

Wharton's Art of Presence: The Case of Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth*

by William E. Cain

There have been many excellent analyses of *The House of Mirth*, including those written by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Richard Poirier, Joan Lidoff, Wai-chee Dimock, and Elaine Showalter. But perhaps critics have focused so intensively on Wharton's "representation of Lily Bart" that they have not fully explored Wharton's "representation of herself" in her writing. I'm not necessarily referring here to the ways in which aspects of Wharton's own life inform her book — though these biographical facts are important, as Lewis and Wolff have demonstrated. Instead, I have in mind how Wharton reveals her artistic personality to us through the choices exhibited in her plot and through the linguistic organization of her prose. In this essay, I would like to shift the discussion of *The House of Mirth* (and of the other novels as well) by describing the strengths and limits of the luminous tracing intelligence we respond to, and sometimes quarrel with, when we read Wharton.

As a small but significant index to Wharton's manifest presence, one can cite the curious pages at the beginning of chapter 14 (Book I), where she describes Gerty Farish's contented early morning thoughts about Selden's kindness toward her and his "liking" of Lily Bart (Riverside edition, p. 146). What's especially interesting about these pages is that Wharton's language exposes her own mixed admiration and contempt for Gerty, a woman who is normally decent but shabby. At one moment, Wharton refers to Gerty as "a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables, and content to look through the window at the banquet spread for her friends." It's striking, even slightly unnerving, to come upon language like this as a description of Gerty; the reader might be able to understand her as a "parasite in the social order," which the imagery of tables and banquets would seem to reinforce: Gerty isn't part of Lily's privileged world yet feeds upon it as an outsider. But "parasite in the moral order"



The Lunchroom at A.T. Stewart's (Department Store) (Frank Leslie's)

is perplexing, even perverse. The implication is that the essential moral order — an order which Gerty, to judge from her behavior, in key respects embodies — in fact lies elsewhere: Gerty is "parasitic" upon it.

Possibly Wharton here means us to conceive of the true "moral order" as aligned with the poor women whom Gerty assists and counsels. In this sense, Gerty is "parasitic" upon them: she finds a role for herself in caring for them, fulfilling her own neediness by ministering to their needs. But not only is such an interpretation distinctly unpleasant in what it implies about Wharton's attitude toward good works — that disinterested benevolence does not exist; it also fails to fit the context of the passage as a whole, which focuses upon Gerty's relation to Lily and Selden, not the women she helps.

It's sometimes tempting to read the phrase "parasite in the moral order" simply as a 'mistake', since it jars against the evidence about Gerty that Wharton herself mobilizes. But it's more pertinent to see this phrase as Wharton's admission that, in her estimation, moral

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goodness, at least Gerty's case, is problematic at best and, at worst, vulgar and distasteful. Gerty may well act morally, but she's too unattractive to exemplify a satisfactory "moral order." Wharton recoils from Gerty's brand of lower-class decency, which is too bound up with a dreary appearance and chirping enthusiasms to be compelling or even engaging. It's not only Lily who feels both fondness and disdain for Gerty, the "good" yet "dingy" social worker, but Wharton as well, as the unsettling movements of her language indicate.

I am not certain that Wharton always registers consciously just how conflicted are the assessments of Gerty that she articulates. Wharton's own language keeps implicating her in the moral tensions, divided judgments, and failed strategies which she devises for Lily Bart — which makes the nature of Wharton's self-representation, and her degree of control over it, all the more intricate and intriguing to consider.

This approach to Wharton is important because not enough critical attention has been paid to her rich, suggestive language as it resonates for our thinking about her writerly self-representation. In addition, such an approach dramatizes the ways in which the experience of reading Wharton challenges the assumptions of certain "deconstructionist" branches of post-structuralism. One of the positive effects of post-structuralism, particularly in the work of critics influenced by Foucault and/or feminism, is that it has begun to provide valuable historical and ideological studies of Wharton's work. But the deconstructionist slant of much post-structuralism has also made critics unprofitably skeptical about accounts of a writer's "presence" and descriptions of her "representation of herself" in her artistic employment. I admire and am very interested in Wharton's characterizations of Lily Bart and others, but I am even more drawn to the novels because of the absorbing manner in which Wharton complicatedly characterizes herself.

A second example in *The House of Mirth* occurs several paragraphs later in Chapter 14, where Wharton sets out another ironic judgment of Gerty Farish. Wharton first observes that Lily is sympathetic toward the women whom Gerty befriends at the Girl's Club, but, adds Wharton, Lily's kind of sympathy is limited: she can only see others as they mirror her own desires and strivings, and hence is unable truly to appreciate the separateness of others, the singular qualities of self that make them different from her. Lily enjoys being among the workers and

women at the Club; captivated as always by opportunities to please audiences, she likes the excited movements toward her elegance and poise she manages to stir. Wharton is here bringing out her carefully calibrated understanding of Lily's motives; she has an often delicate feeling for Lily's behavior, but is also prepared to be severe and unwavering in marking the boundaries to Lily's charities and in identifying the self-fixation from which Lily never escapes.

Wharton could have stopped at this point, yet she chooses to emphasize that this insight into Lily's character and conduct is one that eludes the naive Gerty:

Gerty Farish was not a close enough reader of character to disentangle the mixed threads of which Lily's philanthropy was woven. She supposed her beautiful friend to be actuated by the same motive as herself — that sharpening of the moral vision which makes all human suffering so near and insistent that the other aspects of life fade into remoteness. Gerty lived by such simple formulas that she did not hesitate to class her friend's state with the emotional 'change of heart' to which her dealings with the poor had accustomed her; and she rejoiced in the thought that she had been the instrument of this renewal. (pp. 147-48)

This is one of those quietly extraordinary passages that discloses much about Wharton's powerful, and often punishing (and perhaps self-punishing), presence in *The House of Mirth*. Gerty's generous feelings about Lily derive, it seems, from her interpretive innocence. It is only because she does not really know Lily that she succeeds in retaining her fond regard for her friend. Gerty's "simple formulas" make Lily look good to her — and also protect Gerty from the disillusionment that would come from perceiving that sympathy serves, for Lily, once more to express and channel self-interest.

How should we characterize and judge Wharton's presence at moments like this? Sometimes one is led to commend Wharton for her unsparing honesty, saying that she will not allow us (or herself) to credit "simple formulas" about morality and goodness. On other occasions, one may be irritatedly drawn to reprove her cynicism, noting that she cannot conceive of Lily acting selflessly,

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News and Announcements

1990 Special Session Considered

Plans are now underway for a Special Session at the 1990 MLA convention (Chicago) on the topic of Edith Wharton and the issues of class, race, and ethnicity. Carol Singley will chair the session and invites paper proposals, inquiries, and suggestions for speakers or further development of the topic. Please contact Professor Singley at Department of Literature, American University, Washington, D.C. 20016.

Beinecke Fellowships Offered

Visiting Fellowships at the Beinecke Library (Yale University) are offered for post-doctoral or equivalent research. (Library holds the major collection of Wharton papers, letters, and manuscripts.) Stipends include travel to and from New Haven plus \$1200 per month. Length of stay, normally one month, depends on research needs. For the period September 1990 through May 1991, application materials must be received by January 15, 1990. For further information, write to The Beinecke Library, P.O. Box 1603A, Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520-1603. (203) 432-2977).

Wharton Watchers Keep Alert

The Book Review of The New York Times of November 5, 1989 contained the following item.

To the Editor:

How depressing it was to find Edith Wharton termed a "female regionalist" in Susan Gubar's review of Peter Conn's "Literature in America" (Oct. 8). To reduce one of America's greatest writers — not, dreaded phrase, "women writers" — to so limited a role is an ironic pursuit for a feminist scholar.

What was Wharton's region — the New York of "The Age of Innocence" and "The House of Mirth" or the New England of "Ethan Frome" and "Summer"? The answer, of course, is neither. Are we now to refer to Faulkner as a "male regionalist"?

Jessica Hornick
New York

*You are cordially invited to
The Annual Business / Dinner Meeting of
The Edith Wharton Society
during the MLA Convention in Washington, D.C.
at The Roma Restaurant (3419 Connecticut Avenue)
on Thursday, December 28, from 5:30-10:00 P.M.*

*Following dinner / business two papers will be read:
Helen Killoran, "Edith Wharton, Henri Bergson,
and The Glimpses of the Moon."
Adeline Tintner, "Edith Wharton and Paul Bourget."*

*Cost: \$25
Includes open bar
five course dinner
(with entree choices)
wine and gratuities.*

*Make check out to:
Professor Alan Price
The Hazelton Campus
Penn State University
Hazelton, PA 18201.
(717) 450-3024*

R.S.V.P. by December 15th.

FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF THE NEWSLETTER will include "A Portrait of Edith Wharton in Bourget's 'L'Indicatrice' (1905)" by Adeline Tintner, "The Paradox of Desire: Jacques Lacan and Edith Wharton" by Garry M. Leonard, "The Double and The Revenant in 'The Lady Maid's Bell,'" by Ellen Powers Stengel, "The Bibliographic Review — 1988-1989" by Alfred Bendixen, several book reviews and information on the 1991 Wharton Conference in Paris.

The Edith Wharton Newsletter Edith Wharton Society

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Membership: \$8.00

Book Review

Amy Kaplan. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. ix + 187 pp., \$24.95.

Amy Kaplan's fine study of American literary realism approaches the subject from two perspectives. It places fiction in its historical context by exploring the dynamic interplay of narrative forms and changing social forms, especially as these forms manifest themselves in class conflict and the media of mass culture. Realism is thus to be defined as "a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change" (10). For writers who undertook to represent social change in the work of fiction, Kaplan believes, the creating of a novel was inseparable from the creating of the writer's public professional identity. Realism then also becomes "a strategy for defining the social position of the author" (13). The basic premise of the book is that realism in fiction does not simply mirror social reality but encompasses the forms and engages in the very processes it represents. The world of the novel is not detachable from its historical context and cannot be understood apart from the social reality in which it is embedded.

Kaplan devotes the six chapters of her book to three writers — William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser. In a pair of chapters for each writer, she traces in the first chapter the development of the writer's concept of realism and creation of a professional identity; in the second chapter she analyzes the narrative strategies that embody these ideas in a single work that is arguably the writer's masterpiece — *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The House of Mirth*, and *Sister Carrie*.

Of the elements of the historical context in which Kaplan places the novels, the shaping power of mass culture interests her the most. The dynamic qualities of realism are best apprehended, she believes, when realism is viewed in competition with "emergent forms of mass media from which it gains its power and against which it asserts itself" (13). She analyzes the function within the three writers' novels of popular modes of representation such as the newspaper interview, the melodrama, and the journalist's gossip column to show how the fiction en-

compasses popular forms even as it struggles to subvert them. In contrast to critics preoccupied with analogies between the mental processes of the author and the actions of fictional characters, Kaplan develops analogies between the author as a professional in the literary marketplace and the characters in the novels. Lily Bart is the artist *manqué* who cannot or will not capitalize on her assets. Carrie, like Dreiser, invests desire in representations of sentimental fantasy for consumption by an audience. Fulkerson, Lindau, and Basil March in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* embody conflicting tendencies contained in the realist's enterprise. The reader notes that the characters themselves are engaged in creating representations — in the theater, in the houses of the rich, in the pages of magazines and newspapers.

Kaplan's treatment of all three novelists is informative and penetrating. Her chapters on the much-studied novels are filled with fresh insights and illuminating analyses of problematic elements, such as the expressions of sentimentality in *Sister Carrie*, the shifting boundaries of foreground and background in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and the ambiguous role of Selden in *The House of Mirth*. Her analysis of fictional characters as participants in a society which transforms people and works of art into commodities yields arresting conjunctions. In her analysis of commodification in Wharton's *The Touchstone*, for instance, she establishes the identity of the woman of leisure and the professional writer in their status as objects of display to be exploited for monetary gain.

Kaplan's book deepens our understanding of the complexity and subtlety of the art of all three writers, but it does not alter our conception of the place of Howells and Dreiser in American literary history. The chapters on Edith Wharton, however, propose a new position for a writer whose rightful place, Kaplan believes, has yet to be established despite the work of critics in the past ten years. The placement of Wharton, in the middle of the book, between Howells and Dreiser, in itself suggests the affinities to both male writers of the novelist who in *The House of Mirth* identified her narrator as a "drawing-room naturalist." Thus Kaplan moves Wharton from the margins to the center, from the position of a satellite of Henry James or an exemplar of an exclusively woman's tradition, to a dominant place in a literature that

transcends the limiting dichotomies of masculine and feminine.

The discussion of Wharton takes as its starting point the novelist's need to define herself as a professional writer, a task she shared with Howells and Dreiser but which was complicated for her by her position as a woman in an elite society that condemned literary success in the marketplace as vulgar and dismissed women's writing as trivial. Kaplan analyzes Wharton's early fiction to illustrate her rejection of both the tradition of women's domestic fiction and the outdated tradition of the genteel man of letters. In Kaplan's analysis, *The Decoration of Houses* becomes a pivotal work, in which Wharton achieves through her definition of decoration as architecture a synthesis of public and private spheres and a fusing of roles traditionally categorized as masculine or feminine. The architect becomes the model of the novelist and architectural form the sign of professionalism in literature.

In her chapter on *The House of Mirth*, Kaplan shows how the representation of Lily's decline creates architectural form and also charts social change in the world the novel re-creates. The stages of Lily's descent, marked, as Kaplan shows, by successive views of Lily as she views herself in mirrors, both actual and figurative; by the increasingly theatrical nature of the events in which she participates; and by the increasing prominence of cheap journalism in gossip columns and scandal sheets, trace both the downward course of the protagonist and the changing modes of competitive display among the rich. By viewing the novel within the carefully reconstructed context of New York society at the turn of the century, Kaplan can identify the reversal that turns places of business, once defined as the public stage, into a hidden private realm, while the homes of the wealthy become the public stage where economic power is exhibited in elaborate displays to confound rivals and dazzle outsiders.

A notable feature of *The Social Construction of American Realism* is the absence of Henry James in the foreground. Kaplan's purpose was not to write a comprehensive survey, but one would welcome a chapter on *The Bostonians* from such a fine critical intelligence. Kaplan's approach to realism is perhaps not so ground-

breaking as her introduction implies. Other critics, such as Michael Gilmore, Richard Brodhead, and Walter Benn Michaels, have also undertaken to "explore the dynamic relationship between changing fictional and social forms in realistic representation" (8). But the reader is unlikely to find analyses of *The Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The House of Mirth*, and *Sister Carrie* that surpass hers in range and depth of insight.

Elsa Nettels

College of William and Mary

IN MEMORIAM

Joan Lidoff was found dead on October 19, 1989 in her home in Austin, Texas. The probable cause of her death was cardiac arrest. She was 44 years old and an associate professor of English at The University of Texas, Austin. Hired in 1978 to foster then Women's Literature, she was instrumental in developing a flourishing interdepartmental Women's Studies Program, now called Gender Studies.

Professor Lidoff was a member of The Edith Wharton Society and had published a seminal and influential article on Wharton, "Another Sleeping Beauty: Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*." Although ill for several years, she was completing under contract to the University of Chicago her manuscript, "Fluid Boundaries: The Origins of a Distinctive Woman's Voice in Literature."

Book Review

Josephine Donovan, *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989. 198 pages. \$23.50.

Myth criticism has tended either to insist on universal mythic patterns that transcend time and place or to explicate mythic allusions in terms of a writer's specific psychological traumas. In her latest book, however, Josephine Donovan suggests that it is more helpful to view mythic patterns within the framework of the preoccupations of a particular culture during a specific historical period. *After The Fall* argues that the three major American women writers of the early twentieth century were drawn to the Demeter-Persephone myth because it expressed the dilemma of the woman writer of that time. In other words, the myth's depiction of the movement from the mother's garden to patriarchal captivity mirrors the modern female writer's shift from the sheltered world of female domesticity to the professional world of male authors.

In her account of the historical background, Donovan emphasizes the way in which the twentieth century not only opened up new opportunities for women (entrance into universities and some professions) but also destroyed the female community, the world of "love and ritual" that had sustained separate female cultural traditions in the nineteenth century. The modern woman who wished to enter the professional world had to face an ideology that consistently affirmed masculine values, usually equated femininity with weakness, and frequently regarded any community of women with suspicion or hostility. Donovan notes that Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow all began their literary careers by identifying with male authors and a male literary tradition, but found themselves eventually moving to a "reappreciation of the feminine." She traces the way in which each of these writers invested much of her imaginative energy in overcoming an ideology of male supremacy and devising means of reclaiming a matriarchal vision. Donovan is troubled by some aspects of Wharton's art — especially her use of male narrators and the apparent rejection of female bonding — but she argues that *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* show Wharton's final affirmation of maternal sources of inspiration. Cather and Glasgow seem to provide more useful examples for Donovan's thesis, perhaps because their fictional landscapes are generally less urban and more allied to the rural, natural realm of the maternal garden.

After the Fall is provocative, original, intriguing, congenitally argued, and often persuasive. Donovan's arguments are most compelling when she explores tensions and contradictions or defines patterns that help establish the existence of a vibrant but complex female literary tradition in the United States. The book is in many ways a continuation of the rewriting of American literary history that Donovan began in *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition* (1983). She convinces me that the Persephone myth is as crucial to American women writers as the idea of the American Adam is to their male counterparts. Moreover, she also shows that Sarah Orne Jewett is as important as Henry James in forging a literary tradition that shapes the development of Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow. Unfortunately, Donovan's method of organization poses some problems. Separate chapters trace the treatment of the Persephone myth chronologically throughout each writer's career, emphasizing the degree to which these writers reject identification with male figures and reclaim a feminine identity. Although Donovan is able to comment on many stories and novels that other critics have ignored, she sometimes treats a work too briefly and she never provides a full comparison and contrast of these three important writers. Furthermore, her thesis seems to illuminate some works better than others. For instance, her discussion of *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* is much stronger than her treatment of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*.

Moreover, her emphasis on ideology and political criticism leads to some questionable aesthetic judgments. For instance, Donovan seems to imply that a fictional work that depicts female bonding is inherently superior to one that explores conflicts between women. Furthermore, she seems overly troubled by the use of male narrators and fails to recognize when Wharton and Cather are undercutting these male voices. There are also moments when Donovan simply fails to detect Wharton's wit and irony, — such as her claim that "Roman Fever" is an uncritical presentation of a patriarchal vision. She also misdates Wharton's last story, "All Souls" (1937), as having been written in 1908 — a serious error given that Donovan's argument rests largely on the chronology of works. In spite of these problems, *After the Fall* is an important book and a groundbreaking study of the problems of the female artist in a patriarchal culture.

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and can only envision Gerty as able to praise Lily when the praise testifies to how little the simplemindedly earnest Gerty grasps about other people.

Another, related passage, occurring near the end of chapter 14, also poses interpretive dilemmas. Gerty is caring for the distraught Lily, who has just fled from her terribly painful encounter with Gus Trenor; Gerty patiently does what she can to console Lily even as she still suffers herself from the hard recent discovery that Selden cares for Lily, not for her. "The name" Selden, Wharton observes,

as Gerty saw with a clutch at the heart, had loosened the springs of self-pity in her friend's dry breast, and tear by tear Lily poured out the measure of her anguish. She had dropped sideways in Gerty's big arm-chair, her head buried where lately Selden's had leaned, in a beauty of abandonment that drove home to Gerty's aching senses the inevitableness of her own defeat. Ah, it needed no deliberate purpose on Lily's part to rob her of her dream! To look on that prone loveliness was to see in it a natural force, to recognize that love and power belong to such as Lily, as renunciation and service are the lot of those they despoil. (p. 162)

The first time that I read this passage I found it angering, and it still bothers me. Wharton seems to be suggesting here that Gerty rightly perceives that she is forever distant from love and power; she is dingy, and is therefore fit only for renunciation and service. Wharton's designed consciousness for her character reflects unappealingly on the author: Wharton makes Gerty realize, as though arriving at one of life's essential truths, that those who are not beautiful like Lily are both powerless and disqualified from love. Much in the novel, especially the sections that deal with Gerty, appears to sustain this view as Wharton's own. It is all well and good to be morally decent, but we should remember that moral decency is the inevitable trajectory taken by unattractive people: this is Wharton's verdict. Such people lack the gifted personality and physical loveliness that would have directed them to a higher fate.

In pondering the passage further, however, we may judge that it bears a different interpretation, one that leads us toward a less urgent dissent from the class-bias and Darwinian ideology — only the beautiful emerge "fit" for love and power — which Wharton apparently invokes here and which figure elsewhere in the novel. One could claim that, within the world Wharton portrays, Gerty's assessment is accurate; this society values beautiful female forms, and those who possess them maneuver with a radiant freedom denied to others. Of course Lily is *not*, in fact, free. Gerty is thus right about Lily only in the short-



The Sewing Room at A.T. Stewart's (*Frank Leslie's*)

term, for Lily will not finally manage to secure her love for Selden, nor will she ever regain the power that she has already begun to lose. From this angle, Wharton's motions amid the words intimate not what she is doing to Gerty, but what Gerty is doing to herself. Society shapes the consciousness of women such as Gerty into an instrument for self-degradation. Gerty devalues herself, indicting a physical appearance she can do nothing to change and defining her "lot" in life accordingly. She is additionally propelled into futile protest

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against women like Lily, as she concludes that the beauty bequeathed to them is something in fact robbed from others — others like herself who have been “despoiled” in an act of violence and plunder.

It may be that this reading locates a kind of political progressivism in Wharton's presence that her books generally fail to sanction. This reading, furthermore, possibly needs to be adjusted in order to heighten even more the cruelty of *The House of Mirth* — not just the cruelty of the society which exploits and victimizes Lily, but also the cruelty with which Wharton engineers her plot and tantalizingly gives her characters glimpses of a better life that they can never attain. Because Lily is beautiful and cannot face the prospect of that “dinginess” which Gerty exhibits, she cannot be good. On the other side, because Gerty is not beautiful, she cannot be happy. Maybe, one should add, this twist of the novel's logic rebounds to Gerty's advantage: if she were beautiful, she could not (i.e., would not) be good. Dinginess is morally redemptive, though from Lily's and, it appears, Wharton's vantage-point, such redemption exacts an impossibly high price in ostracizing good people from stunning forms.

So Wharton, then, is potentially progressive but is, more fundamentally, conservative, or else simply limited, in her vision of human striving and what it might accomplish. In *The House of Mirth*, characters expend emotional energy, yearn for speech that is in tune with their deepest desires, and labor toward a higher consciousness only to meet defeat: Wharton keeps routing them back into an imprisoning world and overmastering fate.

The case of Gerty Farish illustrates how Wharton is animatedly “present” in her writing in a variety of complex, and sometimes highly contested, ways. Her language fastens our attention on meanings that Wharton may not have seen herself but that she was shrewdly intelligent enough to manage to propose. The more one reads *The House of Mirth*, the more one likely tends toward making inquiries and posing questions about Wharton, rather than about her characters as such. The story she relates about Lily, Gerty, and Selden is accompanied by a sec-

ond story that elucidates Wharton's activity as a writer. This exterior story is the sign for another kind of narrative action, the interior story that recounts the choices, allegiances, judgments, and eloquent disturbances of Wharton's art of presence.

Wellesley College



The Sweatshop (1890) A family of an immigrant tailor brings him garments to sew together at the rate of perhaps fifty cents for sixteen hours work. (*Harper's Weekly*)

(All photographs in this issue come from *New York in the Nineteenth Century: 321 Engravings from Harper's Weekly and other Contemporary Sources*. New York: Dover Publications, 1977).