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on

Teaching Edith Wharton

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New Women, New Men, or What You Will in Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*

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1. Introduction

The Fruit of the Tree has long been a sore spot in Wharton criticism. Critics have tried to understand and conciliate the diversity of questions it deals with, proposing different readings that either provide the novel with a unifying theme or explain its lack of coherence. Is the novel about the labor question, or about euthanasia? Is it about marriage within a patriarchal society or about a variety of irreconcilable social issues, such as the conflict between capital and labor? In general, readings of this novel have tended to fall into two camps. On the one side, critics like R.W.B. Lewis, Cynthia Wolff, Blake Nevius, Millicent Bell, James Tuttleton, and Janet Goodwyn criticize its lack of thematic focus, its dispersion around a variety of social questions and, therefore, its lack of cohesion and coherence. A second camp, represented by Elizabeth Ammons and Margaret McDowell, argues that the central question that gives unity to the novel is marriage and the critique of the patriarchal system. Attempting to reconcile these two perspectives, Deborah Carlin argues that it is through Amherst's conflicting marriages to Bessy and Justine that the novel explores other equally irreconcilable social issues, namely the conflict between capital and labor and the conflict between the individual conscience and social norms (59-60). For Carlin, the problem of the novel does not reside in the diversity of questions it

addresses, but rather in the ambiguity of the narrative perspective in what concerns the fundamental question of tradition: "Tradition, particularly in regard to gender relations, and the novel's ambivalence whether to reform it or to conform to it, is . . . the essential conundrum of this text" (60-61). I agree with Carlin in what concerns the centrality of tradition, which is immediately foregrounded in the biblical title alluding to the cultural and literary tradition of the origins of death, suffering, and gender hierarchization. However, it seems to me that Carlin does not take into account Wharton's complex deployment of differing narrative perspectives, which are played off against each other, suggesting a multiplicity of views on the issue. If the twists and turns of Wharton's plot suggest a revision of the Miltonian version of the biblical myth by pointing to an alternative ending in which Amherst and Justine are equals in a space transformed by their joint work, but end up replicating the fate of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, this does not mean that the novel is ambivalent about reforming or conforming to tradition. Rather, it demonstrates the weight of tradition, literary or otherwise, and the enormous difficulty of changing it.¹

Besides the lack of thematic coherence, commentators have also criticized the contradictory construction of the main characters, John Amherst and Justine Brent. Especially in the beginning, Amherst appears in a positive light, with a social conscience and a sense of solidarity that for Wharton were lamentably absent from modern American society (L 97, 99). However, his

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social and political reformist zeal has clear limits—his conception of women and of gender relations is profoundly patriarchal. His relationship with Justine seems to lead him to revise his stereotypical conception of women as naturally inferior beings, necessarily subordinated to men's authority. But this process of revision of cultural tradition is abruptly interrupted when Amherst proves unable to accept the implications of Justine's mercy killing of Bessy: her radical independence of the established laws of society, science, and religion (cf. Carlin 60). Like Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Amherst denies all responsibility in this transgressive act. The consequence is the irredeemable spiritual separation of both characters and thus the loss of the ideal world of equality that the narrative had suggested.

Justine has also been seen as an ambivalent figure. Although she is characterized as economically and socially independent, representing the New Woman, she seems to relinquish her own will when she accepts Amherst's marriage proposal, a proposal framed in terms of a sharing of his reform work, saying "I'm really just like other women, you know—I shall like it because it's your work" (FT 466). The brief experiment in gender equality ends suddenly with the disclosure of her act of euthanasia, and the traditional gender hierarchy is reestablished through Justine's self-imposed exile and sacrifice for her husband. In spite of a sudden flare of inner rebellion at the end, which again suggests an alternative ending, Justine subjects herself to "old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties" (FT 624). The New Woman becomes the old wife, or rather what Virginia Woolf calls "the Angel in the House" (284-89), erasing herself, her desires, and her projects from the public realm, where she had before "helped clear a space in the wilderness" (FT 146).

Unlike many critics, I believe that these contradictions and apparent inconsistencies at the level of plot and characterization are not a sign of indecision or ambiguity on Wharton's part, but rather indicative of her ability to capture the contradictory responses of characters involved in complex situations as well as of her critical stance in relation to the possibilities of

changing a system structurally grounded in inequality. As a social actor with a public voice, situated in a particular historical period, Wharton could not but respond to the events and ideas of her time. Her private and public writings leave no doubt as to her deep involvement with what was happening around her, and particularly with the condition of women and class relations in America. She was not a social and political activist like her famous contemporaries Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and certainly did not share their ideological agenda, but her civic work with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Benstock 152), her little-known volunteer work for the Newport schools in the late 1890s (Benstock 84; Wegener 60), and of course her much better-known relief work during the First World War, all attest to her sense of civic duty and social responsibility and to her commitment to "better things about one," as she puts it in a letter written to Sally Norton on March 7, 1906 (qtd. in Benstock 159). At about this time, when she was writing *The Fruit of the Tree* (Benstock 153), Wharton began to entertain the idea of settling in Europe. But however much she craved the "mental refreshment" that only Europe could give her (L 104), she is, significantly, pulled back by her sense that "[i]f one lived in another country, [one would feel] the alien's inability to take part, to help on, assert one's self for good. . . . The social action on the community would be impossible" (letter to Sally Norton, 7 March 1906, qtd. in Benstock 159; italics in original). Here she seems to be thinking of direct involvement in the affairs of the community, something that must have been much on her mind while writing *The Fruit of the Tree*. However, as she states in a letter dating from December 5, 1905, writing is also a valuable form of social action, a form of public intervention which necessarily takes on a critical stance: "[T]he more I have considered it [my trade], the more has it seemed to me valuable & interesting only in so far as it is 'a criticism of life'. . . . Social conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast & absorbing field for the

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Announcement The Edith Wharton Essay Prize

Beginning in the fall of 2005, the Edith Wharton Essay Prize will be awarded annually for the best unpublished essay on Edith Wharton by a beginning scholar. Graduate students, independent scholars, and faculty members who have not held a tenure-track or full-time appointment for more than four years are eligible to submit their work. The winning essay will be published in *The Edith Wharton Review*, a peer-reviewed journal, and the writer will receive an award of \$250.

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novelist" (L99).

In *The Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton's 'criticism of life' focuses on two of the most important political and social issues of the decades around the turn of the century: the labor question and the woman question. As I see it, Wharton interrelates these two questions by focusing on women's work, and particularly upper- and middle-class women's work, in modern society, and its significance in terms of women's relation to the public sphere. I will argue that *The Fruit of the Tree*, like "The Valley of Childish Things" (1896), can be read as a political allegory of the situation of the New Women, ambivalently divided between their desire for self-determination and the impossibility (or inability) of freeing themselves completely from the social conventions and structures that both sustained and constrained them. I will also argue that the narrative of the neutralization of Justine (the New Woman) is counterbalanced by the rise to power of Amherst, representative of Progressive Man, and that his empowerment is actually dependent on appropriating one woman's property (Bessy's) and another woman's work (Justine's).² This appropriation, achieved with Justine's complicity at the end of the novel, inscribes Amherst in the position of patriarchal mediator between "his" women and the public sphere.

In the sections that follow, I will begin by discussing the realities of women's work in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, I will focus on the debate about it, on what this debate tells us about contemporary perceptions and conceptions of women

and work, how women themselves, and particularly the so-called New Women, saw their relation to work and to society, and how their ideas were expressed in action, in a variety of activities and initiatives, such as the promotion of protective legislation on child labor and female labor, which contributed to the creation of a more just society, although not necessarily an egalitarian one. Situating *The Fruit of the Tree* in this context will allow us to see how Wharton gives voice to a multiplicity of points of view on these issues, capturing contradictory positions and discourses on women and labor during the Progressive era.

2. Women's work

As I said before, *The Fruit of the Tree* concentrates on women's work, and it is perhaps fitting that a considerable part of the action takes place in a New England textile mill, an industry where female labor had been heavily represented since its establishment at the turn of the 19th century (Degler 367; Kessler-Harris 47-48; Wright 66-67). However, the particular situation of working women, or of the working classes in general, is only part of the background of the novel. The issue that is foregrounded is upper- and middle-class women's work in modern industrial society. This issue is explored through Bessy Westmore and especially through Justine Brent, who represent a group of women largely excluded from the labor market until the end of the 19th century.

After the 1870s, an expanding economy and new educational options opened up new employment

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opportunities for middle-class women, although, as in the case of female workers overall, they tended to be concentrated in a few fields and restricted in their access to positions of power and prestige (see Degler 376; Kessler-Harris 117). According to Nancy Cott, there was indeed an increase in the "proportion of women entering the male-dominated professions . . . from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century," but "three-quarters of the rise in female professionals before 1920 was attributable to expansion in teaching and nursing" (217). Between 1900 and 1910, there was a seven-fold increase in the number of female nurses, making up 96% of this sector in 1920; in 1890, 65.5% of all schoolteachers were women, as against 86% in 1920; the new field of social work was totally feminized in 1890, with 1,000 women, a number which expanded to 30,000 by 1920, corresponding to two-thirds of this sector (Kessler-Harris 116; see also Cott 219 and 350, n.4). Another factor which we should bear in mind is that most professional women were single (Degler 385), as were most female wage-earners, although on the whole there was a threefold increase in the percentage of married women workers, from 3.3% to 9%, between 1890 and 1920 (Kessler-Harris 122).

This schematic statistical picture suggests that women entered into professions considered to be extensions of their nurturing functions and that marriage was considered to be incompatible with a professional career, or indeed with paid employment in general. A women's place was still obviously thought to be in the home. But statistics only tell part of the story. We have to turn to other sources, as well as to other fields of action, in order to understand what these numbers suggest in relation to women's changing position and status in American society.

In her book *What Eight Million Women Want* (1910), the journalist Rheta Childe Dorr stressed the implications of what were for her the most momentous facts of the period around the turn of the century: the increase of women in the labor market, the increase of the divorce rate, and the inevitable victory of the suffrage movement. For Dorr, these facts denoted a change in women's position in society and in gender relations: "Women have ceased to exist as a subsidiary class in the community. They are no longer wholly dependent, economically, intellectually, and spiritually, on a ruling class of men" (84-85). The consequences of this structural change are indeed profound: what is at stake is precisely the appropriation of women and the construction of their identity as "woman," defined exclusively as wife, mother, or daughter within the patriarchal system. As the physician Mary Putnam Jacobi put it, when she defined the modern American state as a collection of "individual cells," not of families, in her 1894 work *Common Sense Applied to Woman Suffrage*, "In this essentially modern conception, women are also brought in direct relations with the state, independent of their 'mate' or 'brood'" (qtd. in DuBois 66). Thus, even

before women's recognition as full citizens with the winning of the vote in 1920, their increasing participation in paid labor and in social, civic, and political activities, especially after the Civil War, entailed a potential threat to the patriarchal structure of the private sphere and to the dominant conceptions of women's and men's roles and positions, since it implied that women's relation to the economic, social, and political order was not necessarily mediated by the institution of the family and was not based on their subordination within it.³

The public debate generated by these issues reveals profound tensions and ambivalences at both the individual and collective levels. The controversy centered not only on the erosion of the traditional family (seen as the inevitable consequence of women's political demands and their participation in the public sphere)⁴ or on the new roles of women, but also, and fundamentally, as Christopher Lasch argues, on the "nature" of the sexes (57).⁵ In general terms, the poles of this debate, which extended throughout the 19th century and intensified around the turn of the century, were based on the principles of equality and difference, often combined in a complex manner in the demands of the suffragists. The principle of equality, derived from the 18th century rationalist tradition of individual rights, and developed notably by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill in England, and by the women and men who drafted the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions at Seneca Falls in 1848, asserted that the moral and rational nature of the two sexes was fundamentally similar and that women were entitled to the same liberties and opportunities that men enjoyed. The principle of difference, with more complex origins in patriarchal ideology, also invoked by Wollstonecraft and appropriated by the American suffragists after the Civil War, defines sex differences as biologically and/or historically and socially constructed. Difference can thus be used to ground opposing positions: on the one hand, if equated with inferiority, it provides a rationale for women's subordinate role and place within patriarchal societies; on the other hand, if it is understood as socially and historically constructed, but not as a mark of inferiority, it justifies the need for women's participation and representation in the social and political sphere (Banks 96; Cott 16-20; Pateman 197). In combining equality and difference to justify women's intervention in the public sphere, the 19th century woman movement as a whole, as Nancy Cott argues, assumed a "functional ambiguity" and a "tactical duality" which was passed on to its successors: "Nineteenth-century feminists could (and did) argue on egalitarian grounds for equal opportunity in education and employment and for equal rights in property, law, and political representation, while also maintaining that women would bring special benefits to public life by virtue of their particular interests and capacities" (20, 30).

The potential tensions and contradictions inherent in the assertion of difference and the demand

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for equal rights and opportunities were particularly felt by the New Women. According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, the New Woman as "a novel social and political phenomenon" emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, to a considerable extent as an outgrowth of the intervention of previous generations of women in the public sphere (176, 247). Although she distinguishes two different generations of New Women in the period between the 1880s and the 1920s, she points to the fact that they shared the same middle-class origins, they were usually single, "college-educated and professionally trained," and "lived economically and socially autonomous lives": "In short, the New Women, rejecting conventional female roles and asserting their right to a career, to a public voice, to visible power, laid claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men" (176-77). First-generation New Women developed their careers primarily in the fields of social work, health, and education between the 1880s and World War I. Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, Florence Kelley, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were some of the most prominent and influential figures of this generation. The second generation, trained in many cases by the first, came of age in the second decade of the 20th century. As active as the first generation in the social and political arena, they put the accent on self-fulfillment and self-expression. Their participation in the arts and in the international Bohemian world, as well as their rejection of dominant gender conventions, marks a significant difference in relation to their precursors. Crystal Eastman, Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Isadora Duncan, Natalie Barney, and Margaret Sanger are some of the most visible figures of this second generation of New Women (Smith-Rosenberg 177-78, 247).

In general terms, we can say that the women of the first generation emphasized gender difference, which was used to justify their social and political activism, while the second generation based their demands and activities on the principle of social, political, and gender equality. Attacked for their alleged rejection of maternity, the women of the first generation responded by emphasizing precisely their role as "public mothers"—through the promotion of legislation on child labor, the public health movement, educational reform, and other measures that contributed to the welfare of society, they were simply keeping with the ancestral female tradition of nurturing, caring, cleaning, and protecting (Addams, Reader 105, 108, 114-15, 123; Smith-Rosenberg 263). Jane Addams, speaking for the 1881 class at Rockford College, insists on the difference of the New Woman, who "wishes not to be a man, nor like a man, but . . . claims the same right to independent thought and action. . . . We . . . are not trying to imitate our brothers in college; we are not restless and anxious for things beyond us." In this speech, Addams manages to combine rhetorically the demand for freedom of thought and action, which was in fact transgressive despite her disclaimer, with the traditional ideal of wife

and mother, whose "noble mission" is to give, create, and nurture:

But while, on the one hand, as young women of the 19th century, we . . . proudly assert our independence, on the other hand we still retain the old ideal of womanhood—the Saxon lady whose mission it was to give bread unto her household. So we have planned to be "Bread-givers" throughout our lives; believing that in labor alone is happiness, and that the only true and honorable life is one filled with good works and honest toil, we have planned to idealize our labor, and thus happily fulfill Woman's Noblest Mission. (Reader 103-04)

Contrasting with this emphasis on duty, work, and mission, second-generation New Women insisted on their right to self-determination in all fields and assumed publicly an attitude of revolt "as much against Woman as Man—both of those capitalized impersonalities," as Mary Beard declared in 1915 (qtd. in Cott 37). By assuming unconventional or masculine dress and behavior, they exposed the fictionality of gender identities and proclaimed their autonomy in relation to established gender norms and their right to individual expression. As Marie Jenney Howe, the founder of the feminist group Heterodoxy, asserts, "We intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole big human selves" (qtd. in Cott 39).

However, their affirmation as "whole human selves" and the transgression of traditional female roles led to inner conflicts in both generations of New Women. The social and family pressures that Jane Addams mentions in "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements" (1892) or in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902),⁶ generate a sense of alienation, a feeling that they occupy an undefined place, that they are in fact an "intermediate sex"⁷ in a space that does not exist in the gendered geography of their world. In a diary entry dated from 1871, a young M. Carey Thomas, who would become the president of Bryn Mawr College, expresses, through her repeated negatives, this impossibility of defining herself according to conventional male and female patterns, and reveals also her revolt and her determination to go beyond the established boundaries:

I ain't good and I ain't bad. I ain't a tomboy but I ain't ladylike and I'm everything that's disagreeable and I do want a little excitement and I do want to go to Vassar. . . . I do so want to, and I am perfectly determined to get a good education. . . . I can't imagine anything worse than living a regular young ladies [sic] life. . . . I don't care if everybody would cut me. I despise society and I detest girls. (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 248-89; italics in original)

In a letter to a friend, written in 1884, just before she got married, Charlotte Perkins Gilman also defines herself as different from "most women," being determined to have a professional career, and anticipating conflicts

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with her future husband due to her unconventional behavior and her pragmatic attitude towards marriage. The conflict between dominant patterns and her individual desires and projects leads to a pessimism and a feeling of impotence that are unusual in Gilman's non-fictional work. In fact, marriage is seen here as incompatible with women's new public roles, and for Gilman it represents a mere concession to traditional morality:

The whole thing [marriage] seems to me far different from what it is to most women. Instead of being a goal—a duty—a hope, a long expected fate, a bewildering delight; it is a concession, a digression, a good thing and necessary perhaps as matters stand, but still a means, not an end. . . . It fills my mind much; but plans for teaching and writing and studying for living and helping, are more prominent and active. And that is where I fear some sorrow; lest my other occupations rob my love of time and interest he may feel should be his or ours. (qtd. in Lane 92; italics in original)

The writer and journalist Inez Haynes Gillmore defines the dilemma of the New Woman in explicitly spatial terms in two autobiographical articles published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1912 with the meaningful title "Confessions of an Alien." Gillmore confesses that her decision to "play the man's game" (qtd. in Lasch 60) and become professionally and economically independent situated her in an undefined space, a no man's land, alienated from a world that seems to her to be unalterably divided into male and female spheres:

For several years now I have felt myself alien to this world . . . It seems to me that sociologically, so to speak, I hang in a void midway between two spheres—the man's sphere and the woman's sphere. A professional career. . . puts me beyond the reach of the average woman's duties and pleasures. The conventional limitations of the female lot put me beyond the reach of the average man's duties and pleasures. (qtd. in Lasch 58)

Although Edith Wharton would not define herself as a New Woman, I would suggest that she shares many of the features that characterize the New Woman as a sociological category, as well as the dilemmas revealed above by Thomas, Gilman, and Gillmore. Born into the upper classes, Wharton soon began to reject the conventional role of her mother and of the lady of leisure and to assert "[her] right to a career, to a public voice, to visible power, [laying] claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men," to quote Smith-Rosenberg again (176-77). In reconstructing her life as an aspiring writer in *A Backward Glance*, Wharton stresses the agonistic process of "acquiring a nationality" as a professional writer in "the Land of Letters" (BG 119) against the social and family pressures of an environment that condemned such pursuits by women. Unlike men of

her class who had had "pampered vocations" (BG 121; cf. 150-51), she "had to fight [her] way to expression through a thick fog of indifference if not tacit disapproval" (BG 122). As she makes clear throughout her autobiography, the adoption of a literary career implied the transgression of gender as well as class boundaries, since in the "provincial society" of her parents and their social group "authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour" (BG 69). Amidst the "intellectual desert" of her childhood and youth, as she recalls in "Life and I," her "desire to learn" and "ambition to study" marked her as "different" (1089). In a passage that echoes Carey Thomas's words quoted above, Wharton reveals the young Edith Jones's contempt for her femaleness and her passionate desire to learn about life through books, which appear here as instruments of redemption from a nearly non-human condition: "[O]n the same shelf with Copée [Elements of Logic] . . . I found an abridged edition of Sir William Hamilton's History of Philosophy! Oh, thrice-blest discovery! Now I was going to know all about life! Now I should never be that helpless blundering thing, a mere 'little girl,' again!" (1086; my emphasis). Caught between her mother's "always tidy" drawing-room and her father's library, between the feminine "world of fashion" (BG 123) and the masculine world of the "great classics" (BG 64-72) of literature, history, philosophy, and science, Wharton shows her awareness of the incompatibility of both worlds in her culture when she ironically mentions that she was perceived as "too fashionable to be intelligent" in Boston, and "too intelligent to be fashionable" in New York (BG 119).

Recalling her first meeting with Paul Bourget in 1893, in a eulogy published in 1936, Wharton defines her younger self as a woman "passionate about literature, but never even dreaming of the possibility of becoming a member of the illustrious fraternity of writers" ("Memories" 213). It should be stressed that she does not question her "capacities," but only her "possibilities" of gaining access to what she obviously perceived to be a male domain. The "Land of Letters" into which she strove to gain admission, and in which she wished to be recognized as a writer in her own right (and not as James's "disciple"), was decidedly a male preserve, zealously guarded by critics who made clear demarcations between "proper" fields for "female writers" and "male writers" (or writers *tout court*), and only the latter could reach the highest rung of literary reputation. Wharton's review of Leslie Stephen's biography of George Eliot, published in 1902, explicitly addresses the constraints imposed on women's literary careers, and it is significant that she wrote it shortly after the publication of her first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, in which she not only dramatizes the dilemmas of the intellectual woman through Fulvia Vivaldi (a subject she had already addressed in *The Touchstone*), but also shows her prodigious knowledge in the fields of history,

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art, architecture, and religion. Although the novel had, on the whole, favorable reviews (Benstock 125-26; Lewis, *Biography* 105-06; Tuttleton, *Reviews* 51-59, 62-65), some reviewers criticized her for dealing with questions that were "beyond the capacities of a mere woman" (Lewis, *Biography* 105). Wharton's defense of George Eliot is, thus, also a self-defense, as well as an attack on the inconsistency and duplicity of the standards used by the literary establishment. While the acclaimed Tennyson, Goethe, and Milton have "nourished" their poetry with science, Eliot has been accused of being "too 'scientific'" and of having "sterilised her imagination and deformed her style" (71). As Wharton goes on to say,

Is it because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is reprov'd for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread? Dr. Johnson is known to have pronounced portrait-painting "indelicate in a female"; and indications are not wanting that the woman who ventures on scientific studies still does so at the risk of such an epithet. (72)

Wharton seemed to be willing to take this risk, aware that in order to claim a place in the Land of Letters she had to venture outside the culturally-prescribed bounds of womanhood.

At the same time, however, she seemed to be unable to escape the gendered classifications provided by her culture. Her criticism of the construction of *The Fruit of the Tree* illustrates the conflict she perceived in herself between male conception and female execution: "I conceive my subjects like a man—that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women—and then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breadth, the small incidental details that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterisation, I mean" (L 124).⁸ She seems to be caught in a double bind, first valorizing "male construction & breadth" and then "female episodic characterisation," and she feels she cannot successfully fuse both. The result is that she finds herself "enclosed in a vicious circle from which I suspect silence to be the only escape" (L 124). Silence would of course mean her withdrawal from the public sphere, the end of her professional career as a citizen in the Land of Letters, the end of Edith Wharton. She would become again Mrs. Edward Wharton, the lady of leisure. This is the fate she gives to Justine Brent, a character who shares many of her traits as well as her dilemmas. As Justine stifles her inner voices and opts for silence at the end of the novel, she becomes simply Amherst's "wife" (FT 630).

3. Hanging in a void

The clash between women's ambitions to assert themselves in whatever field they choose and the social constraints on their freedom of action and expression leads, as we have seen above, to a sense of alienation, of "otherness," that is often dramatized in the literature of

the period, notably in works like "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Gilman, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and most of Edith Wharton's works. This inner sense of otherness is intimately related to and emphasized by their social isolation: Gilman's nameless narrator is literally confined to a room, Edna Pontellier shuts herself off from Creole society and in the end wanders into the "abysses of solitude" represented by the sea, Lily Bart is gradually pushed off "the great gilt cage" of the leisure class and dies feeling "the clutch of solitude at her heart" (HM 318), and Ellen Olenska, who "hate[s] to be different," but nevertheless fails in her efforts to "become just like everybody here" (AI 106), ends up being "eliminated from the tribe" (AI 337). I would suggest that the isolation of figures like Fulvia Vivaldi, Lily Bart, Justine Brent, Sophy Viner, Ellen Olenska, and Kate Clephane, to name only a few of Wharton's "different" women characters, allows Wharton not only to emphasize the odds against which they are pitted, but also to establish a vantage point from which she can critically dissect the dominant fictions of law and custom of her society. Thus, Wharton's "criticism of life" is anchored on these characters who, to use Gillmore's terms, "hang in a void," a space between the "man's sphere" and "the woman's sphere." Furthermore, because women's class location depends on a visible relationship to a tutelary male figure, these characters are often presented as hanging in a void between classes.

This is the situation of Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree*. She wants to have "the whole wide world to range through" (147), and indeed has ranged through it, doing "her part in the vast impersonal labour of easing the world's misery" (147). But at this moment in her life, she feels that her profession alone does not fulfill her—the role of "ministering angel" has become oppressive (144). It is, after all, a role that entails the total subjugation of the self to the needs of others and that indeed only transports traditional female tasks to the public space. Through the various references to "the instincts of youth" (147, 223), Wharton makes clear that Justine also wants sexual fulfillment, but not at any price:

She wanted happiness, and a life of her own, as passionately as young flesh-and-blood had ever wanted them; but they must come bathed in the light of imagination and penetrated by the sense of larger affinities. . . . [T]he life she longed for [was] a life in which high chances of doing should be mated with the finer forms of enjoying. (223)

Unlike the ladies of the leisure class who press her to marry, Justine does not want to shut herself up "into a little citadel of personal well-being" (223). By metaphorizing marriage as a citadel, Justine conveys the idea of both protection and imprisonment, whereas the situation she utopically desires for herself is "on the banks, in sound and sight of the great current" of life (223).

By contrasting Justine with other female

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characters, especially Bessy, the narrative stresses the unconventionality of her views and projects, as well as her independence and autonomy. Whereas Bessy is unable to question existing power arrangements, at the level of class or gender relations, Justine is presented from the beginning as an autonomous woman who defies Hanaford's nepotistic system (8-9, 18-19) when she reveals to Amherst the real condition of the worker that suffered an accident at the mills. Justine's independence is further reinforced by the fact that she is a liminal figure in terms of class (141). Having had "a childhood nestled in beauty and gentle ways," after the death of her "prodigal father" she and her mother had to "struggle with poverty," and she had to take on the role of family breadwinner (146). Thus, without a father or a husband, and enjoying a position of economic independence as a nurse, Justine is constructed as an un-appropriated figure, and as such a potential threat to the system.

Unlike Bessy, Justine has a mobility that allows her to move with equal ease in the slums (14, 156), in the hospital, in the factory, and in the sumptuous houses of the rich. Her mobility and freedom are reinforced through her constant association with birds (146, 148, 300-03, 381, 463). However, her desire to be a house-swallow reveals that, for her, freedom is not an absolute value, it does not signify isolation, individualism, and self-absorption, but the ability to range through the world while remaining vitally connected to it, serving those in need. Thus, as a true New Woman, Justine uses her mobility and independence in socially useful work that gives meaning to her existence:

[I]f I had wings I should choose to be a house-swallow; and then, after I'd had my fill of wonders, I should come back to my familiar corner, and my house full of busy humdrum people, and fly low to warn them of rain, and wheel up high to show them it was good haying weather, and know what was going on in every room in the house, and every house in the village. (303)

From the beginning, Amherst's and Justine's marriage seemed inevitable—their intellectual affinities, their reformist interests, and even their similar class origins and positions all suggested as much. When they finally get married, one year and a half after Bessy's death, their union seems to prefigure a new world predicated on gender equality. They share work and pleasure, service to the community, and personal satisfaction: "[T]heir duties had the rarer quality of constituting precisely, the deepest, finest bond between them, the clarifying element which saved their happiness from stagnation, and kept it in the strong mid-current of human feeling" (472). The story could end here with this vision of a happiness constructed according to the heroine's wishes. But Wharton changes the formula of the sentimental novel and frustrates the reader's expectations. On the one hand, she stresses that the heroine's happiness does not derive from the pleasures of domesticity, but from shared work and the sense of connection to the outside world; on

the other hand, she continues the story by developing the consequences and implications of the act of euthanasia that made Amherst's and Justine's marriage possible.

Ironically, Justine's mercy killing of Bessy also makes her marriage to Amherst impossible. Justine's decision denotes her moral and intellectual independence from the triumvirate of science, society, and religion (418, 428-30, 520, 522) which decree that "human life is sacred," and that individual suffering is necessary for the welfare of humanity (407, 418). Justine sees that Bessy had ceased to exist as a human being and had become, especially for Dr. Wyant, "a beautiful case" that would allow him to fulfill his professional ambitions (419).⁹ When she is finally forced to reveal her act to Amherst due to Wyant's blackmailing, she confesses that her only failing was the fact that she hadn't told him about it before their marriage (521). When Justine confronts Amherst with his own opinions about euthanasia and about the need to go beyond established conventions (15, 428-30, 522-23), he finally reveals his conservatism and the contradiction between his theory and his actual beliefs and behavior. He expresses his horror of her transgressive act (523) and clearly sees her as a threat to the value system of the community: "He looked at her coldly, almost apprehensively, as though she had grown suddenly dangerous and remote; then he turned and walked out of the room" (524). Amherst's and the community's "purity" depend on the elimination of the polluting agent (Douglas 35-39), which here takes the form of segregation and exile. Amherst can neither understand Justine's silence, nor accept the implications of her act and her silence; her radical independence denies his appropriation of her as a woman:

[B]etween himself and Justine complete communion of thought was no longer possible. It had, in fact, never existed; there had always been a locked chamber in her mind, and he knew not yet what other secrets might inhabit it. (560-61; see also 587, 605)

From Justine's perspective, Amherst's condemnation and separation from her are due to his inability to act upon his avowed principles of rationality and emancipation from society. She now sees that the example of the New Woman was not enough to change his traditional conception of woman as the inferior and subordinate half of man:

[L]ike many men of emancipated thought, he had remained subject to the old conventions of feeling. And he had probably never given much thought to women till he met her—had always been content to deal with them in the accepted currency of sentiment. . . . Amherst had not risen above prejudice and emotion The tie between them was forever stained and debased. (525-27)

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It is after this moment that Wharton converts Justine into the figure that she had apparently killed—the Angel in the House—by giving her punishment the form of “self-sacrifice” (557). Although Justine continues to defend the integrity of her motives, she recognizes that her act had threatened “the laboriously erected structure of human society” (555), and that as such she has to confront its consequences. From the moment she leaves Amherst in order to save his position at Westmore and to allow him to continue with his work of reform, and in spite of the apparent reversal close to the ending, when Amherst discovers her pact with Mr. Langhope and the dimension of her sacrifice and her love for him, Justine becomes an exile: “The house at Hanaford . . . would look at her with the same alien face—nowhere on earth . . . was a door which would open to her like the door of home” (563, 623).

Having first inscribed Justine, the New Woman, in the social map of America as an independent and self-reliant individual who had cleared “a space in the wilderness” where she built a home (146), Wharton ends up by denying her a place and a home of her own. In a final irony, Justine is made to help Amherst resuscitate his dead wife, now “dressed in a semblance of self-devotion and idealism” (628). The will in which Bessy gives him control over Westmore and the joint custody of her daughter with Mr. Langhope is interpreted by Amherst as “a reconciling word from her grave” (437), a final gesture of subjugation to his authority. The real Bessy, who resisted his Pygmalion-like intents, is finally made into “the angel of pity” (47), an example of altruism and dedication she had never been while alive (628). The narrative makes clear that the power to destroy “this imaginary Bessy” lies in Justine’s hands (628). But by opting for silence and suffering, Justine symbolically becomes this imaginary Bessy or Milton’s submissive Eve, “pledged to the perpetual expiation of an act for which, in the abstract, she still refused to hold herself to blame” (624). Her acquiescence to “old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties” (624) is emphasized in the last scene through her short assenting answers to Amherst’s near-soliloquy (632-33). By resigning herself to be “thrust farther and farther into the background of the life she had helped to call out of chaos” (629), Justine accepts her subordinate position in the old-new order that emerges at the end of the novel. The old Hopewood mansion, symbol of the past and of tradition, now transformed into a recreation center and into a symbol of the reconciliation of capital and labor, metaphorically defines in the last paragraph of the novel the contours of this old-new world, situated between the lost Garden of Eden and the smoke of industrial Hell: “The sun was setting behind the wooded slopes of Hopewood, and the trees about the house stretched long blue shadows across the lawn. Beyond them rose the smoke of Westmore” (633).

4. Plus ça change: The New Man

Wharton’s tale of the disempowerment of the New Woman seems to be at odds with the assessments made by historians about the power and influence that middle-class women achieved during the Progressive period. Although many have pointed to the limitations of their maternalist ideology (e.g. Gordon, Koven and Michel, Kessler-Harris), which restricted the reach of their reformist initiatives, the general consensus seems to be, in Sklar’s words, “that women were central to the process by which the American social contract was recast and state and federal governments assumed greater responsibility for human welfare” (“Historical Foundations” 44). Historians seem also to agree on the process through which women managed to achieve this centrality; by building female institutions and, through them, mobilizing grassroots support for specific initiatives (see, for example, Freedman, “Separatism” and “Separatism Revisited”; and Sklar, “Historical Foundations” and “Hull House”). Although Sklar has questioned the degree to which women’s social power was based on separate female institutions, a thesis defended by Estelle Freedman, she, like others, agrees that institutions like the universities, the clubs, and the settlement houses and organizations like the National Consumers’ League were crucial for women’s “social strength” and participation in the public sphere especially between 1890 and 1920 (“Hull House, 659; “Historical Foundations” 60-69; “Two Political Cultures” 36-37).

In *The Fruit of the Tree*, as we have seen, the New Woman is represented as a solitary figure, cut off from communities of like-minded women. Her cooperation with the New Man seemed for a while to promise the construction of a truly new world of gender equality. However, in the end it is the male Progressive reformer who “recasts the social contract” and constructs a model industrial community which “prosper[s] under the new rule.” His reforms, accomplished with Justine’s help, are visible in “a promising growth of bodily health and mental activity, and above all in a dawning social consciousness. The mill-hands were beginning to understand the meaning of their work, in its relation to their own lives and to the larger economy” (FT 621). The last part of the novel shows that the victory of Amherst’s progressive views involves not only the disestablishment of the older conservative ruling class, but also the neutralization of the radical social projects proposed by Justine as well as the workers.¹⁰ Thus, as I will seek to show, Wharton places the figure of the Progressive reformer at the center of the process of (re)definition of the relation between capital and labor and also of the relation of women to the public sphere. The fictional progressive society that emerges at the end of the novel is constructed under the power and authority of the benevolent and enlightened patriarch represented by Amherst.

Through the figure of Amherst, Wharton represents the activist energies of a group of mostly

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middle-class men who, according to Richard Hofstadter, plunged into social reform as a way of recovering the status and prestige they had lost after the Civil War. For Hofstadter, the marginalization of the middle classes from the centers of power and authority led to their increased awareness about the situation of the underprivileged and to attempts to reconstruct a social fabric that was dangerously rent by social and economic inequalities (Hofstadter 135-73; Lasch 30-31, 147-48). Thus, although Hofstadter interprets the action of Progressive reformers as a response to the social conditions caused by the development of industrial capitalism and the emergence of a new plutocracy, by also taking into account their subjective motivations, he subverts the vision of these men as disinterested defenders of the masses. In Lasch's opinion, this adds a new dimension to liberal historiography, which focuses on the reaction of this group to the objective evils of industrialism (Lasch 32-33).

Hofstadter also emphasizes the limits of Progressivism, seeing it as a conservative movement whose objective was to recover a past America rather than to radically alter the social, economic and political system:

Its general theme was the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost. (5-6)

This process of social reconstruction was predicated, for Progressives, on the formation of a responsible ruling class, capable of moderating the excesses of both plutocracy and mobocracy, a professional class occupying, in Louis Brandeis's words, "a position of independence between the wealthy and the people, prepared to curb the excesses of either" (qtd. in Hofstadter 164). The figure of the disinterested professional, who approaches problems from a scientific and simultaneously pragmatic perspective, is essential to the establishment of this illusion of independence, which translated itself, in fact, into a position of authority that led the Progressives to dominate power structures in the first decades of the 20th century.

Although there are no direct references to Progressivism, as far as I can tell, in Wharton's published writings, the admiration she felt for Teddy Roosevelt as well as her statements about the social responsibility of her class suggest that she shares some of its views. Like Progressives, she feared the excesses of the plutocrats, whom she represented in *The House of Mirth* as "irresponsible pleasure-seekers" who "destroy" and "debase" "people and ideals" (BG 207). Her letters to Morgan Dix and William Thayer, responding to their praise of this novel, highlight her anxieties about "the

harmful influence" of the new rich on American society, since they did not have "inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of the solidarity between the classes" (L 97, 99). In *A Backward Glance*, she criticizes the "American gentleman" who "lived in dilettantish leisure," and mentions the gradual change that led "the best class of New Yorkers . . . to develop a municipal conscience" after the Civil War, although "the idea that gentlemen should stoop to meddle with politics had hardly begun to make its way" (BG 95). She obviously thought that what the country needed was the strong leadership of men of her class, the descendants of that generation of New Yorkers whom she praises for having upheld "two standards of importance in any community, that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" (BG 21). Such a man was "Theodore the First," as she calls Roosevelt in a letter to Morton Fullerton (L 210), although the man she remembers in *A Backward Glance* is the cultivated and witty private Roosevelt. But in *The Age of Innocence*, it is the public Roosevelt that comes to life as the politician who urges the patrician Newland Archer to "meddle with politics" and help "clean the stables" of the nation (349).

The most direct references to the Progressive program of political and economic reform appear in "The Best Man," a short-story that Wharton wrote, according to Lewis, shortly after her visit to the White House in March 1905 (*Biography* 146), that is, at about the same time that she began working on *The Fruit of the Tree*. This story, which would be included in *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908), focuses on nepotism and corruption in the distribution of political offices, and its protagonist, John Mornway, recently elected for a second term as Governor of Midsylvania, is presented as a "disinterested" politician, who puts the public good above his own private interests. Although Mornway appears in a favorable light, there is a hint of ironic criticism in Wharton's depiction of his relationship with his wife and his conception of her subordinate role, a conception that is similar to Amherst's:

She helped Mornway in his fight for the Governorship as a man likes to be helped by a woman—by her tact, her good looks, her memory for faces, her knack of saying the right thing to the right person, and her capacity for obscure hard work in the background of his public activity. (CSS I: 688)

The problem arises when Mornway finds out that his wife had accepted a "tip" from George Fleetwood, the man he had appointed two years before as Attorney General at her own suggestion and against his initial "prejudice" (CSS I: 700-01). Mornway is considering reappointing Fleetwood as the "best man" to continue the work of trust-busting initiated in his first term, but he is now threatened with the exposure of his wife's act and his own complicity in political corruption. Unlike *The Fruit of the Tree*, this story has a happy ending, with Mornway's disclosure to the press of the whole affair and the

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reconciliation of husband and wife.

Although "The Best Man" focuses on the morality of politics, its central issues are similar to those that Wharton would develop with much more complexity in *The Fruit of the Tree*. In both cases, the male protagonists' traditional view of gender relations is shaken by the discovery that their wives can act as autonomous individuals, thus undermining their supremacy and compromising their public reputation. In the end, both the Progressive industrial reformer and the Progressive politician reassert their power and authority in the public and private spheres, and the wives continue with their "obscure hard work in the background" of their husbands' public lives.

As I said in the beginning, in *The Fruit of the Tree*, the narrative of the fall of the New Woman is counterbalanced by the narrative of the rise to power of Progressive Man. In broad strokes, in this version of the "rags to riches" myth, Amherst, as the representative of a class recently disinherited and alienated from the sites of power and as the self-appointed mouthpiece of the underprivileged, manages to annul and dislodge his opponents, achieving in the end a position that allows him to implement his social reforms and place himself at the center of an apparently fairer and more egalitarian society. But his rise to power involves not only the overthrow of the dominant class, but also the neutralization of the radicalism represented by the working class and by Justine, the New Woman, as we have seen.

Although Amherst himself sees his reformist projects as radical (189), and although this view is actually shared by the dominant oligarchy represented by Bessy's father and the Westmore administrators, the way Wharton interrelates the issues of labor relations and gender relations leads to the gradual undermining of his perspective and the exposure of his conservatism.

At the center of each of Amherst's marriages is not only the question of labor reform, but also the question of women's work and women's place in the modern industrial society. Amherst conceives women in general according to a functionalist and instrumental perspective, that is, because of what he sees as their innate characteristics,¹¹ they fulfill functions that are complementary to men's, thus being necessarily subordinated to the broader and more rational male vision of the welfare of the family and society. In the context of the social transformations brought about by industrial capitalism, women's relations to the public sphere have to be renegotiated, and in the case of elite women like Bessy this renegotiation implies for Amherst the transformation of their leisure into socially productive work, through their involvement in philanthropic and charitable activities. However, this renegotiation does not imply Bessy's direct relationship to the social and economic; for Amherst, this relationship should always be mediated by the tutelary

male figure. In this way, he seeks to transform women into instruments of his reformist goals.

In his first marriage to Bessy, Amherst sees an opportunity to change labor relations and to build "an industrial object lesson conspicuous enough to point the way to wiser law-making and juster relations between the classes" (97). Assuming as a given his wife's subordinate position ("He for God only, she for God in him" [179]), and his control over her person and her property, Amherst prompts Bessy to get involved in the social and cultural aspects of his reform at the mills. These are for him "minor projects," through which Bessy will understand the necessity of implementing the broader changes that he has envisioned: "[H]e had urged her to take up [these minor projects] as a means of learning their essential dependence on his larger scheme" (181; my emphasis). But in order to achieve his ultimate goal, he needs to change Bessy, the dependent and selfish child-woman, whose privileged life depends on the exploitation of other people's work (49). The two processes of reform actually become one in his mind: he identifies Bessy with her property ("The mills were Bessy" [180]) and places himself in the position of enlightened educator, who will bring uplift at one and the same time to Bessy and Westmore:

He had not, assuredly, married her because of Westmore; but he would scarcely have contemplated marriage with a rich woman unless the source of her wealth offered him some such opportunity as Westmore presented. His special training, and the natural bent of his mind, qualified him, in what had once seemed a predestined manner, to help Bessy to use her power nobly, for her own uplifting as well as for that of Westmore. (184)

Amherst arrogantly sees himself as offering Bessy redemption and enlightenment, not only through love and marriage, but essentially through the work of reform, which will connect her to reality and make her aware of the suffering that her privileges imply (47, 52).

A fundamental aspect of this process of re-education is the dissociation of Bessy from her dead husband-father,¹² her living father, and the factory's administrators who represent the ruling class that Amherst wants to dislodge. Bessy's appropriation, which entails the control of her body, her mind, and her property, is essential for Amherst's ascension to power. Even before their marriage, Amherst tries to transform her into a mouthpiece for his reformist projects, hiding behind the power that she has as the owner of the Westmore factory, while giving her an illusion of agency and autonomy that is essential to his strategy:

[H]e scrupulously restricted himself to the answering of questions, letting Mrs. Westmore unfold his plans as though they had been her own. "It is much better," he reflected, "that they should all think so, and she too, for Truscomb will be on his legs again in a day or two, and then my hours will be numbered." (111)

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But if Amherst deliberately creates this illusion of agency in Bessy, she, in turn, makes Amherst believe that he controls her. However, after they get married, Bessy begins to resist Amherst's attempts to convert her leisure into work and her capital into reforms in favor of the workers. Ironically, this resistance reveals the power of the status quo and the dominant ideology—Bessy invokes her privileges as the owner of Westmore and as a woman to oppose Amherst's industrial reforms, since these would entail a reduction of her profits and her involvement in activities that she sees as outside woman's sphere (182-83, 200, 284). Bessy's defense of a strict demarcation of gender roles and spheres is supported by the ruling class, who uses her as a means of maintaining the existing system and, simultaneously, as a weapon in their class conflict with Amherst. Bessy's subjection to authority figures with opposing interests causes an internal division which is self-destructive:

[S]he was committed—the more helplessly for her dense misintelligence of both sides of the question—to the policy of conciliating the opposing influences which had so uncomfortably chosen to fight out their case on the field of her poor little existence. (183)

Bessy's death allows Amherst to actually control her property and implement his reforms. It also enables him to achieve a position of power and prestige at Hanaford (625). But Amherst insists in placing himself in a subaltern position which effectively masks his power, seeing "in himself merely the necessary agent of a good to be done" (584). He sees himself not only as the instrument of a superior moral power, but also as the representative of his dead wife, now finally transformed into the "angel of pity," as I said before. This imaginary Bessy is now materialized and monumentalized at Westmore through the hospital, the workers' houses, and the recreation center. In Amherst's public speeches, this Bessy emerges as the true owner and benefactor of Westmore, while he becomes the mere agent of her reforms, "faithfully" following "her design" (627). The falseness of this posture is revealed through Justine's thoughts during the inauguration of the Hopewood recreation center:

[B]y what mocking turn of events had a project devised in deliberate defiance of his wishes, and intended to declare his wife's open contempt of them, been transformed into a Utopian vision for the betterment of the Westmore operatives? . . . This unreal woman, this phantom that Amherst's uneasy imagination had evoked, was to come between himself and her, to supplant her first as his wife, and then as his fellow-worker? (628-29)

Thus, the power and prestige that Amherst achieves at the end rests not only on his control of his dead wife's property and on his appropriation of her imaginary work but also on his living wife's work, on her silence and complicity. I would further argue that it also rests on the projection of his concrete power into an

abstract and unreal figure. The illusion that he is merely the vehicle and agent of an unseen higher force ironically contributes to reinforcing Amherst's authority.

In reconstructing the industrial community of Westmore, Amherst reinscribes Bessy, the unreal ideal woman, as well as her double, Justine, in a renewed patriarchal order, defining their relation to the public sphere as a relation mediated by the centralizing figure of Progressive Man. In this sense, we can say that *The Fruit of the Tree* narrates, not the story of the New Woman, "Justine Brent," as Wharton's first title suggested (Lewis, *Biography* 159), but the story of the old New Man and his re-empowerment.

Notes

¹ Ellen Dupree's more recent reading of the novel makes this point in a different manner, when she states that "because patriarchal assumptions are deeply ingrained in culture and discourse, women's position cannot be changed by argument or legislation." Interpreting Justine and Bessy as positive and negative versions of the New Woman, and reading *The Fruit of the Tree* in the context of Progressive era "problem novels," Dupree argues that Wharton "scathingly critiques the Progressive analysis of the New Woman, exposing it as a strategy for the purpose of retaining women within patriarchal control" (45). As will be clear below, my main argument is not dissimilar from Dupree's, although I develop it in a different manner and situate the novel in the context of contemporary discourses on women and labor.

² Although taking a different orientation, Jennie Kassinoff's stimulating article "Corporate Thinking: Edith Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree*" poses questions that are related to my argument. According to her, the central issue in the novel is the control of production and reproduction. As she puts it, "The question of agency and authority over the production of goods, the reproduction of people, and the management of the resulting socio-economic system is very much at stake in *The Fruit of the Tree*" (28). While her reading of the novel emphasizes essentially "class anxieties," which she interconnects with "gender and authorial anxieties" (31), my own reading interrelates the gender and class dimensions of the struggle over property and work.

³ According to Ellen DuBois, suffrage was the core issue of feminist demands precisely because it implied a direct relationship between women, as individuals, with society, thus undermining the fundamental premise of undisputed male authority: "As citizens and voters, women would participate directly in society as individuals, not indirectly through their subordinate position as wives and mothers" (66). However, I think that the redefinition of women's relation to the public sphere, and thus also of their place within the family, began to emerge as an important issue from the time when a significant percentage of women entered the labor market,

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especially after the mid 1850s, giving an important contribution to the country's industrial development. According to Carl Degler, in 1850, women constituted about 25% of manufacturing workers and worked in 175 manufacturing industries (Degler 368-69). Furthermore, as Linda Kerber mentions, the revision of the laws concerning married women's property, also made during this period in many states, suggested an implicit recognition of a new relationship between women and the market, a relationship not mediated by the husband (Kerber 21-22). The artificial separation of public and private spheres was also denounced by the participation of women (especially middle-class women) in a wide variety of movements and voluntary organizations that had a significant impact on society and politics (see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics").

⁴The Illinois anti-suffragist Caroline Corbin articulated this question in a pointed manner as early as 1887: "Is there any escape from the conviction that the industrial and political independence of women would be the wreck of our present domestic institutions? . . . woman suffrage is incompatible with the present relations of men and women in the home" (qtd. in Degler 353-54).

⁵An article by President Grover Cleveland, published in May 1905 in *Ladies' Home Journal*, illustrates the most conservative position on this issue. Cleveland attacks the suffragist movement as well as women's clubs as manifestations of a perverted nature that goes against the "natural" order created by God: "To those of us who suffer periods of social pessimism, but who, in the midst of it all, cling to our faith in the saving grace of simple and unadulterated womanhood, any discontent on the part of woman with her ordained lot, or a restless desire on her part to be and to do something not within the sphere of her appointed ministrations, cannot appear otherwise than as perversions of a gift of God to the human race" (159).

⁶On social and family pressures, see especially *Twenty-Years* 91-95; and *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Reader 144-45).

⁷This term was coined by the British sexologist Edward Carpenter in the 1890s (Gilbert and Gubar xiii) and, according to Smith-Rosenberg, adopted by British and American physicians and scientists to designate "unmarried career women and political activists" who "violated normal gender categories [and] fused the female and the male" (265).

⁸Katherine Joslin discusses the tension between masculine and feminine modes of presentation in *The Fruit of the Tree*, and argues that, in the end, Wharton "deconstructs the architectonic shape of the novel and celebrates the episodic" (73).

⁹There has been considerable controversy about the moral interpretation of Justine's act as well as about the narrator's and Wharton's ethical position regarding euthanasia. Wolff, Ammons, and Carlin are of

the opinion that both author and narrator approve of it, while critics like James Tuttleton believe they condemn it (see, for example, Stein [335-36] and Bell [255-56]). Tuttleton bases his argument on Justine's subsequent expiation of her act, which he sees as an example of "abstract idealism" ("Justine" 162, 165). For him, Justine understands in the end the moral contingency of all human action and becomes a woman "chastened by her experience" (165-66). I would draw a different conclusion: the narrative plays off the abstract principles of science, society, and religion against the specific circumstances and contingencies that dictated Justine's decision. Furthermore, by choosing to present the facts through Justine's narrative perspective, Wharton emphasizes not only Bessy's physical and emotional agony, but also the empathetic suffering of Justine herself and the long and agonizing mental process that finally leads her to commit euthanasia (see chapters 26-29).

¹⁰Although Wharton focuses on the redefinition of Amherst's relationship to Justine and to the ruling classes at Hanford, the reference to a strike at Westmore at a time when Amherst's reforms are already being implemented suggests working-class opposition to "the new rule." His control of the situation, which leads to "the peaceable adjustment of the strike" (FT 588), highlights the new position of power and authority that he has achieved in the community.

¹¹Amherst repeatedly mentions two fundamental characteristics: emotionality and inability to think in abstract terms (see, for instance, 51, 113, 119, 559-60). The following assertion is typical of his reductionist (and, in this case, paternalistic) conception of women: "Was not that concentration on the personal issue just the compensating grace of her sex?" (119).

¹²Dick Westmore's infantilizing treatment of Bessy is mentioned several times: he protected her "as if she were a baby" (211), sparing her from the realities of the factory's administration (182).

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Janey Archer's Myopia and *The Age of Innocence*

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In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton finds distinctive purpose for a stock character: the gaunt, nearsighted woman relegated to secondary status in her social community because she is unmarried. Physical descriptions of Janey Archer, Newland's spinster sister, emphasize her eyes and linger on the symptoms of an uncorrected nearsightedness. Her generally unprepossessing appearance is rendered pitiable, even grotesque, by constant grimacing: "screwed upon" the objects of her attention, her eyes tend to "bulge" and "project" unattractively (133, 41, 82). These facial contortions are caused by a myopia that is acknowledged, although not named, by her brother when he sees her vainly attempting to study the lavish costumes of his wedding guests. "Poor Janey!" he thought, looking at his sister, "even by screwing her head around she can see only the people in the few front pews" (156). Though Janey plays a relatively minor role in the novel, her presence allows Wharton to comment on her central theme from an unusually salient perspective. Like other female members of the privileged class to which she belongs, Janey has been

raised under the stifling conditions considered crucial for the preservation of all-encompassing virginity, an "abysmal purity" of mind, heart, body, and spirit (17). Since marriage offers girls in this society the only legitimate path to adulthood, women who do not marry are doomed to lead their lives as elderly girls: they are provided with no alternative route to maturity. Janey's enforced, lifelong naivete reveals the confining effects of socially engineered innocence. Her myopia proves to be an impediment with larger implications, highlighting the limitations of her experience.

Visual impairment, whether or not it is corrected by lenses, is a prominent feature of the spinster stereotype in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Perhaps the best known example is Mark Twain's Miss Watson, described irreverently by Huck as "a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles" (4). Later in the century Mary Wilkins Freeman features two elderly sisters, both unmarried and both myopic: the elder wears "spectacles" but still experiences difficulties with her vision, needing to hold objects "close to her eyes" ("A Gala Dress" 100). The younger sister wears no lenses but is said to be "near-sighted" and walks "with peering eyes, her long neck craned forward" (107).¹ Popular literature is replete with examples of the nearsighted spinster: in *So many Steps to Death*, for instance, Agatha Christie creates the "thin spectacled" Miss Jensen, who is disparaged by the novel's male protagonist as one of "these plain angular short-sighted girls" (87, 132). The contemporary poet Judith Moffett draws on this frequently encountered image for her *Now or Never* sonnet sequence, recalling the repugnance evoked by the caricatured figure on the Old Maid card: "that gaunt crone" wearing a pince-nez, "strange glasses on a stick" (line 6, line 3). In her short story "Xingu," Wharton herself employs an unmarried female character who wears "spectacles": even with these visual aids, however, Miss Van Vluyck "peer[s] shortsightedly up and down" the pages of a book (49).²

Such instances represent only a small fraction of those that might be invoked, but they suffice as reminders of a familiar stereotype. In unmarried female characters like Janey Archer, myopia is associated with gracelessness as well as with narrow-mindedness. Tending to manifest itself in squinting and peering, nearsightedness typically leads to head craning, distorted posture, and uncertain gait. Whether or not she wears glasses, the old maid's poor eyesight contributes significantly to the awkward and ridiculous impression she makes, sealing her lack of feminine appeal. At the same time, her limited vision signals a permanent and childish ignorance. She suffers from a double vulnerability that stimulates mockery or pity rather than gallantry and ardor. In Janey's case, readers must notice that even her brother appears to have little respect for her. More often than not, he displays impatience with her opinions, emotions, and desires. His brotherly affection expresses

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emotions, and desires. His brotherly affection expresses itself chiefly in the form of condescending sympathy: throughout the novel she remains, in Newland's mind, "Poor Janey." In creating her character, Wharton draws attention to a well documented source of social stigma, cultivating a stereotype in service of larger thematic purposes and cultural criticisms.

Janey chafes in vain against the boundaries of the circumscribed social role allotted to those in her situation, finding no meaningful outlet for the "springs of suppressed romance" within her (40). Consigned to the outskirts of her world, she is rarely seen participating in any social functions except for private dinners in her own family home. She wields no influence in the community and exercises no power. As the protagonist's only sibling, she nevertheless appears in some important scenes and contributes, however cryptically, to some significant conversations. The few careful descriptions of her are quite poignant. She is portrayed as "tall, pale, and slightly round-shouldered, with . . . a kind of drooping distinction," while her clothes hang "more and more slackly on her virgin frame" (39). She makes an upper-class impression, to be sure, but is devoid of voluptuous appeal. She lives with her widowed mother; self-abnegatingly, the two women "squeeze[e] themselves into narrower quarters" to allow Newland--son, brother, and sole male in the household--maximum living space (38).

Janey's peripheral social position is marked by a seemingly incongruous interest in high fashion. For her brother's benefit, for instance, she relays details of the outfit worn by Ellen Olenska during a social call. "She had on a black velvet polonaise with jet buttons, and a tiny green monkey muff; I never saw her so stylishly dressed," Janey reports, adding, "she had one of those new card-cases" (132). She is well informed about the revealing "dark blue velvet" gown that drew attention to Ellen at the opera, and she wonders whether the countess wears "a round hat or a bonnet in the afternoon" (43). Intriguingly, Janey's "morbid interest in clothes" (as Archer uncharitably dubs it) is concentrated on the new, the stylish, and even the risqué (165). Although she herself is described as wearing old-fashioned "brown and purple poplins," unalluring and ill-fitting, she demonstrates consistent fascination with the clothing and accessories chosen by the fashion-forward Countess Olenska (39). Archer admits that his sister is unimpressed with the "dowdy Newlands and Dagonets" at his wedding, yearning instead to view the more stylishly attired guests (156). Janey's attentive examination of avant-garde fashions no doubt serves as an outlet for her own suppressed sensuality. Propriety demands that she choose the drab and conservative garments befitting the modesty of a rapidly aging, upper-class maiden--certainly nothing conspicuous or provocative. Even if she were to find a husband at this late date, her brother muses, she would not be permitted to array herself in a magnificent satin and lace bridal gown like May

Welland's: "poor Janey" is "reaching the age when pearl grey poplin . . . would be thought more 'appropriate'" (255). Contenting herself, of necessity, with the pleasures of sublimation, she immerses herself in passionate scrutiny of attention-attracting fashions that are sadly off limits for her.

Her preoccupation with personal adornment is only one facet of Janey's role as passive witness--rather than active participant--in her social community. More by default, apparently, than because of any innate propensity, she is reduced to the position of observer in a society that denies her any other function. Without husband and children, she fails to meet fundamental social expectations for women, namely, forging family alliances and carrying on lineage. Since she is debarred from full participation in much of the activity around her, Janey experiences vicarious pleasure in studying those who possess the social significance she herself lacks. Her interest in high fashion is one manifestation of this tendency. She keeps close watch, in addition, over her brother's life, which is far richer and more action-packed than her own. When she waits up for him in hopes of learning the contents of a telegram, Archer wryly notes that "no item of his correspondence was safe from Janey" (149). Fashion, status, family, and etiquette typically are the objects of her scrutiny. Even when travelling she manages to discover the "names, dress and social situation" of complete strangers (163). Avidly gathering information, absorbing and classifying her impressions, she busies herself at the periphery of her social universe. Her preoccupation with minutia appears to be a last-resort effort to claim membership in a community that accords her such a frustratingly narrow range of use. There is obvious irony in Janey's obsession with observable detail, since her myopia inevitably limits the richness and accuracy of her perceptions. She is unable to satisfy her own hunger for information. Literally, as well as figuratively, her yearning for unrestricted vision remains unfulfilled.³

Her social role is characterized by serious dysfunction in other ways as well. There is an obvious clash between her behavior in public and in private: when guests are present she plays the part of the aging ingenu, but when she is alone with her mother an adult persona emerges: "She and Janey knew every fold of the Beaufort mystery, but in public Mrs. Archer continued to assume that the subject was not one for the unmarried" (40-41). In the public sphere, at least, her progress to maturity has been halted prematurely and unnaturally; the actual human being has continued to develop, but social expectations of her are frozen in time. She is "grown-up," as Archer notes, but is not permitted to comport herself accordingly (44). A never-ending process of role-switching gives Janey, more than perhaps any other of the novel's characters, a strong sense of dislocation: her real self is blurred by the self she must pretend to be.⁴ In one of the few scenes when readers

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see her alone with her brother, she is described as "wander[ing] in on him" (80). This hesitant, "wandering" approach to her objective seems to point toward larger uncertainties in her cultural position. As Ammons and Fryer both point out, the novel opens with Christine Nilsson singing the part of Gretchen in *Faust*. A woman who makes her living playing roles, the famous singer provides a telling introduction to women in the novel who are forced to do so in real life (Ammons, "Cool Diana" 222-23; Fryer 159-60). Through no fault of her own, Janey is caught fast in the web of "hypocrisy, affectation, presenting a false front, and evasion" that "pervade[s] the texture of social relationships in *The Age of Innocence*" (Jacobson 72).

Janey's innocence often appears to be feigned, but she is not permitted to articulate her ideas straightforwardly. Hence she expresses herself covertly, frequently with what is interpreted by others as "artless malice" (43). With apparent guilelessness, she offers comments that undermine the tactfully evasive style of communication favored by her community. She horrifies her mother, for instance, by comparing Ellen Olenska's opera gown to "a night-gown," and she disrupts "the pure and tranquil atmosphere of the Archer dining-room" by repeating the "bombshell" rumor that Ellen "means to get a divorce" (43, 44). Such remarks are anything but subtle; they are calculated, rather, to shock and provoke. Protected by the facade of maidenly naivete, Janey specializes in flat-footed, childish uninhibited conversation-stoppers. Since she is not allowed to be sophisticated, she derives compensatory enjoyment from being outrageous. Indeed, readers may suspect that her "malice" is directed in large measure toward her discomfited conversation partners. She escapes public reproach, however, because the conventions of innocence require her listeners to credit her with "artlessness"; they are compelled to assume that ignorance accounts for her sometimes socially awkward utterances.

An observer with defective sight, an adult assigned a child's role, Janey Archer is caught in a cruelly impossible situation, trapped in what her brother dubs an "elderly youth" (278). Her predicament is, moreover, merely an exaggerated version of that in which most of the women in the novel find themselves. The cultivation of innocence is, as Ammons observes, "deliberately designed to arrest female human nature" (*Argument* 147); it condemns them to a lifetime of "grown-up little girlhood" ("Cool Diana" 219). Throughout the novel, furthermore, Wharton employs blindness as a figure for female innocence: a young girl's carefully guarded naivete is the equivalent of a "bandage" covering her eyes (48). Kept during her formative years in an ignorance so profound and so sweeping that Archer likens it to the darkness of an underground cave, she risks losing the use of her eyes irretrievably: "what if . . . they could only look out blankly at blankness?" (79). In this context Janey's nearsightedness functions as another

version of the impaired vision from which all women in her culture suffer.

The analogy Archer draws between blindfolded girls, unable to develop their full perceptual potential, and Kentucky cave-fish, "which had ceased to develop eyes," may well remind readers of the famous allegory in Plato's *Republic* (79). There a group of individuals is confined in a cave and compelled to live in darkness, presented only with shadows and dim reflections of the real. Like the prisoners in Plato's cavern, women raised in "innocence" prove unable to transcend, or even to acknowledge, the limits imposed upon them.⁵ May Welland, for instance, "ha[s] not the dimmest notion that she [is] not free" (167). Marriage, which supposedly marks the threshold to new awareness and the "smashing" of "factitious purity," fails to endow acuity of vision upon faculties atrophied from long disuse (48). In the ongoing contrast between May Welland and Ellen Olenska, furthermore, Ellen is credited with having "had to look at the Gorgon," yet she has escaped without being "blinded" (233); as a cultural hybrid, she proves to be "a perceptual and experiential antithesis" to women raised in the "insulated environment" of innocence (Jacobson 75; Saunders, "Portrait" 92-94). Women like May and her mother remain victims of an inescapable "hard bright blindness," their imaginative and empathic powers permanently underdeveloped (274, 128).

The elaborate pattern of imagery centering on blindness demonstrates that no woman raised and molded in the culture of innocence is unaffected by it. Deftly woven into the fabric of this metaphor, Janey Archer's nearsightedness assumes irrefutable significance: it is the literal embodiment of the diminished sight attributed figuratively to every "nice" woman in her social universe (46). The reader is moved finally to ask whether the spinster's fate is much worse than that of her married counterpart, or, in fact, much different. In her creation of this minor character, Wharton has put a stock figure—the skinny, shortsighted old maid—to unexpected new purpose. She mines a stereotype to develop major themes, rendering her social criticism richer and more all-encompassing. Janey's myopia, a little noticed and easily underestimated detail in the narrative, completes Wharton's indictment of the damaging long-term consequences of innocence.

Notes

¹ The plot of Freeman's story actually hinges upon the younger sister's defective sight: she is maneuvered by a mean-spirited neighbor into a danger she cannot see, "a nest of fire-crackers" (108).

² Although Wharton's fiction shows persistent interest in the stereotype of the old maid, she explores the association between spinsterhood and visual handicap only in the character of Janey Archer. In "Xingu," Miss Van Vluyck's nearsighted forays through the encyclopedia prove entertainingly ridiculous, serving as part of the satire

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visual acuity is not otherwise of interest. Charlotte Lovell of *The Old Maid*, Wharton's most elaborately developed spinster, manifests many stereotypical features, including rigid posture, lean figure, old-fashioned dress, and fussy precision, but she is not nearsighted. Charlotte enjoys excellent vision, in fact: it is she who reads aloud in the evening while her cousin Delia embroiders. The depiction of Janey Archer's weak vision in *The Age of Innocence* represents the deliberate mining of a stereotype for unique purposes. Wharton invests Janey's myopia with thematically relevant significance, weaving it skillfully into a larger metaphor of culturally blinded women.

³ It is worth noting that one of the few other unmarried women mentioned in the novel, Miss Sophy Jackson, is, like Janey, an observer. Sophy's brother, Sillerton Jackson, has forged a status-enhancing role for himself as an "authority" on family history and local scandal (19). Guardian of secrets and arbiter of standards, he exercises "surveillance and control" in the community (Eby 96). Sophy Jackson derives her very limited social clout from her role as adjunct to him, since he sends her to dine with "all the people who could not secure her much-sought-after brother" (37). It is her task to bring him "bits of minor gossip that filled out usefully the gaps in his picture" (37). Her observations acquire value only because they contribute to those of a powerful male relative.

⁴ A more comprehensive discussion of the disparity between social role and inner self in Wharton's female characters is provided in "Becoming the Mask: Edith Wharton's *Ingénues*."

⁵ Singley examines characters and theme in *The Age of Innocence* in the context of Platonic theory, considering metaphors of sight as part of that discussion (170-80).

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Edith Wharton and the Ghost of Poe: "Miss Mary Pask" and "Mr. Jones"

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In *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton reported that Edgar Allan Poe, "that drunken and demoralized Baltimorean," was among the writers banished from her parents' library in her childhood (68); but Wharton did not share her parents' prejudice against Poe. In his landmark 1975 biography of Wharton, R.W.B. Lewis established her respect for Poe by quoting her letter to critic William C. Brownell, who was finishing an essay on Poe for the January, 1909, issue of *Scribner's Magazine*: "These two [Poe and Whitman], with Emerson, are the best we have--in fact, the all we have" in American literature (Lewis 236).

Wharton's view of Poe was, however, complex, as we see in "False Dawn," published in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1923 and included a year later as the first of the four novellas in *Old New York*.¹ In a parallel with Wharton, the enthusiastic young central character of "False Dawn," Lewis Raycie, disregards his father's condemnation of Poe as an "Atheist" and "blasphemer" ("False Dawn" 23). Lewis admires Poe and has heard him read his poetry. When Lewis discovers his sister, Mary Adeline, on a secret errand to deliver food to the poor and terminally ill Mrs. Poe, he contributes a dollar and asks his sister to tell Mrs. Poe that her husband is "a Great Poet." Surprisingly, Mary Adeline refuses: "Oh, brother, I couldn't . . . we never speak of him" (23). This answer suggests an ambivalence in Wharton toward Poe, perhaps implying that "poor Mrs. Poe," as she is called almost every time she is mentioned in this story (22, 72), suffers unduly in her marriage and bears the brunt of her husband's dedication to his art. She is also twice said to be "dying of a decline" (22, 72). The Poes are mentioned

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be "dying of a decline" (22, 72). The Poes are mentioned only occasionally in "False Dawn," and they remain offstage; but later in the book we learn that the main character has reached a more measured estimate of Poe, "true poet still to Lewis, though he had since heard richer notes" (48). This balanced judgment parallels Lewis's maturation as an evaluator of paintings, which forms the central plot of the novella.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, published in 1925, a year after *Old New York*, Wharton expressed enthusiasm for Poe's "awful hallucinations," which she called "models of the subtlest artifice" and "some of the most original of our great English short stories" (37); but she also continued the ambivalence expressed in "False Dawn" by describing Poe as "the sporadic and unaccountable" (33-34).

Further evidence that Wharton had Poe on her mind in the twenties came in 1928 when she wrote a tribute to Brownell for *Scribner's* after the critic's death. In this essay she praises Brownell for the impartiality of his critiques of Hawthorne and Poe, the two authors who were "most difficult for an American to judge objectively twenty-five years ago--Hawthorne because, for some mysterious reason, every old literary cliché still sprang full-armed to his defense whenever his name was mentioned, Poe because of the factitious prestige lent to him by the genius of Baudelaire in the very country whose intellectual judgments were the source of Brownell's" ("William C. Brownell" 208). Wharton's final comments on the critic's treatment of Hawthorne and Poe sustain this ambivalence:

Though I have quoted only depreciatory comments from these two chapters it must not be thought that Brownell felt the qualities less than the defects of the authors he dealt with. But Hawthorne and Poe had been mummified by undiscerning admiration; their cult was in danger of becoming a superstition, and Brownell's fearless hand merely swept away the flummery accumulated about their images. I know of nothing as honest and independent as his criticism of these two writers since the young Emerson's reverent but lucid estimate of the Lake Poets. ("William C. Brownell" 209)

Wharton's reference to Hawthorne and Poe as "mummified by undiscerning admiration" is telling. It reflects Wharton's insistence on a balanced view of her predecessors Hawthorne and Poe and one of her strategies for creating that balance in her readers: appropriating one of Poe's motifs, mummification, and turning it back on its original author. This essay will argue that Wharton deals with Poe in similar ways in two Gothic short stories she wrote during the 1920s: "Miss Mary Pask," first published in *The Pictorial Review* in 1925, the year Wharton published *The Writing of Fiction*, and "Mr. Jones," which appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1928, the year of her tribute to Brownell.

Amid the rising tide of interest in Wharton's Gothic

stories in the past two decades, several critics have analyzed or at least noted connections between her work and Poe's. For example, in a 1986 essay focusing on Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and Wharton's "The Duchess at Prayer," Eleanor Dwight reached a sound conclusion: ". . . Wharton knew her Poe and she borrowed from him in her own way" (56). In an essay with some parallels to mine Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney connect Wharton's story "Pomegranate Seed," written in 1930, two years after "Mr. Jones," with Poe's "The Purloined Letter"; but their goal is to show Wharton's ambivalence to the power of purloined reading and writing symbolized in her story by letters.

Although "Mary Pask" and "Mr. Jones" have attracted their share of critical attention, only a few critics have discussed their connections with Poe. In a survey of the supernatural stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Wharton, Benjamin F. Fisher calls the country house in "Mr. Jones" "a recognizable descendant of Poe's House of Usher" (31). He concludes his laudatory discussion of Wharton's story with these words: "Unmistakable debts to Poe are detectable throughout, although they may initially be masked by Wharton's use of an omniscient, instead of Poe's customary first-person, narrator" (32). But Fisher does not identify any of these debts to Poe other than the house. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that Wharton "as a long time admirer of the works of Poe . . . had always been fascinated by the trope of 'purloined letters'" (405 n. 106), which they point out in "Mr. Jones" and other stories by Wharton. These brief comments by Fisher and the footnote by Gilbert and Gubar don't sufficiently deal with Poe's presence in "Mr. Jones." This paper will consider in depth the Poe connection in "Mary Pask" and "Mr. Jones," not to identify "debts," as Fisher calls them, but to analyze Wharton's creative use of a source in the spirit of Dwight's comment and one by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar:

We claim, then, the existence of a distinctive women's tradition of ghost story writing in both England and the U.S. from 1850 on. Like work by women in other genres and periods, ghost stories by women challenge the assumptions of men's work in the genre during each period; women often seem to develop their stories in conscious antithesis to men's stories. (10)

* * *

Although in *Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion* Helen Killoran discusses Wharton's use of Poe, her book focuses on the novels. Still, one of the kinds of allusions she identifies in Wharton's novels can also be seen in "Mary Pask." Killoran points out allusions she calls "one-word clues," that is, "single words that are unusual in a novel's

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individual style, rhythm, and tone" (2). In "Mary Pask" the phrase that best fits Killoran's definition is "cataleptic trance," a reference to the paralysis that triggers the plot of the story by apparently killing the title character. This trance prompts a cable announcing Mary's death to her younger sister Grace in New York. Only as the unnamed narrator, a friend of Grace and a victim of fever and nervous collapse, is about to visit Mary at her house by the sea in Brittany, does he remember the announcement of her death. He attributes the memory lapse to his recent fever. What follows when he enters the house is a bizarre conversation in which he believes he sees and talks with Mary's ghost. Only on the last page of the story do we learn that Mary did not die but fell into a "cataleptic trance," from which she later awakened (144).

The phrase "cataleptic trance" recalls the most famous literary case of this malady, Madeline Usher's in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," first published in 1839. Once we make this connection, striking similarities between the two stories begin to unfold; but, I believe, in each case Wharton makes a significant change to complicate and often invert Poe's original story.

A key to interpreting "Usher" is the ambiguity of Madeline's return at the end. Critics have long debated whether her return should be taken literally or seen as Roderick's hallucination, in which the narrator participates under the influence of Usher's disintegrating personality, the raging storm, and a book they are reading, the "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning.² Thus, the blush of color the narrator sees on Madeline's bosom and face as he and Roderick entomb her may be a sign of lingering life or only the illusion of it attributable to her disease. While Madeline looks alive, she may well be dead, as Poe's narrator then believes. In Mary Pask's case the opposite is true. Although she is alive, the catalepsy has so changed her that she appears dead. The narrator describes Mary's hand as "changed and shriveled—somehow like one of those pale freckled toadstools that the least touch resolves to dust . . . Well—to dust? Of course . . ." Next the narrator mentions "the soft wrinkled fingers, with their foolish little oval finger tips that used to be so innocently and naturally pink, and now were blue under the yellowing nails. . ." (136).

The consequence of each woman's ailment is the same: burial, possibly premature for Madeline, certainly so for Mary. But here we come to an important difference between the two stories: Wharton transforms Madeline's literal entombment into Mary's figurative burial. Because of her isolation Mary is dead to the world and might as well be buried in her garden, as the cable announced she had requested (135). In fact, she says she sometimes sleeps there during the day (139).

The dramatic change in Mary's appearance may intensify her isolation, but it's not the original cause, which is probably the difficult life of a single woman in her day or the loss of "close intimacy" with her sister when Grace married. Mary refused to follow Grace and her

new husband to America either because of her interest in European art or, according to the narrator, because she didn't like her brother-in-law or found herself attracted to him (131). Jennice G. Thomas makes a persuasive case that "Mary is lonely because she has lost a sister, not because she has failed to find a husband" (114). Grace admits that she hasn't seen her sister in six years and confesses guilt for not visiting her after the catalepsy. Mary feels so estranged from her sister that she seeks assurance from the narrator that Grace was upset at the news of Mary's death: "I'm glad she was so sorry . . . It's what I've been longing to be told, and hardly hoped for. Grace forgets . . ." (139). These last two words haunt the narrator for months afterward (142). Through Wharton's rewriting of "Usher," Mary's entombment in loneliness seems more believable and threatening than Madeline's literal burial. Even Wharton's befuddled narrator seems to understand the seriousness of Mary's plight when he says: "I wonder if she isn't better off now than when she was alive?" (139). He is aware of "the unuttered loneliness of a lifetime . . . what the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden. . . No end of women were like that, I supposed. . ." (141).

This narrator also has connections with Poe's unnamed narrator in "Usher." Both narrators encounter someone and something frightening and eventually flee, but in Poe's story the narrator's key relationship is with Roderick Usher, and he knows Madeline only through her brother. By eliminating Roderick from her story, Wharton brings her narrator face to face with Mary and everything she represents: the feminine—which terrifies him—his own loneliness and mortality, and a rare chance for intimacy. Recognizing him as "a man who'd had his troubles too," Mary pleads with the narrator: "Oh, stay with me, stay with me . . . just tonight . . . It's so sweet and quiet here . . . No one need know . . . no one will ever come and trouble us" (140).

The narrator of "Usher" has to flee at the end or be swallowed by the house as it collapses into the tarn, but the ending of "Mary Pask" is more muted: the narrator's freely chosen flight from Mary's ghostly house is repeated in his flight from thinking about her and what she represents. Following Richard Wilbur's lead, one tradition of Poe criticism sees his narrator and Roderick Usher as alter egos, representing respectively the conscious and the unconscious or the imagination. In Daniel Hoffman's version of this reading, the narrator achieves something by telling his tale: "Little though he consciously understands those experiences, in his telling of the tale we see the collaboration of Usher's intuitive power with Narrator's conscious mind" (315). In contrast, Wharton's narrator fails to make any connection with Mary and remains as fragile and fearful of life at the end as he was before seeing her. Critics have noted the limitations Poe allows us to see in the narrator of "Usher," but Wharton diminishes the stature of her narrator even further as his story reveals him to be merely petty, confused, and defeated.³

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Wharton's main interest in "Mary Pask" is not the narrator but Mary herself—as if the author has taken Madeline from the margins of "Usher" to place her in the center of this story and give her a voice. She has almost none in "Usher." Karen Weekes notes that Madeline is "speechless in her only pre-entombed appearance" (150); and she fares only slightly better when she awakens, if she awakens at all. As he and Roderick read the "Mad Trist," the narrator hears "a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound" (414); Roderick later identifies this as not a scream but "the grating of the iron hinges of her prison" as Madeline tries to escape it (416). The only vocal sound the narrator is sure Madeline makes is "a low moaning cry" as she falls on her brother, who joins her in death (416-17).

Unlike Madeline, Mary survives and speaks in a self-aware, ironic voice that makes itself heard despite the noise of the sea and the narrator's repeated attempts to keep her on the margins of his story. As Thomas demonstrates, Mary jokes about her "death" and seriously articulates her loneliness. The narrator, of course, doesn't get her jokes and runs from her attempts to communicate. By the end of the story, when he has learned that she isn't a ghost, he says he'll forget her: "I felt I should never again be interested in Mary Pask, or in anything concerning her" (144). Yet she haunts him still, so much that he has just told her story, in which she is a far more vivid and articulate character than he is, able and willing to address issues he evades. In "Mary Pask" Wharton successfully uses Poe's tools of irony and hoax to unearth the woman buried in Poe's "House of Usher" and allow her to speak for herself.

* * *

In "Mr. Jones" Wharton's reference to "the letters purloined by Lady Jane" (195) caught the eyes of Gilbert and Gubar. This phrase also fits Killoran's description of "words that are unusual in a novel's style, rhythm, and tone," as if Wharton wants to alert us to Poe's presence in this short story. The letters Lady Jane purloins reveal another isolated woman character, the Viscountess Juliana, an early nineteenth-century occupant of the family estate Lady Jane Lynke has recently inherited in Sussex. As the letters by Juliana and others show, the Viscountess was isolated partly because she was deaf and dumb; but, as with Mary Pask, the more serious, less surmountable cause of her isolation was not physical. Juliana was trapped in an oppressive marriage, which her unfaithful husband had contracted for her money, and she was kept a virtual prisoner in the house by Mr. Jones, the Viscount's powerful servant. Although these letters are rightfully part of Jane's inheritance, she has to "purloin" them because the ghost of Mr. Jones has hidden them in an effort to keep his master's behavior secret even a hundred years later. When after considerable effort Jane gets the key to the muniment

room, where most of the house's old documents are kept, these letters are missing. Apparently Mr. Jones has removed them to his own desk in the blue parlor, another room the current housekeeper discourages Jane from using. In that desk Jane finds the letters that tell the suppressed story.

As Fisher suggests, the echoes of Poe in "Mr. Jones" are more pervasive than this reference to "The Purloined Letter." In "Mr. Jones" Wharton's references and overall response to Poe are less to a single tale, as in "Mary Pask," than to his work as a whole. Wharton names the house Jane inherits Bells, reminding us of Poe's well known poem "The Bells," a favorite declamation piece for students in schools and professional elocutionists on stage in the second half of the nineteenth century. A good example of the "mummification by undiscerning admiration" Wharton complained about.

Another significant connection with Poe can be found in the name of the housekeeper who does Mr. Jones's bidding: Mrs. Clemm. She shares the name of Poe's widowed aunt, Mrs. Maria Poe Clemm, one of the series of mother figures from whom the orphan Poe received support throughout his brief life. From 1831 to 1835, as he struggled to make his way as a writer, Poe lived with Maria Clemm, her daughter Virginia, and Maria's invalid mother, Poe's grandmother, whose dead husband's Revolutionary War pension of \$240 per year was Maria's "most reliable means of support" (Thomas and Jackson xxi). Maria was also the mother figure in Poe's household when he married the thirteen-year-old Virginia perhaps privately in 1835 and certainly publicly in 1836, when Poe was twenty-seven. Most Poe biographers see this marriage as reflecting both Poe's idealized love for the young Virginia, whom he tutored and sometimes called "Sissy," and the hope that he could provide financial stability for Virginia and her mother after Maria's mother's death ended the pension on which they had all depended. Maria Clemm kept house for Poe and Virginia throughout their marriage, and after her daughter's death from tuberculosis in 1847 she continued to live with Poe and care for him until his own death two years later. In "False Dawn" Mary Adeline Raycie mentions young Mrs. Poe's mother living in poverty with the poet and his wife, although Mary Adeline doesn't refer to her by name.

The connection between the historical Mrs. Clemm and the one in "Mr. Jones" is complex. Since the publication of the "Beatrice Palmato" fragment in the 1970s critics have been alert to the incest motif in Wharton's fiction. Wharton's negative portrayal of Mrs. Clemm may be a criticism of Maria Clemm's approval of her underage daughter's marriage to her much older first cousin, biographical information that was well known in Wharton's day. Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman comments on the doubly incestuous aspects of Poe's marriage:

First-cousin marriages were not unusual at the time, but Virginia's age was. Opinion

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about the appropriate marrying age for women differed, and women in the South married younger than those in other sections. Yet to marry at the age of thirteen was extremely rare and, as Neilson Poe [Edgar's cousin] did, most people would have considered Virginia far too young. (107)⁴

Although reliable Poe chroniclers Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson describe the Poes' marriage as "unusually happy" (xxi), "False Dawn" suggests that Wharton was not so sanguine.

Another similarity between the historical Mrs. Clemm and the housekeeper in "Mr. Jones" is that both women are victimized by men they support. Poe's aunt/mother-in-law was apparently willing to provide the struggling writer financial and emotional support; but, as Wharton makes clear in "False Dawn," she endured a difficult life doing it. In part because of his drinking and squabbles with other literati, Poe was unable to provide her or her daughter with financial security and sometimes even the bare necessities. Mr. Jones victimizes Wharton's Mrs. Clemm more actively. Driven by fear of Mr. Jones, she sustains his rule of the house by trying to prevent Jane from looking into its secrets, and her fear is legitimized at the end of the story, when he apparently strangles her for her failure to stop Jane.

To see what all these references to Poe in "Mr. Jones" add up to, we need to return to the purloined letters at the heart of the story and to the Poe tale to which they allude. In Poe's "Purloined Letter" the detective genius Auguste Dupin rescues a woman of high, even royal status, whose indiscretion has left her vulnerable to the Minister D_____s theft of an incriminating letter. Like Madeline Usher the imperiled woman never gets to speak in her own words. We hear of her situation only from the Prefect of the Paris police. But, as in "Mary Pask," Wharton takes a woman from the margins of Poe's story and moves her into a prominent position so that she can tell her own story, in this case through her letter.⁵

Besides allowing the endangered woman to speak for herself, Wharton switches the sex of the principal detective and main character from Poe's story. In "Mr. Jones" Jane Lynke symbolically rescues the silenced Viscountess. Although Jane receives help from her novelist friend Edward Stramer, she has plenty of stature of her own. At thirty-five, she is a world traveler, a published author, the heir to Bells, and the character whose actions set the plot in motion and keep it going. As Hoffman and others have noted, Poe's Dupin uses the same intuitive genius as the Minister to recover the letter by replicating the crime (Hoffman 122). Similarly, Jane defeats Mr. Jones by replicating his crime of purloining the letters by Juliana and others revealing her plight.

Candace Waid connects these letters with a suppressed literary tradition by women. She finds convincing evidence in the following passage that "Mr.

Jones" is a commentary on the silencing of women in literature and history throughout the ages and that Jane's liberation of the letters is an exemplary effort to give those silenced stories voices:

If those marble lips in the chapel could speak! If she could hear some of their comments on the old house which had spread its silent shelter over their sins and sorrows, their follies and submissions! A long tale, to which she was about to add another chapter, subdued and humdrum beside some of those earlier annals, yet probably freer and more varied than the unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers buried there so completely that they must hardly have known when they passed from their beds to their graves. "Piled up like dead leaves," Jane thought, "layers and layers of them, to preserve something from budding underneath." ("Mr. Jones" 175)

Waid rightly catches the pun on "leaves" that suggests what she calls "the mute pages, the frozen whiteness that forms the background for the portrait of the silent, voiceless women of Bells" (Waid 191).

The final and most important difference, then, between "Purloined Letter" and "Mr. Jones" is that Poe imagines the aristocratic woman's safety being secured through the suppression of her recovered letter. Presumably she will now destroy the letter or at least hide it, and things will be as they have always been for her, at least outwardly. Wharton, on the other hand, envisions the vindication of both the dead Viscountess and the living Jane Lynke when the purloined letters are liberated and read. Jane now understands and takes charge of her personal and family history. Instead of another cover-up like the one at the end of Poe's story, Wharton's ends with a discovery, in the root sense of the word; and the discovery of the letters exposing the family's secret history means that things are definitely not as they have always been at Bells.

* * *

"Mr. Jones" provides a rationale for Wharton's references to Poe in both the stories I've discussed. As Jane Lynke purloins the letters, Wharton purloins Poe's work and even at times information from his life and recasts both as her commentary on his art and the male literary tradition with its marginalization of women. In both "Mary Pask" and "Mr. Jones" she uses parallels with Poe to assert her own creativity and her differences from his work and the tradition of texts by famous men. Her direct allusions to Poe invite and empower readers to play detective and discover this "Lynke" for ourselves.

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Notes

- ¹ For a brief discussion of Poe's presence in "False Dawn" from the perspective of a Poe scholar, see David Ketterer.
- ² See, for example, the debate between G. R. Thompson and Patrick F. Quinn on the reliability of the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher."
- ³ For a detailed discussion of the limitations of the narrator of "Mary Pask," see Kathy A. Fedorko, 104-08.
- ⁴ Perhaps even Poe thought Virginia was too young, for he later said that the marriage was not consummated for at least two years, and, according to Silverman, his statement "is ambiguous enough to leave it uncertain whether he had sexual relations with his wife even after the two years" (124).
- ⁵ In the past two decades some Poe scholars, most successfully Leland Person, have argued that Poe's understanding of gender is more complex than was previously thought; but even Person acknowledges that "Poe seldom grants female characters subjectivity or a voice" (137).

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