describe the young man's background as well as "the Gryce library in a fire-proof annex that looked like a mausoleum" (22). Later, at Bellomont, the terrace overlooking the "sunken garden" strikes Lily as "surrounding atmosphere . . . propitious to this scheme of courtship" (46). If Lily's "job" is to find a husband and marry, then the garden takes on significance as a place of labor.

The landscape at Bellomont even resembles Lily, particularly given Wharton's descriptions of both. The garden offers a "tranquil scene, a landscape tutored to the last degree of rural elegance"; it is the result of a gardener's art, nature cultivated to its limits (48). At the same time, Wharton points to "the modelling of [Lily's] little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair – was it ever so slightly brightened by art? – and the thick *planting* of her straight black lashes" (5) [italics mine]. Lily herself reflects that "Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it . . . seemed to give it a kind of permanence" (49). The analogous relationship suggests that Lily is a gardener and that her personal garden demands constant cultivation.

The gardens at Bellomont and those that appear elsewhere in the novel continue to provide an alternative to the library. Lily interrupts Selden and Bertha Dorset in the Trenors' library, only to retreat to the garden where Selden ultimately joins her. Later is the crucial *tableau vivant* scene in which Lily poses as Mrs. Lloyd: as Waid

has pointed out, "the narrative does not note that the portrait of Mrs. Lloyd is the figure of a woman engaged in writing (28)." But rather than write in a library Mrs. Lloyd is writing on a tree – again a shift from the world of books to that of nature. That Lily belongs in the garden is made very clear once the *tableaux* have concluded: she and Selden pass out of the house to stand "suddenly in the fragrant hush of a garden." The garden, with a "fountain falling among lilies," is quiet "but [for] the plash of the water on the lily-pads" (137). The repetition and variation on Lily's name suggests that Wharton is planting *her* Lily firmly in the garden.

That Lily Bart, like Wharton, rejects the library in favor of the garden is obvious at the novel's end. As Waid has noted, Lily "casts her lot with . . . Chlora, the goddess of flowers . . . Lily takes the chloral in the hopes of entering the green and floral world of Elysium that lies beyond experience and the torment of reading and writing" (48). I would add that in this final – and fatal – shift to the garden Wharton is asking her reader to consider the garden as the only alternative available to the female artist.

Walker's definition of the female artist as one who plants "ambitious gardens" suggests that Celie in *The Color Purple* is an artist who turns to the garden as a place of work. For Celie the land has always represented "work"; from the earliest days of her narrative she is "in the field . . . chopping cotton three hours before he comes."[11] Her understanding of the land as a space for female creativity comes only gradually.

The most prominent garden in the novel is not Celie's mother's garden; rather it is her stepfather's, yet another revision of Showalter's paradigm. Upon learning that the man she believed to be her father is only her stepfather Celie returns to the home of her birth. She is keenly aware of her surroundings as she approaches the house, as if the spring flowers have awakened her to new possibilities. Not only has she learned that her birth father was an honorable man who loved her mother but she also knows that her children were not conceived incestually. References to "Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers" suggest the promise of a new life for Celie (184-85). Before her she sees: "All around the house, all in back of it, nothing but blooming trees. Then more lilies and jonquils and roses clamming over everything" (186). There is a life to this garden which Celie can't fail to appreciate and claim as her own. She begins to realize that she "never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn . . . not the color purple . . . not the little wildflowers. Nothing . . . Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool" (204).

With Celie's move to Memphis there is a shift in her understanding of the garden. This move is important for Celie as she has chosen to leave her husband and start a new life with Shug. Shug has her own house and landscaped grounds with fountains and statues. The garden becomes for Celie something to work on, to plan. She recalls:

> Us talk about houses a lot . . . Talk about how to make the outside around our house something you can use . . . Flower boxes go here, she say, drawing some. And geraniums in them, I say, drawing some . . . By the time we finish our house look like it can swim or fly (216).

Finally the land, the flowers, offer Celie the opportunity for creativity. And with the death of her stepfather, Celie inherits the garden that first opened her eyes to her own abilities. Once established in her own home with her own garden, Celie truly comes alive. She runs her own store, selling pants that she designs and creates, and supports herself for the first time in her life. It is in this home that she dares to paint her room the color purple, bringing inside the colors of wildflowers that she never before dared to notice.

Alice Walker, in her essay, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," writes that she is interested in "the way black writers and white writers seem . . . to be writing one immense story coming from a multitude of literary perspectives" (5). Walker refuses to settle for the "narrowing view of life" which denies the thread that exists between white and black writers; she actively seeks models in the writers who have preceded her. For Walker, models in "*growth* of spirit and intellect . . . *enrich* and enlarge one's view of existence" [italics mine]. In thinking of Walker as writing a part of Wharton's story, the garden metaphor continues to resonate. That the writing of Edith Wharton and Alice Walker shares the metaphor of the garden enlarges the reader's conception of the garden and what it means to women who write. But it also allows the reader to make the garden a "cultural symbol": "an image that conveys a special meaning (thought and feeling) to a large number of those who share the culture" (Marx, 4). Through the revision of Wharton and now Walker, the garden becomes not only a place of warmth, comfort, and sensuality, but a place of work. This garden, not the father's library, is a space women writers can claim as their own.

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1. Elaine Showalter, "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*," *The New American Studies* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1991) 37. Subsequent page references will appear directly in the text.

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Another Reading of Wharton's View of Woman in *French Ways and Their Meaning*

Laurel Fryer-Smith

In the Fall of 1992 an article by Julie Olin-Ammentorp appeared in the *Edith Wharton Review,* addressing Wharton's 1919 nonfiction work, *French Ways and their Meaning*. Olin-Ammentorp's article, "Wharton's View of Woman in *French Ways and their Meaning,"* analyzed in particular Wharton's chapter entitled "The New Frenchwoman." Olin-Ammentorp averred, among other things, that Wharton engaged in "large-scale oversimplifications and overgeneralizations," that "Wharton's view of women is not so simple as once thought," and that "[a] closer examination of her war works may lead us to modify our views of her in other ways as well." With the latter two statements I am in wholehearted agreement. I disagree, however, that Wharton has engaged in large-scale oversimplifications and overgeneralizations; rather, it is Olin-Ammentorp who has engaged in such generalizations and simplifications in her analysis of *French Ways and their Meaning,* to the extent that I believe a rereading of the specific chapter with which Olin-Ammentorp takes issue ("The New Frenchwoman") is in order.

Olin-Ammentorp fails to alert her readers to the fundamental reason Wharton ascribes as the basis for the adultness of French women – a reason that is essential to understanding why Wharton believed that the French were the most civilized of all people. "It is because the two sexes complete each other mentally as well as physiologically that no modern civilization has been really rich or deep, or stimulating to other civilizations, which has not been based on the recognized interaction of influences between men and women" (103).

Hence Wharton believed that full adulthood for men and women can be achieved only if a society is composed of grown-up men and women; "and it is possible to have a ruling caste of grown up men and women only in a civilization where the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other" (113). This would not seem to suggest, as it suggests to Olin-Ammentorp, that Wharton had an "unstated belief in the fundamental inferiority of women." On the contrary, Wharton believed in the complementary role of men and women, the source (for both sexes) of "real living" which Wharton defined as a "deep and complex and slowly-developing thing, the outcome of an old and rich social experience." For Wharton, such growth "has its roots in the fundamental things, and above all in close and constant and interesting and important relations between men and women" (102).

The sticking point for Olin-Ammentorp seems to be what she believes is Wharton's misapprehension of the word "partner" in describing one of the means by which Frenchwomen derive their power (the other two are "as a mother and above all as an artist" (111).) Olin-Ammentorp asserts that a Frenchwoman could hardly be considered her husband's partner because she is actually an "unpaid employee" or in a role clearly "subordinate to her husband's," alleging Wharton is either "remarkably naive or consciously conservative." Consciously or not, it is clear that Wharton was conservative. However, at least as to the above statements, it is Olin-Ammentorp, not Wharton, who is naive.

However, Olin-Ammentorp's error is understandable, for she fails to perceive the essential difference between how French and Americans value money. The French do not believe that a lack of renumeration is indicative of a lack of value or a sign of disesteem. As Wharton takes

pains to point out, the French have a completely different view of money and moneymaking. Unlike Americans, they do not consider moneymaking meritorious in and of itself. And it is not the average Frenchman's dream (and at the turn of the nineteenth century it would have been a man) to make himself "inordinately rich in his lifetime . . . but he wanted, and was bound to have, material security for his children . . . with perpetual, relentless thrift" (87).

It should be clear to anyone who has done a close reading of *French Ways* to sense that the basis of marriage in France also differs from marriage in America. For the French, the basis of marriage is neither the myth or love nor fleeting sexual attraction, but for children. "Marriage, in France, is regarded as founded for the family and not for the husband and wife . . . and to secure their permanent well being *as associates* in the foundation of a home and the procreation of a family" (128, emphasis added). It seem rather unnecessary to quarrel over the pronoun references ("his business," "his customers") when Wharton makes it clear that "the lives of the French bourgeois couple are based on the primary necessity of getting enough money to live on, and of giving their children educational and material advantages" (103). In light of this, it also seems unnecessary to worry, as does Olin-Ammentorp, about what might befall a French wife who did not "'volunteer'" to assist her husband. It would have been to her benefit and to the benefit of her family to assist her husband in his business endeavors for the aforementioned compelling reasons.

At the heart of this issue, and the issue of Olin-Ammentorp's concern with Wharton's statement that "the man is stronger and the closer to reality" (103) is a failure to grant an historical perspective to *French Ways*. Wharton here refers not to the turn of the twentieth century, but of the nineteenth, where men were closer to "reality" if one defines reality as the world of a formal education, the franchise, owning businesses and property and being involved in affairs of state. Wharton is simply portraying the superiority of men and women complementing and completing each other.

Olin-Ammentorp is concerned that there really is not a balance of power between French men and women. Wharton cites as evidence for the balance the significance of French women and the "obscure part played by millions of wives and mothers whose thrift and prudence silently built up her [France's] salvation in 1872" and "the millions of brave, uncomplaining self-denying mothers and wives and sisters . . . who mourned them silently" (105). Olin-Ammentorp complains that Wharton defines women by their roles and by their "silence and abnegation." But what could these women have done to play a more decisive, significant role in their country's well being? Obviously, they could not go into combat, assume roles in government or plan battle strategies for the Franco-Prussian War. With its males in battle it seems logical for women to be defined as the wives, mothers, sisters, and aunts of those at war. All women are kin both to their own and the opposite sex; they lost husbands, sons, brothers, nephews — what possible elevation in status could be acheived by referring to these loyal relatives as women as opposed to referring to them as relatives of the men at war?

Olin-Amentorp also takes issue with the dissimilarity between the French ideal of woman and the kind of womanhood Wharton achieved. She wonders, in light of Wharton's statement that women were "better listeners than talkers" if Wharton didn't do some talking herself at "all those memorable dinner parties and evenings

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Edith Wharton's Gift to Nella Larsen
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be unfathomable. In *Quicksand,* Helga has no choice other than to become what she despises; Larsen realizes what for Wharton and Lily remain imagined horrors.

The plagiarism scandal after the publication of Larsen's 1930 short story "Sanctuary" complicates any discussion of conscious intertextuality in her work. The line between intertextuality, allusion, and plot similarity blur as we begin to consider the questions of origins, of who inherits a literary legacy and who might be its accidental beneficiary. As a narrative of disinheritance, *The House of Mirth* anticipates its appropriation by Nella Larsen, disinherited by both African-American and American feminine literary traditions. Larsen's "signifying" on Lily Bart's story, the ostensible property of the white elite, forces us to question who owns stories and to what effect those stories may be appropriated. Such a process might provide a useful example for us as we continue to renarrativize American literary history.[1]

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1. After writing this essay, I read Elizabeth Ammon's essay on Edith Wharton and Jessie Fauset ("New Literary History: Edith Wharton and Jessie Fauset" in *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays,* Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit, eds. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

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To Sinclair Lewis, who dedicated *Babbitt* to her, she confessed herself "long since resigned . . . to the idea that I was regarded by you all as the – say the Mrs. Humphry Ward of the Western Hemisphere, though at times I wondered why" (Lewis, 433). Thanking F. Scott Fitzgerald for *The Great Gatsby,* she wrote, "I am touched at your sending me a copy, for I feel that to your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and gas chandeliers" (*Letters,* 481).

Stafford wrote "The Captain's Gift" before her reading of Wharton in the New York Public Library. Perhaps those months there gave her a different impression of the novelist. But she was acquainted with Wharton's grimmest work of fiction before then. Sonia Marburg, the protagonist of Stafford's first novel, *Boston Adventure* (1944), spends a morning "dream[ing] over *Ethan Frome*" (138).

Possibly Stafford is satirizing the satiric narrator of "The Captain's Gift," but the shocking conclusion of the story belies such a reading. (At the end, Mrs. Ramsey unwraps a package from her favorite grandson in Europe to find a braid of blond hair, "cut off cleanly at the nape of the neck" and "shining like a living snake" (445).)

One is left to ask whether Stafford, consciously or not, needed to reduce her formidable predecessor to a figure she could satirize. If so, she acknowledged the power of Wharton's legacy in the very act of denying it.

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2. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964) 4. Subsequent page references will appear directly in text.

3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1983) 5. Subsequent page references will appear directly in text.

4. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Scribner's, 1933) 66. Subsequent page references will appear directly in text.

5. Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land Volume 2: Sexchanges* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 132.

6. Thomas Hayes, "Edith Wharton's Garden at the Mount," intro, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904; reprint, New York:' De Capo, 1988) xiii.

7. R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Fromm, 1985) 135.

8. See Candace Waid's *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* for a discussion of the place of the woman writer in Wharton's work. She has observed that "Explicit depictions of female authors or artists are rare in Wharton's fiction; yet this was not true in 1904 and 1905 as Wharton was writing *The House of Mirth*" (17).

9. Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; reprint, New York: Scribner's, 1969), 189. Subsequent references will be noted directly in my text.

10. Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P., 1991) 25-26. Subsequent references will be noted directly in my text.

11. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket, 1982), 27. Subsequent references will appear directly in the text.

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French Ways
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around the fireplace." Can there be any doubt that Wharton had ideas, ideas which "put her on an equality with men"; that she knew "how to guide the conversation by putting the right question or making the right comment" (240); that she "contributed[d] not a little to the flashing play of . . . talk" (25) — precisely as Frenchwomen do? And it was Wharton herself who, according to Percy Lubbock, "enjoyed repeating the comment that she was a self-made man" (11).

A puzzling assertion is Ammentorp's statement that "the fiction [Wharton] did not write" also "resists this model" ("of the womanhood [Wharton] espouses"). This curious statement is one even Wharton was not canny enough to have anticipated, although she did state, "there could be no greater ineptitude than to judge a novel by what it ought to have been about" (*A Backward Glance* 206).

But what is most unfortunate is Olin-Ammentorp's choice to analyze only one chapter of *French Ways and their Meaning* and not the four in which Wharton captures the distinctions and the clear superiority of the French — the superiority of both its men and its women. As this article has endeavored to illuminate some of the issues Olin-Ammentorp has raised, it is beyond the scope of this response to address the chapters in the detail they deserve. Suffice it to say, however, that Wharton's avowal of the superiority of the French is based upon four characteristics she believed the French possessed and Americans most lacked — "taste," "reverence," "continuity," and "intellectual honesty." These traits, the most important of which is intellectual honesty, or "the courage to look at things as they are, is the first test of mental maturity" (58).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, men were "stronger and closer to reality"; then, as now, the "Frenchwoman is grown up,"; "[m]arriage in France is regarded as founded for the family and not for the husband and wife" (128). Wharton summed up the greatness of the French in her conclusion to *French Ways:* "As long as enriching life is more than preserving it, as long as culture is superior to business efficiency, as long as poetry and imagination and reverence are higher and more precious elements of civilization than telephones or plumbing, as long as truth is more embracing that hypocrisy, and wit more wholesome than dullness, so long will France remain greater than any nation that has not her ideals" (149).

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