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CONFERENCE NEWS

1991 MLA IN SAN FRANCISCO

Sign and signifier of our new status as an official allied organization of the MLA, two program slots have been accorded the Edith Wharton Society for the annual MLA Convention in San Francisco, December 27-30, 1991. The last session will be followed by a cash bar and business meeting. Our first session, "Wharton's Neglected Art: The Short Story" will be held on Friday, December 27 between 5:15 - 6:30 p.m. in Teakwood A & B, Hilton. Annette Zilversmit, Long Island University, Brooklyn, will preside. Papers and participants are: "The Muse's Triumph: A Reassessment of Wharton's Short Stories," Alfred Bendixen, California State Univ., Los Angeles; "Incest and the New England Stories," Barbara White, Univ. of New Hampshire, Durham; "Early Life, Early Stories: Wharton's *Greater Inclination* and *Crucial Instances*," John Halperin, Vanderbilt Univ.; "Wharton and the Business of the Gothic," Candace Waid, Yale Univ.; "The Supernatural and Dialectical Realism: The New Poetics of Wharton," Ellen Powers Stengel, Univ. of Central Arkansas.

The second session, "Edith Wharton's Eroticism" will take place on Sunday, December 29th between 3:30-4:45 p.m. in the Franciscan Room A, B, C, & D, Hilton. Clare Colquitt, San Diego State University, will preside. Papers and participants are: "At the Hands of Her Father: Edith Wharton and Incest," Gloria C. Erlich, Princeton Research Forum; "Wharton's *Ménage à Quatre*: Mothers, Daughters, Lovers and the Uncanny," Deborah L. Clarke, Pennsylvania State Univ., University Park; "Incest and the Female Body: Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country* and the 'Beatrice Palmato' Fragment," Judith A. Rosenberg, Brandeis Univ.; "Reinvesting the Feminine Imaginary: Mothers, Daughters, and Intrusive Lovers in *The Mother's Recompense*," Nicole Hoffman, Univ. of California, San Diego; "Love and Exile: Edith Wharton's Fictional Lives," Susan Goodman, California State Univ., Fresno.

A Cash Bar/Business Meeting of The Edith Wharton Society will follow this session on Sunday, December 29 between 5:15-6:30 p.m. in the Teakwood Room A & B, Hilton. Among the items to be taken up is the topic and leader for the second Edith Wharton panel for the 1992 MLA Convention in New York City. This second session will be decided from suggestions from the floor and the holder of the chosen topic will be the session organizer and moderator. This nomination is open to all members (new and old) present at this meeting. So come prepared with suggested topics.

Author's Query

If anyone has come upon pictures of Edith Wharton, her friends, family, houses, travels or post cards send or received by her, please contact Eleanor Dwight who is working on an illustrated book. Full credit will be given. E.D. 315 Central Park West, New York, NY 10025. Many thanks!

1992 MLA IN NEW YORK

Susan Goodman who assumes the presidency of the Wharton Society in 1992 will chair a panel on "The Non-Fiction of Edith Wharton" for the 1992 MLA Convention in New York City. She invites 1-2 page proposals by March 1. Send material to her at: Department of English, California State University, Fresno, CA 93740.

3rd ALA IN SAN DIEGO

For the third annual conference of American Literature Association a round table discussion session on "New Feminist Myths and Edith Wharton" is being organized by Annette Zilversmit. She would like four or five panelists to give five minute presentations and then be prepared to engage with the audience on points raised. Issues to be considered might include: Has feminist thought and theory erected a new mythology of womanhood? Are Wharton heroines too idealized and thus too simply martyrs and/or spiritual heroes? Has intimacy in narrative and biography been too neglected in favor of artist-woman autonomy? Can some personal pathology be attributed to Wharton and/or her female characters and still have readers feel empathy for such women? (Can the woman/human condition incorporate limitations?) Do social protest scenarios still dominate Wharton criticism (as in does for other women writers) to the detriment of the craft of her art, the more formal artistic strategies she employs? Each panelist may concentrate on one of these aspects or others she or he find appropriate. Send one-page proposals by January 10th to Annette Zilversmit, 140 Riverside Drive, Apt. 16-H, New York, NY 10024.

The ALA conference will be held at the Bahia Resort Hotel on Mission Bay in San Diego on May 28-31, 1992. Conference fee is \$30 (\$10 for students, independent and retired scholars), and conference room rates are \$74 (single) and \$80 (double). Write to Professor Alfred Bendixen, Dept. of English, California State University, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110.

AMERICAN FICTION IN MEXICO

Edith Wharton was generously represented at the first of the small symposiums organized by The American Literature Association held in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, November 7-10, 1991. The topic was "American Fiction" and Clare Colquitt, San Diego State University, organized the session on Edith Wharton. On the panel were: Ellen Friedman, Trenton State College, "Irony, Contingency, and the Wharton Heroine"; Abby Werlock, St. Olaf College, "A Modernist Woman's Revision of Marriage: George Sand's *Indiana* and Edith Wharton's *Indiana/Undine*"; and Susan Goodman, California State University, Fresno, "Edith Wharton's Male Coterie."

Neglected Areas: Wharton's Short Stories and Incest

Part II

by Barbara A. White

I think Wharton was probably an incest victim in early childhood. Of course, this contention cannot be proven, any more than the psychoanalytic interpretation, but it is certainly suggested by her writings and explains some still unanswered questions about her life. She had many of the same characteristics and life patterns that are now being discovered in survivors of father-daughter incest, as the taboo against talking about incest is broken and an increasing number of survivors speak out in surveys and autobiographical narratives.²⁶ Like incest survivors who have described the "post-incest syndrome," Wharton experienced the following major difficulties: 1) a miserable unhappy childhood and a troubled relationship with both parents that seems to have no explanation; 2) vexed romantic and sexual relationships in adult life; and 3) occasional to frequent mental breakdowns.²⁷

The two adult patterns are detailed by Wharton's biographers, Lewis and Wolff. We know she had problematic romances with Walter Berry and Morton Fullerton and that she avoided a sexual relationship with her husband, whom she eventually divorced. Lewis says, "There is no question that the sexual side of the marriage was a disaster." Apparently the marriage was not consummated for three weeks, and whenever Wharton had to share a bedroom with her husband she suffered asthma attacks.²⁸ As a young woman, Wharton had several breakdowns, in which she reported the same specific symptoms as incest victims, severe nausea and loss of appetite and choking and breathing difficulties. She later wrote her friend Sara Norton that "for twelve years I seldom knew what it was to be, for more than an hour or two of the twenty four, without an intense feeling of nausea." Her illness "consumed the best years of my youth, and left, in some sort, an irreparable shade on my life."²⁹

It would seem that Wharton herself traced her adult problems to childhood, for the emphasis on childhood in her autobiographical narratives is striking. "Life and I," an unpublished manuscript, and "A Little Girl's New York," a published article, are both about her childhood, and Wharton's life as young child plays a prominent part in her

autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, both in the amount of attention devoted to it and the intensity with which it is rendered. In her accounts of her life before marriage only 10 to 15 percent of the space is devoted to her adolescence; the memorable images, including the most vivid in *A Backward Glance*, have to do with Wharton as a child rather than a debutante. The unfinished novel, "Literature," which is heavily autobiographical, also emphasizes childhood.³⁰

Wharton describes herself as a "morbid" and "unhappy" child plagued by intense fears, including a phobia connected with her father ("Life and I," 40). She says her "external life" (15) seemed normal enough, but her internal life diverged (the splitting into external and internal is mentioned by all sources as characteristic of incest victims). Wharton suffered for seven or eight years from "an intense and unreasoning physical timidity" and lived in a "state of chronic fear." She asks, "Fear of *what*? I cannot say — and even at the time, I was never able to formulate my terror. It was like some dark undefinable menace, forever dogging my steps, lurking and threatening; I was conscious of it wherever I went by day, and at night it made sleep impossible, unless a light and a nurse-maid were in the room." The daytime fears became associated with thresholds, especially as she returned from walks with her father and sensed that "it" was "behind me, upon me." She felt "a choking agony of terror" if the door did not open immediately (17-18). Wharton says she had a phobia about thresholds, being unable to stand for half a minute on a doorstep, into adulthood.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her biography of Wharton, makes the connection between thresholds and incest, noting Wharton's use of the threshold as motif in her works with an incest theme (see pp. 172-74 and 272-75). Interestingly, the phobias of incest survivors often involve space, as in fear of a certain type of space.³¹ Wolff also associates, as I have noted, the hand of Wharton's father, held by her on her walks, with the "third hand" of Mr. Palmato in the incest fragment. It may also be relevant that the vestibule of Wharton's childhood home was painted red (Lewis, 22), for the color red is

associated with incest in her works. Siena, the setting of "The House of the Dead Hand," is the red city, and the woman in the mysterious portrait wears red; the home of Charity and her foster father/husband in *Summer* is the red house; Mr. Palmato's third hand is a "crimson flash" (Lewis, 548).

In her autobiographical narratives Wharton portrays her father positively but distantly. Her few references to him have been described as "curiously perfunctory, idyllic, and unreal" (Wilson, 172). She notes that she appreciated his gentleman's library and imagines "there was time when his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had anyone with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy . . . I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure" (BG, 39). This is the only extensive comment Wharton makes about her father, and in the franker "Life and I" George Jones plays even less of a role. Besides his presence on her walks, she mentions only his final illness, referring to him briefly as "my dear kind father" (46). The adjectives "dear" and "kind," one of which Wharton generally uses in speaking of her father, may seem a bit perfunctory and unreal, as in Wilson's complaint; but they have been enough to establish him as a "benevolent presence," in Wolff's terms. However, as Wolff goes on to point out, he seems only a "silent visitor" in the little girl's world: "Never once, in any of her memoirs of childhood, does Wharton quote her father directly; never once do we hear his voice" (34). Goodman concludes that the relationship was problematic because of the father's absence (18).

Wharton spends more time on her "cold" and "disapproving" mother, showing palpable hostility and accentuating her mother's refusal to answer questions about sex. The voice of Lucretia Jones resounds throughout the autobiographical writings, and it always seems to be criticizing, shriveling up any "buds of fancy" in daughter as well as husband.³² In *A Backward Glance* there is just a glimpse of the mother's reluctance to discuss sex: an older Edith insists on knowing why her cousin George has disappeared from society, forcing her mother to mutter, "Some woman" (BG, 24). The same situation is described twice in "Life and I" in much more ominous terms. In the first instance Wharton says that whenever she asked her mother about sex she was told that she was too little to understand or that it was not nice to talk about such things. When at

age seven or eight a cousin told her where babies came from, she confessed to her mother and received a severe scolding.

The second instance Wharton describes as follows:

[A] few days before my marriage, I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery, that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, and begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me "what being married was like." Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. "I never heard such a ridiculous question!" she said impatiently; and I felt at once how vulgar she thought me.

But in the extremity of my need I persisted. "I'm afraid, Mamma — I want to know what will happen to me!"

The coldness of her expression deepened to disgust. She was silent for a dreadful moment; then she said with an effort: "You've seen enough pictures and statues in your life. Haven't you noticed that men are — made differently from women?"

"Yes," I faltered blankly.

"Well, then —?"

I was silent, from sheer inability to follow, and she brought out sharply: "Then for heaven's sake don't ask me any more silly questions. You can't be as stupid as you pretend!"

The dreadful moment was over, and the only result was that I had been convicted of stupidity for not knowing what I had been expressly forbidden to ask about, or even to think of! . . . I record this brief conversation, because the training of which it was the beautiful and logical conclusion did more than anything else to falsify & misdirect my whole life . . . And, since, in the end, it did neither, it only strengthens the conclusion that one is what one is, and that education may delay but cannot deflect one's growth. Only, what possibilities of tragedy may lie in the delay! (34-35; ellipses Wharton's)

It is questionable whether Wharton's portrait of Lucretia as a cold and disapproving person who cast a blight on her life should be accepted at face value. While Wolff, in the tradition of psychoanalysis, blames Wharton's mother for most of her ills, Susan Goodman has recently suggested that we consider the dynamics of why Wharton needed to see her mother in a negative light.³³ But the important point here is the vividness of the description and intensity of the language. Although Wharton's account of her mother's refusal to discuss sex is sad, she seems

to exaggerate in claiming it did "more than anything" to "falsify and misdirect my whole life" and caused a "tragedy." The passage recalls an earlier one in "Life and I." Before the onset of her fears, Wharton endured what she calls a "moral malady" that seems from her description even worse than the fears. She tells a rather conventional anecdote about confessing a misdeed because of her desire to tell the truth and then being scolded by her mother. She concludes:

Nothing I have suffered since has equalled the darkness of horror that weighed on my childhood in respect to this vexed problem of truth-telling, and the impossibility of reconciling "God's" standard of truthfulness with the conventional obligation to be "polite" and not hurt anyone's feelings. Between these conflicting rules of conduct I suffered an untold anguish of perplexity, and suffered alone, as imaginative children generally do, without daring to tell anyone of my trouble, because I vaguely felt that I *ought* to know what was right, and that it was probably "naughty" not to. (7)

Not only the content but the intensity of the language is similar to Wharton's questioning of her mother about sex. One can sympathize with the child's dilemma, but the language seems overwrought, particularly from a skilled author writing at least fifty years after the event. It is odd that this problem would cause greater "suffering" than any subsequent trouble, and the terms "darkness of horror" and "untold anguish" seem out of proportion to a conflict between truth and politeness, just as "tragedy" does to a lack of information about sex. In general, Wharton's attitude toward her parents appears extreme. Certainly remote parents have always been common among the upper classes, and she provides no evidence that her parents were unusual or that they ever neglected her or intentionally treated her cruelly. What is strange is that her father's supposed kindness should lead to silence and distance and her mother's refusal to discuss sex to virtual rejection. Wharton never gives a satisfactory explanation for the depth of her alienation from either parent or the intensity of the language she uses to describe a seemingly uneventful childhood ("horror," "anguish," "tragedy").

If, however, Wharton was sexually abused by her father when she was a young child, the conflict between truth-telling and politeness could have been a dark horror. Her mother's refusal to provide any explanation that would help her understand the ex-

perience might well have poisoned her life and led her to view her mother as a tacit collaborator in male corruption (this last term is used by Donovan [47] to describe mothers in many Wharton stories.) It would be no wonder, then, that Wharton seemed to feel she was an orphan, a "homeless waif" (*BG*, 119), and created so many orphaned heroines.³⁴ Wharton's phobias and fears, such as her fear of being alone in the dark (she slept with the light on until she was twenty-five), her nausea, depression, and feeling of being an outsider, are all routinely described by incest survivors. Her family also fits the pattern so far established through surveys of victims: a financially stable, even high-income, family that stresses appearances — "conventional to a fault," as one researcher puts it.³⁵ Although the fathers in such families tend to impress outsiders as "sympathetic" and occasionally even passive, sex roles are firmly adhered to in the family; for instance, sons are privileged and daughters isolated and heavily supervised.³⁶

We might expect that Wharton's attitude toward her parents would differ from that commonly expressed by incest survivors, for the victim would presumably feel hostile toward the perpetrator. But, although nearly all survivors hated and tried to escape the abuse, the majority make excuses for their fathers. Even through their wariness, they tend to pity the fathers and view them as especially intelligent and gifted.³⁷ The common attitude toward the mother is ambivalent at best. Most survivors see her as "cold," blaming her for not coming to their aid. A researcher notes, "The personal accounts of incest victims are replete with descriptions of distant, unavailable mothers and with expressions of longing for maternal nurturance."³⁸ This whole scenario fits Wharton completely.

It was a consecutive reading of Wharton's short stories, however, rather than her biography or "Beatrice Palmato," that first led me to the belief that she may have been an incest victim. This might be because, as Candace Waid suggests, "the short stories provide the most intimate record of Wharton's fears and desires as she negotiated the boundaries between art and life."³⁹ Critics sensed some mystery about Wharton's life, something that her art fed on, even before her papers were opened and "Beatrice Palmato" discovered. In discussing "Mrs. Wharton's Mask" back in 1964 Marius Bewley noted that the dearth of information about Wharton had not been fortunate for her critical reputation. Bewley continued:

She belongs among those writers whose work, however obliquely, is an extension of their personal tensions and their intimate personal ties,

a knowledge of which may do more to illuminate their creative motives and the particular effects their art achieves than anything else can. The quality that so many of her heroines and heroes have of being hopelessly trapped . . . seems projected from some deep center in herself, from some concealed hopelessness, frustration, or private rage that we are never allowed to see except at several removes in the disguising medium of her art.⁴⁰

More recently, Jean Gooder uses the comment by an acquaintance of Wharton's that "I think she's never been really unlocked, and that most of her emotions have gone into her books" for the article title "Unlocking Edith Wharton" (35). This is an interesting metaphor, considering the importance of keys and unlocking in "The House of the Dead Hand" and other stories. Lev Raphael has written several essays on the theme of shame in Wharton's longer fiction; although he has not explained its significance to Wharton, shame is central to incest victims, who tend to blame themselves for the abuse.⁴¹

The repressed memory of childhood sexual abuse might be the hidden "deep center in herself" that critics have sensed in Wharton. I think there are two reasons why no one has put forth this theory,⁴² even after the discovery of "Beatrice Palmato" and increased discussion of the incest theme in Wharton's work: first, the incest taboo — that is, the taboo against talking about it, and the resulting ignorance about the characteristics and life patterns of incest victims; and second, Wharton's hostility toward her mother and compassion for her father in the autobiographical narratives, attitudes that fit perfectly with the general tendency of society to excuse the father and blame the mother. Without the knowledge that incest survivors frequently portray their fathers as gifted and deserving of pity and their mothers as cold and distant, critics have been misled. Thus, for instance, Lewis assumes that the source of Wharton's threshold terrors has to be her mother. Wharton's statement that the menace lay *behind* her as she hovered on the doorstep must therefore be wrong: "For surely the threat lay *inside* the house. And who was waiting there . . . but her own mother?"⁴³ But surely one does not make this big a mistake in describing one's own phobias. Lewis's instincts are right, as usual, because when he goes on to develop Wharton's supposed fear of her mother, he adds that "nobody, not even her good looking father, could protect her" (645). Why "good looking," an odd and seemingly irrelevant choice of adjective, unless the father is being eroticized?

It was not only the strange father-daughter stories that led me to the incest theory but also the obsessive themes of hidden male corruption and revelation of past crimes and secrets. (Survivors of childhood sexual abuse, having been almost universally threatened not to tell, are usually preoccupied with secrets.) In Wharton's second collection, *Crucial Instances*, all the stories have to do with the past, and many of the early stories already discussed deal specifically with past crimes and secrets, including "The Lamp of Psyche," "A Cup of Cold Water," "The House of the Dead Hand," and "The Portrait." In addition, the slight tale "A Coward" (1899) concerns a man's past moment of cowardice that has overshadowed his life, and "The Confessional" treats the secret past of two Italian-Americans. The theme of past secrets becomes even more central in Wharton's later period, as does the related situation of a man's hidden corruption, which is often accompanied by a woman's complicity. This related theme can be traced in all the short stories mentioned above, as well as "That Good May Come," "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Rembrandt" (1900), and even "The Journey."

The latter story, which I mentioned in Chapter 1 as an effective portrait of a woman who conceals her husband's death during a train ride, is generally interpreted as a death wish fantasy in which Wharton succeeded in getting rid of her husband.⁴⁴ However, it quite literally fits the incest paradigm — a man's hidden corruption accompanied by a woman's complicity. Wharton based one of her last stories, "Confession" (1936), titled in the magazine version "Unconfessed Crime," on the Lizzie Borden case; interestingly, she departs from history and has the Lizzie character kill only her father and not her mother. While acknowledging that the story, and the play version she also wrote, stemmed from a real case, Wharton told a correspondent that the young woman could just as well have murdered an intolerable husband.⁴⁵ One might apply this clue in looking at some of Wharton's early stories and ask whether the familiar claustrophobic wife in stories like "The Journey," "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Moving Finger," and "The Lady's Maid's Bell" could just as well be seen as a walled-in daughter/incest victim.

Part of the feeling of claustrophobia seems to lie in having to protect the terrible secret from oneself even more than from others. The ghost of the father, Dr. Lombard or Mr. Jones, with his admonitions not to tell, may be less threatening than the remembering itself. A very common characteristic of incest survivors is their tendency to repress incidents of abuse, resulting sometimes in occasional

memory gaps and sometimes in almost total amnesia, even into middle age.⁴⁶ Amnesia would, of course, be very likely if the sexual abuse occurred before the child's memory was firmly established (Wharton's walks with her father, which are clearly connected with her childhood phobias, began before she was four). The stories indicate that Wharton probably had no consistent memory of abuse, although she may have had flashbacks or partial recall at various periods in her life. The heroine of "The Quicksand" (1902), who is shattered by the discovery of her husband's moral corruption, cannot forget, even after his death: "But something persists — remember that — a single point, an aching nerve of truth. Now and then you may drug it — but a touch wakes it again" (1: 410).

In other stories also it is the simple revelation of the secret, and not particularly its nature of ill effects, that destroys the protagonist. The oddities of "The Portrait," for example, cannot be explained merely by reference to an "incest theme." There is no indication in the story that Miss Vard and her father have had an incestuous relationship or that his corruption involves anything more than dishonesty in business; but the story does shriek at the top of its voice that the revelation of a father's evil might well kill the daughter. In later short stories, as we shall see, the discovery of a secret or of hidden corruption leads to immediate mental breakdown, as in "The Triumph of Night" (1914), or to suicide, as in "The Young Gentlemen" (1926).

If the secret must be guarded even from consciousness, the daughter has to be rendered mute, and so Miss Vard is "monosyllabic" (1: 178) and Mr. Jones's first victim deaf and dumb. The latter, whose only name is that on a monument, "Also His Wife," looks out from her portrait "dumbly, inexpressively, in a state of frozen beauty" (2: 606). Also His Wife reminds the reflector of generations of silenced women, piled up like dead leaves around the house; she thinks of "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" (2: 599). But the reflector herself happens to be a writer, an independent, tweedy travel writer who loves gardens. This most Wharton-y character, although afraid of Mr. Jones, succeeds in challenging him. Even Sybilla is named after the sibyl, female prophet or fortune teller; she may seem more dead than alive but she finally does "tell." The attention Wharton gives to the communicative ability or inability of the women in the incest-related stories underscores its importance for her. This writer begins her autobiography expressing her "long ache of pity for animals, and

for all inarticulate beings" (*BG*, 4). According to Wolff, the horrors of Wharton's childhood (interpreted by Wolff as "insatiable oral longing," 206, and by me as sexual abuse) became at an early age "inextricably bound in Wharton's mind with the ability to communicate. Nothing is worse than to be 'mute'" (25).

Significantly, this conclusion dominates the literature about incest. Although one might expect therapists and their clients to stress the importance of talk, they place a surprisingly heavy emphasis on writing; book after book describes its healing effects.⁴⁷ Wharton seems to have made this discovery in childhood when she became obsessed with "making up."⁴⁸ She learned early to "tell" but tell it slant; her mother, her first audience, would not listen to agonized questions about sex but would pay attention to made-up stories. Of course, to publish the stories as an adult was something else again. Wharton portrays female artists as lawbreakers, as we have already seen, and the artist who reveals secrets is doubly criminal. On top of Mrs. Manstey's dilemma — I must create, but it's illegal — she adds Sybilla's dilemma — I must tell, but Father might kill me. No wonder Wharton had such a difficult time, as is well documented by Wolff, coming to her vocation as a writer. Wolff notes that the greatest strength of writing, that she could use the process to come to terms with the "hidden elements in her nature," lay close to its greatest danger, that access to these elements would overwhelm her (87). Wolff thus explains Wharton's bad breakdown in 1899, *after* she had managed to let go of her first short story collection, as the "flooding into consciousness of hitherto-repressed infantile feelings," her childhood beasts. If writing "summoned the beasts to consciousness" (86), we have seen their shadows in the early stories.

For Edith Wharton, then, writing was in many ways an act of courage. That fact may explain the prevalence in her stories of the theme of courage versus cowardice. Several of her early stories, like "The Coward" and "The Line of Least Resistance," debate such questions as "What is a coward?" and "How could one act bravely in this situation?" This concern is at least secondary in such stories as "The Lamp of Psyche," "Friends," and "A Cup of Cold Water," and Wharton would never lose interest in the subject. She connects it with art in stories like "That Good Might Come" and "The Recovery" and with the courage she thinks artists must have to avoid selling their souls. The "sewer gas" theme that dominates the artist stories discussed earlier seems to have personal relevance. The strength the artist needs to produce serious work instead of trash, and

most Wharton artists do weaken and pander to the public at some point, could be interpreted as a disguised form of the courage Wharton felt she had to summon to write at all.

Wharton's attitude toward writing and its relation to incest and other issues discussed in this chapter is effectively revealed in "The Angel at the Grave," one of the best stories of her early period. Indeed, it is one of her finest short stories and reminds us that Wharton, like all great writers, could one day project her personal conflicts into a queer, half-jelled sketch like "The House of the Dead Hand" and the next day transmute them into a perfectly cohering work of art. Wharton is in total control in "The Angel at the Grave." She departs somewhat from her usual practice by making the point of view so distanced from the reflector, Paulina Anson, that it often seems omniscient narration. In this story the voice of the author-narrator comes through very strongly, colored throughout by Wharton's most sparkling and epigrammatic wit.

Paulina is the granddaughter of Orestes Anson, the famous philosopher (the name recalls Orestes Brownson, a minor Transcendentalist friend of Emerson). Because Anson had no sons or intellectual daughters, Paulina devotes her life to keeping up the Anson House and the great man's memory. Or, as Wharton puts it, when "nature" denied the Anson daughters the gift of intellect, "fate" directly fitted the granddaughter for her role as custodian (1: 246). The controlling metaphor of the story is, appropriately, Transcendentalism, and Wharton plays throughout with terms like "necessity," "destiny," and "predestination." She gets in as many titles of Emerson essays as possible, not only "Nature" and "Fate" but even "Compensation" — Paulina's existence is viewed as such by her grandmother, who considers her "designed to act as the guardian of the family temple" (1: 247). The House, always capitalized, even has a central "fane" and an "altar," where the priestess Paulina memorializes the divine Anson by writing his biography. It is funny but not merely a joke, as we shall see, since the working of fate turns out to be a serious theme.

The first ominous note strikes when Paulina rejects a suitor because he refuses to live in the House, and the author-narrator tells us directly that she did not leave to marry him because of "an emanation from the walls of the House, from the bare desk, the faded portraits, the dozen yellowing tomes that no hand but hers ever lifted from the shelf" (1: 249). Then her remaining relatives die and "the House possessed her"; Paulina can hardly leave it for a day, as she loses herself in "filial pantheism" (1: 249). The Anson House seems to be turning into the House

of the Dead Hand with its paternal ghost. After tourists stop coming to see the house and the publisher rejects Paulina's biography, explaining that Anson is no longer a big name, Paulina joins Sybilla, the duchess at prayer, and Wharton's other claustrophobic ladies:

[I]t seemed to her that she had been walled alive into a tomb hung with the effigies of dead ideas. She felt a desperate longing to escape into the outer air, where people toiled and loved, and living sympathies went hand in hand. It was the sense of wasted labor the oppressed her . . . There was a dreary parallel between her grandfather's fruitless toil and her own unprofitable sacrifice. Each in turn had kept vigil by a corpse. (1: 253)

Like Sybilla, Paulina has a potential recuer. One day the doorbell rings (for some reason, probably connected with Wharton's threshold phobia, there is much ado about the bell in this story, as in "The House of the Dead Hand").⁴⁹ A young man appears, asking to see an Anson pamphlet, and Paulina "drew a key from her old-fashioned reticule and unlocked a drawer beneath one of the book-cases" (1: 256). But here the resemblance to the earlier story ends, for this man is a true savior bringing welcome news. It turns out that before Anson became a Transcendentalist he had made a major scientific discovery, identifying a species of fish that formed an evolutionary link. Thus his reputation will be revived, and Paulina can share in the work; as the story ends, she feels touched by youth.

Although the story is generally considered one of Wharton's best, this sudden "happy ending" has been criticized. Lewis finds it "at once unexpected and not quite persuasive" (99). Donovan thinks it shows Wharton's growing acceptance of patriarchy. She notes parallels with Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" but observes that the local colorist would never have ended the story with Paulina feeling useful and vindicated: "It should be pointed out . . . (and Wharton does not) that in the end Paulina has served as a vehicle for the transmission of a patriarchal tradition; her own work remains unpublished and therefore on the margins, silent" (53). Lest we suspect the critic is trying to impose contemporary standards on Wharton, it should be noted that Wharton was perfectly capable of this kind of feminist thought. In a comic story about authorship, "Expiation," she even sets up an analogous situation: the plot of *Through a Glass Brightly*, a novel she satirizes, involves a poor consumptive girl with two sisters to support who manages "to collect money enough to put up a beautiful memorial window to her grandfather, whom she had never seen"

(1: 443). It would be hard to find a better description of the maintenance of patriarchy. Why, then, are we supposed to believe that Paulina has *not* wasted her life memorializing her grandfather when the consumptive girl obviously has? We might also ask, from our knowledge of the parallels to Wharton's incest stories, how does Paulina manage to escape so easily from being "walled in"? Isn't the ending a lapse?

I would suggest that just as Wharton makes the coincidence of meeting ex-husbands part of the situation in "The Other Two," she presents us with a *deus ex machina* as part of the theme of destiny. A writer might quite realistically end up being remembered for something altogether different from the work that acquired a contemporary reputation (Wharton herself considered Herman Melville an author of sea adventures for boys). It is a quirk of fate much like the "accident" of Paulina's having been born an Anson or "designed" to guard the family heritage (1: 245). Moreover, this type of quirk is one of the few trump cards of the powerless; the powerful do not have complete control from beyond the grave. To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, speaking of the "landlords" from the perspective of the earth,

They called me theirs,
Who so controlled me;
Yet every one
Wished to stay, and is gone,
How am I theirs,
If they cannot hold me,
But I hold them?

("Hamatreya," lines 53-59)

Fate finally allows Paulina to hold her grandfather and the House of Anson. Although it is true she will be transmitting a patriarchal tradition (the pendulum has simply swung from Transcendentalism to Darwinism), she is not really silenced. Clearly, with the reversal in her grandfather's reputation, her biography will become a hot item; Paulina will have work, will be published — and she controls the House of Anson.

It is very important in the story that Paulina has not always found the House a prison. The first description emphasizes its nearness to the street: it "opened on the universe" (1: 245), for the street "led to all the capitals of Europe; and over the roads of intercommunication unseen caravans bore back to the elm-shaded House the tribute of an admiring world" (1: 246). This is the opposite of claustrophobia, and Paulina loves the House, finding it "full of floating nourishment" (1: 247) and absorbing from the atmosphere "warmth, brightness,

and variety" (1: 248). She loves her work and, like the New England nun, has no trouble giving up her suitor to preserve it. The event that changes the House into a tomb is not the loss of her beau but the *rejection of her manuscript*. Only when Paulina is denied communication with the world through being published, and secondarily through showing the House to visitors, does she begin to feel walled in. Thus the restoration of communication at the end of the story immediately lifts the walls, and the promise that she can resume her work makes Paulina feel that she has not wasted her life. Writing or, more precisely, being published gets you out of the House of the Dead Hand.

The working out of Wharton's personal dilemmas can easily be recognized in "The Angel at the Grave." She seems to have succeeded in playing angel at the grave of her own past; as this favorite metaphor is explicated in another story, "It's as if an angel had gone about lifting gravestones, and the buried people walked again, and the living didn't shrink from them" ("Autres Temps . . .," 2: 264). But Wharton also gets beyond her own situation in a way she could not in "The House of the Dead Hand" and other stories. With the help of a very distanced narrative point of view and the controlling metaphor of Transcendentalism, she creates a story that coheres on several levels and can be read in terms of different themes, including art, fate, and the past. Moreover, as is often the case in her best work, she maintains a double perspective toward all these issues. The story may be read as a Hawthornesque satire of Transcendentalism with its "cloudy rhetoric" that doesn't deserve to survive (1:252), or of past doctrines in general; why waste one's time at the grave keeping watch over dead ideas, especially when they cannot be trusted and a prehistoric fish may suddenly gain precedence over an elegant exposition of nature? On the other hand, only the angel's vigilance permits any continuity in individual consciousness or public tradition. The past must be come to terms with.

In its particular incarnation as the Anson heritage, the past both buries Paulina and keeps her alive. Donovan's interpretation of the story, which forms part of her treatment of the Demeter-Persephone myth in Wharton, makes Paulina a Persephone figure, kidnapped from the sphere of the mothers by the god of the underworld to serve the fathers. The tradition Paulina transmits is patriarchal, as we have seen. If we read "The Angel at the Grave" as a female artist story, we can add that the protagonist is merely another lesser artist — "Paulina," like Theodora, Mrs. Amyot (toy man), and Mrs. Manstey in earlier tales. The tradition she will

transmit, as represented by Anson, is moribund besides. But on the other hand, Wharton does not let us forget that Paulina has escaped muteness. Hers is not to be one of the "unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers" piled up like leaves. A turn of the wheel of fortune gives her the opportunity to rewrite the dead tradition and in fact inscribe herself. The author-narrator tells us, "It was not so much her grandfather's life as her own that she had written" (1:250). In the last female artist story of Wharton's early period, a woman finally gets to be a professional writer.⁵⁰

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NOTES

26. Book-length personal narratives include the following: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why Caged Birds Sing* (1969); Katherine Brady, *Father's Days* (1979); Charlotte Vale Allen, *Daddy's Girl* (1982); Eleanor Hill, *The Family Secret* (1985); Margaret Randall, *This Is about Incest* (1987); Sylvia Fraser, *My Father's House* (1988); and Louise M. Wisechild, *The Obsidian Mirror* (1988). A collection of writings by incest survivors is *Voices in the Night: Women Speaking about Incest*, ed. Toni A. McNaron and Yarrow Morgan (Pittsburgh: Clies Press, 1982). For an account of the effects of incestuous abuse on a renowned writer's life, see Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989). Woolf lived from 1882 to 1941, Wharton from 1862 to 1937. Rush (56) claims that there was a marked increase in sexual assaults on children during the Victorian era. Because of the secrecy surrounding incest and the effects of repression (see note 82), it is very difficult to estimate the number of women who have suffered incestuous abuse. The most commonly cited contemporary statistics about childhood sexual abuse indicate that from 25 to 38 percent of American women were molested as children, most by someone they knew. See E. Sue Blume, *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), xiv.

27. The "post-incest syndrome" is so named by E. Sue Blume and other therapists. For description of the syndrome I have relied on personal narratives, plus the following sources, all of which agree as to the main characteristics of incest survivors: Blume; Herman; Russell; Denise J. Gelinis, "The Persisting Negative Effects of Incest," *Psychiatry* 46 (November 1983): 312-32; and Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). The three broad patterns I listed might be thought to fit a large segment of the population, but the key in the survivor's life is the seeming lack of explanation for the problems.

28. Lewis, 53. Wolff claims that any marriage would have been disastrous because "the crisis of sexual intimacy . . . resurrected the bogies of childhood" (51). See Lewis, 52-54, and Wolff, 50-51.

29. *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 139-40. All sources on the "post-incest syndrome" specify these symptoms. For Wharton's illnesses, see Lewis, 74-76 and 82-84, and Wolff, 75-91. She was once treated by the noted (or notorious) physician S. Weir Mitchell, whose "rest cure" was immortalized by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). "The Portrait" was written during Wharton's "rest cure."

30. For an analysis, see Janet Goodwyn, "Literature" or the Various Forms of Autobiography," chap. 6 in *Edith Wharton:*

Traveller in the Land of Letters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 103-130. "Life and I," a 50-page manuscript, was probably written in 1920 or 1922 (Wolff, 417). *A Backward Glance* appeared in 1934, and "A Little Girl's New York" was published in *Harper's Magazine* in March 1938. "Life and I" is more revealing than the published works, apparently too revealing in Wharton's view, because she presented a much expurgated version of her childhood in *A Backward Glance*. The extent to which she censored herself, even in "Life and I," is shown by an interesting revision in the manuscript. She begins a sentence, "I am often inclined — like most people — to blame my parents for" and then crosses out "blame" and "for," substituting "think," so that the final sentence reads, "I am often inclined — like most people — to think my parents might have brought me up in a manner more suited to my tastes and disposition" ("Life and I," 18).

31. Blume, 128. Blume also notes that survivors are "likely to be afraid of sleeping alone in the dark" (124).

32. Thus the most memorable images of Lucretia are her acid sayings — her criticisms of novelists, like the "common" Mrs. Beecher Stowe (BG, 68); her dry "Where did you pick *that* up?" in response to her daughter's newly acquired slang, and her famous "icy comment" on Edith's first novel attempt, which included a reference to tidying up the drawing room: "Drawing-rooms are always tidy" (BG, 73).

33. See Goodman, 13-28. One explanation is offered in Janet Liebman Jacobs, "Reassessing Mother Blame in Incest," *Signs* 15 (Spring 1990): 500-514. A reality that should be noted is that, in spite of the drawing-room comment, it was the prosaic Lucretia who encouraged Wharton's writing, not the poetic George. Lucretia was the parent who actually promoted the "buds of fancy," listening to the child's stories, trying to write down the narratives she voiced, and eventually having her poems privately printed as *Verses* (1878) ("Life and I," 11, 37; Lewis, 31).

34. Wendy Gimbel in *Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984) deals with this aspect of Wharton's work.

35. Herman, 71. Russell notes that her "most startling finding" was that "girls reared in high-income families were more frequently victimized by incest than girls in lower-income families" (102, italics deleted). In her notes for a story to be entitled "The Family," Wharton describes an upper-class family that seems perfect on the surface. The reflector, who has just returned from a lonely life abroad, envies his sister's domestic happiness until her daughter commits suicide. It then comes out that his sister has had a series of affairs, her husband drinks, and both children's marriages are unhappy. Wharton ends her summary as follows: "Such is 'The Family.' The above is absolutely true, but if I were to use it as a subject all the critics would say it is not like real life, that such 'unpleasant' things may exist singly, but don't occur in one household, whereas that is just where and how they do occur, one source of corruption/Mrs. Catherwood in this case/infecting everything." "Subjects and Notes" (1918-23), Wharton Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

36. Herman, 71 and 110-11. In "A Little Girl's New York" Wharton describes herself as "a much governessed and guarded little girl" (361).

37. Herman, 82; Miller, 63; Blume, 137.

38. Herman, 44. See also Bass and Davis, 125; Russell, 360-68; and Blume, 138.

39. Candace Waid, Introduction to *The Muse's Tragedy and Other Stories* (New York: New American Library, 1990), 9.

40. Marius Bewley, *Mask and Mirrors* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 146-47.

41. The Raphael essays are "Kate Orme's Struggles with Shame in Edith Wharton's *Sanctuary*," *Massachusetts Studies in English* 10 (Fall 1986): 229-30; "Shame in Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*," *American Imago* 45 (Summer 1988): 187-203; and "Haunted by Shame: Edith Wharton's *The Touchstone*," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 9 (August 1988): 287-96.

See Alfred Bendixen, "The World of Wharton Criticism: A

The Businesswoman in Edith Wharton

by Wendy M. DuBow

The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange.

Ralph Marvell, *The Custom of the Country*

It is curious that Edith Wharton, herself a shrewd businesswoman, managing her own estate as well as her publishing affairs, creates female characters in *The House of Mirth* and in *The Custom of the Country* with no understanding of conventional business. Men's business — their money-producing jobs — takes place far away from the primary setting, either "down town" in the earlier novel or on "Wall Street" in the latter. Because financial profit lies in the men's domain, the women remain commercially ignorant. Oddly enough, the men of business devote little energy to what they do. In direct contrast, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* invest all their natural and acquired shrewdness into securing appropriate husbands, and thus rising in the hierarchy of social power.

In these two women characters, Wharton has created undeniably attractive, socially masterful, intellectually adept professional husband-seekers. As they have no other way to rise in society and no alternative outlet for their ambitions, the right husbands will assure both Lily and Undine satisfying places in society. Wharton exploits the custom in high society of referring to a single women's marriage quest as her "career" by employing business terminology to describe both protagonists. This terminology helps to call the reader's attention to the difference between the women's career options and the men's.¹

In both these novels, the narrators and the characters themselves pay more attention to the women's social careers than they do to the men's business pursuits. The men, though present on as many cruises and at as many parties as the women, attend primarily for amusement. Generally, their livelihoods and reputations do not depend on these social gatherings. The upper class women, on the other hand, although not allowed to work, are expected to have far-reaching financial means. Thus, they are faced with a conflict between being decorative objects, their "recognized function in 'man's world'" (*Images of Women*, 59), and controlling their destinies. These women do not simply use social business to amuse themselves, but rather to survive in their restricting society. Augmenting the importance of every social step she takes is each pro-

tagonist's driving ambition and refusal to settle for second best. The fatal difference between the two is that Undine considers her social enterprising a viable career — well worth all her attention — while Lily partly disdains hers.

Because of the lack of narrative attention and the character's own negligent attitudes, money-getting in *The House of Mirth* remains mysterious. As we know from her letters and from R.W.B. Lewis' biography, Wharton did in fact possess the knowledge to write about financial transactions, but keeping them vague in her fiction furthers her point. With two exceptions, the men in *The House of Mirth* and in *The Custom of the Country* have little drive, but all the power; while the women, Lily and Undine in particular, have all the drive and very little sustainable power. As single women, these two must use strict marketing and negotiating techniques and exert all their charms to remain afloat socially; for to sink socially is to drown out of existence, as Lily's death sadly proves. Mary Ann Ferguson corroborates this evidence of female characters' constrictions in her discussion of the female novel of development: "Most women authors . . . have represented female characters either as finding satisfaction within their limited development in the domestic sphere or as expressing their dissatisfaction through various self-destructive means" (59). Lily, of course, falls into the latter category.

Our first view of Lily is Selden's. He sees her as completely affected: ". . . her discretions . . . and imprudences . . . both were part of the same carefully elaborated plan" (5). Selden, as representative of the male restrictive point of view, reveals his notion of the woman's role: "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't that what you're all brought up for?" (9) Selden's questions establish the limited scope Lily has for her skills.

Characteristic of her gender in Wharton's fiction, Lily Bart knows little about what financial success involves, aside from the necessity of acquiring a rich husband. But to survive as a single woman, she must use a great amount of business sense, perhaps more than any of the men around her. Through most of the novel, we rest comfortably with Lily as our heroine. She controls every situation; she can rescue herself from even the most opprobrious conditions. In fact, until Lily descends from her comfortable social strata, her every action reinforces our confidence in her resourcefulness. And yet she never succeeds in getting the rich husband she seeks — not

because she blunders unconsciously, but because she gives up just short of success.

Carry Fisher, another single woman in Lily's social sphere, presumes that Lily stops short "because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (189). It is significant that Carry Fisher and Judy Trenor do guess Lily's hesitations. The single tie common to all these women seems to be their vocation. In fact, the only instance of a helpful, sincere bonding between women occurs while Lily pursues Percy Gryce.² The other women try to make Lily's pursuit as easy as possible for her. At this point, Lily works within the "feminine solicitude that envelopes a young woman in the mating season . . . and her friends could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance" (46). These women all experienced similar tenuousness before they were married. Lily's position is somewhat more precarious, however, because as she so often laments, she has neither family fortune nor a mother to guide her in her strategies. Lily must "manage her affairs without extraneous aid" (46).

Up to a point, Lily's background has trained her for this job. Mrs. Bart has counted on Lily's beauty to sustain them after Mr. Bart dies, and to take care of her daughter once she herself passes away. Thus, Lily has come to think of her beauty as her survival mechanism. Because she must keep herself intact to get what she wants, "[i]t seemed an added injustice that petty cares should leave a trace on the beauty which was her only defense against them" (28). Her sense of her worth has been oddly diassociated from her sense of herself and has evolved into an anxiety over her market value. Despite her obvious power, she cannot relax in confidence because her existence depends on constant and careful calculations. Like any stockholder on Wall Street whose success depends upon the fluctuations of the Stock Exchange, Lily's rests upon the undulations of New York social trends.

Reflecting on Lily's life, the reader sees that she is a self-made woman: her father died before she came of age, and apparently was unassertive while he was alive. She has no clear sense of his personal or business character: "the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (29). Lily did benefit from her father's financial support, but she had no idea how he made his money. Mr. Bart never discussed his work with his daughter, nor did he every deny her any material goods or attempt to explain when it may have been more prudent not to appease her. Instead he always mysteriously came up with whatever funds the

women deemed necessary. Lily had little chance to learn anything practical from her father.

Mrs. Bart, on the other hand, seems to have been even more pragmatic than her "intensely practical" (38) daughter: "Mrs. Bart who was spoken of by her friends as a 'wonderful manager' . . . was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means" (30). It is from this perspective that Mrs. Bart dubs Lily "the last asset in their fortunes" (34). Thus, Lily learns at an early age to think of herself as a commodity.

Mrs. Bart also teaches Lily the reason and method behind the necessity of manipulating men. Unfortunately for Lily, her "feelings were softer" (33) than her mother's, as we see when Mr. Bart dies: "To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose" (33). Although Lily and her father did not share a special and intimate relationship, his death pains her: "There was in Lily a vein of sentiment" (35). Throughout her career, she struggles between her sentimental and her more rational sides.

For instance, Lily lets personal feelings intervene in her dealings with Gus Trenor. She begins her business of procuring money through him quite innocently. But when she realizes that he has been speculating for her with his own money, she becomes morally indignant. She decides that as soon as she receives the money from her aunt's estate, she will settle her debt with Trenor. The reader cannot help but recall at this point that he had encouraged her to believe that she was profiting from the investment of her own money. This sort of misunderstanding seems inexcusable in someone so astute as Lily Bart, but she has had no opportunity to learn about the business of Wall Street.

Because, as a woman, Lily has no direct control over money, chance plays a large part in her career. When Lily proposes to Trenor that she herself ask Simon Rosedale for financial "tips," Trenor is appalled and denies her access. Money handling is supposed to be men's work. And as we see with both Lily and Undine, the men's control of money restricts even the most naturally powerful women.

Simon Rosedale, sensing a partner in Lily because of their shared ambition and business instincts, proposes marriage to her, knowing that she was "not dead in love with" him. He offers her a "plain business statement of the consequences" (177). He describes all the ease he can give her if she will simply marry him. Lily refuses to merge with Rosedale, however, because she loathes him. He can offer her the social power she craves, and the admiration she is accustomed to; above all, the marriage could be on her terms. But Lily lets personal antipathy

obstruct a union she could view as an advantageous professional move. Lily's moral principles frustrate her natural potential. Her opinion of Rosedale improves, however, as her comfort disintegrates, and "[m]uch as she disliked Rosedale, she no longer absolutely despised him. For he was gradually attaining his object in life, and that, to Lily, was always less despicable than to miss it" (240).

When she tries to accept Rosedale a year later without his reproposing, he will not be swayed by sentiment, and so refuses her. But aware that she has the married Bertha Dorset's compromising love letters to Selden, he suggests that she use them as blackmail. When she balks at his inside knowledge, he explains, "Getting onto things is a mighty useful accomplishment in business, and I've simply extended it to my private affairs" (258). Lily feels the deal's "subtle affinity to her own inmost cravings" (259). Rosedale's informed perspective tempts her:

Put by Rosedale in terms of business-like give-and-take, this understanding took on the harmless air of a mutual accommodation, like a transfer of property or a revision of boundary lines . . . Lily's tired mind was fascinated by this escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures. (259)

Here she gains momentary insight into Undine's more straightforward mode of appraisal. Though Rosedale is willing to do his "share in the business" (259), Lily refuses to participate.

It is Lily's moral ideals which undermine her, not her lack of confidence or ability. When Lily is thinking clearly, she understands that her sentimental ideals cannot be realized for practical reasons. For instance, she knows that she cannot marry Selden — even when she considers him emotionally and spiritually intriguing. He too realizes that he could never be "part of her scheme of life" (69). Lily knows she has been trained to have rich tastes; she knows she will not be satisfied without her material wants gratified and her sense of social superiority appeased. (She realizes this anew each time she goes to Gerty Farish's flat.) Still, she refuses to see her character through to its logical success.³

Lily backs off from all practical moves in deference to an abstract set of morals, which, finally, does her no good.⁴ Ostracized from her society, she is, thus, shut out from her career because people have chosen to believe she has corrupted herself. Lily perceives her status too late: "She saw with the clearness of vision which came to her in moments of despondency" (241). By refusing Rosedale and signing over her last funds to Trenor, she relin-

quishes her only options. Wharton reinforces the futility of Lily's final gestures by focusing in the closing chapter on Selden and his selfish grief, rather than on any other consequences Lily's death may have precipitated.

Social proprieties which dictate that a woman can provide for herself only indirectly, deprive Lily of an independent life.⁵ Lily cannot, then, appease her moral ideals and still survive as a single woman in the cut-throat milieu that she insists upon. As Judy Trenor tells Lily, "Everyone knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman" (44).

Once Wharton comes to create Undine Spragg eight years later, she has refined her female hero to such an extent that some readers view Undine as just that, "a nasty woman."⁶ This "nasty woman" has all of Lily's means of survival with none of Lily's means of self-destruction. Undine is also beautiful, ambitious, shrewd, and pragmatic, exceeding Lily, and the other characters in *The Custom of the Country*, by her enormous zest for life, and by her complete commitment to fulfilling her potential. She maintains her self-confidence through her mistakes because she always uses them to improve. Despite her greater strength, some readers consider Undine less appealing than Lily because in her characterization of the former, Wharton defies most traditional expectations of a sympathetic female character. Ferguson points out that in the traditional novel, "women who rebel against the feminine role are perceived as unnatural and pay the price of unhappiness" (59). From her research, she concludes that "the view of women as passive has been integral to the male novel of development" (59). So when Undine is neither satisfied in the domestic sphere nor self-destructive when she ventures out, traditional critics have conceived of her as "a monstrosity" (Nevius x). As Margaret McDowell points out, "The most commonly held critical objections to the book have always been the extreme nature of Undine's selfishness and pugnacity, her unlimited destructiveness" (45). Perhaps, if Undine were a man directing her same qualities toward a more accepted business, readers would not find her so distasteful.

Blake Nevius expressed his disgust with Undine because she is "vulgar, irreverent and dishonest" (xviii-xix). In an early critical work, Nevius describes Undine as "the most egocentric and dehumanized female in American fiction . . . Rootless, vain, and crudely opportunistic" (148). To Nevius, Undine's inhumanity is magnified by the fact that "she lacks the instinct of motherhood and rebels at her con-

finement during pregnancy, complaining that it spoils her freedom" — which, of course, it does. Alongside his denunciation of Undine, Nevius must concede that "[w]ith society constituted as it is, she holds all the cards" (149). But obviously he does not think that this power makes her a positive character. In fact, Nevius asserts that in these "new woman" novels, "the heroines . . . frequently devote themselves to pushing their husband's careers [yet] Undine is incapable of even this degree of altruism." Surely, Undine's devoting herself to her own advancement rather than her husband's need not be considered a character flaw.

Geoffrey Walton more recently says of Undine, "while always seeking to dominate, she picks up the manners of whatever group she is placed in" (119). If we drop the gender pronoun, most readers probably would agree that this statement describes an admirable hero — the sort that adapts himself to any new situation, and then conquers it. However, Walton construes these characteristics as only negative: "Her most terrifying and far-reaching quality is her coldness" (119)⁷ Does he, then, consider her abilities to cope and to dominate "terrifying" as well — simply less so? Walton has the same problems with Undine that many readers have had: he dislikes the fact that Undine Spragg is the sort of woman that "no one would ever try to sentimentalize" (119). Although Walton acknowledges "that the values of old New York . . . [are] incapable of survival in any struggle for existence" (122), he refuses the idea that Undine's survival as a self-driven female constitutes success.

In *The Custom of the Country*, the business terminology runs rampant, even more so than in *The House of Mirth* because Undine is the consummate business woman; she succeeds where Lily falls short. Undine is the next evolutionary stage of this species of woman perfectly adapted to the restrictions imposed upon by her male-dominated society.⁸ Charles Bowden, the novel's own social critic, labels Undine "a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph" (207). It is true that Undine is not able to rise above her social system, but within its bounds, it is she who triumphs, not society.

To some, Undine appears reprehensible because she has had four different bed partners, and one of those in an adulterous affair.⁹ Others have difficulty accepting Undine because she seems to have no lasting concern for anyone else — not even for the weak, and therefore sympathetic, males to whom she is related. Undine's father, husband and son are the three males who should be paramount in her consideration. All three are sweet, but in a practical sense, ineffectual. Mr. Spragg lets Undine control

him and his wife. Undine looks out for herself but he, instead of protecting himself, also looks out for her. Mr. Spragg could stand to apply some of his own business advice to his dealings with his daughter: "it's up to both parties to take care of their own skins" (261). Mr. Spragg does not "take care of his own skin"; rather he endangers his own livelihood in order to furnish Undine with whatever she wants. Mr. Spragg's most significant fault lies in his failure to aid her in the single way he really could: he does not confide any of his acquired practical knowledge to her, his only child. Instead, he shrouds money-getting in mystery.

As was the case with Lily, Undine has no reason to believe there is any logic behind men's work on "Wall Street" because every time she needs something, first her father replies that he can't help her out, and then, "I'll see what I can do" (127). In the end, he always fulfills her desires. Wharton implicitly condemns men for not including women in their day-to-day affairs. Neither her father nor any of the other men teaches Undine business strategies. As Wharton insists, Undine's social abilities are inherited from her father, not learned.

Wharton uses the connections between Undine's social career and her father's conventional career to highlight the former's superior skills. Significantly, Wharton leads us to believe that Mr. Spragg shows surprising strength in his business dealings: "From the moment he set foot in Wall Street, Mr. Spragg became another man" (119). Undine inherits her "overflowing activity" and her "patient skill" (201) from her father's business personality, but her unrelenting ambition is her own. In fact, Undine proves more successful than he ultimately because she has but one unalterable standard. At the beginning of her New York career, Undine states explicitly her sole guiding principle: "I want the best" (24). This principle persists: "As she had often told her parents, all she sought for was improvement: she honestly wanted the best" (52). Rather than adhering to "blind ambition," as Nevius terms her incentive, Undine perseveres, working within the social system she is confined to, and struggles always to be at the top. Where Nevius deprecates Undine by calling "her career . . . an uninterrupted pursuit of material awards," a feminist critic might applaud her for the fact that her career is "an uninterrupted pursuit" at all. As Ferguson explains, "A woman who lives happily and submissively with her husband is the ideal; one who rebels — especially if she does so successfully — is both feared and abhorred" (*Images of Women* 21). Undine has clearly been "feared and abhorred" by readers resentful of her aggressiveness.

In order to advance himself, Mr. Spragg would

need more flexible standards of morality — like those of his daughter. Time and again, “Undine felt the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory. Her scruples, indeed, were not serious” (201). We do, however, see Undine, in a unique bout with her conscience, consider submission. Her father commands her to return the pearls Peter Van Degen has given her:

as far as Undine could remember, it was the first time in her life her father had ordered her to do anything; and when the door closed on him she had the distinct sense that the question had closed with it, and that she would have to obey . . . and she had never before hated her life as she hated it then. (376)

Undine rallies with her father temporarily and shares his “righteous ardor” (376), but she cannot long abide by this sort of defensive posture. As soon as she perceives an alternative course, “Undine began to be vaguely astonished at her immediate submission to her father’s will” (378). She changes her mind, decides her father is over-reacting, and sends Mrs. Heeny to sell the pearls for her: “A few days later there appeared a bundle of banknotes considerable enough to quiet Undine’s last scruples. She no longer understood why she had hesitated” (379). Pragmatism carries her over the obstacles in her life.

This practical resourcefulness gains her successes, but loses her admiration among some readers. In particular, Undine’s popularity wanes when she abandons Ralph, her husband, and reclaims Paul, her son. Walton refers to this as Undine’s “most immoral action, deliberately and wantonly cruel and doubly deceitful” (129). Indeed, Wharton goes to great lengths to make Ralph seem sympathetic by emphasizing his suicide and his devotion to Paul. Yet when the reader scrutinizes Ralph closely, he appears weak rather than sympathetic. While courting Undine, Ralph admires her person blindly; during their marriage, he ignores her character’s progressive revelation. His initial desire to play Pygmalion with her, and his final breaking down because she was not a virgin upon his marrying her, suffice to make *him* distasteful. Ralph thinks to himself on their honeymoon, “The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience” (147-148). Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains his desire to protect Undine: “Eager to play his ‘manly’ part, Ralph seeks only ‘to guard her from this as from all other cares’ (149). And thus the perversity of her education continues” (246). The condescension evident in Ralph’s attitude toward Undine coupled with his general lack of control over his life serve to counter his admirable traits. Bowing to determinism, Ralph himself acknowledges that

“weakness was innate in him” (437).

During their honeymoon, when Ralph and Undine need money, Ralph cannot figure out what to do. When Undine offers a solution to their difficulties, he responds by feeling hurt: “What hurt him most was the curious fact that, for all her light irresponsibility, it was always she who made the practical suggestion, hit the nail of expediency on the head. No sentimental scruple made the blow waver or deflected her resolute aim” (165). Ralph’s emotional response reveals Wharton’s frustration with this sort of male who cannot deal with harsh practicalities, but still cannot relinquish his socially approved role as controller. Ralph’s most important and lucrative business deal is precipitated by Undine, and Ralph feels lost when Elmer Moffatt explains the particulars to him: “Ralph had never seen his way clearly in that dim underworld of affairs where men of the Moffatt and Driscoll type moved” (258). In Undine and Ralph’s discussion after this meeting, their dissimilar natures surface: Ralph muses, “I wish I could put him in a book! . . . But what she wanted to know was the practical result of their meeting” (254). Undine penetrates to the center of business concerns while “Marvell was too little versed in affairs to read between the lines” (81).

Undine’s enthusiasm for her “career” shines in comparison with Ralph’s apathy towards his work For Ralph,

his profession was the least real thing in his life . . . he could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them! . . . Nothing in the Dagonet or Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life . . . The only essential was that he should live ‘like a gentleman’ — that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting. (75)

When Ralph must provide his own living, he still cannot conceive of his career as important because his romantic notions interfere. Neither can Ralph’s less practical ambition, writing, withstand the test of hard work and perseverance. When his heart is broken by Undine, he does not seek reinstatement of self either in his writing or in his work; instead he sees the long stretch of days ahead wherein he will continue to work simply as a fulfillment of duty, a way to support his family. Ralph concludes that he cannot stand the strain of dealing with practical living; “his business life had certainly deteriorated him” (283). Wolff points to Ralph’s unrealized ambitions to demonstrate his “fundamental passivity” (238) and concludes that he “has spent all his emotion in passive fantasy” (240).

Ralph’s paternal devotion to Paul is undermined the afternoon he kills himself. Elmer’s declaration

to Undine of what he would do if Paul were his son echoes in the novel: "Fight you to a finish! If it cost me down to my last dollar I would" (417) With all the wealthy people Ralph knows, it seems likely he could have found some source for the necessary money — at least until the deal with Moffatt paid off. Ralph has claimed, "His two objects in life were his boy and his book . . . Paul's existence was the all-sufficient reason for his own" (423-24). Yet his last thoughts are not about Paul. He does not stop to consider that his suicide will leave Paul essentially an orphan. Even in his final act, Ralph does not respond to the important requirements of life.

Undine's third male relation, her son Paul, does not, of course, fall into the category of culpable male victim — Paul, a helpless little boy, is a purely sympathetic character. It is not his fault that he was born to a mother who simply didn't want children. But neither is it Undine's fault that she was born as a woman powerless to choose not to have children. Thus, though her initial response to her pregnancy may seem heartlessly unmaternal, the reader must concede that pregnancy will, in fact, distort her figure.¹⁰ And Undine's figure, through the conscious use of her beauty, represents her only form of power. She is forbidden control over the fate of her primary survival tool because society does not allow her any options but marriage and motherhood; though she would rather not have either, and is not fitted to either. Undine does not let either her pregnancy or Ralph's suicide debilitate her. Managing to use the fact of Paul's existence to her advantage, she acquires him and the money connected with him.

Regarding custody and parental treatment of Paul, readers often overlook the fact that Ralph "had assisted at the perpetration of this abominable wrong, had passively forfeited his right to the flesh of his body, the blood of his being!" (436) When readers disparage Undine for her actions concerning Paul, their responses seem to be manipulated by implicit expectations of how a mother should act — stemming, perhaps, from the assumption that a mother should feel more responsible for her child than a father. Why is it worse for Undine to ignore her child than for Ralph to do so? In relation to these gender-based expectations, Wolff argues that "because society has offered them [men] humanizing options and a greater degree of control over their own destiny, it adds a moral dimension to their natures that cannot reasonably be brought to bear upon their consorts [i.e. women]" (250). Like wifehood, motherhood proves to be an inadequate placement for the female character. As in true in many of Wharton's novels, the mother/child configuration raises necessary questions about the nature

of parenting.

There are only two men who match Undine's pragmatism, and she is attracted to both of them: Peter Van Degen and Elmer Moffatt. In the elite New York society, Van Degen is the first man Undine can speak to on her own terms. In a predicament reminiscent of Lily's with Trenor, Undine exacts money from Van Degen to assuage her creditors. Like Lily, Undine must deal with Van Degen's increased expectations of her "payment." Unlike Lily, Undine accepts money from this married man, perfectly aware of the possible ramifications. "She saw the mistake she had made in taking money from him, and understood that if she drifted into repeating that mistake her future would be irretrievably compromised" (234). Undine is neither abashed nor digusted.

She continues to see Van Degen and just before he leaves for Europe, he confronts Undine with her coyness: ". . . the installment plan's all right; but ain't you a bit behind even on that? . . . Anyway, I think I'd rather let the interest accumulate for a while" (231). Undine does not resolve to pay back Van Degen and extricate herself as Lily did, but instead to plunge in "and lay solid foundations" (235). Immediately, she begins scheming to secure Van Degen as her husband. Wharton describes Undine at this point as "too resolutely bent on a definite object, too sternly animated by her father's business instinct, to turn aside in quest of casual distractions" (236). Undine does not seek "passing amusement," but rather a more permanent goal which requires the "patience" and "skill" that she inherited from her father (231). In their first confrontation, she calculates and finds, [i]t was time to play her last card (234). But when Van Degen realizes that she is maneuvering him with her most acute business sense, his attitude changes, and he meets "her look with an odd clearing of his heated gaze, as if a shrewd businessman had suddenly replaced the pining gentleman at the window" (234). Unfortunately for Undine, Van Degen has had more experience in this business than she, "and Undine saw that in the last issue he was still the stronger of the two" (234).

In Europe, Undine comes closest to success with Van Degen. At this crucial juncture, Wharton compares Undine's discipline with her father's: "So Mr. Spragg might have felt at the tensest hour of the Pure Water move" (294).¹¹ In the conclusion to this confrontation, Van Degen cries out, "I'll do anything you say, Undine; I'll do anything in God's world to keep you!" (301) Contrasting his earlier victorious pose, Van Degen's face now "looked as small and withered as an old man's" (301).

Finally, however, Van Degen wins. After several

months of living with Undine, he returns to his wife. Disappointed, Undine pauses to evaluate the soundness of her venture:

She had done this incredible thing, and she had done it from a motive that seemed, at the time, as clear, as logical, as free from the distorting mists of sentimentality, as any of her father's financial enterprises. It had been a bold move, but it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street 'stroke' . . . she now saw that it had left certain risks out of account. (364-65)

In an instance of female communion, Undine's friend Mrs. Rolliver admonishes her for her conduct in the Van Degen affair: "If you'd only had the sense to come straight to me, Undine Spragg! There isn't a tip I couldn't have given you — not one!" (344) Mrs. Rolliver continues, "You never *never* would have given way to your feeling before you'd got your divorce" (348). It is significant that Mrs. Rolliver regrets Undine's lack of savvy, not lack of moral discretion. They exchange "tips" as two businessmen might on Wall Street. Undine played as strategically as she knew how, and lost.

Undine's next conquest proves unsatisfactory as well. Her life with Raymond de Chelles quickly became unbearable.

She was beginning to see that he felt her constitutional inability to understand anything about money as the deepest difference between them. It was a proficiency no one had ever expected her to acquire, and the lack of which she had even been encouraged to regard as a grace and to use as a pretext. (495)

Undine and Raymond lack common ground: Raymond does not seem to understand that he restricts her from pursuing her own career by keeping her confined to the chateau. And "[s]he did not understand how a man so romantically in love could be so unpersuadable on certain points" (495). She feels exceedingly stifled by his inattention, and this "intensified the sense of her helplessness" (505). Rather than acquiesce to her lack of control, she seeks escape. Her only venue, of course, is with another man, for she is not willing to lose any of the social prestige she has gained.

Undine's next partner, Elmer Moffatt is the only one who truly understands her; she sees Moffatt as "someone who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms" (536). Undine, though restricted to the discourse of women which has "no terms" to name her instincts and motivations, asks for Elmer's story:

Absorbed in his theme, and forgetting her in-

ability to follow him, Moffatt launched out on an epic recital of plot and counterplot . . . It was of no consequence that the details and the technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant to her was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them. (537)

Once again, Undine penetrates his explanation and basks in her sense of their mutual aims. Undine is not ashamed by her reflection, but rather encouraged. Moffatt's tenacity is like hers, and she confirms to herself, "He used life exactly as she would have used it in his place" (563). Undine does not feel at all disgusted by her male counterpart, as Lily did by Sim Rosedale. Undine is confident enough with all parts of herself not to be repulsed by someone so like her in mind and spirit. Unlike her characterization of Rosedale, Wharton portrays Moffatt as shrewd, calculating and attractive to Undine while not reprehensible to the reader. Elmer, like Undine, has little disinterested compassion for anyone. Even his affection for Undine has now become part of his plan.

Though Lily Bart may be the more moral of the two, Undine Spragg fulfills our notions of an admirable protagonist: she achieves her goals. Undine simultaneously uses and defies societal constrictions, stopping at nothing to attain her ambitions.¹² Lily, though possessing more natural acumen and sophisticated finesse than Undine, fails: Lily fails to obtain a husband; she fails to secure a place in high society; most important of all, she fails to survive. In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, a critique of narrative strategies among twentieth-century women writers, Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts, "Death occurs as the price for the character's sometimes bemused destabilizing of the limited equilibrium of respectable female behavior" (16). In specific reference to Lily Bart, DuPlessis concludes,

she lacks an unquestionable complicity with the economic and social circumstances of the speculative marriage and divorce market, which she plays like a gambler. She is too daring for stolidness, yet too scrupulous for some of the more sordid exchanges of money and love of which she is, nonetheless, implicated. (16)

Undine, on the other hand, is not "too scrupulous"; she deliberately assumes the implications of the "sordid exchanges of money and love" which her society offers her.

In 1905, Edith Wharton's heroine, Lily Bart, falls

into the patriarchal abyss and dies. Lily cannot escape judging herself from Selden's perspective. In 1913, however, Wharton's heroine becomes a female hero.¹³ When the novel ends, we know that Undine's career will not. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that, despite all odds, Undine Spragg could eventually become "an Ambassador's wife" (594).

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NOTES

¹ Wayne Westbrook confirms the parallels between men's business and women's: "Fifth Avenue and Wall Street are one in Edith Wharton's fiction, because she clearly perceives they are governed by the same principles, operated by the same codes, and subject to the same fluctuations" (145). In *Wall Street in the American Novel*, he captures the prevalence of commercial language through ample textual evidence and, cleverly, through his own prose as well. From a different angle, Amy Kaplan describes the New York upper class's general disdain for productive work in the nineteenth century — whether men or women engaged in it. In chapter 3 and 4 of *The Social Construction of American Realism*, she addresses Wharton's particular struggles with the social expectations of her class and the literary expectations of her readers.

² For a different and thoroughly argued opinion of women's relationships in Wharton, see Goodman.

³ Westbrook interprets characters like Lily Bart as "innocents contaminated merely through a business or money relationship with the arrivistes" (142). If Lily is indeed contaminated, it seems to me that the burden of impossible moral standards, as advocated by Selden, is one key corrupting factor.

⁴ This issue of Lily's morality has received much critical attention; traditionally, readers emphasized her moral victory over society or else empathized with Selden's sentimental view of her death. More recently, however, feminist critics such as Restuccia have interpreted the advent of her death as outweighing any victory of integrity. See Dimock for a convincing argument of how her "heroism" in this world of exchange is inevitably suicidal. See Kaplan (71-74), Wagner-Martin (31), and Wolff (118) for a discussion of how Wharton's ending comments upon sentimental novel traditions.

⁵ In her account of Lily's destruction, Kaplan points to Lily's refusal to use "intimacy as a medium for exchange" (83) or "or to accept her society's dictum to expose or be exposed" (84).

⁶ McDowell (46-49) and Wolff (253-258) both describe the differences in Wharton's own life between the writing of *House of Mirth* and that of *Custom of the Country*. In addition, they outline the similarities and differences between Undine's personality and Wharton's own, as does Goodman (61).

⁷ By the time Wharton finished *Custom of the Country*, she had lived through marrying and trying to divorce Teddy, and loving and breaking off with Morton Fullerton. (See n.6 for more information regarding Wharton's intervening life). It may have been a relief for her at this stage to imagine a woman who could not be hurt either by society's opinion when she withdrew from an ill-suited marriage, or by the men she was involved with: "it was admiration not love that [Undine] wanted" (223).

⁸ Along with other critics, Goodman links the two protagonists, Lily and Undine, in the demonstration "of what results when women adopt their society's values and play by its rules" (8). Although I too pair these protagonists, I would not say that Undine adheres to her "society's values" and "play[s] by its rules"; rather she *overplays* the rules, turning them upside down through her extreme dedication.

⁹ Wolff sees this layering of marriages as evidence for the fact that the usual categories of heroine don't fit Undine: Wharton "gives the reader an ironic insight into the inadequacy of this device [marriage] as a way of 'placing' her heroine" (256).

¹⁰ Ralph also considers Undine's pregnancy an inconvenience — although he criticizes Undine for this same reaction: ". . . there gradually stole to him the benumbing influence of the thoughts she was thinking: the sense of the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives. 'That's all you feel, then?' he asked at length a little bitterly, as if to disguise from himself the hateful fact that he felt it too" (185).

¹¹ This is the business transaction which enabled Mr. Spragg and his family to move from Apex to New York.

¹² Much like the woman writer Mary Jacobs describes in her article "The Difference of View," Undine must at once "challenge the terms [of her society] and work within them" (19-20).

¹³ I am using DuPlessis' term distinctions here. The "female hero is a central character whose activities, growth and insight are given much narrative attention and authorial interest . . . the heroine [is] the object of male attention" (Notes 200). The traditional heroine tends to give up her quest and settle for romance whereas the female hero does not; clearly, Undine cannot be considered a typical heroine.

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Protagonism in *The Reef*: Wharton's Novelistic Discourse

by Scott DeShong

In the title of *The Reef*, Edith Wharton sets up a guiding metaphor for the novel, one that guides from beneath the surface of the text, so to speak. The word "reef" (while hovering in the Scribner's edition in the title at the top of each page) never occurs in the text of the narrative. The novel begins with the words "unexpected obstacle" as a reference to some unnamed and nebulous difficulty, thus introducing a theme of unreliability that permeates the novel, a theme that is developed through a gradual movement into the fully-restricted third person point of view of the protagonist Anna Leath. This limited point of view is primarily what establishes Anna as protagonist; although the novel also uses a point of view that is restricted to George Darrow, the title's theme of unreliability is developed in such a way that its full significance is achieved only in and through Anna's character. It is for Anna that the complex and puzzling nature of the reef comes to bear in Wharton's novel.

The narrative's playing out of irresolution, through Anna's consciousness, establishes her as the particular character for whom the narrative fails to resolve, and a character whose own makeup becomes unstable. By paying attention to Anna, a reader of *The Reef* becomes aware of Wharton's subversion of conventional resolution in the novel. It is in terms of Anna's consciousness that Wharton's handling of her material is most clearly visible as exemplary of novelistic discourse — discourse whose nature it is to evade conventions. I refer to novelistic discourse as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel." The novel achieves not closure, but rather an opening in the narrative; ambiguity is a primary characteristic of the most fully novelistic discourse.

The perceptions and thoughts of Anna — her "reading" of the world of the novel — comprise the field in which Wharton develops the theme of unreliability and hence achieves the novel's openness. In parallel with Anna's reading, the novel works to its lack of closure by building a discussion, or argument, on the inefficacy of language. Indeed, if there is anything like closure in the text, it occurs in an arrival at polyvalence or chaos: it is in Anna's arrival at a position wherein she is left without any clearly-delineated options, where she is to forge her life anew or to return in some sense — though indeed never the same — to some position she has rejected. And the cacophony of the finale — the dog's barking, the odd resonance of "Jimmy Brance" amid Anna's descent into Sophy Viner's past — represents

the novel's arrival at linguistic indeterminacy. Anna's readings of the world around her, of other characters, even of herself, are by the end of the novel entirely disrupted, as the novel's argument for the unreliability of language arrives at its full expression.

This novelistic irresolution is a species of what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls "writing beyond the ending," an example of an ending written in such a way that conventions, both literary and social, are disturbed in the outcome of the narrative (3). Of course, a reader of such an unconventional ending could find fault with it as such (this was the case with most contemporary reviewers of *The Reef*) or impose interpretation on it by construing some resolution from the prior details of the narrative. The latter case represents an impulse to "write" an ending, an impulse to destroy the effect of the ending's being unwritten. In any case, a clear delineation of Anna, or an attribution of a clear direction to her, would pinch the end of the novel and damage the precarious effect achieved by the irresolution of narrative and character development. It would excise what is most novelistic in the work.

Wharton did at one point complete the book with a substantially different and ostensibly more conventional closing than the one it took to press. Her first complete manuscript plays upon a "fairy tale" ideal of marriage and romance (Ammons); the end of this version presents Darrow and Anna spending a quiet afternoon at Givré as husband and wife. Other than the ending, the manuscript is generally in line with the published novel. So en route to a solution which seems typical of romance-plot conventions, the manuscript plays against those conventions via the development of the theme of uncertainty. Again, the theme receives support from the development of the ambiguity of the protagonist's character — the multivalence of Anna's thoughts and actions — as it also entails the argument for the unreliability of language. So when the manuscript ending ostensibly ties up this argument by a conventional resolution, the effect is one of irony, whose resonance entails the kind of "writing beyond the ending" that is subtle enough to ostensibly fulfill conventional structure — such as Wharton accomplishes in *The House of Mirth*, for example (DuPlessis 16-17). In the published ending of *The Reef*, however, Wharton takes the step of bringing irony and irresolution into the open, leaving Anna in obvious and active ambiguity.

Classic, tragic five-act structure may serve as a better paradigm than the romance-plot for the published version of *The Reef* (Gargano). Still, Wharton manipulates conventions, in order to achieve something other than the effect of the traditional form. In the role of tragic protagonist, Anna diligently pursues truth, and that diligence helps provide for the destruction of the realm over which she has held sway — Givré, the family. Yet the end of the novel does not bring her to epiphany, but rather negative epiphany. She reaches a blindness, achieves no tragic vision: the world does not come into focus — its relations are not revealed as ordered. Anna's discovery that the forms themselves of the world are unstable — and that language, the means by which the forms may be explored, is unreliable — results in a multivalence of irony. Indeed, the end achieves irony against the irony of the traditional resolution of tragic narrative, as it opens the possibility of "writings" beyond the traditional limitations of the endings of tragic form.

Anna's eminent difficulty at the end appears entirely personal, and it must be, in order for Wharton to fully express the quandary of the user of language, the difficulty entailed by the unreliability of the forms of the world. Specifically, Anna cannot make a decision: she does not know what to do because she cannot reliably construe the details of her world. Within that world, that field of details, she has problems with subordinate fields of elements; each of the other characters, for example, is a field of information — a text, so to speak — that Anna can read or misread, and her readings of characters become problematic for her. A reader of the novel experiences similar problems. One first leans to read Anna incorrectly, through George Darrow's point of view; then through her point of view in Book II, it becomes clear that this has been a misreading. In subsequent segments told from Darrow's view, the corrected reading of Anna persists alongside his original reading of her, so one reads Darrow — and Anna through him — differently than before. Then in Anna's later segments, Darrow is misread again through Anna's misreading, even though the reader knows Anna is misreading. The reader shares with Anna the discovery of the error, as Anna comes to realize that she cannot trust her reading.

Darrow has given Anna the burden of the decision of marriage, having repeatedly offered to break off the engagement rather than help her with uncertainties; this primary unresolved decision at the end of the novel of course involves the difficulty of her construing Darrow's character and motives. The problem is compounded by the difficulty she finds in her readings of other characters. Anna is not only

paralyzed due to her lack of a stable understanding of Darrow, but also because the elements of other fields by which she has framed understanding in the past are no longer reliable. She has based decisions on the structure of her family at Givré, which is to a great extent the structure of the family under Fraser Leath. The end of the novel finds her "grotesquely out of her element," among strangers in the bedroom in Paris (Collins 54). She has based many decisions on her stepson Owen, whose fleeing to America conclusively demonstrates that his character is unreliable. Anna places trust in Sophy's character, but Sophy becomes undependable once Anna knows she has also left and perhaps returned to a disreputable life with Mrs. Murret. Anna's relationships with Darrow, Owen and Sophy — as fiancée, mother, mother-in-law — have never been clearly defined, and at the end of the book each of these relationships is dubious or destroyed.

Anna is left without familiar ground on which to act, to judge character, to make decisions. She lacks contexts in which to see the ramifications of decisions, uncertain as she is of other characters; and so, her understanding of herself is unstable. And at the close of the novel, all her recent contradictory impulses are in the air. Yet Anna's instability serves as Wharton's means for giving the protagonist the possibility of control of her situation, which, as I will discuss more fully below, can arise from Anna's vision of not only the unstable nature of language but the unstable grounds beneath it: this is Anna's vision of the nature of the reef. She is not trapped at the end of the narrative; her problem is that neither she nor her world are well defined — the defining parameters are ambiguous. Ambiguity is where hope for freedom or new self-definition resides, where the possibility exists for a writing and reading beyond the conventionally-construed shapes of the world.

The process of construing or reading the world becomes problematic for Anna when she becomes extremely aware of language's difficulty — when she finds unresolvable contradictions, blocks, and gaps in meaning. She is not alone in this perception. Darrow exhibits an understanding of the difficulty of language, to which he appears to have long been resolved, by expressing his awareness of language's limitations. Yet Anna gradually observes such limitations as the novel progresses, although the observation for her entails coming to no such resolution. She finally faces the difficulty of language, and examines it, after Darrow's point of view vanishes from the narrative and the reader is restricted to her third-person limited point of view. Then with her recognition of the inherent chaos of representational systems

there appears the difference between Darrow's reading and hers of the text of the world, a difference between continuity and discontinuity.

Darrow recognizes "the futility of words," Anna says (328). She can believe that he truly distrusts language or representation, yet what for Anna is his recognition of language's futility appears for the reader his careful use of his mistrust, a means of control of the difficult forms of language. In sections of the novel written from his point of view, he details a view of his understanding of language as difficult and tenuous, and at the same time reveals his understanding of the way language may be used, even perhaps used to do just what he says it cannot. He says to Sophy, "A good deal depends on the words one uses to define rather indefinite things" (171), and he thinks, "silence may be as variously shaded as speech" (175-6). Darrow seeks to maintain order, including the ordering of his own integrity or individuation, and to keep the world undisturbed — a world he appears to believe exists behind language, a world that is stable despite the difficulties in its representation. If silence may be shaded and indefinite things can be defined by words, then although representation is troublesome, it can provide continuity, and for practical purposes a consistent, continuous world. In any case, the deft user of language may maintain a measure of control over the unspoken, unrevealed world beyond language — the user may create for himself his own kind of continuity, in which he may then believe.

Darrow's repeated assertions that language will ultimately do no good lead Anna to believe that he sees that same complexities beneath representation that she discovers, and her mistake hides from her the conservatism by which he actually acts. Indeed, she achieves an understanding of language that is deeper than his. And once Anna achieves her incredulity towards language, she never relinquishes it. She at first wants all silences explicated — albeit that she has no idea what she will do with the information and fears it as well; she disrupts Darrow's manipulation of the unsaid or unsayable by demanding "You must speak!" (269), upon which he admits his configuration of lies. It is just after this that his point of view disappears from the novel to make way for Anna's confrontation with the nature of the linguistic maze. She goes on to express the inadequacy of language with a number of remarks: when she wants to "find a word," she cannot (308); she finds "she could not speak" (307, 327); "she no longer even knew what she had meant to say" (327); and just prior to finally despairing of "the uselessness of speaking," she arrives at her most explicit statement concerning the quandary of expression and

perception:

The truth had come to light by the force of its irresistible pressure; and the perception gave her a startled sense of hidden powers, of a chaos of attractions and repulsions far beneath the ordered surfaces of intercourse. (353)

Anna grasps a "truth" here, as she sees it — but its stability is undermined in its very emergence: she is able to see the chaotic operation of the system by which truth is produced.

The novel contains imagery that helps develop the complexity of the nature of truth: for example, there are the references to veils and walls in Anna's mental landscape. And to represent the discontinuity of language and also to tie the reader's reading of the world to Anna's, ellipses in the text designate gaps or spaces. What happens in print bears closely upon Anna's thinking, in the limited point of view of her sections.¹ Jean Frantz Blackall examines the occurrences of ellipses throughout Wharton's work, concluding that they provide spaces for the conflation of expression and perception, whose difficulties thereby fall into sync (and there work at levels of both author and character). She explains that the gaps mark "stages in thought" and in time; the depiction of thought itself in stages, as abrupt and discontinuous, problematizes the continuity Darrow finds in processes of representation: it portrays the discontinuity that characterizes Anna's understanding of language.

Wharton's breaking of continuous form in narrative, character, and language — by abruptions in what for Anna is the disordered surface of intercourse — provides both Anna and the reader with both polyvalent emergences and gaps in the structure of the text of details representing the world. As Anna's world becomes more and more unreliable, the problematic, crucial reef is at any moment perhaps an emergent impulse or perhaps a revealed chasm amid the instability of discourse. The reef metaphor not only represents difficulty, but is itself a species of difficulty in its shifting nature; and also, the trope is not only discomfiting because its referent cannot be located, but because the posited referent, as nexus and abyss, is not reliable as a presence or an absence. By the end of the novel, the reader is not sure to what extent it would be in Anna's favor to support or to subvert any structures — for example, those of marriage or family — with which she deals. Structures in Anna's world shift as she (and the reader) beholds them; the reef is never clear, hovering somewhere amid the text but, again, never represented in print.

Yet a lack of reliability in language need not squelch one's desire to use it. Anna's "You must

speak!" rings throughout the text to the end, borne out in her constant pursuit of understanding, despite the phlegmatism that is introduced to her character by the establishment of speaking's "uselessness." The myth of the stability of structures is what is restrictive for Anna; her desire for speech works toward the attainment of fluidity, as opposed to solidity, of understanding. She finds something more than an unreliable web of words: Anna's "startling" is a physical reaction upon which she recognizes the "irresistible" underlying pressure; the discovery is presented tangibly, re-rendered kinetic and active (353). This helps establish the precariousness of her position. She stands at what appears to be a threshold between the nightmare or chaos of polyvalent perception and the transformation the perception could lead to; she is in a position where she may define herself anew, and her startling represents at least the spark of impetus. The forging of new life here must involve the challenging of an working upon structures — of representational ones, in order to approach underlying ones — and it should involve a movement into more fluid structures. Wharton represents fluidity and activity by developing Anna's awareness of spoken discourse; this is a component in the novelistic development of narrative rich in the instabilities that characterize speech.

Still, it is not clear whether Anna will be animated by the desire and apply herself to language in the making of a world and a self — whether she will indeed use the "reserve of unused power" she mentions early in the novel (87). The reading beyond the ending I would hope for requires a leap of faith, in hope for an Anna who would emerge as a maker from a situation where — at the ending moment — her desire appears multivalent and her understanding disintegrated. Wharton brings her to such a precarious position in order to establish that forging life anew is among Anna's options. To return to the context of the relationship between Anna and Darrow and to focus further on the implications of the latter's position (with an eye toward gender-specific implications I will not develop here), I trace Wharton's purpose for bringing Anna, and the thematics of the novel, to the concluding crisis in understanding. I thus begin developing the dynamics of complicity for the situation wherein Wharton's protagonist-within-discourse arrives at her position.

Late in the novel, Darrow reaches as far as he can toward a view of discontinuity, but rejects it. Since he does not share Anna's vision of the discontinuity beneath language, the incredulity about structure that her vision entails is, for him, tantamount to giving one's life away — which, he tells her, "men" do

not do. He continues to hold sway over his own realm of language and representation, and he gives Anna the choice of accepting this realm as it is, saying: "If you won't have [my life], it's at least my own, to do the best I can with." He implies that incursions into the difficulties of language will reveal only its terrible inadequacy, and lead to the endless play of terminology. And for him, life — and not merely its representation — appears "just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits." But he speaks here of re-configuring existing structures whose representations, but not essences, have been disrupted. For Darrow, the world appears disrupted because "we're struck blind sometimes, and mad sometimes." His impression is that there is consistent and continuous shape beneath representation. In light of this, his refusal to open issues Anna wants to open seems a mere refusal to fight with the difficulty of representation. He does not believe the fight would be with structures beneath. (313)

But that disbelief is what most seriously implicates him in responsibility for Anna's difficulties. It is true that if Darrow does not see that the attractions and repulsions of their world are unstable, his complicity may not even entail a sin of omission. But this failure of his vision is more troublesome than even his deliberate manipulation of language, which can at least be confessed. In his ignorance of the nature of linguistic unreliability, Darrow remains a beneficiary of the practically unconscious power that permeates the play of intercourse between him and Anna — power that exists amid apparently insoluble misconceptions between the two of them. The source of the power does not reside only with Darrow: it is structural, and it traverses the muddled system of perception and expression, extending into Anna's belief that his understanding is the same as hers. Again, it is not clear whether Anna will get beyond her misconception; she has access to the power to do so, although she seems not to know that she does. And since Darrow does not share her understanding of the shifting of the grounds under the discourse, he cannot reshape the power amid the couple's relationship — he could not, even if he would want to.

The linguistic quandry of the protagonist in *The Reef* represents the difficulty of anyone baffled by a system of disembodied power. It is hard to trace the sources of the difficulty; for one reason, the problems I have discussed extend into the criticism itself of novelistic discourse. It takes extreme care to avoid designating false sources, to avoid supposing that particular obstacles are tangible rather than only illusorily so; I gesture here toward the difficulties of this type that one would encounter in carrying out

a gender-specific analysis of the linguistic dynamics of *The Reef*. Anna and Darrow are intricately in such a complex situation — the dynamics of which give Darrow a kind of upper hand — that the dynamics of power relations do not exclude either gender's having an upper hand. Nevertheless, Anna's position is inextricable from its being that of a woman in Western culture — Wharton surely has this in mind — and the novel will bear out detailed study of the facets of that position.

What I do wish to emphasize is the novel's general disruption of the contingencies of discursive conventions. Although Wharton does not sketch any new self-definition for Anna, she provides for her a vision of the instability of the bases of conventions. A character intricately in systems of convention may not necessarily find a way out: Anna's options seem to remain limited, as her blindness is never cured but only rendered more painful in the cacophonous finale. But the reader who shares in the quandary has a better vantage point for understanding the systems and the unreliability of the bases. Like a character, the reader is a protagonist facing the difficulties of the representations of the world. Of course, the reader deals with a field of details that is more complex than that restricted for any single character, and the reader may also read the relations of the author to the text.

Obviously, the author is a linguistic protagonist amid the discourse of the novel. Of *The Reef*, Wharton remarked, "I put most of myself into that opus," although she later complained, "it's not *me*, though I thought it was when I was writing it" (Lewis *Biography* 326, *Letters* 284). It appears, perhaps, that "hidden chaos" affects the more or less unstable "truth" she means to produce in the work. In any case, Wharton's project in *The Reef* is to open conventions of narrative and character in such ways as to render via the novel something that would be difficult for anyone to claim as "me." The difficulty of construing the representation of one's self in the work is a significant feature of novelistic discourse; the reader and author here find a lack of closure not only in the text, but in their own relations to the text. *The Reef* presents, rather than closure, a complex, novelistic fragmentation of discursive structures, which entails an opening of them to revision or reconfiguration and a passing beyond "ending." The idea of closure is itself a species of reef, and not a tangible referent but a looming, unreachable specter which Wharton construes in her novelistic development of the linguistic reef.

University of Iowa

Note

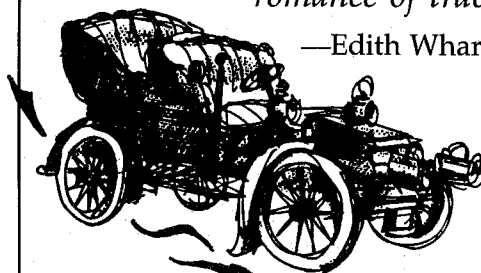
1. Ellipses also occur in sections written from Darrow's point

Continued on page 32

Northern Illinois University Press

"The motor-car
has restored the
romance of travel."

—Edith Wharton



A Motor-Flight Through France

Edith Wharton

Introduction by
Mary Suzanne Schriber

Escaping social confines that existed for women in America during the early twentieth century, Wharton set out to explore France in the newly invented "motor-car." In *A Motor-Flight Through France*, originally published in 1908, Wharton chronicles her travels, combining the power of her prose, her love for travel, and her affinity for France.



This compelling travelogue records Wharton's early impressions of the country she later claimed as her own and offers genuinely good reading for those who wish to see France through the eyes of a great American writer. The introduction by Mary Suzanne Schriber analyzes Wharton's use of the genre of travel writing and places her work in the context of her life and times.

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Homecoming to Edith Wharton

by Annette Zilversmit

July 1, 1991, a plaque was placed on Edith Wharton's Paris residence. The event and dedication culminated the First International Edith Wharton Conference held between June 28 and July 1 and attended by over 100 scholars. Speeches were given by Roger Asselineau of The Sorbonne, M. Roger Gouze of La Mémoire des Lieux, and Annette Zilversmit, Long Island University, Brooklyn (whose text follows). Andrew Gregg of The American Embassy was also present. The Spring 1992 Edith Wharton Review will be a special edition of selected papers from this conference. The issue will be guest edited by the conference director and associate director, Katherine Joslin and Alan Price.



Standing here at 53 rue de Varenne at this dedication of her Paris residence of ten years, I know why Edith Wharton came to Paris and France and never left. Five years ago I stood in a grimy hotel room in the New York neighborhood where Wharton was born and lived for twenty-five years. I pleaded before a community board of real estates owners for a similar plaque to be placed on her birthplace, or a street to be named in her honor, or even a small sign to be hung on a nearby lamppost. I told them that great cities such as Paris abound in urban tributes to their great artists. At least a quarter of the streets of Paris are named for French writers — Balzac, Hugo, Chateaubriand, Feydeau, Giradoux, Zola, Beaumarchais, Proust, De Maupassant, Malraux, Corneille, Wharton's beloved George Sand. Even foreign authors are honored — Dante, Goethe, Byron, and an avenue Charles Dickens. Houses, cafes, shops are marked and museums set up where these writers lived or frequented. My pleas fell on deaf ears. Like much of America, Wharton's neighborhood, her *arrondissement* as one would say here, had changed. The brownstone, the townhouse, she was born in had been turned into a printing plant. The house she lived in with her mother before her marriage had been razed. The area was no longer residential. It was a commercial district of small industries and warehouses, its street essential to the business and commerce of the city. Such signs would confuse truckers and merchants I was told. Plaques would mar buildings. In fact, if it were known that the area was of cultural interest, it might be declared an historical district and profits would decline and real estate values threatened. I denounced their American philistinism, but I had read enough of Wharton to know that I would not win and didn't. There are no plaques, no streets, no markers, no public awareness that a famous author not only lived in this section of New York City but also immortalized the quarter, and that much of the history and manners of more than a hundred years of life in New York City are only known and examined because they are recorded in her writings.

This America is still not ready for Edith Wharton. But Paris, France, is another story, the cliché with subtle appropriateness as I tell the next narrative. Here a lover of Edith Wharton, not even a scholar, Jacques Fosse, but a gentleman who had known Wharton as a child and now was president of Les Amis du Vieux Saint Brice, suggested this plaque. He put me in touch with La Mémoire des Lieux, a private organization of French citizens dedicated to preservation of cultural landmarks in Paris, and with its president, M. Roger Gouze. With the help of Professor Roger Asselineau of the Sorbonne and Professor Joan Templeton of my own Long Island University, a few letters ensued and in a only a few months, what you see behind me was accomplished. (I am glad to say that this is not the first plaque to mark Edith Wharton's life here. M. Jacques Fosse had already persuaded the residents of St. Brice sous Forêt to do that. We shall see that tomorrow.) With this impressive plaque now placed on 53 rue de Varenne, Wharton's name becomes inscribed with all the great writers, native and otherwise, who came from the provinces of France and from other countries to thrive in a city where Wharton herself wrote "the very stones of the immemorial ordered buildings breathe the fine vibrations of intelligence, the activity of high strung minds."

Make no mistake, even here commercial interests had to be consulted. Fortunately but expectedly, the building and the street still are their stately elegant selves, the ambience still the ordered dignity that drew Wharton here. Only this townhouse had become *un syndicat de la copropriété*, a cooperative, the tenants real estate owners. But these French of property didn't calculate their equity, the depreciation of their investment. They were honored that their walls, their stones, had once embraced a writer, a daring American women who chose and needed French soil to nurture her art and thereby enrich her adopted city and country.

That La Mémoire des Lieux have placed this plaque would deeply please Wharton, and I on behalf on the entire conference will never be able to sufficiently thank them. But from her many tributes to the French, her acerbic depiction of Americans, and from her essential ironic stance, Wharton would not have been entirely surprised. What would, however have surprised, even shocked her, was that cooperation and participation for this plaque came from an academic and literary society devoted exclusively to the study of her life and works, The Edith Wharton Society, with almost five hundred members, most of whom are American, most of whom are women, and all of whom I would call feminist scholars. What would assuredly please her is this sign of rising eminence of her place in American letters. What she might still find ironic is the disregarding of her own advice that women stay in the kitchen and only listen to the more interesting conversation of men. She would be shocked to know that women scholars have taken these words not as wise admonitions but as signs and signifiers of the anxiety of her own bold independence, the inner trepidation of her taking as a woman of authorship, authority, and autonomy.

Wharton would be also be amused but moved that we have not even accepted her expatriation unequivocally. New feminist scholars know that to be an expatriate connotes the courage to exit from the *patria*, the land of the fathers with its constraints and limits for women, to ex and cross out the rules and customs of the male-oriented commercial America. But an expatriate is also one who does not become a citizen of another *patria*, because to do so not only demands adoption of another set of rules and regulations but because one has not abandoned hope that the country of one's origins will appreciate the exiled self.

Wharton never became a citizen of France, never wrote a major work in French. Each morning Wharton awoke and wrote in her mother tongue. For in her memoirs after recounting the rich social life she established with friends in this arrondissement, she confides that the "core of her life was under my own roof where my work was growing and spreading and absorbing more and more of my time and imagination." Here, besides two volumes of short stories, she completed *The Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef*, *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence*. Thus, each day, somewhere in the labyrinth of her many roomed apartment, she continued tales of American heroines searching for meaning in the streets of and countryside of theirs and her native land and city. Only occasionally would her American protagonists have cause to find themselves in Europe. What they search for explicitly are men to complete their lives, but the trope of the marriage plot, quite evident in Wharton, is also the search of the exile, the unusual woman, for place and acceptance in her own world.

This conference, this dedication, is somewhat of a pilgrimage to the shrine of this creative woman's mind which issued countless tales of human frustration and defeat and recorded many tellings of buried female desire. But I should also like to take this occasion, this conference, this convocation and dedication, to be a homecoming, — home coming - to the expatriate Wharton, to tell her that thirty years after her death, almost a hundred years after her first publication in 1899, almost eighty years since she took her first permanent residence here in rue de Varenne, both men and women of her own country, have made a place for her in America and are beginning to expand her reputation internationally. They are assuring that her voice, her writing, her yearnings are not only heard and inspiring, but delved into for notes she never thought would be sounded. In these last three days, the sounds of our many flat American voices, the smells of our American breath with "the corned beef hash" we eat for breakfast and "the mustard" we put "on mutton", two distinguishing traits Wharton herself noted about Americans, the sight of our relaxed-muscled faces breaking easily into smiles, have come to inhabit and surround these streets and now stand before the home where Wharton visibly flourished but more privately must have yearned for the unself-conscious repose of the familiar of her origins.

If there are maternal echoes in this embrace, the patriarchy, the paternal, has also listened and answered, for although more than forty of the American participants from this conference have responded to the call with money for this plaque, their donations will no longer be necessary. The American Embassy, official representative of the business and political as well of cultural

hegemony of the United States, has made the complete necessary contribution.

If what we do here today would initially surprise, then thoroughly move Wharton, what might still disturb her is not that women have not heeded her domestic advice, but that I, a particular woman, am giving this dedication. For if at times, in moments of anxiety, she warned against women forgetting the art of the homelife, in greater periods of stress she feared a more particular woman. When her sister-in-law asked for money in 1915 for young writers, she refused for she feared the funds would go to "female Yids." I am perhaps related to those Jewish women beginning their careers in American in 1915. Although my mother had just been born in New York City and my grandmother had only just about mastered English from a nearby settlement house, I'm sure friends or neighbors were aspiring writers. Although Wharton was pro-Dreyfus when she first visited Paris as an adult at the turn of the century, her portraits of Jews in her work show that she came with some bias. Theories of master races were beginning here and in the fateful twenties and thirties, she continued to echo anti-Semitic slurs as Europe churned. She died before World War II officially broke out and Paris fell and Albert Camus wrote that a great spiritual plague descended on Europe. I imagined coming here with mixed feelings to commemorate Wharton especially in France. But a few weeks ago, I became aware of unusual heroism of some French, French, who I do not think many know of, who are not yet honored as Wharton is today. I learned of the five thousand citizens of a small French town in the Auvergne which I haven't even been yet able to locate on a map. The town of Le Chambon sur Lignon and the surrounding villages of struggling small farmers, took in and disguised as relatives and friends, five thousand French and emigré Jews. These villagers were inspired because of their unique minister, Andre Trocmé and because they themselves, although ancient to the soil, were a minority in France, Protestants who had once been the persecuted Huguenots. Without once ever thinking that what they were doing was heroic, or anything more than their Christian duty, they recognized injustice. When the police came to round up the Jews in the final days of the War, they never surrendered one. Five members of the ministry were taken to the concentration camps instead. Two never returned, Daniel Trocmé, cousin of the pastor, and Dr. Roger Forrestry, the village doctor. The life of not one Jew was ever taken.

I think Wharton would have recognized and added another quality to the French she so revered. She had once listed as essentially French traits that of taste, reverence, continuity and intellectual honesty. Today, I hope she would add moral courage. I think from her own harboring of refugees during World War I, the Great War, for which she was given the French Legion of Honor, she knew that healing others' wounds heals oneself. The people of Le Chambon have helped heal mine and allow me to thank again most profusely M. Roger Gouze, president and all members of La Mémoire des Lieux, the eminent representatives of the French community that have eagerly arranged and helped pay for this plaque to an American woman writer, Edith Wharton. When wounds are healed, new bonds or firmer ones are formed. I take

Book Reviews

***Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction*, by Lev Raphael. Introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Martin's Press, 1991.**

As critical attention to Edith Wharton continues to grow, it approaches a new phase. It is time to move beyond reconsiderations of the same four or five Wharton works, to a closer look at her "forgotten" novels. These works deserve reassessment, and they need to be considered as part of Wharton's complete body of work, to be examined for a coherence of concerns and themes that connects them to the more popular novels. Lev Raphael's book, *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction*, is just such a reassessment.

As Raphael explains in the preface, the book examines Wharton's fiction from the perspective of affect theory, specifically by applying the work of Silvan Tomkins and Gershen Kaufman, in studying shame, to an analysis of Wharton's characters. The process, Raphael says, leads us to an appreciation of Wharton's neglected fiction as "generally far superior than previous critics have acknowledged," and to a new understanding of decisions made by Wharton characters "that have been misinterpreted, or dismissed as artistically unconvincing and flawed." And "an understanding of the dynamics and impact of shame" can enhance our appreciation of Wharton classics like *The House of Mirth* or *The Age of Innocence*.

Raphael establishes his method and defines his terms through an application of affect theory to one novella, *The Touchstone*. He explains that, according to Tomkins, affects are stronger than drive deprivation or even pain, and they provide "the primary blueprints for cognition, decision and action." Of all the affects, shame is the most powerful, and Raphael uses the term to include indignity, defeat, transgression, alienation, discouragement, shyness, embarrassment, and guilt. He discusses it as a product of both nature and nurture, citing Kaufman, who says that shame is generated when one significant person "somehow breaks the interpersonal bridge with another." In this crucial first chapter, Raphael demonstrates how shame drives Stephen Glennard of *The Touchstone* and how it haunted each stage of Wharton's life. He traces the impact of shame from Wharton's childhood rejection by her mother, to her relationships with Walter Berry and Morton Fullerton, both cold and distant men, and he connects Wharton's hauteur to shyness, which was a manifestation of shame.

Raphael cautions that we must approach Wharton's fiction not merely by recognizing the impact of shame in her work and life, but by experiencing the shame "she wrote about with such devastating accuracy and deep intuition." Subsequent chapters cover "Flights from Shame" (*Sanctuary*, *The Mother's Recompense*), relationships "Divided by Shame" (*The Valley of Decision*, *Madame de Treymes*, *The Reef*, *The Children*), the characters, in family or marital bonds, who suffer "Shameful Relations" (*The Bunner Sisters*, *Old New York*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*), "The War Fiction" (*The Marne* and *A Son at the Front*), "Writers and Ar-

tists" (*Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*), and "Wharton's Classics." Each chapter also discusses relevant short stories.

The strengths of the book include a very clear definition of terms, established early, and lucid applications of the model, making the interpretations extremely convincing. There is also a careful and comprehensive study of Wharton criticism. More significantly, Raphael's approach leads to insightful character analysis. Perceptive and intensive analysis of character brings a new understanding of much-discussed characters, like George Darrow of *The Reef*, and an awareness of previously unrecognized strengths in other works: the book explores Wharton's meticulous charting of Kate Orme's decision in *Sanctuary*, the nature of Kate Clephane's internalized shame in *The Mother's Recompense*, and the shifting balance of power (and shame) in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Thus, works often quickly dismissed as flawed are reclaimed as sources of complexity, irony, and ambiguity.

The inclusion of related short stories generally works well. Occasionally, however, too many short stories are covered too quickly, so that readers who are not familiar with all the stories will have difficulty sorting plot from motif, and story from story, as in the "Writers and Artists" chapter. The inclusion of a chapter on the Wharton "classics," on the other hand, is quite effective. The discussion does not take us to the same critical territory we've travelled before; instead, it briefly demonstrates the dynamics of shame at work in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Frome*, and *Summer*. Since the theme of shame has been carefully and comprehensively discussed in lesser known novels, this shorter study of the five classics is sufficient, and is astutely positioned.

Thus, the general plan of the book is clear and the argument convincing. By tracing a consistency of theme in all stages of Wharton's work, Raphael invites us to explore beyond the Wharton standards. Such exploration can develop our understanding of the writer, for it will challenge us to re-examine not only Wharton's work, but our own attitudes towards it as well.

Palm Beach Comm. College, CAROL WERSHOVEN

***Edith Wharton, Revised Edition*. Margaret B. McDowell. Twayne's United States Authors Series. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991.**

Cross-reading the 1976 Twayne Series edition of *Edith Wharton* by Margaret McDowell with the revised 1991 edition leads to a deep sense of respect, even awe. Professor McDowell, in 1976, was a prophet.

There is also a little bombshell in this revised edition that explodes upon the alert reader, deepening the interpretation of a famous Wharton classic. But first we must turn to the prophecies. There is much more to the prophet in the first edition than simply the conventional, wistful (in 1976) concluding lines that refer to the Q.D. Leavis 1938 assessment that Edith Wharton was a "remarkable novelist if not a large-sized one." Margaret McDowell ended her first volume; "She was, indeed a remarkable novelist. She may someday be recognized as a great one."

Professor McDowell has long been the unsung heroine of Edith Wharton scholarship — working quietly, systematically and effectively behind the scenes, arguing prophetically and persuasively long before it was fashionable: Read the later novels! Read the ghost stories! Look at the place of woman!

Therefore, what she has to say now, after the Wharton revolution, is extremely important. This revised edition more than fulfills the purpose of a Twayne Series volume. It can be usefully studied as an introduction to Edith Wharton and an overview of her work and the major critical questions surrounding her. Who cannot recall grabbing a Twayne Series volume off the shelf in a moment of desperation, an hour before class?

But, to recommend this revised edition as an introduction alone is a serious mistake. Yes, this book can be offered to any student wanting to know Wharton better. But the seasoned scholar must have it on the bookshelf to consult for the best existing analyses of the later novels, particularly of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, with the brilliant character study of Halo Tarrant, for the groundbreaking new material on the ghost stories, the critical background offered throughout the volume, the excellent enumeration of Wharton's aesthetic principles and many of the most measured, persuasive, coherent feminist readings — although this book would not be labelled essentially “feminist criticism” — to date.

Professor McDowell has added what is certain to become an important new reading of *The Mother's Recompense*. No one will turn from her sharp analysis of Kate Clephane without a gnawing desire to take another look at the book. Such will also be true of the sections on *The Children* and *Twilight Sleep*, although they are almost identical in the two editions. The note of the apologist survives, and McDowell's carefully structured arguments defending her later novels, although word for word the same in many instances, are well worth noting because there are still many who stop reading at *The Age of Innocence*.

Margaret McDowell and James Tuttleton were among the first to argue the merits of the work after 1920, and their insights should be studied as laying a foundation for what was to come. Margaret McDowell saw, in the 1970s, what others were later to verify: Edmund Wilson and Irving Howe were not right. Edith Wharton had a great deal that was valuable and accurate to say about the world after the Great War.

Yet there is even more of prophetic insight in that first edition than awareness of the value of the neglected work. As far back as the early 1970s she could intuit, with only the Love Diary as evidence, that Morton Fullerton was not the psychological savior he was first thought, but, on the contrary, left Wharton, in many respects, bewildered and frustrated. Even at that early date, McDowell was carefully measured in her assessment of Fullerton's contribution to Wharton's life and letters. Her more extensive treatment of the affair in the revised edition is therefore all the more important as it stems from an intuition of the “extremely low self-esteem” which she can now document in Wharton's letters, unavailable in 1976.

There is also much new material on the ghost stories, which every Wharton scholar is certain to find fascinating. In the first edition, she chose three short

stories — “The Eyes,” “Bewitched,” and “After Holbein” — to dissect in some detail. These readings, essentially identical, are still treasures of insight. She has added a long discussion of Wharton's work in the ghost story genre and detailed, thoughtful analysis of “All Souls.” Those familiar with Leon Edel's famous use of “All Souls” as an example of the meaning and use of psychological biographical criticism, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's brilliant classic psychological study *A Feast of Words*, and Annette Zilversmit's detailed psychological study of the story will want to look at Margaret McDowell's important insight into Sara Clayburn's psychology as that of the strong, independent woman — like Edith Wharton — facing aging and death but also, in Sara's case, intimations of the malevolent supernatural.

Throughout this revised edition one motif is the recurring reference to the use of techniques and symbols Wharton borrowed from literature of the supernatural, for example, the note taken of Bessy Westmore's influence on the lives of the living after her death.

More than in any other book-length study of Edith Wharton we find here an absolutely clear understanding and enunciation of Wharton's critical principles that runs as another motif throughout the volume. Chief among these, McDowell asserts in numerous places, is the realist's close attention to selectivity and structure. The penetrating discussion, which also appeared in the original edition, of Wharton's intelligent objections to modernist fads throughout *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* leaves the reader with new appreciation, not only of Wharton's keen perception of what was going wrong in modern literature, but also with the most coherent understanding of Wharton's aesthetic values in print anywhere.

There is an important new introduction to the discussion of *The Custom of the Country* that deserves close attention because McDowell offers a defense of that much-maligned work and the characterization of Undine in light of Wharton's intention to present her picaresque heroine as a vehicle for satire of the position of women. To McDowell, the novel is an exploration of

all the commonly accepted conventions and prejudices that contribute to the inequality of the sexes and she [Wharton] considers their relationship to class and money. She views with sardonic insight the havoc caused by women who must fight these conventions in order to survive, but who may also enjoy doing so as they gain power by unscrupulous means. Seen as an analysis of the limitations imposed upon women and of their attempts to survive in an unequal world, this novel becomes Wharton's response to the questions she left unanswered in *The House of Mirth* and *The Fruit of the Tree* and its implications remain as relevant today as they were when Wharton wrote these books.

Likewise, we find stimulating new appraisals of *The Fruit of the Tree* and *The Reef*, ever sympathetic to the problems of women without the strident tone of some feminist criticism. Margaret McDowell emerges throughout as a quiet, sensitive, persuasive feminist, whose consideration of spiritual values and the spiritual plight of Wharton's characters underlies her analysis of their social and economic situations.

This type of well written, lucid feminist criticism bears careful perusal because there is no way to attack or

dismiss it as "feminist cant," and therefore its power and message are most effectively presented. In the midst of her discussion of *The House of Mirth* we find such insights:

By steady control of her fear and anger in this violent encounter [with Gus Trenor], Lily escapes rape, but throughout the rest of her life she suffers from the irrational shame that rape victims often feel. During the attempted assault, she thinks of herself as two separate people — one angry and terrified, the other calm and in control — and allows the second person to speak aloud, sometimes challenging and scolding Trenor and sometimes placating him.

Traumatized after her escape, Lily rushes to her cousin, Gerty Farish, to avoid the isolation of her own room at her Aunt Julia's home and her aunt's questioning, but she is unable ever to tell even Gerty what caused her hysteria. She determines that she must "confess" to Selden the next day, because she expects him to meet her to declare his love for her. Instead, he never learns of her life-changing experience.

Mention must be made of helpful footnotes which cite critical articles through the eighties on such subjects as *The House of Mirth's* connection with American economics at the turn of the century and differing interpretations of *Summer*. This is obviously a scholar who has done her homework in the modern journal.

The most heartening aspect of this revised edition of *Edith Wharton* is certainty that, through this book, more students outside the world of Wharton scholarship will come to Edith Wharton than through any other. Thus, the author of a Twayne Series volume has an immense responsibility as well as an unparalleled opportunity. Professor McDowell has, as always, fulfilled her obligation with extraordinary skill, drawing on years of scholarship, and has met her opportunity with the grace and wisdom of one of the leading ladies of American criticism.

Fordham University,

KRISTIN LAUER

***Edith Wharton: A Descriptive Bibliography.* By Stephen Garrison. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990. xxiii + 514 pp. \$100.**

In a hilarious presentation at "Edith Wharton: Woman of Letters in New York," Stephen Garrison explained just what it is that bibliographers do. He pleaded with the scholarly family to have patience with and pity on their eccentric cousins who rattle around in attics and cellars, wiping dirt off windows, trying to get a good light in order to check their Centroid color tiles, while the family discusses matters of "Great Critical Import" in the well-appointed drawing room. After ten years, the madman in Mrs. Wharton's own attic has descended — with every moment of his time accounted for — bearing gifts for every member of his family: critics, collectors, librarians and readers. Professor Garrison has, through his painstaking scholarship, superbly demonstrated the difference between the cutting edge and the trend.

Edith Wharton: A Descriptive Bibliography supersedes all previous lists and bibliographies. This fact alone makes

this landmark volume a necessity for all serious collections. The detail and specificity expected from the Pittsburgh Series in Bibliography are merely the starting points for the list of excellencies contained herein. Lucidity of presentation and "user-friendliness" for the non-specialist are enhanced by the compiler's incisive editorial judgement. Therefore, what is not said is as important in evaluation as what is; there are no superfluities of description, such as leaf thickness or sheet bulk because "there is no case for Wharton in which these measurements are required to differentiate printings" (xviii). Garrison opts for descriptive Centroid color designations rather than using the obscure numerical system but notes that "color identification by the Centroid system is inexact." So too are publications codes abbreviated.

Each item is indexed separately in lettered sections: A. Separate Publications, AA. Collected Editions, B. First Book and Pamphlet Appearances, C. First-Appearance Contributions to Magazines and Newspapers and D. Books Edited by Wharton. A twenty-page index to all entries allows for ease of referencing and cross-referencing. Because of current interest in Wharton's short stories, the "C" section is of particular note. References to magazine publications are not limited to short stories, but include reviews, speeches, verse, novel syndication and articles in the United States, England and France. Title changes, where relevant, are noted throughout, thus further facilitating cross-reference. Absence of any "miscellany," "fragments," or extracts enhances coherence.

Each entry in the "A" section includes description of dust jacket or slipcase, binding cloths, page trimming, gilding or staining. Facsimiles or quasi-facsimiles of title pages and jackets are included. Textual variants are included in each citation.

As concise as all listings are, they are a boon for the collector: A glance at the entry for *The Marne* will propel the woebegone holder of a "useless" printing to salvage that grayish olive-green copy, for the first printing has, indeed, no printing code.

For the working scholar or voracious reader, all first publications are specifically noted. Previously inaccessible works, such as "Life and I," are asterisked.

The title changes of some short stories, from serialization to book publication, are carefully noted. Garrison's meticulous tracking down of obscure titles, such as that of "Poor Old Vincent" to "Permanent Wave," deserve particular commendation. Garrison's notes of novels which were heavily revised for publication after syndication should send critics sprinting for their microfilm. Also included in the "C" section is a compendium of previously unpublished archival materials available in critical articles written for modern scholarly publications.

Garrison circumvents the policy of non-disclosure of initial printings held by certain publishers with a careful search of Wharton's voluminous correspondence with her publishers, a service above and beyond the call of the bibliographer's duty.

The "A" and "AA" sections reveal consistent publication of Wharton's works through 1990. A particular curiosity is a 1962 collection of short stories used for ESL classes which highlights a neglected use of Wharton's oeuvre.

The function of the bibliographer's combined art and

science is, as Professor Garrison's window-cleaning metaphor implies, to shine a light of surgical intensity on his heroine. *Sans* editorial embellishment, only a list of "just the facts" remains. It is, invariably, a humbling of the hero. Thus, there is a delicious irony in the compiler's choice of the 1905 Christmas photo of the bejewelled and be-jetted Mrs. Wharton "trying to look modest" as frontispiece. Her purpose is undercut by each page of this unrivaled volume. By merely including Mrs. Wharton in the Pittsburgh Series, Stephen Garrison places her in the ranks of Hawthorne, Emerson and Dickinson. Edith Wharton has nothing to be modest about, nor does her bibliographer.

Fordham University, MARGARET MURPHY.

***Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man*, by David Holbrook, London: Vision Press, 1991. 208 pp. (\$39.95)**

David Holbrook's *Edith Wharton and the Unsatisfactory Man* tries to explain why Wharton's male characters are "weak, undependable, duplicitous, cowardly, ineffective and incapable of commitment" (201). The bulk of this book is given over to discussions of *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome*, *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence*. There are also chapters on *The Reef*, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, and a short chapter on *The Mother's Recompense*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Twilight Sleep*, *The Buccaneers*, *The Children*.

Holbrook gives sex a central place in Wharton's fiction, in the context of a search for meaning and affirmation within relationships. That search in inevitably frustrated, Holbrook writes, as it was in Wharton's own life, because she perceived sex to be inherently debasing, cheap, and frightening. She saw sex as "the most dangerous thing in the world" (198), which could lead to annihilation because it emerged from such voracious hunger. Holbrook's ideas about sexuality in Edith Wharton's life and work seem at first to go further than the critics who deconstruct the meaning of incest as a motif in her fiction. For Holbrook claims that Wharton might actually have been molested by her father, though he is careful to make it clear that this is a speculation. This abuse, Holbrook suspects, might explain why Wharton "often refers to problems so unspeakable that people flinch from even daring to refer to them" (20).

What is Holbrook's evidence for claiming that Wharton was possibly a victim of abuse? First of all, Wharton was involved with "unsatisfactory men" who could not fulfill her needs for deep emotional connection: Walter Berry, Henry James, Morton Fullerton among them. Her attraction to these men was based, Holbrook asserts, in her inability to fully imagine sex as something positive and creative — since she might have been abused by her father. And to find a satisfactory man would be to dethrone her father. Wharton's "unsatisfactory man" is "so often a child — a child who finds the slightest rejection so intolerable that he can only make emotional demands that are appropriate as from an infant to mother" (70). Holbrook thus shows us — as many other scholars have — how George Darrow fails and betrays Ann Leath in *The Reef*, Ralph Marvell falsely believes that Undine Spragg is as sensitive and intelligent as she is beautiful, Vance Weston treats Halo Tarrant deplorably.

READING THE LETTERS OF EDITH WHARTON

Guest Editor: Annette Zilversmit

Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus, New York, USA

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Holbrook's further "proof" of his assertion about Wharton's sexual abuse is a decoding of the Beatrice Palmato fragment, which he reads as an effort to render the horror of incest as something positive, in order to protect the image of Wharton's father. That is: "idolization . . . is an attempt to hide the horror, in trying to preserve a false solution to the problem[.]" (18) Hence the reference to Palmato's "right" to his daughter. Full of "strange phrases" (16), the fragment is heavily autobiographical, Holbrook writes. He finds the sexual joke about Palmato's "third hand" to be unnecessary to the fragment itself and therefore quite possibly a specific reference to Wharton's own sexual past. The allusion to Beatrice Cenci likewise might refer to real events in Wharton's life and not just be appropriate to the erotic encounter. Equally as personal, Holbrook claims, is the narrator's noting of Palmato's "silver-sprinkled head"; this "loving detail," Holbrook says, "conveys a deep erotic proclivity towards the father" (17).

Holbrook's reading of the fragment, which makes no distinction between a writer's life and her imagination, seems hopelessly naive and literalistic. Holbrook's evidence is neither convincing nor clearly thought out. What is especially "loving" or "erotic" about the description of Palmato's hair color, and why should the detail have to refer to Wharton's father? Is the nickname for Mr. Palmato's penis necessarily a sign of incest — in Wharton's life — or could it be connected more to her relationship with Fullerton, if one *must* find an autobiographical source? The "references to a private intimacy, and old habits or procedures" between Beatrice and her father," Holbrook says, "could be the product of being fixated on an incestuous father who abused the daughter" (17). Why? Aren't the elements he notes really quite appropriate details of the fictional scene?

Holbrook's great failure in his discussion of the fragment, and in general, is a lack of any reference whatsoever to the extensive literature on child sexual abuse — as, for example, the internationally acclaimed work of Alice Miller. His book could have explored the psychology of the female incest survivor and attempted to trace these patterns in the fiction, but the incest material is basically raised and then dropped. He thus does his readers and his own analysis a deep disservice. His explications of *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Reef*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* do not offer substantially new insights; remarkably, he devotes only a brief chapter to Wharton's fiction in which incest is generally acknowledged to be a theme: *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, *The Children*. Holbrook also does not mention significant articles by Louise K. Barnett, Kristin Olsen Lauer and Adeline Tintner in connection with the incest motif in Wharton's fiction.

It is one thing to suggest that Wharton had powerful incestuous longings for her father, and something entirely different to assert that her being the victim of child abuse "both twisted her view of sexuality [and] was a main-spring of her art" (20). The dynamics of Wharton's internal life could not be identical (as Holbrook implies with his either / or argument) if what were fantasized had actually happened. And if she were an incest victim, would she *idolize* her father? Would she not be angry and ashamed, as women incest victims widely report, and distant from him? Does it seem at all likely that a victim

of child abuse would be able to raise the issue of sex before her wedding night with the mother who either colluded in the incest, or failed to protect the girl by not knowing about the violation of security and trust in her own home? Wharton's painful interview with her mother recorded in "Life and I" seems impossible in that light. Would Wharton have been able to surrender to sexual ecstasy with Morton Fullerton so completely and unambivalently if she were an incest victim? Edith Wharton may indeed have been molested as a child, as it seems currently quite fashionable to assert — but Holbrook's book does not make a convincing case. Like other recent critics with equally as tendentious "proof" of the assertion that Wharton was victimized by her father, Holbrook seems to lack imagination, to turn a theme with significant metaphoric possibilities into a trendy reality. What we have here, then, is criticism as daytime talk show.

Another problem in his book is the less than careful editing. For instance, Lily Bart is said to have accepted Rosedale's proposal before she goes off on Bertha Dorset's yacht (31); Vance Weston is reported to have been offered "a promiscuous adolescent adventure at the Willows" with Floss Delaney (155). Carol Werhoven's intriguing and valuable concept of the "female intruder" is mentioned, but her name is not immediately present in the text (13) — a curious gap since the term is original to her work. Cynthia Griffin Wolff has most notably drawn our attention to Wharton's anxieties and fears about "the threshold," but Holbrook leaves her name out in that context (99), though he otherwise draws on and takes issue with Wolff's interpretations throughout the book.

Holbrook also uses his book occasionally — and distractingly — as a platform from which to make cranky attacks on contemporary fiction (or: "today's fashionable novel") "in which sex is brutally presented with coldness and distaste, as a mechanical and meaningless process." Wharton belies this "schizoid perversion," Holbrook writes, because she was deeply aware "that intimate involvement cannot be divorced from being" (57). Holbrook's book is also laced with sexist comments, like references to the essential and mysterious nature of "woman" and "female intuition." When he praises Wharton's ability to penetrate women's psychology, Holbrook appears to be relegating women to an entirely different and inferior realm of emotional being, even when he claims the opposite. Also jarring are his sometimes intemperate and quite unnecessary attacks on the Wharton critic Geoffrey Walton, as well as a consistent comparison between Wharton and Henry James that keeps damning James for his purported lack of insight into passion. We have heard such tedious protests before, just as Holbrook's general arguments and analyses have been subtly and intelligently made by previous and more original Wharton critics. Those looking for new insights into Edith Wharton's fiction and life will not be satisfied by this flawed and derivative study.

Michigan State University,

LEV RAPHAEL

The Fruit of the Tree e la narrativa de Edith Wharton
by Maria Novella Mercuri. Salerno: Edisud, 1990. 125 pp.

Edith Wharton is hardly a household name in Italy. To date, less than half of her oeuvre has been translated into Italian, although the pace has increased

since the 1980s. Maria Novella Mercuri decided to devote her study to a reassessment of the thus far untranslated *The Fruit of the Tree*; in so doing she has both provided the Italian neophyte with an erudite and elegant introduction to Wharton's work and the Wharton scholar with a useful summary of critical attitudes towards the author in general and this novel in particular. Her own intelligent and original comments on the text are illuminating albeit tantalizingly brief.

I said reassessment. Rehabilitation is perhaps the better word. That Mercuri's is the first work dedicated centrally to a study of *The Fruit of the Tree* indicates the low critical esteem in which it has been held. The novel enjoyed a brief vogue when it came out in 1907 riding on the coat-tails of the best-selling *The House of Mirth* but fell into critical disfavour thereafter. The reasons for this are carefully weighed by Mercuri in her second chapter and to some extent dismissed.

The criteria of Gérard Genette (1972) provide the basis of the textual analysis by which she judges whether the story has any internal logic. Her discussion of the narrator's standpoint, internal point of view, the structure of the novel, and Wharton's style, brings out some weaknesses, particularly of the final section with its laboured plot and melodramatic tone, but Mercuri demonstrates convincingly that the novel is not a failure despite these flaws. She argues that the solution to the impasse between the protagonists at the end, often considered contrived, is plausible and acceptable.

Criticism of *The Fruit of the Tree* began with Henry James's doubts about the construction of the novel, and most subsequent commentators have shared his authoritative judgement, according to Mercuri somewhat blindly. She demonstrates convincingly in her fourth chapter that, far from the multiplicity of themes in the novel resulting in lack of cohesion, the three themes of euthanasia, working class conditions (the 'Westmore' theme) and the relationship between the sexes (the theme of 'the custom of the country') are, in fact, unified and each fully developed through interconnecting scenes. By meticulously tracing the development of these three themes throughout the novel, she shows that no one theme dominates nor is discarded through lack of interest but that the three strands are interwoven to form one central theme which Mercuri feels underlies much of Wharton's work; that is, how to reconcile individual morality with duty to others and to society. Mercuri clinches her case for thematic coherence neatly by showing how the title of the novel underlies the complex pattern of symbols that help to carry the main theme; moreover, she relates the organic metaphor of the tree, conveying the idea of continuity, to Wharton's work as a whole.

We know that Wharton thought the creation of living characters as central to the novel; but we know, from Mercuri's study, that she felt that in *The Fruit of the Tree* she has sacrificed characterization to construction. Most critics have seen the novel as 'a novel of situation': Mercuri pits herself against both the author and the critics in her final chapter by setting out to prove that the novel is mainly 'a fine and penetrating character study. She maintains that all the main characters, even Bessy, change and develop during the course of the novel and that they act in a believable way. Although she declares that she will discuss the characters as purely linguistic structures, her case is made mainly by tracing the psychological

Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame

A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction

Lev Raphael

Introduction by Cynthia Griffin Wolff

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changes that take place within the characters and the reasons for those changes. But on this level she argues her point with great thoroughness.

Mercuri concludes that *The Fruit of the Tree* 'is a sort of bridge between two worlds, two localities, two spheres of interest and two aspects of Wharton's work'. In particular, the novel acts as a bridge by introducing characters of 'the custom of the country' type as well as of the 'social protest' type. Mercuri ends by pointing out similarities between the characters in this novel and the two that preceded it, *The House of Mirth* and *The Valley of Decision*.

It is not only the Italians who will be grateful to Mercuri for her energy and thoroughness: all those interested in Wharton will welcome her enthusiasm, erudition and economy of style — and look forward to further studies in which her undoubted talent is allowed freer rein.

PENELOPE VITA-FINZI
Polytechnic of West London, England

Neglected Areas, Part II - Continued from page 10

Bibliographic Essay," *Edith Wharton Review* 7 (Spring 1990): 20, for comments on the essays. For discussion of shame and incest, see Herman, 173, and Blume, chap. 7, "Spoiled and Soiled: Guilt, Shame, Self-Blame, and Self-Esteem," 109-119.

42. I myself have some reservations about offering the incest theory. A recent critic has questioned the "inquisitiveness about personal, especially sexual, matters" that she thinks characterizes much contemporary Wharton criticism; she thinks the unveiling of her letters to Fullerton, for instance, would have horrified Wharton (Joslin, 199). My concern is not so much what Wharton might think, for she deliberately left us evidence that she could have destroyed and she firmly believed in the advancement of knowledge (see my discussions of "The Debt"). But I do regret the uses that might be made of the theory by critics like those quoted in my Preface, who claimed that women are more likely than men to write out of personal maladjustment. Wharton no doubt posed as the "priestess of reason" (*Letters*, 483) and wrote a reserved autobiography because she wished to be remembered as a genius rather than a woman relieving emotional strain. If I thought her cover were effective, I would let matters stand, but as the waning of her literary reputation showed, it did not succeed. Thus, with the understanding that the artists described by Bewley include men as well as women, I offer an explanation of the deep center projected into Wharton's short stories.

43. R.W.B. Lewis, "Powers of Darkness," *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 1975, 644. Further references will be noted in the text.

44. For instance, Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 85.

45. *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 584.

46. Blume states, "Amnesia, or 'blocking,' is the most common feature of Post-Incest Syndrome" (81). She reports that about half her clients do not remember the abuse at first and that most have limited recall; see 81-99. See also Russell, 34 and Bass and Davis, 42.

47. Typically, Bass and Davis claim that the process of writing is itself "healing" (14).

Note the end of the passage, where Wharton identifies the book she was using for "making up" as a play about a prostitute. Whenever Wharton discusses her beginnings as a writer she introduces sex in some way. For other examples, see *A Backward Glance*, 24-25, 69-70, 75, and "Life and I," 7-8, 37.

49. See also the discussion of "The Lady's Maid's Bell" in the next chapter.

50. The Anson House will thus again "open on the universe" and lead to "all the capitals of Europe" (1: 245-46). We can com-

pare Wharton's feelings on the publication of her first volume of short stories: "I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship" (BG, 119).

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of view; to account for these, I defer to Blackall's distinctions between uses of ellipses for different effects.

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this occasion of the first International Conference of the Edith Wharton Society in Paris to celebrate these strengthened bonds between France and America, between French culture and American scholarship, between women and men of all persuasions and nationalities, who recognize that what binds are our common humanity and our commitment to the creative acts of life and art. I take this opportunity most of all to thank Edith Wharton for the complex character of the life she chose and made and for the characters she so vibrantly created in her art who fed and will continue to feed the hungers of the spirit and the mind. I look forward to many more occasions like this one in France and in America and anywhere else Wharton's work inspires. Again, on behalf of the Edith Wharton Society, all the participants who are here at the conference, all the the people, organizations, and institutions who helped but could not come, I dedicate this plaque as marker, sign and signifier, of the great American writer, Edith Wharton, who lived and created within these walls. Thank you.

ERRATA

The university affiliation of Helen Killoran, book reviewer in the Spring 1991 issue, should be The University of Washington, Seattle, (not Washington State University).