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# CONFERENCE NEWS

## ANNUAL MLA CONVENTION - SAN FRANCISCO - DEC. 27-30, 1998

### I. The Other Edith Wharton: Travel and Other Non-Fiction Writings

Moderator: Kenneth Price, College of William and Mary

December 27 - 9:00 - 10:15 p.m. - Parlor 3, Continental Ballroom, SF Hilton

1. "Hieroglyphics of Culture: Edith Wharton's *The Decoration of Houses*,"  
Susan Goodman, University of Delaware
2. "'A Little World So Well Ordered': Autobiographical Evasions in *A Backward Glance*,"  
Kristina Brooks, Westchester University
3. "Tourism and War: Edith Wharton's Explorations of France,"  
Hildegard Hoeller, Babson College
4. "Edith Wharton's Morocco: Travels between Fact and Fiction,"  
Anja Lange, University of Colorado

### II. Edith Wharton and her 1920's Contemporaries

Moderator: Donna Campbell, Gonzaga University

December 28 - 8:30 - 9:45 a.m. - Union Square 1 & 2, SF Hilton

1. "Not in Sisterhood: The Careers of Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Zona Gale,"  
Deborah Williams, Iona College
2. "A Corpse Too Hastily Buried: Wharton, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and the History of *The Old Maid*,"  
Catherine Nickerson, Emory College
3. "Telling the Other Half How to Live: Edith Wharton and Caroline Bartlett Crane,"  
Katherine Joslin, Western Michigan University

## ALA (AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION) CONFERENCE

Baltimore, May 28 - May 31, 1999

### CALL FOR PAPERS

1. "Edith Wharton into the Twenty First Century"  
Organizer: Augusta Rohrbach, Oberlin College, Eng. Dept. Oberlin, OH, 44074
2. "Edith Wharton and Economics,"  
Organizer: Reiner Kornetta, Germany, (Send proposals to Carole Shaffer-Koros,  
Kean University, Graduate Humanities Program, Union, NJ 07083)

**Deadline for 1-2 proposals for both sessions is November 1, 1998.**

### COMING ATTRACTION: EDITH WHARTON AT 2000

All Wharton Conference at Newport, Rhode Island

June 22-25, 2000

Details Forthcoming

# The Moral Significance of Living Space: The Library and Kitchen in *The House of Mirth*

by Keiko Beppu

"Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary." So reads the Thoreauvian economy of housekeeping. This exponent of self-reliance and of simple living goes on to say that "a large box of six feet long by three wide" will suffice to keep oneself warm and secure from rain and cold; thereby one may have freedom in one's love and in one's soul be free. Whereas, he continues, "many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box" (30). What waste of energy and detour it is to attain freedom for one's soul's contentment! he may deplore. Indeed, a box of one's size, a coffin, is all that one needs at time of death. Just the same while in life one must have dwelling space for protection and comfort, however slight a shelter that may be, for like other creatures human species is, among other things, territorial.

This Thoreauvian code of dwelling place is the last thing that attracts heroes and heroines who inhabit the house of Edith Wharton's fiction, which, however, deserves reconsideration. As the fate of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905) illustrates, Wharton comes very close to what Henry David Thoreau rules out in *Walden* as the moral significance of living space that we are given a dwelling place in an interim of our existence in this life and that nobody ever owns a house of his or her own. In other words we are all tenants in "the house of mirth" -- a crazy madhouse called life -- where we are equally given uncertain occupancy. The problem of dwelling space thus assumes an ontological significance in the way one lives and how one defines oneself.

In Buddhism woman is said to have no home in the

three realms of existence, that is the past, present, and future. In this patriarchal religion and culture such has long been woman's destiny regardless of her social class and position. She has a temporal home in her father's house until she marries into another house, her husband's, but she will never secure a shelter of "her own" at her disposal<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, in Western societies traditionally women have been placed in a similar situation; the life cycle of a heroine in 19th-century fiction illustrates a grim social mechanism in which she struggles to acquire a husband so as to secure a home, unless she is a natural inheritor to family estate like May Welland in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), or Catherine Sloper in Henry James's *Washington Square* (1881), or a few such exceptions of independent and not "marriageable" girls as Gertrude Farish who enjoys "the privileges of a flat" (7). Even so these heroines are portrayed as the keeper/decorator rather than the owner, much less the builder, of the houses they inhabit. As Thorstein Veblen observes, the socio-economic structure of Victorian America defines women as consumers rather than creators of material goods, while American men are invariably builders of houses and makers of money their women spend on decorations of the houses as well as of themselves.

Such gender-oriented bifurcation of economy is reflected in the space men and women occupy and the function each performs within the house. Wharton's heroines expend a good part of their time and energies decorating their houses just as they renew their wardrobes each new season. In *Dwelling in the Text* (1991) Marilyn R. Chandler explains such activities of American Victorian middle-and upper-class

women as their "few acceptable avenues of expression open to them," and that they "poured their creative energies into their houses" (150). Building houses, roads and bridges or making money is the farthest thing in the thought of women especially "nice" women in that society. Women, trapped in the home, and excluded from the business world and marketplace, had to use their vision to create a larger space where they can breathe. In this plight they are like writers and painters in the 19th-century America, who were shut out of the "real" world of money making.

The case of Edith Wharton provides an extraordinary exception in such socio-cultural background. A veritable owner of more than a single house both in America and in France during her lifetime, Wharton literally utilized her time and energy in designing and decorating the houses where she never was a permanent resident. She built a great country manor, The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts; she decorated the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice-sous-Forêt outside Paris and Ste. Claire-le-Château at Hyères on the Riviera. Furthermore she went so far as to write a book on the interiors of houses, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) with Ogden Codman before she completed her first important novel, *The House of Mirth*. Naturally, she paid jealous attention to the description of the houses and "the decoration of houses" that appear in her novels. In *The House of Mirth* an interesting demarcation of living space for men and women within the house becomes distinct -- the library/study and the kitchen/drawing-room -- each playing a decisive role in the drama of the heroine.

This paper is an exploration in the moral significance of living space in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*; it attempts to clarify a rather enigmatic relation between the heroine, Lily Bart, and dwelling place which plays a fatal role in the drama of her life and of Wharton's novel. In the discussion that follows I'd like to examine the central locus of the drama -- the library and the kitchen -- and the semiotic significance each plays in the relation between Lily and Lawrence Selden in Wharton's "house of mirth."

## I

In *The House of Mirth* the stages of Lily Bart's fall are graphically traced from the rigid fixity of domestic spatial arrangement of Mrs. Peniston's brownstone house on Fifth Avenue to the more relaxed space of the Trenors' Bellomont, to the gaudy vulgarity of the Brys' and Gormers' mansions, and to the gilded suite of the Emporium Hotel where Norma Hatch resides. The sense of dwelling space for Lily becomes less secure and more marginal as the novel progresses.

We first meet Lily at the Grand Central Station,

unaccompanied, and again at the end of the novel we see Lily wandering the street near Bryant Park at dusk -- an ominous implication of the homeless state of her being throughout the novel. Unlike other heroines such as May Welland or Undine Spragg or even Ellen Olenska, Lily is on the road, so to speak, travelling from one place to another; she never finds "a private corner" and cultivates it, as James's heroine does. In this she resembles Madame Merle, another social parasite, in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, who spends her life as a "welcome" guest making a round of visits at her friends' country houses. Such life style is not unusual among fashionable people in old New York or in European society where Wharton's drama is staged; they are all, in James's phrase, "hotel children." Wharton's satiric rendition of such rootless life Lily as a young girl experiences is quite precise: Lily lived a nomadic life in "a house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company'" and with "a series of French and English maids" and "an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen," exposed to "quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room" (28-29). One almost hears an ironic comment being made: What kind of moral character does such domestic spatial arrangement foster in a sensitive, impressionable child, if that child is by nature prone to sensual enjoyments of living space and luxuries of life? For the author of *The House of Mirth* believed that by putting the sense of proportion and order in living spaces people can make these spaces into "a world of conversation and stimulation, of continuity and tradition" (Auchincloss 31). Lily has been deprived, since her early childhood, of such regularity and sense of continuity.

And in her adult life, orphaned and homeless, Lily has no place of her own, sojourning at the houses of other people, either of her aunt Mrs. Peniston's town house on Fifth Avenue or of her "summer" friends, Judy Trenor, Bertha Dorset, the Gormers, or with Norma Hatch at the Emporium Hotel. Lily overstays the hospitality of these friends for better or worse; she is fated to end her life as she does on a narrow bed in a small room at the boarding-house. To have a place of one's own, even a slip of space, is synonymous with one's existence in this life. When Lily loses her living space one after another, therefore, she simply cannot exist. Hence her death at the end of the novel has a poetic justice, whether it is suicide or not has no relevance. The great irony of her life is that in her small box of a dwelling space Lily has preserved the integrity of her person, what Thoreau prescribes as "freedom in one's love" (Lily's love for Selden who does not deserve it); she has always been free in her soul because ironically she is unhampered by a larger box of dwelling space. Lily has to go through a humiliating experience finally to earn a place in "the house of mourning." In this

perspective *The House of Mirth* reads as a poignant comment of the moral significance of living space.

Now a closer examination of the central locus within the house -- the library and the kitchen -- will clarify how these living spaces define and determine the relation between Lily and Lawrence Selden and will clarify the meaning of Lily's death at the end of the novel. In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton spares a considerable space for the architectural significance of the library, smoking-room, and "Den" which can be marked as masculine space in a private home, where men retreat either to read or to relax: "The housing of a great private library is one of the most interesting problems of interior architecture. Such a room, combining monumental dimensions with the rich color-values and impressive effect produced by tiers of fine bindings, affords unequalled opportunity for the exercise of the architect's skill" (151). The walls of the books with fine bindings constitute an important decoration of the room. The library provides a private space for reading and contemplation, one of the privileges of a gentleman in old New York (See Figures 1 and 2). Yet, Wharton comments further that the great private library is still so much a thing of the future in America: "Few of the large houses lately built in the United States contain a library in the serious meaning of the term" (151). (In *The Age of Innocence* the library is given its full serious meaning as space for privacy and independence, and even more than that, as we shall see later.)

The semiotic significance of the library as indices of cultural values (Chandler 3) is clearly present in the description of this space in Wharton's novel. The library is portrayed so as to illustrate the taste and the intellectual habit of the owner of the house. It provides information about the characters who use the place; it is self-referential among the owner, the books the shelves contain, and his social status. In *The House of Mirth* Wharton is critical of the uses the library at Bellomont is put to: "A few family portraits of lantern-jawed gentlemen in tie-wigs, and ladies with large head-dresses and small bodies, hung between the shelves lined with pleasantly shabby books: books mostly contemporaneous with the ancestors in question, and to which *the subsequent Trenors had made no perceptible additions*. The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation" (59. My emphasis). Clearly, the library at Bellomont is an eloquent index of the moral as well as intellectual character of the owner, Gus Trenor. He is no gentleman as he reveals himself in his transaction with Lily Bart, who on her part is miserably naive. The library at Bellomont is a fake, a sorry joke, just like Gatsby's Gothic library at the West End mansion he owns. The rows of books

in Gatsby's library he never reads could have been expensive durable cardboard bookshelves which however surprise an owl-eyed guest for being "real" and authentic (45-46). Thus the library in a private home is regarded as a gentleman's status symbol. On the contrary, at Bellomont it is exactly as a place for flirtation that the library is used; Lily comes upon Selden and Bertha Dorset sitting tête-à-tête in easy chairs there scattered around (59).

In contrast to the library at Bellomont, there are two other occasions where the library is given dramatic importance in *The House of Mirth*: Selden's library is mentioned twice in the novel, where Lily and Selden meet alone on both occasions. Yet unlike house-guests at Bellomont, this pair of a lady and a gentleman is acutely aware that they are in the library and not in the drawing-room. Therefore, each time their conversations veer toward a certain intimacy they remind each other where they are. For the pair the library is decisively not a place for flirtation. If anything at all it should be a space for conversation and stimulation, even though more than once Lily is tempted to provoke Selden, who is "indolently amused" (8); being in the library thus creates a significant distance in their relationship. Wharton's use of the library is subtle and ingenious as dramatic locus in the novel.

While waiting for the next train to Bellomont, Lily accompanies Selden to his bachelor apartment, the first moral mistake Lily makes on impulse, yet with full knowledge of its gravity. She is ushered in his modest flat, into a slip of a hall hung with old prints. The details of his apartment illustrate more than anything else the modest financial status, yet fastidious taste and refinement of its occupant. Lily finds herself in a "small library, dark and cheerful, with its wall of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug, a littered desk, and a tea-tray on a low table by the window, where Selden rests in shabby leather chairs." All this makes Lily say "how delicious to have a place like this all to one's self!" (7). Further Lily jokingly complains at this point in the novel, "what a miserable thing it is to be a woman," that is, not to own a place of one's own. Lily is too fastidious to pay the price exacted by the society, which is to marry a rich bore, a Percy Gryce with his collection of the *Americana* or a social upstart like Sim Rosedale, so as to be given a space to decorate. At the same time, she is too fastidious to endure the fate of a Gerty Farish for that matter. Yet the joke assumes an increasingly tragic meaning for the physical and moral state of her being as the drama develops.

## II

In the above-examined library scene the symbolic

meaning of owning a place of one's own is spelled out as the state of independence. It is only natural that Lily expresses her envy of Selden's cozy corner, from which woman in general, and woman even of Lily's social position, is excluded because she refuses to pay for the ticket to the game she is not prepared to play. So is Newland's sister hovering on the threshold, afraid to intrude him in his study, even though it is the female hand that keeps order in the library: "A vigilant hand has, as usual, kept the fire alive and the lamp trimmed; and the room, with its rows and rows of books, its bronze and steel statuettes on the mantelpiece...looked singularly homelike and welcoming" (42). Chandler observes that descriptions of rooms serve "as introductions to the characters and as indices of their tastes, values, and habits as well as of their place in a complex network of social relations" (156). The library belongs exclusively to men, not to women in the Victorian America. Men are ensconced there to read and to dream of their future; women on the other hand go there to dust and to decorate, not to sit and read.

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) -- the date of publication is worth noting -- Wharton makes a different use of a library, where May intrudes with her workbasket and to sit with Newland either to talk or listen to him read a book of poetry. The library is not only Newland's personal private space, but it becomes a living space where May claims her right to be, thereby to establish a certain conjugal communication within the house they share, for as Auchincloss observes Wharton "never believed in a separate world for women" (31), for which we have a clear evidence from the life she herself lived if not those of her heroines and of heroes as well. But in *The House of Mirth* Lily is never allowed to share her time/place with Selden in this sanctuary of his. On her first visit there Lily saunters about the library, examining the bookshelves which encase volumes of "ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco" (10), and her eyes linger on them caressingly, appreciating their tones and textures. She knows of their aesthetic values, but she is not to demonstrate her knowledge of their contents, even if she is familiar with them, because intellect in women is to be shunned in the society where she has her being.

Lily's interest in the first edition of Jean de La Bruyère she takes in her hand on the occasion is not in its contents but in its market value. If she realized who La Bruyère is -- Virginia Woolf quotes this 18th-century French moralist as an example of misogynist along with Dr. Johnson<sup>2</sup> -- she could have known the true nature of Selden -- he is self-complacent in his superiority as a person: he does not doubt "the universal right of a man to enlighten a woman when he sees her unconsciously placed in a false position" (280). Selden appreciates more than anyone else the ornamental

worth of this exquisite woman which to him is not so different from the fine tooling and old morocco of his precious collection. Lily should have known why of all the authors and books Selden owns the first edition of La Bruyère. Instead she asks him how much it is worth, asking Selden if he minds not being rich enough to buy all the books he wants (11). In asking the question Lily is thinking of the worth of the *Americana* in Percy Gryce's collection, an indication that Lily regards herself as much as or even more than what the *Americana* costs Percy Gryce. As Wharton's earlier working titles for the novel indicate, she is "a moment's ornament" or an American beauty, a special species of cultivated red rose. The flower is cultivated with fastidious care to please the eye of the observer. Earlier Selden observes that "he had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (5). And such frivolous civilization eventually claims what it has produced as sacrifice; Lily has only herself to blame for self-depreciation.

Single and impoverished, Lily is deprived not only of the ownership of a house but of the privilege, enjoyed by other women of her class, of decorating the interiors of a house and of arranging furniture as she likes. She complains to Selden, "If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman" (8). Too easily she forfeits the right of doing so due to her moral weakness or her fastidiousness in her choice of husbands. The identification of living space and one's moral character is all too evident here. From the very beginning Lily is fated; she is inadequate as a person because she is morally restless as she is physically homeless. To be homeless means, in Wharton's politics of dwelling space, to be morally destitute, deficient in moral fibre: "In this desultory yet agitated fashion life went on through Lily's teens; a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need -- the need of more money" (29-30). If home is to offer protection, warmth, and affection, Lily never has received such until the very end of her life in the well-lighted miraculously clean kitchen of a working woman Lily meets quite by chance.

The scene in the library examined above drives the message home; it clearly shows the fate of the hero and the heroine in Wharton's novel. Selden ensconced in his library at the beginning and at the end, self-complacent with a sense of his superior position in his seclusion, where Lily will never have a place as his companion in life. Symbolically, *The House of Mirth* closes with another scene in Selden's library: "The green-shaded lamps made tranquil circles of light in the gathering dusk, a little fire flickered on the hearth" (304); the

scene is the same, where Lily recognized "the row of shelves from which he had taken down his *La Bruyère*, and the worn arm of the chair he had leaned against while she examined the precious volume," and "the shaded lamps and the warm hearth, detaching it from the gathering darkness of the street, gave it a sweeter touch of intimacy" (304-05). But this light and warmth is not for Lily; the intimacy is not for the fated pair, either. Selden, comfortable in his library yet a confirmed bachelor for life, is never to know the real warmth of the kitchen fire which cures Lily of "the mortal chill" in her heart in Nettie Struther's kitchen.

As has been mentioned earlier, *The House of Mirth* provides a semiotics of dwelling space and the moral significance of living space Lily comes to realize is incomplete without reference to the kitchen and the fire in the kitchen. The importance of the kitchen space for women is apparent; as Showalter remarks, it is "the ritual center of much nineteenth-century women's fiction" (100).<sup>3</sup> The kitchen as dramatic locus and its semiotic significance is not made so conspicuous as that of the library in *The House of Mirth*. This is no surprise as the domestic work is done off stage by a changing dynasty of maids and cooks in "the house of mirth" Lily and her friends inhabit. Naturally, in *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton spares no space for the kitchen while she lays out elaborate plans for the interiors of the house -- such domestic spaces as halls, dining-rooms, drawing-rooms, and the library and smoking-rooms. In her *Felicitous Space* (1986) Judith Fryer points out an interesting social factor which influences the designs of the model American home: it is not until the beginning of the 20th-century that the kitchen has become the center of the modern house and that Wharton's book on the interiors of the house became "clearly out of date a decade after its publication" (35).<sup>4</sup> Fryer also observes that "the kitchen was, however, the focus of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's criticism of bourgeois domestic life" (35), and the attention paid to the kitchen in house planning points to "a growing interest in scientific values and rational planning for every sphere of life" (34). Thus, the kitchen became increasingly the center of the modern house, which however was not an issue in old New York where Lily's drama takes place. Just the same, as has been mentioned earlier, the kitchen figures as an important dramatic locus as the library in *The House of Mirth*.

Despite the deterministic and pessimistic reading so far made of Lily's fate, the denouement of the novel looks toward a brighter vision of future for Wharton's heroine, as Showalter contends in her book, *Sister's Choice*: "The scene between the two women is unique in *The House of Mirth* for its intimacy and openness..., for its setting in the warm kitchen, for the presence of the baby, and for its

acknowledgement of physical need" (100). The difference is clearly distinct from the deceptive intimacy in Selden's library, which Lily eventually leaves. Out on the street Lily is then taken up by Nettie and invited in to her warm kitchen. "It's real warm in our kitchen, and you can rest there" (313. My emphasis). Here the possessive pronoun "our" refers to Nettie and her husband for one thing, but in the dramatic context it also refers to Nettie and her friend Lily Bart as well. Nettie apologizes that there is a parlor, but it is real warm in the kitchen. "It was warm in the kitchen, which, when Nettie Struther's match had made a flame leap from the gas-jet above the table, revealed itself to Lily as extraordinary small and almost miraculously clean" (313. My emphasis). Wharton's dramatic use of the kitchen space at the closing part of her novel is deliberately contrived as "the ritual center" of women's fiction and of female solidarity.

Poor as she is Nettie does not economize the fire in her kitchen. We recall Mrs. Peniston never allows fire in the living room unless there is company. Lily hesitates to burn the letters because there is no fire in her aunt's fireplace; Lily asks Selden on her last visit to make a fire to warm herself, that is to burn the packet of letters she has kept all her life. She sacrifices herself there if for one thing to save Selden's reputation, but to preserve her self-respect more than anything else, thus forever depriving Selden of the vital warmth of human fellowship.

As this paper has shown, it is the moral significance of living space that gives one the real sense of life, which Thoreau expounds in *Walden* that a shelter is what provides one protection and the vital fire of life. But "how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary." Confusion in the arrangement of one's living space coalesces with that in one's moral being and existence. In a "stranger's" kitchen Lily, for the first time in her life, "felt stronger and happier...., and the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart" (316. My emphasis). Back in her boarding-house, she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life" (316). This is the new and different Lily, who has outgrown her life as an ornament, and who now lives as a person in "the house of mourning"; she is utterly reconciled to "the conditions of the life" -- her rootless life. In Lily's end there even is noted a salutary and tragic sense of good life consummated -- not wasted -- because of the self-realization she finally achieves.

Kobe College, Japan

(This paper was originally presented at the Edith Wharton at the Mount Conference held at Lenox, Massachusetts from June 12th to 14th, 1997 to celebrate the centennial of the publication of *The Decoration of Houses*. It has been substantially revised and is now reprinted with permission from *Kobe College Studies*, Vol. XLIV No. 3, March 1998.)

## About the Displacement of Certain Words in *The Age of Innocence*: A Bataillian Reading

by Gilles Mayné

### I

*'I heard of her a few months later living alone in Venice. I believe Lovell Mingott went out to get her. He said she was desperately unhappy. That's all right -- but this parading her at the Opera's another thing.'*

*'Perhaps,' young Thorley hasarded, 'she's too unhappy to be left at home.' This was greeted with an irreverent laugh, and the youth blushed deeply, and tried to look as if he had meant to insinuate what knowing people called a 'double entendre.'* (The Age of Innocence, 17)

In these lines, which provoke the hilarity of New York gentility, the ambiguity -- the *double entendre* the text speaks about -- concerns the word "unhappy." For, the fact that the New Yorker of old stock, Ellen Mingott, could have had an unhappy marriage in Europe is one thing; that at the outcome of this union to an unfaithful husband she could have been so "unhappy" as to flee with his secretary is another. But that, being "desperately unhappy," and having been brought back home in her uncle's good hands, she could have the impertinence, not only of going to the opera to entertain herself as if nothing had happened, but of being late (later than the "dilettante" Newland Archer himself), of having done her hair Josephine-style and of wearing an "unusual" dark blue dress revealing more than the conventions tolerated -- and finally that, after entering the family box, she could have pushed the provocation so far as to mingle, as if it were

the most natural thing in the world, with May Welland's virginal beauty, is all decidedly unbearable to the right-thinking New York of the time. Hence the "irreverent laugh" provoked by young Thorley's naive remark.

The reader cannot do otherwise than note that the intrusion of "a new figure" (since from the start Ellen is not named but mentioned in this manner (12) in the "New Land," that is, in the aristocratic New York of the time but also in Newland Archer's "New Land." In the implicitness of his condition of being newly-engaged (or about to be newly engaged) -- he, one of the most sophisticated persons of the set -- literally makes the men burst out laughing, while, as can be supposed, it provokes among "the circle of ladies who [are] the product of the system" (11; ch. 1) nothing but an embarrassed silence. Looking at the scene from a sociological or psychological point of view, one could easily deduce that the generalized laughter which punctuates Ellen's entrance is (already) a laughter of *exclusion*, one caused indirectly by the sudden awareness of the disparity existing between the sophistication of the theater and Ellen's constant awkwardness, between the "elaborate" truth (immediately taken for granted) that she is an unfaithful wife and the much more prosaic possibility that she came to the theater just for the sake of going out in order to forget her "unhappiness."

However, it should be noted also that Ellen's unexpected entry does not make Newland laugh. There are two basic reasons for that. First he feels "superior" to the other representatives of masculine gentility:

In matters intellectual and artistic, Newland Archer



felt himself instinctively the superior of those chosen specimens of New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen more of the world, than any other man in the number. (11)

Thanks to this "superior" knowledge, Newland has learned to keep his distance from one Lawrence Lefferts, described here as "the foremost authority on form" (11) whom he knows to be a downright hypocrite, or from Sillerton Jackson ("an authority on family" (12), smug, embittered old person whom he knows lives exclusively to find tidbits of scandalous gossip to carry about.

Second, the distances that Newland takes are gradually reinforced by the increased reactions of exclusion toward Ellen, especially when his first two encounters with her do not seem to justify such a strong movement of rejection. The disparity between this generalized exclusion and Newland's own impressions of Ellen grows even more so that he has the chance of observing this phenomenon of rejection first-hand or, so to speak, *from within*, first at a family dinner during which he is exasperated by Sillerton Jackson's, his own mother's and sister Janie's viciousness in criticizing Ellen (on this occasion he feels compelled, against his will, to defend Ellen); second when all the young couples invited to the party old Catherine Mingott gives for the long-absent Ellen refuse the invitation. On this occasion Newland feels that he has to solicit the intervention of the van der Luydens, New York's most prestigious family (to whom he is related), so that the slight can be washed away.

2

*He was once more conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values, and of the need of thinking of himself into conditions incredibly different from any that he knew. (89 emphasis added)*

Thus Ellen is the one who provokes scandal. New York's upper class rejects her instinctively (without verifying the rumors that have been spread about her) and in a global way. I mean by this that Ellen is rejected not only by the men looking critically at "the circle of ladies who were the product of the system," but by those ladies themselves; not only by the young (May, Janie, and all the couples that refuse the invitation) but by the old (Mrs. Welland, Sillerton Jackson). This refusal rapidly spreads to all the families, even the most prestigious, as a matter of fact even to Ellen's own family: "even the Reggie Chiverses, who were of the Mingott clan, were among those inflicting [the slight]" (43-44).

What should be insisted upon here, more than the

diversity of its rejection, is its uniformity ("the intended slight was [characterized] by the *uniform* wording of the notes [of rejection]" (44, emphasis added) and its universality. It is precisely this universality which causes some of the most prominent figures in this aristocracy -- figures who are not a priori in favor of Ellen (Mrs. Welland, Mr. van der Luyden) - to react. But even if they do react, they do so selfishly, so as to protect not only Newland's marriage but especially the integrity of this highly-compartmentalized, highly-ordered and codified society to which they belong: "if we don't stand together, there'll be no such thing as society left," states Mrs. Archer (46).

"Hang Ellen Olenska" (43) and "Hang Countess Olenska" (75): these statements, uttered not without a bit of (self-) irony and derision by Newland, could, undoubtedly, be taken literally and interpreted from a Girardian point of view, that of the scapegoat. According to Girard, when a highly-organized social group feels menaced by disaster, its citizens, as a means of exorcising the destructive violence, turn on one of the members of the community, whom they sacrifice violently. Thus, "with one blow, in a final killing, the sacrifice puts an end to the internal crisis that has been devastating the community."<sup>1</sup> Clearly in *The Age of Innocence* the exclusion of Ellen, then later her final return to Europe could make her such a scapegoat. Interestingly enough, Newland Archer makes the following observation when convincing Ellen not to divorce: "the individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest" (96; ch. 12).

Nevertheless, Girard's theory has been found to be rather limited<sup>2</sup> and a long line of sociologists (Freud, Frazer, Durkheim, Hubert, Mauss, Caillois, Bataille) clearly shows -- going beyond Girard's theories -- that this reconciling and reunifying violence does not happen to just anybody. It always happens to a member of the community having very noticeable physical or spiritual characteristics: a madman, a cripple (or any individual with obvious physical or mental defects), an unfaithful wife, a prostitute, etc., but also and above all to the priest or sorcerer, the chief, the king, the sovereign (in any case, the father figure). In other words, it is not enough to find a scapegoat at any price (as in Girard); it is necessary, above all, for the "system" to function,<sup>3</sup> that the sacrifice be a highly symbolic one.

In *The Age of Innocence* it is, thus, not enough to look at Ellen quite superficially (or quite naively) from the outside as the result of a generalized rejection of which she is the object, but rather as the sum of the specific qualities which designate her inevitably from within as this object itself. This is where Georges Bataille's heterological theory proves to be extremely effective. For Bataille there are two realities which

are radically exclusive of one another: a *homogeneous* reality revolving around the "reproduction and ...the conversation" (*Visions of Excess [VE]*, 116)<sup>4</sup> of goods and of the system of values at work in a given social group: a reality which characterizes a useful or productive society; and a *heterogeneous* reality which cannot be defined as the opposite of the homogeneous society/reality but only by *exclusion* of such a reality. One can see that, not only is there a difference in intensity or a thematic difference between these two realities, there is undeniably an ontological difference:

*Homogeneous* reality presents itself with the abstract and neutral aspect of strictly defined and identified objects (basically, it is the specific reality of solid objects). *Heterogeneous* reality is that of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge.... In summary, compared to everyday life, *heterogeneous* existence can be represented as something *other*. (143)

To these two realities correspond two forms of existence and two types of individuals: one who is *homogeneous* (essentially the *bourgeois*, the capitalist, but also the "socialist," this word being understood in the sense of systematized [Russian] socialism of the 30's, 40's, and 50's); and a *heterogeneous* individual who, in relation to those "who represent...the platitude inherent to *homogeneous* society,...stand[s] out as something *other*" (143; "something other" ["*tout autre*"] is emphasized by Bataille). Thus, in the same way that *heterogeneous* society "includes...everything rejected by *homogeneous* society as waste or as superior transcendent value" (142), the *heterogeneous* individual is the one whose behavior extends beyond or exceeds that of homogeneous individuals *from above* and *from below*: from above in that he heads towards that which is "higher, noble, or exalted" (145), from below in that he corresponds to "categories" of "violence, excess, delirium, madness" (142), but also to that of "the unconscious" (143), of "misery." (One can see here, as noted by Bataille, the double etymological meaning of the word "sacred" which, as "*sacer*," meant for a long time "soiled as well as holy" [102], pure as well as impure.)

If in *The Age of Innocence* there is a character who "stands out as something *other*," it is Ellen. The fact that, from the very beginning of the novel, she has trouble finding her place in the Manson Mingotts' box, is not just symbolic, but premonitory of what will happen later. From the beginning, Ellen has problems integrating herself in the aristocratic New York which she, nevertheless, comes from. She does not know where to sit, even in the family box, that

is, in "her" own box. The theater appears as a concentrated topography of the upper class of that period: despite a few rare absences, which are easily excusable (that of the matriarch Catherine Mingott because of her obesity), everyone is there, clearly in his place (clearly in his box), clearly in his role, clearly on time (during his wedding, Newland will find the same rigid order in the church: "How like a first night at the Opera!" he thought, recognizing the same faces in the same boxes (no, pews)"[152]). On one side are the "products" of the "system" ("the circle of ladies") and on the other are the "gentlemen" who are clearly responsible for having made of the ladies the "products" of this "system." Ellen, however, from the beginning, appears as the *heterogeneous element* to this system, the one who transgresses, more or less consciously, the rules: she is late, does not know where to sit, does not wear a suitable dress (whose neckline "shocked and troubled" (16) even the "dilettante" Newland). Soon after, she starts to keep company with people that the "system" hypocritically condemns (Julius Beaufort, Mrs. Struthers), to show more skill in repartee, more humor (the adjective "vivid" comes back again and again in descriptions of her), and especially more frankness and freedom of mind than the "system" will allow.

It is necessary to insist here on the fact that if the "system" immediately attempts to exclude Ellen, she does not show, at least in the beginning, any animosity towards this system that she tries, by all means, to assimilate. This comes out during the successive conversations that she has with Newland in whom she has found the confidant who will facilitate this integration. Thus she states: "But you'll explain these things to me -- you'll tell me all I ought to know...I want help so much more. You must tell me just what to do" (66; ch.9); "I want...to become just like everybody else here" (93). She even admits, a few lines later: "if you knew how I *hate to be different*" (emphasis added). However, in spite of all her efforts to integrate, in spite of the sacrifice of her divorce (of her "freedom"), thus of that which she holds most precious, this integration never takes place: "she had found herself, as she phrased it, too 'different' to care for the things [New York] cared about." First she leaves New York for Washington, then she progressively takes her distance from the "system" ("she had grown tired of what people called 'society'" (201) and, after having temporarily "[found] her own level" (218) with the Blenkers and among artists, she sees no other solution than to return to Europe.

If, in the end, she returns to Europe, it is not because of a weakness on her part; it is clearly because, after having tried everything to stay, she has become aware that her integration is impossible. In reality, her failure to integrate -- if it is a failure -- comes less from what Ellen had done, or

has not done, and which causes various movements of rejection from those around her (this rejection progressively diminishes after she moves) than from what she *is* and will always be, that is radically "different," unassimilable to the "system," to the "society" surrounding her. Early in the story, the narrator states:

Wherein, then, lay the resemblance that made the young man's [Newland's] heart beat with [this] kind of excitement? It seemed to be, in Madame Olenska's mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities *outside the daily run of experience*. She had hardly ever said a word to him to produce this impression but *it was part of her*, either a projection of her mysterious and *outlandish* background or of *something inherently dramatic, passionate and unusual in herself*. (98-99, emphasis added).

These lines confirm Bataille's theories. Ellen *is* the one who "moves," who "excites," who finds herself "outside the daily run of experience" (therefore outside the *homogeneous* sphere of existence). At this point, the definitions of the word "outlandish" should be recalled: (1) "strikingly out of the ordinary"; (2) "exceeding proper or reasonable limits or standards."<sup>5</sup> Ellen is the one who has "something" more, this contagious, emotional "charge" (see quote p.6) which causes, as Bataille notes, "sometimes attraction, sometimes repulsion" (*VE*, 142) -- something out of the ordinary, *heterogeneous* to this world of forms, of conventions, or moral codes, which makes her go in spite of herself beyond this (homogeneous) reality *from above* and *from below*. From her childhood on, she stands out as *superior*, as seen in "the charm of her *high* colour and *high* spirits" (53, emphasis added), in her precocity and her aesthetic gifts, qualities that maturity turns into class and even into dignity: "the movement of [her] eyes struck him as *highly* trained and full of conscious power" (54, emphasis added); she is also incredibly rich -- but at the same time Ellen is also "poor Ellen" in that she is placed on the side of misfortune ("she remained...as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of *ghosts*" (174, emphasis added), of (often unhappy) amorous passion, of the tragic, of mystery, even misery. Having come from a family of wanderers who sometimes had her dressed up like a "gipsy foundling" (53), she is associated with everything "foreign" and/or "unpleasant" (especially in 84-86): she lives in "*des quartiers excentriques*" (65), in "unmapped" (87; ch. 12) or "bohemian" (89) quarters, among suspicious people ("they were odd, they were uncertain" [87]) that is, the "people who wr[i]te" (87)...

*In an unclouded harmony of tastes and interests they cultivated ferns in Wardian cases, made macramé lace and wool embroidery on linen, collected American revolutionary glazed ware, subscribed to Good Words.* (32).

*He was struck again by the religious reverence of even the most unworldly American woman for the social advantages of dress. 'It's their armour,' he thought, 'their defence against the unknown.'* (166, emphasis added).

*He lowered his voice to ask: 'What sort of need?' 'Ah, don't ask me! I don't speak your language.'* (112, emphasis added).

One may be surprised by the importance given to luxurious clothes and rich fabrics throughout the entire novel. However, this luxury, this richness are not so important *in themselves*; what matters above all is that the "fashion" code not be, under any circumstances, transgressed. Thus the very first thing that one notices about Ellen is not so much what she says or what she does than the fact that what she *is wearing* is seen as "unusual." Later, in London, the panic that seizes May when she does not know what to wear to Mrs. Carfry's dinner ("what shall I *wear*?"); "but how will the other women be *dressed*?" (163) is equally revealing as is the lengthy amount of time she spends ordering clothes instead of acknowledging her husband's wish to go to Italy, because it is crucial for her, once back home, to be able to assert "the social advantages of *dress*" (166, emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

For the "circle of ladies [of] the system," it is thus of the utmost importance that the image projected through their clothes not upset "the unclouded harmony of tastes and interests" by which the "system" defines itself. To act in such a way as to keep the reality of the "system" "unclouded" implies that the symbols which the "system" rests upon be transparent. Here, these symbols not only concern clothes they are also linguistic (symbols). In order for the "society" to be, or to go back to being in "harmony" with itself, not only must its clothes but also (and especially) its words must not be mismatched or, in other terms, must be "'Good' Words", "solid objects"<sup>7</sup> of knowledge conveying clear, unambiguous meanings. Like clothes, words serve as protection against everything that does not con-form (that which is not formed with) to the symbolic code: in the same way as clothes serve as "armour...against the unknown", (Mr. Letterblair's) words are for this "Pharisaic...society" a means of "barricading itself

against the unpleasant" (85). And when the "armour," the "barricade" can no longer perform its function, when society feels dangerously threatened, it uses words such as "unusual," "unpleasant," "unknown," "uncertain," or "unmapped" -- words whose meanings are clear, but which, nonetheless, have a special status -- as a means of exclusion.

In one of his early articles, concerning the word "informe" ["formless" (VE, 31)] which was published at the same time as the review *Documents* (1929-31), Georges Bataille says: "a true dictionary would not only give the meaning of words, but their tasks" (VE, 31, trans. modified). Bataille opposes words whose tasks are to class, to *place* (to produce forms, meanings) to those "serving to *displace*" (emphasis added), such as the word "formless" whose meaning is quite different from its task. One could compare this word to the word "unmapped" mentioned earlier which not only has no fixed place (it is not to be found in American and British dictionaries, except in a list and without any given definition), but designates something that has no fixed place, has no form<sup>8</sup> -- in fact, has no reason to be placed (to exist). "Unmapped" not only refers here to all the adjectives which start with the prefix un- but also, by extension to "foreign," "odd," "strange," "excentrique," "bohemian," etc. All these words which Wharton takes over from the "refined" jargon of the time<sup>9</sup> and uses for their own sake and with which she qualifies Mrs. Olenska are aimed at displacing or "declassing" her, that is, at making her literally go out of "her" "class" (social, but not only) so as to designate her as *the* "heterogeneous" (unclassable) element par excellence.

It was seen earlier that Ellen, as this element, went beyond the "system" *from above* and *from below*. But consequently, she also goes beyond it *from within* the linguistic code which rules the system. Indeed, the fact that Ellen cannot blend in with what Newland calls an "elaborate system of mystification" (41) -- that is, enter into the "system" which she exceeds (and so becomes excessive) -- could only affect Ellen's language and translate into the distortions that she forces some of the key words of this "hieroglyphic" world -- "where the real thing [is] never said or done, or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (41) -- to undergo. Or, stated otherwise, it was unavoidable, because they had been placed in direct contact with Ellen -- Ellen the character but also Ellen-Edith Wharton, "the [person] who wr[i]te[s]" -- for these "hieroglyphs," these "signs" which "set" this code to come to exceed themselves, that is, to go out of themselves and start slipping out of their clear established meanings to signify something-other-than-what-they-usually-mean. Or it should have been anticipated that the direct counterparts of the clearly-filled and clearly-ordered "boxes" within the "theater"

where the scene of human comedy is being played, that is, within "the" sentences, (some of) the words ordering this comedy/these sentences would, so to speak, start to "box" their way out.

Ellen, as she herself admits later, "do[es]n't speak [the same] language" (see heading). It seemed to me that it was possible to identify throughout the text several incidents of this phenomenon of displacement, in which words lose their status as "good words" (good and loyal words which one can count on) and "de-double," become "de-centered" or, in this precise context, are thrown "off-center" towards something "Other." I have tried to make a short list of such incidents, including the following words: "fashion," "play," "dilettante," "unpleasant,"<sup>10</sup> "lonely," "happy," "heaven," "happen," "new land/country," and "innocence."

The words "fashion," "heaven," "lonely," and "happy" seem to be the most revealing of such a phenomenon.

-- Upon learning that the "quartiers excentriques" (65) are not considered as "fashionable," Ellen protests: "Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one's own fashions?" (65). Thus, there is a slipping in meaning from the first "fashion" towards another one which is plural: "one's own fashions." Ellen's formula could be extended to the following question: "Why not fashion fashions one can fashion oneself?" -- a sentence which *met en abime* the word "fashion."

-- The word "heaven" is quickly filled with ambiguity. The clarity of this concept ("this dear old place [the theater] is heaven" (19), later "How do you like my funny house?"... "To me it's like heaven" [64; ch.9]) is threatened four pages later in the following sentence which comes after Ellen's first tears when she realizes that she is unhappy in New York as she was before: "Does no one cry here either? I suppose there's no need to, in heaven" (68; ch. 9). There are also two kinds of loneliness: the loneliness which one can speak about and not be ashamed of (true loneliness, that of Ellen) and the one that one cannot speak about because the "system" tacitly forbids doing so. The latter is a "worse" kind of loneliness, the loneliness of those who want to forbid loneliness. Once again the concept slips on itself/out of itself.

-- The word "happy" is "de-centered" from the beginning by its own comparative when May states: "You *do* love me, Newland! I'm so happy" and Newland retorts: "But then -- why not be happier?" (72). This sentence is echoed by that of May (who honestly does not understand Ellen): "After all I wonder if she would not be happier with her husband" to which Newland snaps: "Watching the contorsions of the damnes is supposed to be a favorite sport of the angels; but I believe even they don't think people happier in hell" (183). Thus, there are people of simple happiness (May) who refuse

to admit that they could be "happier" and refuse to be; and there are those who know that there is a disconcerting greater happiness. Here the word "happy" is deconstructed twice, first through its comparative, then as its comparative since there are (just below the surface) the people who are "happier" in heaven and those who can only bear to see people "happier" if they can confine them in hell. Or: the people who cannot be "happier" can only be so by locking away those who can in hell.

The words "dilettante," "play," "artist," "happen," "new land," "country," "archer," "age," and "innocence" seem to be more deeply displaced and should be studied following a more global problematic. All of these words have an initial meaning which, during the course of the novel, is "deconstructed"/displaced/de-centered well beyond what one could have imagined at the start. Thus at the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Newland in the following way: "he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (8), an idea confirmed in the very last pages: "he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante" (289). However, one cannot but notice that if Newland Archer knows how to preserve his image of a "dilettante," it is only an image which describes him only in appearance. Between the two uses of this one word and the two periods they refer to, the reader knows well enough that Newland has experienced amorous passion, an experience in which he, ready to do anything so as not to lose Ellen, has found himself two steps away from "giving everything up" so that he can follow her to Europe. It is obvious that in those moments of tragic rupture, Newland was hardly the "dilettante" whose image he had been projecting. The status of the word "dilettante" is, from the beginning, rather ambiguous given that, in general it has two meanings, in both English and French. The word means either "a lover of the arts"<sup>11</sup> or "a person having a superficial interest in an art."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the novel, the reader can only note that Newland goes further and further away from the first definition and gets closer and closer to the second, displacing the meaning of "dilettante" from one to the other. Indeed at the beginning of the novel, he is certainly this "lover of the arts" of the first definition; he does not hesitate to admit to Ellen that he "care[s] immensely [for the arts]" (92, emphasis added), and the ending confirms that he is still very much concerned by them, since he has become a respected connoisseur and philanthropist. However, the reader quickly realizes that, as concerned by the arts as he may be, he is *superficially* so, like an amateur (second definition): his "immense" interest in the the arts is limited to certain arts, certain artists. Ellen suspects it when she asks, "What kind of artists?" and makes a

difference between artists as a whole and dramatic artists: "I was really thinking of dramatic artists, singers, actors," (91) she says, before she herself appears dressed in a "tragic mask" (93) like a "pathetic and even pitiful figure" (93) endowed with something "inherently dramatic [and] passionate in herself" (99).

Newland's problem is that he separates art from life. One may consider the definition of "dilettante" given in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: "a person who amuses himself with an art or branch of knowledge, but without taking it seriously." This definition fits Newland word or word: he is the one who refuses to take art "seriously" and who refuses to place art at the center of his life. Newland has a limited vision of art, the vision of an outsider: that of a collector, of a library and museum hanger-on (his vision of art remains very 19th centuryish). This is why he remains an amateur in art as well as in love. He is the one who refuses to become the artist of his own life, who refuses to look the (tragic) evidence in the face, the evidence that it is only in letting oneself go towards the "unknown," that is, in taking a *major* risk, that of the "dramatic artist" -- that one can feel pain, of course, but also the most intense joys. Worse, Newland is aware of it: "Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life" (289). Newland, nonetheless, has made his choice: he does not let himself be carried away in the concrete reality of his passion for Ellen, a reality in which things are constantly happening, *in the making*, where it is impossible for the lover to grasp the object of his desire, because this object is an object which constantly slips out of reach, an object-which-is-not-an-object (this points to the deepest reality of art and that of eroticism, as in Newland's "*Each time you happen to me all over again*" near the end of the novel (239, author's emphasis). Instead, Newland has transformed this reality into a reality that he can *control* (barely) and Ellen into a vision that he can contemplate "lightly" and at will, as a "dilettante." He has turned Ellen into an *object of art* (one that he could tuck away on a shelf in his bookcase): "When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture" (289).

To this "happen" in *Each time you happen to me all over again* one could oppose to May's "Has anything happened?" when Newland visits her in St. Augustine. On the one side the slippery, ungraspable reality of amorous passion, on the other a reality which must be grasped and controlled at any price. One must be aware of the more than ambiguous role that May plays at the end of the novel, May who advances her pawns one by one until she has total control of the situation with an iron hand which hinders Newland from leaving. One might think here of the dialogue

between Lawrence Lefferts and Beaufort when May wins the archery contest: "Not one of the lot holds the bow as she does"; and Beaufort retort[s]: "Yes; but that's the only kind of target she'll ever hit" (178). It is clear in this case that just as May's hand does not make her bow tremble (nothing to do with Ellen's hand which Newland contemplates several times) -- her words do not tremble either, they have *one single* meaning, a definitive one.

The "We *did* use to play together, didn't we" uttered by Ellen at the very beginning of the novel becomes clear in retrospect. Once again there are two types of game: one in which one wins every time (the one played by May) and the one played by Ellen in which one plays only for the sake of *playing* (as children do). On the one side a game of power in which one plays in order to win while knowing that one has every chance of winning: a "minor" or "serious" game; on the other side a "pure game," a game-for-the-game or a "sovereign" game<sup>13</sup> in which one scorns the result (the fact of winning or losing). A game of power against a game of desire, a game of desire which Newland has renounced in the end and which will eventually kill desire. In Newland's "country" (in his new "New Land") a minor power, that of keeping an aborted passion as a frozen memory, is preferred to a real (major) desire. In *The Age of Innocence* it can be thus said that Archer is beaten at his own game by May -- now May Archer -- who is not as innocent as she seems. However, it is clearly the image of the innocent May that Newland wants to conserve at the end -- which in the prolongation of what has just been said about game -- forces one to come to the following conclusion. There are clearly two innocences: pure innocence or *innocent* innocence, that of Ellen who *is* perpetual vivacity and who does not worry about winning -- an *ageless* innocence; and an innocence guilty of having killed innocence by transforming innocence into a power. In *The Age of Innocence* it is the latter -- a cold and cynical innocence -- which triumphs in the end.

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#### Notes

- 1) René Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, quoted and commented on by Jean-Michel Heimonet in *De la révolte à l'exercice: Essai sur l'hédonisme contemporain*: 4. My translation.
- 2) *De la révolte...* 1-23 and following.
- 3) One cannot but notice that the sacrifice of Ellen is delayed throughout a large part of the novel. In addition is she sacrificed or does she sacrifice herself? Undoubtedly the

question has to be asked since Ellen sacrifices her divorce for Newland and May; she sacrifices her fortune to her husband (who wants to get her back) for her freedom; finally it is she who decides to return to Europe and not the group who forces her to do so.

- 4) Concerning the quotes from Georges Bataille, I have used the translations from some of his works in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited by Allan Stoekl.
- 5) Definitions of various words in this article are taken from *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, 1993.
- 6) On page 164 (ch. 20) the phrases between parenthesis: "(after a month with the Paris dressmakers)"; "(once her clothes were ordered)"; "(where they were to spend a fortnight while he ordered *his* clothes)" only emphasize the unpleasant surprise Newland feels, and make May's pressing need to accumulate the most clothes even more obvious.
- 7) See quote p. 5.
- 8) Bataille adds: "In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape...: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat."
- 9) This does not mean that the "tasks" of such words no longer exist today.
- 10) In the text there is, concerning this word, a tell-tale slip which occurs when it is first used several times by Mr. Letterblair, the legal advisor, so that Newland questions its usage (85-86; ch. 11), then, when he himself is with Ellen and he realizes that he is about to use the same word, he thinks better of it and uses another one instead: "[Your husband] can say things -- things that might be unpleas- might be disagreeable to you" (94; ch. 12).
- 11) "Dilettante": see the definitions in *Webster's* and in the *Random House College Dictionary*, 1975 edition.
- 12) "Dilettante": see the secondary definitions in *Webster's*.
- 13) I borrow these distinctions from a lovely article by Georges Bataille entitled "Sommes-nous là pour rire ou pour être sérieux?" [Are we here to laugh or to be serious?], XII, 100-129, of his *Oeuvres complètes*.

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## Resolutions of Guilt: Cultural Values Reconsidered in *Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*

by Ferdâ Asya

Over the last two decades Edith Wharton has been studied by critics who have increasingly read her work in the context of her life with an effort to detect the writer's emotional anxieties as the source of her creativity. Elizabeth Ammons indicates that Wharton's novels are her evaluation of romantic love, marriage, divorce and motherhood in the context of her own experiences, Wendy Gimbel considers Wharton's novels as her means of search for identity and self-realization, Susan Goodman analyzes in Wharton's novels the author's relationships with her parents and other women and observes her satisfaction with her independence from her mother, Janet Goodwyn delineates Wharton's literary evolution in reference to the places that she lived and travelled in America and in Europe, David Holbrook discerns the author's being abused by her father as the reason for her fictional creation of unsatisfactory men, Candace Waid sketches Wharton's attempt to imagine the place of woman writer throughout the writer's career, Carol Wershoven depicts that the "woman intruder" in Wharton's novels is the author's portrayal of her own identification with the woman outside of her society, and R.W.B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff read Wharton's oeuvre in the context of her life.<sup>1</sup> Wharton's biographers and critics seldom acknowledge guilt as a significant emotion in her life and art. Nor does Wharton admit in her autobiographical writings that the feeling of guilt influenced her thoughts and actions.<sup>2</sup> Yet some of her novels suggest that the need to resolve her guilt feelings over her adulterous affair and her divorce was the motive that impelled her to write. Study of her private life, her social life, and her art convinced me that one means of penetrating to

Wharton's level of creativity is through the use of Freudian analysis focusing on the guilt that fueled her need for wish-fulfillment and expression.

As she was growing up, guilt feelings were first instilled in Wharton by parents, society, tradition and culture. Later, they were internalized and formed her indomitable conscience.<sup>3</sup> In her autobiographies some of the incidents of her early childhood, such as her mother's meticulousness in "good manners" and the correct usage of languages,<sup>4</sup> fastidiousness in the tidiness of drawing-rooms (cf. 839), perfectionist style of dressing (cf. 796), reluctance to explain to her daughter their family's and society's taciturnity about moral issues, namely divorce and adultery (cf. 839), and her rude refusal to answer her daughter's questions on sexual matters, such as marriage and having children,<sup>5</sup> cast light on the formation of her conscientious character by the restrictive training of her family. In most cases, Wharton had the feeling of guilt without even clearly understanding the nature of the transgression, as in the case of the adulterous affair of her father's cousin George Alfred.<sup>6</sup> When the writer was young, it was the influence of the notion of "being nice" ("Life and I" cf. 1087) that caused her natural feelings and thoughts to be suppressed and that inhibited her from asking questions on sexual matters. If her thoughts or actions departed from the accepted codes of behavior, she knew that she had not been "nice," so she had guilt feelings and she believed that she deserved punishment.<sup>7</sup>

In her autobiographies, Edith Wharton never mentions her divorce from Edward Wharton or her love affair with Morton Fullerton. After the end of the love affair (1910) and



the divorce (1913), the guilt feelings for adultery and divorce continued to occupy the writer's mind but they modified as they persisted. Until the beginning of the First World War, her moral guilt for these two incidents of her life had a private origin; her conscience was troubled over her violation of moral values to which she outwardly subscribed. After the war, observing the degeneration of cultural values in America, she realized that her actions were of the kind that had contributed to the deterioration of traditional social norms. Her guilt feelings switched focus from the personal to the social domain. Although the post-war moral and social values were less guilt-inducing for adultery and divorce than those of her own generation, she considered this reformation as a slackening of traditional cultural norms in post-war America and a cause of unfavorable changes in the civilized order of life:

Social life, with us as in the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old framework, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary at the domestic rites of the Pharaohs (*A Backward Glance* 780-81).

Wharton's art was an opportunity for her to actualize her desires, which were denied satisfaction in reality by guilt feelings. The feeling of guilt was the impetus that compelled her to write some of her fiction either to evaluate the diverse aspects of her complex personality or to recreate some incidents of her life and some aspects of her personality in her fiction as she wished them to have been in reality. *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence* represent clearly the artistic working out in her fiction of the influence of guilt feelings caused by her divorce and her adulterous affair.

Although *The Custom of the Country* was serialized in *Scribner's* from January to November 1913, Wharton had begun writing the novel in 1908.<sup>8</sup> The gestation period of the novel includes both her adulterous affair with Morton Fullerton and her divorce from Edward Wharton. The social, sexual, and marital adventuring of her heroine Undine Spragg certainly invites analytic comparison with the writer's own expanding independence and experimentation and sheds light on Edith Wharton's "long yearning for psychological freedom" (Lewis 350). But "Undine, despite her red hair, is not Edith Wharton" (Wolff 230). Wharton's purpose for writing this novel was to explore her evolving understanding of cultural values about marriage, divorce, and extra-marital affair after experiencing all of these herself. By 1913, with an adulterous affair and a divorce behind her, Wharton was not only astonished at what she had done but feared what she

might do if the freedom she had experienced was allowed to grow unchecked. The unusual force which drives Undine Spragg to seek several divorces for her convenience reflects not a conscious endorsement of the rightfulness of such conduct as her heroine's, but rather Wharton's own fear of a similar loss of moral principle and violation of cultural values. Her fears turned into absurdity in the character of Undine, which rendered her novel an "absurd nightmare." Compared to Undine's remorseless disregard of the accepted marriage and divorce norms, Wharton's own reluctant divorce appeared principled and unavoidable, thus perhaps relieving severe guilt feelings in her.

Although Wharton called Undine with her own nickname, "Puss" (*The Custom of the Country* 698), and ascribed some of her own physical characteristics to her, she gave her heroine a background different from her own. The laxity of moral and social constraints in Undine's environment freed her from the prohibitions and inhibitions that Wharton had suffered but deprived her of the cultivated and refined side of Wharton's personality and rendered her behavior not only morally and socially inappropriate but also ridiculous. When Wharton was young, she was expected to conform to the cultural values and rules of the social class of her family. In the novel, Undine is encouraged to climb beyond the social sphere of her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Spragg never discourage their daughter from ambitiously striving to obtain what she thinks "still better beyond...more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her" (656). Wharton knew that her traditional moral upbringing "did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect...[her] whole life" ("Life and I" 1088). But by 1913, she also realized that total lack of moral concepts would result in total lack of self-respect.

When Wharton was young, it was the influence of the notion of "being nice" in her thoughts and actions that prevented her from freely and directly expressing her natural feelings or asking questions on sexual matters. Having no socially or morally instilled respectability, Undine mistakes the sexual advances of Peter Van Degen, "who was noted for not caring for 'nice' women," as "niceness" and respect for her feelings. Van Degen's "extraordinary 'niceness' seemed to justify her and to prove that she had been right in trusting her instinct rather than in following the counsels of prudence" (*The Custom of the Country* 754).

Although Wharton's social and cultural background pressured her to accept an unsuitable marriage and put up with a husband who showed little effort to share her interests, she still bandaged guilt feelings over her divorce from the unfaithful, deceitful, and psychologically unstable Edward Wharton. The writer contrasts her own conscientious attitude with her heroine's remorseless behavior. In order to attain



each marriage, Undine invests her beauty, and stays in it as long as its purchasing power lasts, then leaves for a new one with a better rate of exchange. Her remorse, when she divorces, is because of her loss of purchasing power rather than a failure of happiness: "Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity" (859). She regards a new marriage as a new business deal by which she can secure a better financial position that she has lost rather than an opportunity for the happiness that she has missed: "Her one desire was to get back an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife" (859).

With the irreconcilable Ralph-Undine marriage, Wharton envisioned, in a reversal of sexual rules, the impossibility of her own marriage to Edward Wharton. The entire lack of comprehension on the part of the offending spouse, the sexual adventuring, the financial vampirism and the refusal or inability to maintain loyalty and fidelity rendered Undine/Edward Wharton not merely disappointing but actually impossible people for Ralph/Edith Wharton to live with. But Wharton could not let herself off so easily, for her guilt feelings told her that her *wishes* to be rid of Edward Wharton and to find sexual satisfaction and passionate love elsewhere were themselves wrong, even before they were acted upon. The writer understood the reasons for her affair and divorce and had adjusted her feelings to the new conditions of her life. But she was unable to eliminate guilt feelings. These feelings warned her that if she abandoned her traditional moral perspective totally, she might turn into as ruthless a person as Undine. When she compared her sense of responsibility and respectability to the selfish, ruthless, and remorseless behavior of Undine, Wharton felt less guilt over her own adulterous affair and divorce and also appreciated the significance of the traditional values which had granted her the morality with which she lived.

By 1920, Wharton knew that the traditional conventions had been changing, but she had social guilt feelings for violating, with an adulterous affair and a divorce, the moral and social norms of her country. Her deeply entrenched guilt prompted her to write another novel in quite a different manner. By this time, she had already analyzed and resolved her roles as daughter, wife, lover and writer in her various fictions. In her novel, *The Age of Innocence*, she reassessed her role as a member of the New York society.<sup>9</sup> In her adult life, Wharton endured the difficulty of resisting temptations. She also suffered the contritions of yielding to departures from norms. Her experiences had taught her that the continuation of order in society often requires the individual to suppress desire and submit to moral and social

rules. This is the reason that in her novel she was both critical and appreciative of the traditional cultural values of her country. Wharton wished that she had been able to overcome temptation rather than give in to it. Her guilt feelings ensuing from her adulterous affair and divorce caused her to deny the liberal-minded Ellen Olenska, first, a divorce, then, a love affair with Newland Archer, and to surrender Newland's free will and choice of happiness with Ellen, first, to the will and choice prescribed by the traditions and conventions of his society, then, to fate, which determined his "deserved" loneliness after his wife's death. *The Age of Innocence* is Edith Wharton's fictional acquittal of her social and moral guilt feelings.

Wharton bound the characters of her novel to the same social and moral norms that had suppressed her own actions. The word "nice" encompassed all the accepted values that a little girl should have in old New York. Significantly, Wharton's memories of being "not nice" mostly concern sexual matters. In her novel, through Newland Archer's contemplations, Wharton fulfills the wish not only of questioning but also of criticizing the reliability of this standard of virtue for women. The writer became increasingly aware of the influence on her thoughts and actions of her country's social conventions after living in France, a country with different social and moral values. Wharton reports her own evolution through Newland Archer's reading of anthropology and social theory, his observations of society, his awareness of the artificiality of its norms, and finally his acceptance of their social necessity.

Newland realizes that "niceness" is only a cultivated ignorance in women. Ellen's predicament urges him to say, "Women ought to be free - as free as we are" (*The Age of Innocence* 1048). But he knows that in his society "[n]ice' women...would never claim the kind of freedom he meant" (1049). Eventually, his actual view about the "niceness" of women remains unchanged: "[I]f a man married it must necessarily be among the nice" (1176).

For May, "niceness" is a personal asset as well as a social necessity. In May, Wharton recreates the woman of old New York who copied the behavior of her ancestresses without evaluating its honesty. May's "purity" is not a conscious performance but is "cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses..." (1051). By the exercise of "traditionally inherited skills," she first ensnares Newland into marriage, then keeps him faithful, and finally prevents his leaving her. Through Newland's reflections on his wife, Wharton shows that it is the individual's compulsion to comply with social conventions that most inhibits the individual from speaking directly and behaving naturally. But, she also indicates that

personal sacrifices can serve the public interest. Although "May's pressure was already bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep" (1176), for Newland, "she had represented peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an unescapable duty" (1179).

Through the character of May, Wharton relieved guilt feelings for her own flight from New York. After experiencing adultery and divorce, she feared becoming a calculating character like Undine Spragg but neither did she wish to succumb to the social and moral values that could instill in her the scheming character traits of May Welland.

More than any of the other heroines in her novels, Ellen Olenska is a faithful reproduction of Wharton herself, in both personality and the incidents of her life. Ellen's life in a foreign country, her separation from her husband, her adulterous affair with M. Rivière, her brief visit to her country and finally her permanent settlement abroad closely resemble the incidents of the author's life. Were it not for having known Ellen Olenska, Newland Archer would most likely have been unaware of the significance of the conventions of his country. On the one hand, Ellen Olenska represents the part of Edith Wharton's self which is highly critical of tradition. Ellen defies convention and violates the values of old New York. She refers to the van der Luydens' dinner as simply "a nice party" (1075) and their duke as "the dullest man I ever met" (1066). She walks with the disreputable Julius Beaufort "up Fifth Avenue at the crowded hour" (1040) and attends the musical receptions of Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, "a woman they consider common" (1085). She chooses to live in the "unfashionable" (1074) neighborhood of "people who wrote" (1069). Unlike her relatives, she is sympathetic toward Mrs. Beaufort after her husband's business disgrace (cf. 1255). On the other hand, having the experiences that she had, Ellen is more aware of the utility of tradition. She practises what Newland only customarily preaches: "Our legislation favours divorce - our social customs don't" (1103). She sacrifices the personal freedom she could have gained with a divorce to the social respectability her family wants to maintain by keeping her in an unhappy marriage. The experience of her previous affair with Newland prevents her from making a similar mistake with Newland. Not only does she resist further temptation herself, she prevents Newland from yielding to desire. When he proposes her to live with him, she guides him to distinguish between fantasy and reality: "[W]e'll look, not at visions, but at realities" (1245). With a similar past, Undine Spragg would be relentlessly continuing to have affairs, marriages, and divorces. Ellen is neither paralyzed with guilt feeling nor willfully contemptuous of decent observance of a code. Ellen Olenska's sacrifice of the personal desire for the

communal interest depicts the kind of person that Edith Wharton had become by 1920. The latter realized that without having violated the restrictions of her tradition she would never have appreciated its value and without having endured painful experiences she would never have understood the meaning and cultural value of "innocence." It is this realization that relieved Wharton of guilt feelings over her adulterous affair and divorce.

Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer seemingly form the two opposing sides of Edith Wharton's personality: the adventurous and the conformist. But this initial appearance later proves misleading. By 1920, the different aspects of the writer's personality were slight nuances, not sharp contrasts. Newland and Ellen are both unable to defy tradition and transgress the moral and social values of their society. But their separation is caused by their deeply ingrained regard for the rules of decency in civilized society rather than their intentional decision to sacrifice their love and sexual attraction for each other for the happiness of specific individuals in their community. As each begins to understand and appreciate the values of the other, Ellen and Newland step-by-step render their chance of being together impossible. At first, it is Ellen who makes Newland aware of the existence of the "truth" and "reality" of genuine emotions beyond the falsehood of social norms, and it is Newland who convinces Ellen of the importance of abiding by convention. Subsequently, they exchange roles. Each seems to be prevented from yielding to desire by the conscience of the other. Ellen "want[s] to cast off all...[her] old life, to become just like everybody else here [in New York]" (1101), whereas Newland wants a "real Life." At the end of the novel, Newland remains "innocent" of the family consequences that an adulterous affair can produce and of the public outrage of a divorce attempt, but he is saved from these pains by one who is "experienced" in these aspects of life. His "innocence" is sustained also by the influence of the culture that has formed him. Unlike the generation of his son Dallas, which has "the facility and self-confidence that came of looking at fate not as a master but as an equal" (1300), Newland's fate becomes his master. In the end, he is able to behave as perhaps in 1920 Wharton herself would have done in a similar situation: when there is nothing to hinder him from being with Ellen, instead of going up to her flat to see her, "Newland Archer [gets] up slowly and walk[s] back alone to his hotel" (1302).<sup>10</sup> In the characters of Ellen and Newland the two parts of Wharton's personality merged into one and became both her fulfillment of the mature understanding of "innocence" and "experience," and her wish to retain her "innocence" despite her painful experiences.

Through the process of writing these two novels

Wharton released both her personal and her social guilt feelings. She no longer had reason to suffer from personal guilt feelings for she was able to go beyond her traditional realm to gratify her personal happiness. She was also cured of social guilt feelings by regarding her unconventional experiences as necessary to the development of a personality which was mindful of moral and social compliance but also tolerant of human weaknesses.<sup>11</sup>

Paris, France

### Notes

- 1) Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980); Wendy Gimbel, *Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival* (New York, Philadelphia, Easthome, UK, Toronto, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney: Praeger Special Studies, Praeger Scientific, 1984); Susan Goodman, *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals* (Hanover and London: The University Press of New England, 1990); Janet Goodwyn, *Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters* (New York: St. Martin's 1990); David Holbrook, *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man* (London: Vision Press and New York: St. Martin's, 1991); R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Fromm International, 1985); Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1982); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (London: Oxford UP, 1977).
- 2) There is a difference between "being guilty" and "having the feeling of guilt." Being guilty is an objective, conscious, and social status. To violate the prohibitions or flout the standards of one's society renders one guilty of transgression. One *is* guilty. Freud names the consciousness of this kind of guilt, "remorse" ["Civilization and Its Discontents (1930 [1929])", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959) 21: 57-145. 131. Hereafter all writings of Sigmund Freud will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text. ] Freud emphasizes the conscious aspect of the "deed" by further defining "remorse" as a "consciousness of guilt" (134) as different from a "sense of guilt" (135). Being guilty results from the misdeed whereas the feeling of guilt may occur even before a malefaction is performed or attempted. Being guilty is the complete opposite of being innocent whereas a person may have guilt feelings and yet be perfectly innocent of an actual transgression. Unlike "being guilty," "having guilt feelings" can be a subjective, unconscious, and psychological condition.  
For the difference between "being guilty" and "having guilt feelings" see James A. Knight, *Conscience and Guilt* (New York: Appleton, 1969).  
See also Gabrielle Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).
- 3) In narrating her obedience to her mother's restriction about reading novels, Wharton states that at the age of ten, she "was a painfully conscientious child" [Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, sel. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: The Library of America, 1990) 767-1068. 834] Although she remembers the constraints of her conscience when she was ten, that conscience had begun to be effectively functional much earlier. The system of "truth-telling" [Edith Wharton, "Life and I," *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, sel. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York:

The Library of America, 1990) 1069-96. 1073.] that Wharton employed after calling the mother of her dancing teacher "an old goat" clearly demonstrates that, when she was six or seven years old, she had already internalized external prohibitions and her conscience had begun to operate as a "guilt-inflicting and punishment-allotting" mechanism. The little girl had guilt feelings not only for being "not nice" by using a "naughty" word but also for *thinking* about associating her teacher's mother with an animal. Apparently, it was neither her teacher nor her mother, but her super-ego that indicted her for her "sin" and instructed her to publicly confess her guilt. As Wharton says, "I perfectly remember...a distinct sense of disappointment when, instead of recognizing & commending the heroism of my conduct [of confessing], she [her dancing teacher] gave me a furious scolding for my impertinence" (1073). Wharton's condition can be described in Freud's terms:

First comes renunciation of instinct owing to fear of aggression by the *external* authority. (This is, of course, what fear of the loss of love amounts to, for love is a protection against this punitive aggression.) After that comes the erection of an *internal* authority, and renunciation of instinct owing to fear of it - owing to fear of conscience. In this second situation, bad intentions are equated with bad actions, and hence comes a sense of guilt and a need for punishment ("Civilization and Its Discontents" 128).

- For an exposition of Freud's ideas about the unconscious functions and aspects of the conscience and the super-ego, see especially Edmund Bergler, *The Battle of the Conscience: A Psychiatric Study of the Inner Working of the Conscience* (Washington DC: Washington Institute of Medicine, 1948).
- 4) Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, sel. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: The Library of America, 1990) 767-1068. cf. 820. Hereafter all references to *A Backward Glance* will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 5) Edith Wharton, "Life and I," *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings*, sel. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (New York: The Library of America, 1990) 1069-96 cf. 1087. Hereafter all references to "Life and I" will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 6) Wharton's introduction to some moral issues was so vague as to be almost dream-like. Her father's cousin George Alfred had been involved in an adulterous affair with "some woman." The family "had long since washed their hands of George Alfred - had ceased even to be aware of his existence" (*A Backward Glance* 803). "Some woman" was the key phrase to designate George Alfred's misfortune. While the author's autobiographical account of how she learned this story from her mother is tinged with sarcasm and humor, its effect was dreadful enough to be both remembered and consciously suppressed (cf. 803). She reminisces that among the sins against which she was "warned every week in church" (839) adultery was the most mysterious and yet most tangible.
- 7) Freud, in "Civilization and Its Discontents," associates the feeling of guilt with "the need for punishment" (128 and 136).  
See also J.C. Flugel, *Man, Morals and Society: A Psycho-analytical Study* (New York: Viking, 1961), especially 146 for guilt as "need for punishment," and 148 for "confession as an alternative punishment."
- 8) Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, *Edith Wharton: Novels*, sel. R.W.B. Lewis (New York: The Library of America, 1985) 621-1014. Hereafter all references to *The Custom of the Country* will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 9) Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, *Edith Wharton: Novels*, sel. R.W.B. Lewis (New York: The Library of America, 1985) 1015-1302. Hereafter all references to *The Age of Innocence* will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 10) Freud's contention, in "The Ego and the Id (1923)," 19 (1961): 1-66,

explains Newland's condition:

The super-ego fulfills the same function of protecting and saving that was fulfilled in earlier days by the father and later by Providence or Destiny (58).

- 11) Guilt feelings, whether conscious or unconscious, can function on two different levels: social and personal. Robert W. Firestone in his article, "The 'Voice': The Dual Nature of Guilt Reactions," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 47 (1987): 210-29, divides guilt feelings into the "neurotic" and the "existential." According to Firestone,

Neurotic guilt may be defined as feelings of remorse, shame, or self-attack for seeking gratification, for moving toward one's goals, and for pursuing one's wants.... This form of guilt reaction appears to be related to emotional deprivation, parental prohibitions, and faulty training procedures in childhood (211).

The "parental prohibitions" are established by one's tradition, culture, and society. In "Civilization and Its Discontents" Freud names this system "ethics" (142). He explains that the high demands that ethics puts on human beings render them not more civilized, but more unsatisfied, aggressive, and unhappy. According to Freud, then, ethics is not only unable to prevent anarchy but actually adds to discontent. He states that neurosis, or the feeling of guilt, is one of the results of yielding to ethics (cf. 142). When Wharton, as a youngster, tried to be faithful to the ethics of her family and her society, the result was the repression of her instinctual desires, and the development of a conscience and guilt feelings.

In contradistinction to the neurotic, repressed guilt of conscience, Firestone names the other guilt feeling "existential" or "ontological guilt":

The second type of guilt...is triggered by holding back or withholding one's natural inclinations. It is generally

experienced by individuals when they turn their backs on their goals, retreat from life, or seek gratification in fantasy (211-12).

Clearly, this feeling of guilt is generated not by disobedience of parental authority or social codes but by succumbing to them and transgressing or betraying oneself.

Naturally, Edith Wharton was caught by the "dual nature" of guilt feelings. She attempted to comply with the external prohibitions of her family and society as a protection against "neurotic guilt feelings," but her submission to authority, eventually, induced in her "existential guilt feelings." Her life, as a compliant daughter and wife, generated "neurotic guilt feelings" and her early writing career expressed these at the same time that it relieved her of "existential guilt feelings." By the time she entered into an adulterous love affair and a divorce, she had finally overcome most of her "neurotic guilt feelings," so that she was able to negotiate the transgression of the two "taboos" of her tradition with a conscious rationale, if not with comfort. However, her treatment of "adultery" and "divorce" in her later novels suggests that the author's conquest of guilt over these issues was only temporary and insecure. Finally, Wharton found it preferable to sacrifice personal happiness for the benefit of "civilization." Her "neurotic" guilt proved more intolerable than the "existential."

See Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Holt, 1947), especially 210-26.

See also James A. Knight, *Conscience and Guilt* (New York: Appleton, 1969), especially 92.

For a comprehensive study of "existential feeling of guilt" see Donald V. Morano, *Existential Guilt: A Phenomenological Study* (B.V. Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1973).

## Living Space

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### Notes

- 1) Only in recent years young women of independent means can become the owner of a home or a flat in Japan without any reservation. Virginia Woolf writes that in England "after the year 1880 a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property" (116).
- 2) Woolf quotes La Bruyère as an example of misogynist with his "Les femmes sont extrêmes: elles sont meilleures ou pires que les hommes..." (29-30).
- 3) Also the semiotic significance of the kitchen is markedly made in the writing of contemporary women writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Anne Tyler, or the Japanese novelist Yoshimoto Banana.
- 4) In 1997, the 100th anniversary year of *The Decoration of Houses*, Alexandra Stoddard, a New York based decorator, updated Wharton's book and published her book under the same title - *The Decoration of Houses*. Stoddard gives full credit to Wharton's book, and is reported to say that "There's no deception. My book was meant to praise and to celebrate Edith Wharton," and the "Classical principles don't change - ... Wharton was a keen observer, and she still has relevance."

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# Edith Wharton's "The Angel at the Grave" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*

by *Reiner Kornetta*

Right from the start of Edith Wharton's short story "The Angel at the Grave" the lines seem strangely familiar. We are reminded of things we have heard and read before. A feeling of *deja-vu* soon sets in: an imposing, old house with elm trees in a small place somewhere in New England. Without doubt Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* can be given as the source of Wharton's story<sup>1</sup>, for the evidence is overwhelming. If the two works are compared more closely with one another there is a whole series of things they have in common. First of all there is the geographical position already indicated above: a small town in New England. In 1957 in her essay, "New England in the Stories of Edith Wharton"<sup>2</sup> Nancy R. Leach had already pointed to Wharton's associations with this region, "...historical advantages she herself regards with slight disdain" (91). "The manners and morals of New England caused Mrs. Wharton discomfort. So the writer comments on the lingering puritanism of New England...., supplementing these impressions were those she gained from reading the stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne" (97), concludes Leach. Consequently, Edith Wharton's picture of New England was not exactly a positive one. The people living there are often described as "proud, ignorant, superstitious and melancholy, capable of hard physical labour and infinite human suffering" (97). Alan Henry Rose also comes to a similar conclusion in "Such Depths of Sad Initiation": Edith Wharton and New England<sup>3</sup>: "...In these barren settings Wharton seems to have felt the full extent of the negation, the sense of the void..." (424). The characters cannot develop freely: "...New England constitutes a block to maturity in Wharton's fiction" (426).

He talks of "life denial" in the case of Paulina and concludes that Wharton's New England characters have no choice and are at the mercy of their environment for better or for worse.

The common aspects of the works are not restricted to the geography. Wharton writes the Anson's house with a capital letter, just as Hawthorne did with the Pyncheon's house: "For sixty years it had written itself with a capital letter ..." (AG, 129) and both houses are emblems of family success and function as the nucleus of the setting. The houses exercise power on their occupants which makes it impossible for the people to leave the buildings for any length of time, and the houses turn into almost independent characters in themselves. Ghost houses<sup>4</sup> that have developed their own lives and are filled with ancestors who do not let their descendants go. "After that the House possessed her [Paulina]" and "...it had become more and more difficult for her [Paulina] to leave the House even for a day" (AG, 137). Hepzibah is in a similar position in *The House of Seven Gables*. Her attempt to escape from the power of the house by running away also fails. Consequently, Hawthorne's Hepzibah is a prisoner in the same way that Wharton's Paulina is in a house steeped in tradition and ghosts. Even the description of the interior of the house is almost identical. "The high-ceilinged rooms, with their panelled walls, their polished mahogany, their portraits of triple stocked ancestors..." (AG, 133), and "...the cold clean empty meeting-house..." (AG, 132) suggest the inhospitality in both houses.

On closer attention even the owner's surname, that is Anson, reminds us with its suffix of the name Pyncheon. Furthermore in "The Angel at the Grave" we meet an aunt of

Paulina's called Phoebe<sup>5</sup>, the very name that is known well enough in classical antiquity and *The House of the Seven Gables*. And if that weren't enough Wharton compares the historical Hawthorne to her fictitious Orestes Anson by writing: "...he [Orestes] had come to be 'the friend of Emerson,' 'the correspondent of Hawthorne'" (AG, 141).

With so many common aspects and references it is hard to speak of chance. Those who know Wharton know with what care she selected the names of her characters and the geographical locations<sup>6</sup>; they also know that she used these common aspects which are listed above in her short stories not because she lacked creativity herself, but because in doing so she pursued a very definite purpose. It has to be assumed that she wanted her readers to register the close connections between 'The Angel at the Grave' and *The House of the Seven Gables*. So it is worth asking what motivated Wharton to produce such an obvious connection between her short story and Hawthorne's romance.

Taking a look at Greek mythology may prove to be helpful and be a first step in this direction. Edith Wharton was familiar with Greek mythology and there are suggestions of it in her numerous other short stories. (Persephone in "Pomegranate Seed" and Hermione in "The Last Asset" are just two examples.) The origins go further back than the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus and deserve attention: Orestes' great grandfather Pelops wanted to marry Princess Hippodamia and had to test himself against her father, King Oenomaus in a chariot race. To be on the safe side he makes an arrangement with Myrtilus, the son of the God Hermes and charioteer, who looks after the king's horses and chariots. If Myrtilus replaces the linchpins on Oenomaus' chariot with wax ones so that Pelops wins the race, then Myrtilus is to receive half of the kingdom and a night of love with Hippodamia. Myrtilus agrees, fulfills his part of the deal, and Pelops, who kills Oenomaus, is the winner of the race. Later Pelops no longer wants to know anything of his promise to Myrtilus. He hurls him from a cliff into the sea. As he falls Myrtilus curses Pelops and his descendants. From now on there is no more peace for the House of Atreus. That is sufficient for the prior story.

So a curse is the starting point of future disaster for generations. The connection between Orestes and Maule's curse is obvious. It is about guilt and atonement for wrongdoing. The sins of the fathers continue to affect the following generations. In *The House of the Seven Gables* old Pyccheon's guilt and Maule's curse for the injustice done to him can be clearly seen. In Wharton's "The Angel at the Grave" it is not easy initially to talk of guilt going on for generations or even to recognize it as such. Wharton's concept of guilt - if it can actually be called that - is much less tangible, much more

abstract, and can only then be recognized maybe if we think of Hawthorne and establish parallels. So the question arises: Is there really guilt in "The Angel at the Grave" and which guilt is it? Is it to do with Orestes Anson's guilt or the guilt of his generation? On the one hand his first name points to Aeschylus' Orestes and is without question tainted with guilt when seen from this perspective. But he also corresponds to the historical figure of Orestes Brownson, the forgotten transcendentalist who is sometimes mentioned along with Thoreau in the same breath<sup>7</sup>. This assumption is confirmed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar: "...a monumental figure out of the 'American Renaissance' who is no doubt based on the transcendentalist Orestes Brownson"<sup>8</sup> and surely seems more probable than the assumption of Carol J. Singley who thinks "Orestes Anson (is) a famous transcendentalist who unmistakably suggests Emerson" (52). And now if we also recall that Brownson's son in his day published his father's works, then the parallels to the fictitious Paulina Anson and her work on her grandfather's biography become quite clear. But what could we reproach or blame Orestes Anson for? After all he did not decree that his granddaughter, Paulina, should spend her life taking care of his literary bequest. However, for his wife and her daughters it was clear very soon, "that she [Paulina] was designed to act as the guardian of the family temple" (AG, 132). She was the only one who could read his works and this had to be seen as, "sure evidence of predestination" (AG, 134).

When she moves into her grandfather's house (in *The House of the Seven Gables* Phoebe also comes as a young girl to the Pyncheon House) Paulina is given a task which imprisons her for the rest of her life. And we cannot help getting the impression that the other members of the family expect her to be completely devoted to this task<sup>9</sup>. Maybe the reason is that her mother left that very house years before, preferring to marry, which did not gain the family's approval, rather than tackling her father's works. "There had been a third daughter so unworthy of hers that she had married a distant cousin, who had taken her to live in a new Western community where the *Works of Orestes Anson* had not yet become a part of the civic consciousness; [...] she was tacitly understood to be excluded from the family heritage of fame. [...] and the interest of it returned to the Anson House in the shape of a granddaughter who was at once felt to be what Mrs. Anson called a 'compensation'" (AG, 132). It is clear to the aunts and to the village inhabitants, who are the immediate influences on Paulina, that this precious literary inheritance of the village can only be properly managed by his granddaughter. In the following years Paulina devotes all her strength to her grandfather's literary bequest. "Paulina, in fact, delighted in her grandfather's writing" (AG, 134). She

becomes a sought after authority in this field. She declines an offer of marriage to Hewlett Winsloe and so rejects the possibility of escaping from the confinement and restrictedness of New England because the house and the ghost of her grandfather hold her back: "...but such disapproval as reached her was an emanation from the walls of the House, from the bare desk, the faded portraits..." (AG, 136).

It is worth considering the reasons why Paulina saw herself as the custodian of her grandfather's treasure ("the interpreter of the oracle" (AG, 134). Her conduct is ruled by the thought that she owes it to her village community, her aunts, to posterity, to her grandfather of course and to herself to take care of his bequest. "On women of Paulina's mould this piety toward implicit demands, toward the ghosts of dead duties walking unappeased among usurping passions, has a stronger hold than any tangible bond" (AG, 136). This is an attitude which was conveyed to her for so long until she believed and accepted it herself. The external coercion, which was exercised subtly on her by her relatives, turns into inner coercion. Paulina's strong sense of duty and her willingness to make sacrifices lead us back to the starting point, that is to New England and the kind of people living there. Jo Agnew McManis<sup>10</sup> is somehow of the same opinion when she writes: "...we find that her [Wharton's] characters suffer not so much at the hands of other characters as from self-sacrifice" (986). "If not consciously, then at least subconsciously, Edith Wharton serves her *penance*<sup>11</sup> through her characters. She makes them conform where she did not" (988). "They seem to derive some sort of masochistic pleasure from their self-sacrifice." (986).

Paulina does not realise that her efforts were in vain until there are fewer and fewer visitors at the House and the publishers reject her manuscript. Only then does she start losing faith in the importance of her grandfather's work. She becomes aware of the senselessness of her action. She gave up everything to keep her grandfather alive. She realises that it was all in vain. "It ruined my life!' ... 'I gave up everything,' she went on wildly, 'to keep him alive.' 'I sacrificed myself - others - I nursed his glory in my bosom and it died - and left me - left me here alone'" (AG, 150).

In this context Jenni Dymann<sup>12</sup> talks of "women's psychological enslavement and acceptance. Paulina learns too late that the very 'foundations of her consciousness' have been moulded to enslave her to a fruitless life of sacrifice ministering to the preservation of patriarchal authority and law" (137). Without doubt this is true, but only until the moment when Mr. George Corby enters the House. With his appearance the story takes an unexpected turn, for his interest in Orestes Anson is not of a philosophical but of a scientific

nature.

Wharton turns away from transcendental ideas towards science and without question this shows her scepticism of the former. Many indications in the text have to be interpreted in this way and her satirical undertone shows her rejection: "The little knot of Olympians" (AG, 141); "They [Anson and his colleagues] were continually proclaiming their admiration for each other" (AG, 142), "the Olympian group" (AG, 138), "a place of worship" (AG, 132), "the great Orestes Anson" (AG, 129), "the guard of the family temple" (AG, 132) and "fragments of his Titanic cosmogony" (AG, 134).

The new interest in her grandfather makes Paulina back away again from her belated understanding of her situation, in part at least. Maybe it was worth it after all to manage and preserve her grandfather's bequest. Not because of its philosophical qualities, certainly, but because of its scientific ones. Carol J. Singley not only draws attention to the fact that Wharton saw transcendentalism and its representatives with mixed feelings and suspicion ("...Wharton hammers a nail in the coffin of transcendentalism" 53), but she also points to the decisive turn in "The Angel at the Grave" "...arguing that the search for higher truth only through science or reason is immortal. [Wharton] only partially redeems self-sacrifice, however; Anson's work was worth preserving, but it takes a male scholar to recognize the genius that Paulina mindlessly served"<sup>13</sup>.

This change at the end of the story means two things for Paulina: she regains both her faith in her grandfather and her strength and youthfulness ("...she looked as though youth had touched her on the lips") (AG, 151). Her years of servitude were not in vain, but this apparent happy end also means that she is still being held captive by the House and her dead grandfather with no chance of escape. With Mr. George Corby's discovery the grandfather is accepted anew in the circle of great scholars. Paulina's fears that "It was the world's enthusiasm, the world's faith, the world's loyalty that had died" (AG, 139) are no longer valid. She will continue to use all her strength and energy to uphold her grandfather's reputation. The fact that the interest in her grandfather's work has shifted its position is only of secondary significance to her. Her grandfather continues to be believed in, that alone counts for her and seen in this light the many years she invested were worth it.

With this ending Wharton takes into account the spirit of the age at the turn of the century. By giving clear priority to Darwinian beliefs, that is to rational, verifiable scholarship over transcendentalism, she also points to the futility of holding fast to old traditional ideas. Family pride and the adherence to incomprehensible theories no longer have a place in the America of fast social and economic change. Just



as Hawthorne puts an end to the erroneous belief in the psychical and the delusion of witchcraft, so Wharton buries transcendentalism. In this way both also expose the delusion of grandeur. This is manifested in *The House of the Seven Gables* when the marriage between Holgrave and Phoebe draws a line through quarrels of the past and heralds the beginning of a new era. Wharton does the same in 'The Angel at the Grave' by setting other theoretical priorities. The old is replaced by the new, the transcendental is superseded by the rational.

By deliberately setting her short story 'The Angel at the Grave' in New England Edith Wharton managed to produce a high level of plausibility and authenticity. "Edith Wharton chose that particular environment for artistic reasons" (97-98), emphasizes Leach who compares the works of Wharton and O'Neill and reaches the conclusion that [Wharton and O'Neill] recognized certain aspects that appealed to their artistic imaginations, and they utilized these to heighten the effectiveness of their plays and fiction" (98). Wharton's use of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* throughout the story strengthens the effects discussed. The reader who knows *The House of the Seven Gables* consequently has more of "The Angel at the Grave."

Remseck/Neckar, Germany

#### Notes

- 1) There are not too many essays dealing with "The Angel at the Grave" and no author draws parallels to *The House of the Seven Gables*.
- 2) Nancy R. Leach, "New England in the Short Stories of Edith Wharton", *New England Quarterly* 30 (March 1957), pp. 90-98.

- 3) Alan Henry Rose, "'Such Depths of Sad Initiation': Edith Wharton and New England", *New England Quarterly* 50 (1977), pp. 423-439.
- 4) Compare: Jenni Dymann, *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, New York 1996, p. 33: "...other early tales that atmospherically and thematically function like ghost stories are 'The Angel at the Grave' ...One is reminded of Edgar Allan Poe's house in 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'"
- 5) The name *Phoebe* in Greek mythology and in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* has a positive connotation. It promises light and salvation (deliverance).
- 6) Compare: Robert L. Coard, "Names in the Fiction of Edith Wharton", *Names* 13 (March 1965), pp. 1 - 10.
- 7) Carol J. Singley is of the opinion Wharton compares Orestes Anson to Emerson. In *Edith Wharton. Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 52, she writes: "Orestes Anson, a famous transcendentalist who unmistakably suggests Emerson."
- 8) *No Man's Land. Vol. 1, The War of the Words*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1988. Coard is of the same opinion in his already mentioned essay "Names in the Fiction of Edith Wharton", *Names* 13 (March 1965), p. 6: "...and Orestes Anson (probably modeled on the name of the actual New England thinker Orestes Brownson in the short story 'The Angel at the Grave') ...".
- 9) "Laura and Phoebe, content to leave their father's glory in more competent hands, placidly lapsed into needlework and fiction, and their niece stepped into immediate prominence as the chief 'authority' on the great man" (AG, 135).
- 10) "Edith Wharton's Hymns to Respectability", *The Southern Review* 7 (1971), pp. 986-993.
- 11) My italics.
- 12) *Lurking Feminism: The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, Peter Lang Verlag, New York 1996.
- 13) *Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1995, p. 53.



## Book Reviews

Donna M. Campbell. *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915*. 233 pp. Athens, OH, Ohio University Press 1997.

By Augusta Rohrbach

In *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915*, Donna M. Campbell examines "the displacement of the local color movement, and the gender-linked oppositions between naturalism and local color that contributed to it" (5). Many of her readings--rich in the careful use of details to support her analysis--reconsider classic texts of the American canon by Frederic, Norris, Drieser, London, Crane and Wharton in light of recent critical focus on literature as a business. As Campbell explains, "innovations in magazine publishing and naturalism emerged together in the 1890s, and their audiences grew concurrently" (54). Campbell augments other studies that recognize literature as a commodity with a focus on gender-related aspects of the marketplace by arguing that naturalism was, in part, a backlash movement--a form of resistance to the woman-dominated local color movement.

Interestingly for Wharton scholars, Campbell reframes Wharton's disdain for local color fiction--an attitude that has typically been construed as peculiar to Wharton--as part of a larger revolt against the literary genre prevalent among writers of her generation. Campbell's definition of local color bears a striking resemblance to Wharton's oft quoted remark about the way Jewett and Freeman wore "rose coloured spectacles" because Campbell holds that the local color movement "seeks to affirm what is usable about the past and the ordinary" by "celebrating not disruption but continuity, not timely events but timelessness" (7), creating an idealized vision of New England culture. What might trouble readers about this stated focus are some of the critical oversights that are implied by this definition. One is the question of terminology and genre distinctions. Much critical work has been done to show that local color writing is carefully nuanced, historically complex and critically engaged--the collection of essays on Jewett edited by June Howard that Campbell cites is just one example. Though Campbell does offer a long note that reviews criticism on the distinction between local color and regionalism, the discussion itself consistently occludes this distinction. Another, and perhaps more serious, problem arises as a result of Campbell's mode of analysis. Her study--carefully researched and illuminating in its specifics--undermines itself through the use of polarizations such as female versus male and local color versus naturalism. These oppositional instruments of analysis end up creating more problems than they solve. For instance, Campbell treats all local colorists as female without noting

the important exceptions; Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," both published in 1868, are usually cited as the founders of the movement. These two prominent figures, as well as George Washington Cable, Charles Chesnutt, Edward Eggleston, Hamlin Garland, and Joel Chandler Harris are also excluded from her definition of the movement. Thus, Campbell's characterization of local color as a woman-dominated literary style is historically questionable; rather her representation of the movement reflects the ideological bent of the last two and a half decades of feminist criticism.

Yet Campbell's discussion of the shared, even if shifting, ground between local color fiction and naturalism can prove useful. Both literary styles dwell, for different ideological gains, on the relationship between people and the environment they live in, for instance. And though local colorists and naturalists alike are concerned on some level with the philosophical legacy of this relationship, Campbell's observation that "naturalistic writers rarely have a 'tradition' [as do the local colorists] upon which to draw; however, instead they have a 'past' or an inherited 'tendency' that, far from proving them with moral strength in times of crisis, proves instead to be something that they must overcome" (9) is an intriguing thesis developed throughout the course of the book. In fact, once Campbell fastens her attention on naturalism exclusively, the book takes its place among other intelligent and perceptive discussions of the genre.

Of particular interest to Wharton scholars will be Campbell's discussion in Chapter Six, "Edith Wharton and the 'Authoresses.'" Here she transforms her sometimes limited definition of local color into a useful and at times even powerful analytic tool; the chapter brings the book together. Campbell re-examines both local color and naturalism from the antagonistic point of view that Wharton held toward many literary "fashions." Wharton's equal disdain for the "rose and lavender pages" of local color and the "navvies and char women" of naturalism provide Campbell with a healthy skepticism with which to view both movements. To that end, Campbell explores "Mrs. Manstey's View," *Bunner Sisters* and *Ethan Frome* as Wharton's forays into the literary marketplace and efforts to place herself within the pantheon reserved for the American "author,"--a masculine construction for Wharton and her contemporaries. Campbell's readings treat these three works as part of Wharton's strategy to rewrite conventions popularized by both the local colorists and the naturalists. Campbell shows us how, in *Ethan Frome*, for instance, Wharton turns the participant-observer of local color fiction into "a modern man of action, [who] begins immediately and directly to

investigate his characters," thus framing the narrator's virtual invention of Ethan's story as a positive effort to reach beyond the stifling constraints of the community (164). Wharton also customized naturalism's conventional representation of animal fate by keeping the narrator a sympathetic but distant observer whose "vision" "grants unity, stability, and decipherability to the fragmentary mutterings of his informants" (164). Ultimately, Campbell is able to conclude that Wharton "developed into the kind of writer she became in part because of the complicated influences and pressures that women's local color fiction exerted on her" (172).

*Resisting Regionalism* will reward readers with careful analysis of key texts that either are associated or can fruitfully be associated with naturalism. It is when she is at work on the details of the stories that Campbell is at her very best and readers will enjoy her fresh insights into works that have become the mainstays of the early twentieth-century American canon.

Oberlin College

**Maureen E. Montgomery. *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York Illustrated*, 206 pp., New York Routledge Press, 1998, \$18.99 (Paperback).  
By Cynthia Davis.**

*Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton's New York* is an odd but ultimately enlightening work. By "odd" I mean that even its author seems a bit confused about what type of book she intended to write: an ethnography of New York's leisure class? A literary analysis of how Wharton and occasionally James viewed and portrayed this elite group? In essence, *Displaying Women* combines both, although not always gracefully. The press release accompanying my copy of the book claims that it is "a literary exploration of the role women played in displaying the concept of leisure in New York's turn-of-the-century society." But this description is only partially accurate: more often than not, the "literary" aspects of Montgomery's examination provide not the driving force but instead merely one subset of data concerning how leisure was conceptualized when the century turned. This is not to suggest that the book somehow "fails" because it treats Wharton's writings primarily as evidence. As an historian, Montgomery conveys none of the literary critic's qualms about turning to fiction to uncover "truths" about an era, and the information she gleans from Wharton does provide illuminating insights into the period and its wealthiest set. Nonetheless, the book represents better history than it does literary analysis. In the main, Montgomery's detailed discussions of gossip columns, the bicycling craze, charity and subscription balls, and the like prove far more riveting than her rather stolid and rarely original synopses of Wharton's life, works, and opinions.

The book's oddness extends to its organizing structure, which I have yet to grasp fully even after having read it

thoroughly. By arranging her chapters according to issues and themes such as "the mechanics of high society" (covered in Chapters 1 and 2) and "women in the public eye" (Chapters 4 and 5), Montgomery allows for a good deal of overlap and occasional bouts of repetition. Still, the fact that she is able to devote two full chapters to such topics shows just how much she has to say concerning them. Montgomery is a skilled researcher and she has brought to light a wealth of information concerning the particularities of daily life for members of the leisured class. I especially enjoyed her expositions on such topics as the customs of "calling," the social importance of the opera (Monday and Friday were the fashionable nights), the establishment of the "cozy corner," newspaper debates about "the servant problem," and the desultory lifestyles of the "homeless rich." Throughout, Montgomery draws heavily on the private papers of specific society women, including Wharton, and on a series of columns written for *Town Topics* by "the Saunterer." Montgomery suggests in her conclusion that this acerbic columnist is linked to Wharton to the extent that he represents yet another "self-appointed critic and upholder of standards" (166). But of course, as Montgomery acknowledges elsewhere, Wharton would doubtless have shrunk in revulsion from the kind of prurient scrutiny and often erroneous gossip that was the Saunterer's bread and butter. One can only imagine her distaste at being featured in a "Saunterer" column citing her penchant for taking long drives with an "admirer" identified as being "as ripe in years and as rosy of cheek as his name suggests" (i.e., Walter Berry) (113).

Wharton garners Montgomery's most sustained attention in a chapter entitled "Interiors and Façades," a good portion of which is devoted to juxtaposing Wharton's fictional portrayal of interior spaces with her views on architecture and interior decoration as expressed in *The Decoration of Houses*. In most of *Displaying Women's* chapters, the segues to and from illustrative passages on Wharton are undertaken abruptly and often awkwardly; you never know when the author will make a reappearance or suddenly disappear. Still, when she does figure, Montgomery succeeds in anchoring Wharton firmly in her time and place and in confirming Wharton's status as a keen social observer.

The fact that *Displaying Women* proves such a compelling book, in the end, can be attributed to its author's rejection of a strict domination thesis and her willingness to entertain the possibility that upper-class women were simultaneously empowered and disempowered. Montgomery goes to great lengths to show these women having fun within constraints, just as she likewise details "the extent to which women entered into the debate about the definition of femininity during this period" (173n). Wharton scholars fortunate enough to get to teach an entire seminar on the author should find in *Displaying Women* an accessible and thorough introduction to Wharton's milieu, and I would strongly recommend the book as required background reading for such a course.

Not since Thorsten Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* has such careful attention been paid to the mechanics and machinations of New York's reigning elite. But this brings me to a final quibble with Montgomery: her slighting of Veblen. When I received the book, I assumed it would be peppered throughout with references to *Theory of the Leisure Class*, expansions on its conclusions and critiques of them. Instead, Veblen gets scant mention: only three sentences in a book of some 200 pages, and these come across as if mere afterthought. Montgomery's discussions of such certifiably Veblenesque topics as the conspicuousness of leisure display are made conspicuous in themselves for their neglect of Veblen's seminal claims. Despite this oversight, Montgomery's history of the leisure class does succeed in vividly conjuring up Wharton's world and, in so doing, it helps us to an appreciable deeper and richer understanding of the author and her works.

University of South Carolina

Scott Marshall. *The Mount: Home of Edith Wharton, A Historic Structure Report.*

By Alan Price

Speaking before assembled guests and staff at The Mount on July 14, 1998, Hillary Rodham Clinton said: "So, I thank all of you for being caretakers of Edith Wharton's gifts. Each of you has not only made The Mount an example of what caring, dedicated citizens can do, but you have made Lenox, Massachusetts, a shining example of what every community through every citizen from the kindergarten classroom to the corporate boardroom can do." Edith Wharton Restoration (EWR), the primary caretaker of The Mount, has recently published *The Mount: Home of Edith Wharton, A Historic Structure Report* which shows what this non-profit organization can do (and still needs to do) to restore Wharton's estate. After more than a decade in preparation, this volume is a welcome addition to the growing shelf of books on Wharton's talents as a designer.

Those who attended the Edith Wharton at the Mount conference in June of 1997 will remember that the gracious home was surrounded by scaffolding. That work was to stabilize the building and to secure its exterior. Those necessary steps were the beginning of a process which hopes to see a complete restoration of the house and gardens by the year 2001. To insure that the work can go forward and to establish an endowment for the care and operation of The Mount, EWR is in the midst of a capital campaign to raise fifteen million dollars. *The Mount Home of Edith Wharton* describes in detail the changes that the house and grounds have undergone during the past ninety-five years that have made such an extensive restoration necessary. The handsomely printed volume has more than 250 pages of double column text accompanied by more than 160 period photographs and illustrations.

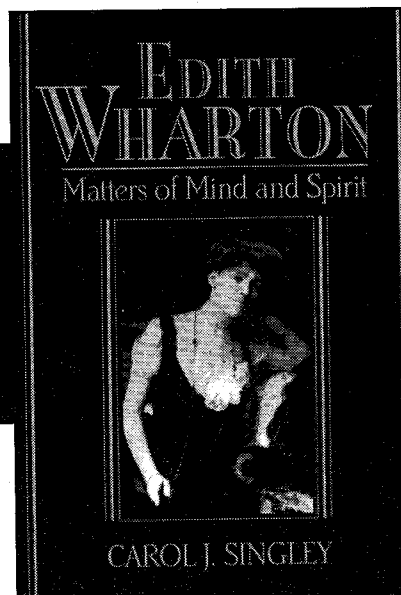
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—Mary Suzanne Schriber, *American Literature*

Edith Wharton emerges in this book as a novelist of morals (rather than manners). Behind her polished portraits of upper-class New York life is a thoughtful, questioning spirit. This book analyzes Wharton's religion and philosophy in her short stories and seven major novels, considering Wharton in terms of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American intellectual and religious life. It also analyzes Wharton in terms of her gender and class, explaining how this aristocratic woman applied and yet transformed both the classical and Christian traditions that she inherited.

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Prices subject to change.

Marshall, Deputy Director of Edith Wharton Restoration. In 1986 Marshall was given the task of producing a detailed physical description and a history of the estate and house. Despite changes in administration at EWR and his own term as executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, Marshall stuck to his assignment and has produced a thoroughly researched and eminently readable "The History of the Mount." This section, which will be of most interest to general readers and to literary scholars, helps round out the picture of Wharton's life during the important years she spent at The Mount (1901-1911). Biographers and scholars have frequently called on Scott Marshall's expertise on Wharton and The Mount and have always found him a rich and generous resource. Now Marshall gives us in his own voice a biography of Wharton and a history of the place she called "my first real home" that will be a benchmark for later scholarship.

Of interest to many will be Marshall's story of the simple (Edith preferred picnic lunches along country roads), if elegant (the footman wore livery) life at the Whartons' country house. Marshall's narrative is also the detailed history of the design, construction, and continuing life of a house, The Mount. We have long known that Edith Wharton was no stranger to modern conveniences, so during 1901-02, when it was under construction, The Mount was home to the most up to date mechanical systems. The Whartons installed an Otis hydraulic elevator, and The Mount was outfitted from the very beginning with electric lights. Of course, it helps if your neighbor is George Westinghouse who installed an electric power plant at Laurel Lake to serve his own Erskine Park and later all of Lenox. Most interesting is the dialogue in Marshall's text between the prescriptive design principles Wharton and Ogden Codman set forth in their *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and the actual designs they argued over and eventually agreed upon for the main rooms at The Mount. We learn that Wharton followed her own advice quite closely.

The economic fortunes of The Mount through the years

as seen in construction costs and resale prices are telling. The Whartons probably spent more than \$250,000 on the purchase of the property and the construction and furnishing of The Mount and outbuildings. The Shattucks, who bought the estate from Edith and Teddy in 1911, paid \$180,000. When it was sold again at auction in 1938, the knock down price was \$88,000. And the Foxhollow School bought the estate in 1942 for the much reduced sum of \$18,000.

In compiling his history Marshall used a great number of wide-ranging sources, from contemporary newspaper notices to present day scholarly articles and monographs on architecture and interior design. The documentation is thorough and very clear. The many period photographs and illustrations are well chosen and always give explanatory captions with dates and sources. One note of caution, however; the book lacks an index, an inconvenience for those of us looking for the scattered references to Wharton's fiction.

The second section of the book by architect John G. Waite is the analytical and descriptive "Existing Conditions, Problems, and Recommendations." Waite heads the architectural firm which did restoration work on Mount Vernon and on Blair House in Washington, D.C., and has now been engaged to do the restoration work at The Mount. His room-by-room inventory of fallen ornamental plaster ceilings and anachronistic fluorescent light fixtures is heartbreaking until we realize that the mansion is still very close to its original plan and exterior. This section of the "Historic Structure Report" will be a guide during the restoration of the mansion, the outbuildings, and the extensive gardens and grounds.

Scott Marshall has brought a building to life by creating an engaging and thorough history of life at The Mount. Copies of *The Mount: Home of Edith Wharton, A Historic Structure Report* may be purchased at \$25.00 a copy through Edith Wharton Restoration, P.O. Box 974, Lenox, MA 01240 or by FAX at (413) 687-0619 or by phone toll-free with a credit card at (888) 637-1902.

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