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A STUDY OF POINTS OF VIEW IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

by

Roslyn Dixon

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The Houses that Wharton Built: A Study of the Points of View in Edith Wharton's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

In her fiction, Edith Wharton addresses the struggle of the individual to reconcile specific spiritual, economic, or sexual needs within the confines of a well-defined social structure. Wharton presents this struggle from several angles of vision, what she calls "reflecting consciousnesses," without providing any moral directives to justify the pain and suffering which her protagonists experience. In failing to provide a moral center, the author reveals the limitations in popular wisdom and conventional mores; she simultaneously undermines traditional ethics by revealing the limitations of conventional morality in practice. Hence, Wharton's subject--and the subject of this thesis--is morality: her vision of morality; the failure of the literary critics to accept the ramifications of that vision; and most importantly, the value of that vision for those willing to accept its implications.

The Introduction to this thesis outlines Wharton's intellectual development, her artistic perspective, and her use of point of view, as well as the thematic conflicts of each of the five major novels chosen for this study: The House of Mirth, Summer, The Custom of the Country, Ethan Frome, and The Age of Innocence. Chapter Two gives serious consideration to the evolution of Wharton criticism. Chapters Three through Seven deal with each of the five novels in turn, specifically illustrating how Wharton's use of point of view allows her to develop her ideas and reveal the implications for society at

large. Chapter Eight concludes by considering the implications of Wharton's vision generally, and by asserting that she is original in her technique, forward-looking in her artistry, and that she deserves to be classed as a major American novelist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My appreciation also goes to Professor Jared Curtis and to Wolfgang Richter, SFU Computing Centre Consultant, for their technical assistance in enabling me to produce this thesis on the computer.

My variant on Stallman's title was first used in a note published on Wharton by Gautam Kundu.

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I. Introduction

Edith Wharton created a unique position for herself in the American literary tradition, partially by circumstance, and partially by design. She was bred to a position of upper-class comfort, but early on, she was exposed for extended periods to foreign influences. More importantly, she had an in-born love for knowledge which drove her beyond the normal expectations of her role as a society matron and into the pursuit of literary craftsmanship. She made herself familiar with traditional literary theories, as well as with the innovations developed by modern writers and theorists. Through this exposure, and as a result of her intellectual growth, Wharton escaped the inhibiting expectations of her social position, although she maintained a healthy respect for the power of the social framework.

In her approach to literature, Wharton drew on her own background and experience, on her literary knowledge, and on her artistic sensibilities to redefine the form of literature for her own purposes. She developed a technical theory concerning point of view which allowed her to address specific issues without restricting herself to a specific moral stance. In so doing, she established technical criteria by which she could define and assess the social, marital, and sexual roles of men and women in various levels of society. At her most ambitious,

in The Custom of the Country, Wharton defined and addressed the evolution of the American cultural identity.

Without a moral stance, Wharton became free to develop each situation to its logical and realistic conclusion, regardless of the implications. She thus creates a literary technique which gives definition to her artistic vision, and by which she moves beyond traditional literary principles. While her approach to literature alienated many in the critical establishment, she also anticipated many of the concerns in modern American literature, which suggests that Wharton has been largely misunderstood by an audience that failed to grasp or to accept her meaning. In Wharton's terms, however, form and meaning are so completely integrated that by analyzing her use of point of view, the meaning becomes apparent, the implications clear, and her abilities evident. Just as Wharton moves beyond pre-established notions, so anyone addressing her fiction must do so as well.

Wharton was able to move beyond the restrictions of her community for a variety of reasons. Although she came from the upper echelons of New York society, she and her parents lived and travelled for long periods in Europe from 1866 until 1872, between Wharton's fourth and tenth years, and again from 1880 until 1883, between her eighteenth and twenty-first years.[1] During those periods, she became fluent in Italian, German, and

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[1]R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1975), p. 19.

French, and was exposed to European culture and intellectual thought. This is not to suggest that when she lived in New York she did not become involved with the usual concerns of upper-class society, but Wharton as well became instilled with a love of learning which lasted her whole life.

She comments at length in her memoir, A Backward Glance, about her love of books, of reading, of the emotional and intellectual adventures she experienced vicariously during her adolescent years in her father's library.[2] Unschooled except by private tutors, she voraciously consumed everything but the popular romances forbidden by her mother until, soon after her marriage, a close friend and mature mentor, Egerton Winthrop, channelled her into very specific areas, which Lewis feels is a turning point in Wharton's education:

> . . . Winthrop directed Edith to the French novelists, historians and critics. This was of major importance, but perhaps more so was his introducing her to the extraordinary world of Darwin and Spencer, Huxley and Haeckel. It was to Winthrop that she owed such understanding as she reached not only of the theory of evolution, but of the naturalist theory of the implacable power of the environment.[3]

These details of Wharton's background are worth noting because they help to explain her unwillingness to perceive life in the conventional manner of her day.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century in New York, specifically in the claustrophobic world which Wharton inhabited

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[2]Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), pp. 55-76.

[3]Op. Cit, p. 56.

during her adolescent years and the initial stage of her marriage, intellectual pursuits were completely overshadowed by social concerns and personal obligations. The society of her adolescence is the society depicted in The Age of Innocence, where, Lewis suggests, May and Newland Archer represent Wharton's own parents.[4] Regardless of such claims, the vision which permeates this novel, her memoirs, and Lewis's biography is of a society where social responsibility, punctilio, ritual and tradition are not only acknowledged, but adhered to reverently.

Wharton acknowledges her own schooling in the requisite social graces and in Victorian guidelines and sensibilities, with the result that she was forced to reconcile two quite disparate elements in her psyche: that of a well-bred, well-mannered debutante who had few interests outside the next social function, and that of an insatiable young intellectual who not only pursued her own interests, but expounded on them at inopportune moments. A picture emerges of a young girl, then woman, who became sufficiently enlightened to view New York society more objectively than might a committed participant.

Wharton's intellectual interest finally centered on the study of literature. At the turn of the century, most writers and critics operated under the influence of the dictum that good literature should entertain and instruct. The result of this assumption is that writers of mainstream literature integrated

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[4] Ibid, p. 24.

Victorian, Christian moral principles into their fiction. Authors like George Eliot, for instance, editorialize freely about characters and events through an omniscient narrator, and these three elements usually interweave towards a logical and morally-uplifting conclusion. And naturally, there is contentment in analyzing literature which reflects and reinforces a clearly-defined moral order, where every conflict evolves into an uplifting message defined by conventional wisdom. The variation involves only how entertaining the instruction will be.

Wharton, however, was able to move beyond George Eliot and towards a more modern perspective. That is not to suggest that she rejected Eliot's worth, for Wharton praised Eliot's abilities and consistently maintained Middlemarch on her lists of favorite books;[5] but as Wharton matured, the limitations for her in Eliot's vision became apparent:

> [Eliot] was a conservative in ethics. She felt no call to found a new school of morals. A deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition . . . is revealed in every page of her books.[6]

Clearly, the influence of Wharton's studies and her own intellectual growth, led to a broader perspective than that provided by the established morals of her day.[7]

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[5] Ibid, p. 75.

[6] Quoted in Ibid, p. 108.

[7] Wharton relates an anecdote in her memoirs about a critic outlining a standard rule for short-story writing: "Always? I rubbed my eyes. Here was a professional critic who seemed to think that works of art should be produced by rule of thumb, that there should be a fixed formula for the design of every

She found this perspective in her readings and through Winthrop's guidance, and her studies provided some sense of the cataclysmic changes occurring in European intellectual thought from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Darwin's Origin of Species, published in 1859 in England, revolutionized the accepted view of human history, and shifted the emphasis away from the traditional hierarchical view of man in relation to God and towards man's relationship with the environment as the determining factor in existence. Darwin's theories gained popularity and led to a shift in intellectual thought which contradicted the Genesis version of man's creation by suggesting that man is formed only by his heredity and by his environmental influences.

The realist trend in the 1860's and 1870's in Europe, represented best by Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and later, by Ibsen's plays, evolved to encompass the tenents of Darwinism and found voice in Emile Zola in France, who came to influence and to represent a whole generation of "naturalist" writers. The trend established by Zola in the 1870's and 1880's did not reach fruition in America until the turn of the century with Norris, Crane, and Dreiser, thus illustrating not only that European writers, specifically French writers, were trend setters insofar as adopting innovative philosophical modes of thinking were

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[7](cont'd) short story ever written or to be written! Even I already knew this was ridiculous." (A Backward Glance, p. 114.) Although Wharton refers here to literary technique rather than to moralism, her reaction illustrates her inability to comply with conventional attitudes and conventions.

concerned, but also that American writers lagged a whole generation behind their European counterparts in adopting such innovations themselves.

While there is some difficulty in assessing the degree to which Wharton's more international outlook might have made her responsive to these new modes of thinking, it is very probable that she was highly receptive to these French writers by the time she was introduced to them in her mid-twenties, because of her European experiences and her voracious appetite for knowledge. Lewis lists her favourite books for 1898, the year before her first collection of stories, The Greater Inclination, is published, and the list is dominated by nineteenth-century French novelists.[8] Thirty-five years later, in her memoirs, she remembers vividly the impact of "the wonder-world of nineteenth century science":

> [Winthrop] made known to me . . . the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement. But it is idle to prolong the list, and hopeless to convey to a younger generation the first over-whelming sense of cosmic vastnesses which such 'magic casements' let into our little geocentric universe.[9]

Wharton's own evolution as a writer thus is intertwined with her exposure to and stimulation by Darwinism and its literary counterpart, naturalism.

As well as the naturalist approach to literature, there were, at the same time, other theories being developed in quite

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[8]Lewis, Biography, p. 86.

[9]Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 94.

different ways, most notably by Henry James and Joseph Conrad, who attempted to articulate in theory and in practice the ways and means of best illustrating their artistic assumptions. James suggests that a novel must be a direct reflection of life, and as such, the use of an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator is contradictory by its very definition. Instead, the writer must use a center of consciousness to unify the work to focus all the elements through a particular perspective.[10]

Conrad suggests that novels should not be simply vehicles for propaganda or moral directives, but rather an accumulation of impressions gathered and reflected indirectly, as one would in life, and any philosophy or doctrine appears only through a cumulative series of impressions.[11] Such premises shift the emphasis from writer as moral instructor to writer as reflector of society's weaknesses and strengths studied from a particular subjective point of view. In such theories, James and Conrad established technical criteria for themselves and for other writers, including Wharton, which undermine the conventional approach to writing.

As an admirer of James's early work especially, and as a writer of the subsequent generation, Wharton was exposed to such innovations, and understood the emphasis on narrowing the point of view in a quickly-changing world where no-one could possibly

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[10]Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in The Future of the Novel, (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), pp. 3-27.

[11]Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), pp. xxxvi-xlii.

provide answers to every problem based on unquestioned moral guidelines. That is not to suggest that Wharton followed the theories of James and Conrad. There is, indeed, much evidence throughout Lewis' biography to suggest that she rejected many of James' theories. Such exposure, however, revealed that alternative approaches to the function of literature generally, and to the use of point of view specifically, were not only possible, but necessary to modern sensibilities.

By the time Wharton published her first collection of short stories in 1899, she brought to her writing more knowledge and maturity than would the average neophyte; already thirty-eight years old at the turn of the century, Wharton's thoughtful reading covered the whole historical and cultural range, from the Bible and the Greeks and Romans, through the European Renaissance, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and her own European, British, and American contemporaries. Lewis describes Wharton as "one of the most intelligent American women who ever lived."[12] She was able to surround herself finally with the intelligensia of America, and later, of France and, to a lesser degree, of England. She was fully versed in the technical theories propounded by James, whom she later counted as a close friend and intellectual companion.

Moreover, she had established a very strong sense of the rituals and traditions of society, of the limitations and narrowness imposed upon the individual, by virtue of her

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[12] Lewis, Biography, p. xii.

uncommitted involvement with a very structured and ordered society in New York, counterbalanced with on-going and extensive travels and her eventual expatriation in Europe. This amalgam of time, place, circumstance, interests, and abilities provided Wharton with a very well-considered perspective on the world.

As a result, she did not simply duplicate traditional techniques, but rather, developed her own theory regarding point of view, which she outlines in The Writing of Fiction:

> In the interest of . . . unity it is best to shift as seldom as possible and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole.[13]

In contrast to Eliot, who uses an omniscient narrator to spell out the moral implications, Wharton makes the drama and the interplay of characters alone create the meaning. This technique leads not to conclusions based on one specific character's actions, or on editorial commentary, but on the totality of the drama and on the general implications arising out of the interplay of characters. This technique demands that the reader assess the interplay and draw his or her own conclusions.[14]

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[13]Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, (London: Scribner's, 1925), p. 87-8.

[14]For this same reason, Wharton cannot be considered a satirist, although there certainly are satiric elements in many of the novels. While she does use irony, and she does expose the limitations in society, she does not do so from a position of moral superiority, nor does she provide a viable alternative.
In European Romantic Irony (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1958), Morton Gurewitch outlines specifically the differences

In contrast to James, Wharton posits that the individual exists as part of a complex and demanding social structure. In A Backward Glance, Wharton relates her comments to James regarding The Golden Bowl: "What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters . . . in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the human fringes we necessarily trail after us in life?"[15] Whereas Wharton feels that James allows his characters to operate in isolation, she utilizes her own literary theories to substantiate her beliefs about the effect of societal pressures on the individual. Moreover, although both James and Wharton layer several angles of vision to create "reflecting consciousnesses," James uses a particular character to provide a

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[14](cont'd) between satire and irony: "Perhaps the fundamental distinction between irony and satire, in the largest sense of each, is simply that irony deals with the absurd, whereas satire treats the ridiculous. The absurd may be taken to symbolize the incurable and chimerical hoax of things, while the ridiculous may be accepted as standing for life's corrigible deformities. This means that while the manners of men are the domain of the satirist, the morals of the universe are the preserve of the ironist.

Irony, unlike satire, does not work in the interests of stability. Irony entails hypersensitivity to a universe permanently out of joint and unfailingly grotesque. The ironist does not pretend to cure such a universe or to solve its mysteries. It is satire that solves. The images of vanity, for example, that litter the world's satire are always satisfactorily deflated in the end; but the vanity of vanities that informs the world's irony is beyond liquidation (p. 9).

[15]A Backward Glance, p. 191.

moral stance,[16] while Wharton purposely fails to provide any moral stance at all.[17] To suggest that Wharton simply copies the technique of Eliot and James, and not too successfully, then, is to disregard not only Wharton's intelligence and skill, but also her own well-defined theories of discourse.[18]

Moreover, to suggest that her enthusiastic response to Darwinism is simply a wholesale commitment to a then-fashionable literary approach, as many critics have suggested, and to presume that Wharton only replicated French naturalism within the narrow confines of an American setting, does not coincide with the picture of this very discerning, perceptive woman which has survived through all the misconceptions. That is not to suggest that naturalism in itself is not a valid literary approach, but Wharton's vision and skill go beyond such confines. Instead, she utilizes some of the elements of

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[16]Henry James, "Preface to What Maisie Knew", in The Art of the Novel, (New York: Scribner's, 1934), pp. 140-59.

[17] Cynthia Griffin Wolff points to the lack of a moral in her discussion of The Custom of the Country: "Nothing is less certain than the moral relationships among the parti-colored crew, for there is no moral center within the world of this novel, no fixed set of principles according to which we may systemically evaluate its characters. We may sympathize now with one, now with another, but the final judgment of any individual must be ambiguous" [A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 232.] While Wolff addresses this issue only in relation to The Custom of the Country, her analysis actually is applicable to all of Wharton's fiction, and provides a means to resolve the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions.

[18]In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton actually outlines what she sees as limitations in Eliot's and James's use of point of view, and discusses their approach in relation to Conrad's theories and to her own (pp. 88-98).

naturalism in order to formulate her own particular approach.

Like the naturalists, Wharton also situates her characters within a clearly-defined milieu. But unlike the naturalists, who feel that the individual is subject to the vagaries of society and is without the strength or will to withstand external pressures, Wharton acknowledges that the individual is capable of making choices as a means of seeking personal fulfillment. Therefore, Wharton is not a naturalist, although the influence of naturalism is evident. Instead, she describes herself as a realist and as a novelist of manners, and focuses on the individual's attempt to fulfill his own needs in the face of his own fears and in the face of the pressures and conventions of society.[19]

As an uncommitted member of her own society, Wharton probably sensed the subtle and insidious pressures put by the group onto the individual to conform; that group always is described in the novels as the "herd" or the "tribe", and suggests Wharton's sense of the community as an unthinking but powerful adversary which perpetuates specific values and beliefs. In The Age of Innocence, the community is rigid and punctilious, while in The House of Mirth, turn-of-the-century New York changes as Lily Bart moves downward through the various levels of society. In Ethan Frome and Summer, the community is

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[19]This description suggests that Wharton acknowledges a debt more to Howells and the realist tradition than to the naturalists and James. Howells, she felt, "was the first to feel the tragic potentialities of life in the drab American small town". (Quoted in A Backward Glance, p. 147-8.)

represented by small New England towns, where one or a few characters embody conventional values, and in The Custom of the Country, the community encompasses not only small-town America, but New York and Europe as well. In each of these cases, the community or its representative articulates the social boundaries for each member in order to maintain acceptance within the group. For Wharton then, society at its most basic, or at its most complex, provides a clearly-defined framework which informs each member's consciousness.

Each of Wharton's protagonists reveals the degree to which he or she has absorbed the values of his or her particular milieu. Lily Bart's commitment to expediency echoes the commitment of everyone around her, as does Newland Archer's dedication to the rituals of his group. Ethan Frome and Charity Royall both exhibit a strong sense of the cultural rules of New England, while in contrast, Undine Spragg illustrates how quickly the conventions of any particular group can be copied or tossed aside, given the desire of the individual to adapt to or to move within the various strata of society. All of these characters are active, if somewhat uncommitted, participants in their communities, thereby suggesting that withstanding the influences of family, friends, and neighbours is impossible.

These characters all mirror Wharton's own situation in that each is inculcated with the values of his or her own society, but at the same time, each has a particular personal quality which forbids complete absorption. That characteristic is a need

for something which cannot be found openly within the confines of the particular society, but which remains latent within the individual. As a result, each of Wharton's protagonists is disconnected from the community in a particular way, in spite of a general commitment to common values.

The manner in which each protagonist's latent need is awakened also is similar. In each case, an outsider, or at least someone who offers an alternative perspective, exerts sufficient influence to provide a contrast to the conventions of the community, and forces the protagonist to reevaluate his or her own particular situation. In The House of Mirth, Lawrence Selden offers Lily a vision of spiritual grace which contrasts dramatically with the exigencies of her precarious existence, just as in Summer, Lucius Harney offers Charity a feeling for the potentiality of life beyond the narrow confines of North Dormer. In Ethan Frome and The Age of Innocence, Mattie Silver and Ellen Olenska represent for Ethan and Newland an escape from dull and meaningless, albeit responsible, relationships, just as in The Custom of the Country, Elmer Moffatt, Ralph Marvell, and others, reveal to Undine the possibilities of life beyond each successive level she inhabits. The fact that such stimulus is provided by outsiders suggests that the community is self-perpetuating and inward-looking, which has portentous overtones for those whose needs are different.

While there is a central character, then, on whom Wharton specifically focuses, the protagonist always is contrasted with

one or more other characters who embody the values of the community, and with an outsider who provides an alternative perspective. The interplay between these characters creates the "reflecting angles of vision" to which Wharton refers in her discussion of point of view, and the "reflecting consciousnesses" forms the "drama".[20] Lily, for instance, is caught between the expediencies of her society and the spiritual directives which Selden provides; Charity is caught between the social restraints which lawyer Royall embodies and Harney's potentiality. Ethan and Newland each are caught between a conventional woman and one who represents the unique, while Undine contrasts with Ralph Marvell and several others to point to specific elements in the American psyche. The struggle of the protagonist to reconcile these quite contradictory elements, as they are embodied by various characters, forms the nucleus of each novel.

The nature of these struggles therefore is important. When Wharton's protagonists are faced with the conflict between their need for what the outsider offers, and the restrictions of their community, they attempt, in each case, with the notable exception of Undine Spragg, to resolve the problem according to philosophical ideals or traditional Christian morality. And in each case, these guidelines prove at best limiting and at worst,

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[20] In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton suggests that this technique resolves potential problems in narrative and chronology ". . . by shifting the point of vision from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet preserve the unity of impression" (p. 87).

destructive. Consequently, the community provides an important frame of reference, but the moral directives arising from that frame of reference do not equip the individual to deal with their needs within the context of the human community. This apparent contradiction suggests that society at large does not subscribe to the beliefs that it demands of the individual, which undermines the basic assumption that moral beliefs and values provide the foundation of civilized society.

Whereas Wharton feels that Eliot accepted conventional Christian morality as a guideline in her artistic vision, Wharton herself sees the limitations in the wholesale acceptance of such unquestioned beliefs, especially when applied to the struggle for personal fulfillment. Escaping from the restrictions of society does not resolve this conflict, however, which Wharton pointedly illustrates in the reaction of the protagonists to those who do escape. For Charity, the people of the mountain seem almost sub-human, while for Newland, Ellen's exotic existence is compelling, but at the same time, it is unfamiliar, foreign, and frightening. More importantly, those who do withdraw matter far less to Wharton than those who remain, which suggests that in her terms, escape is merely an evasion of rather than a solution to an all-encompassing conflict. The struggle thus becomes greater than that of the individual striving to fulfill individual needs in the face of a restrictive community; rather, Wharton's protagonists reveal that those guided by philosophical ideals or inculcated with

traditional Christian morality are ill-equipped to deal with a world operating under more contingent criteria.

Wharton's perception of the limitations in philosophical ideals and traditional morals leads to a significant shift in emphasis. In response to criticism of one of her books, Wharton replied: "I am never interested in the misfortunes of my personages, only in their psychological evolution."[21] Wharton seems to suggest in this comment that she is less interested in what happens to the characters than she is in the reasons why they act, choose, and evolve as they do.[22] Athough this approach is clearly naturalistic, Wharton provides the additional element of evaluating the philosophical tools and moral criteria available to these characters as they attempt to reconcile their needs within the conventions of society. In each case, however, the individual makes conscious and deliberate choices, and to

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[21] Quoted in Lewis, Biography, p. 327.

[22] Wharton defines her approach in yet another way, but the underlying methodology remains consistent: "In this [fictional] world are begotten and born the creatures of [the author's] imagination, more living to him than his own flesh-and-blood, but whom he never thinks of as living, in the reader's simplifying sense. Unless he keeps his hold on this dual character of their being, visionary to him, and to the reader real, he will be the slave of his characters and not their master. When I say their master, I do not mean that they are his marionettes and dangle from his strings. Once projected by his fancy, they are living beings who live their own lives; but their world is the one consciously imposed on them by their creator. Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art" (Writing of Fiction, p. 120). By creating "realistic" characters who must interact within clearly-defined limits, the intellectual aspects are never subjugated in favour of the predictable or the sentimental. In this way, the underlying implications are as important as the character's actions.

this extent, he or she is master of their own destiny.

This is an important distinction to make in comparison to other writers: Wharton feels that Eliot's characters also operate within a clearly-defined moral structure, but misfortune occurs when the guidelines are ignored or abused, and fortune returns when the error is recognized and corrected. The naturalists, in contrast, suggest to Wharton that there are no guidelines to follow and so the individual only can flounder helplessly within the context of a capricious and mutable social structure. Wharton, like Eliot, sees the struggle pre-eminently in moral terms, but Wharton questions many of the basic moral assumptions usually taken for granted. Consequently, there is no moral center or touchstone to reveal the value in suffering or to link a character's pain with any apparent lesson. In not providing a moral center, Wharton undermines the then-popular traditional expectations for literature.

Wharton's description of herself as a realist and as a comedian of manners thus is in keeping with her philosophical perspective. She sees the inevitablity of a well-defined social structure; she accepts that most are absorbed into that structure and unthinkingly absorb the values and beliefs prescribed therein. The social framework which defines and gives meaning to each individual's existence, however, simultaneously inhibits any personal or spiritual growth in those whose needs are different. In each case, the individual who sets himself apart faces a struggle for which he is ill-equipped.

Ultimately, the implications which arise from the evolution of the characters reveal that any commitment to Christian values and beliefs, to philosophic ideals, requires either that the individual ignore the pressures of his existence, or that he ignore his own needs.[23] In The House of Mirth, for example, Lily struggles between economic exigencies and her attraction to ethical considerations. In Summer, Charity is used to examine sexual relationships reduced to the most essential level. In The Custom of the Country, Undine is used to present a relentless analysis of the kind of female and the kinds of survival skills necessary in a world without idealism or values, and where upper-class tradition has atrophied into empty and decadent dilettantism. In Ethan Frome, the protagonist struggles with the conflict between his sense of duty and his desire for emotional contentment, while in The Age of Innocence, Newland flounders between his social needs and his intellectual sensibilities.

Because Wharton does not offer a moral center to justify or to clarify the reasons for suffering, because her characters do not experience spiritual growth as a consequence of their struggles, and because she does not temper realities with platitudes or contrived reconciliations, the individual flounders only in relation to conventional values and social pressures. Whether that society is a reflection of rural 1870 or

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[23]Wharton comments in another context about this contradiction: "There are times when I hate what Christianity has left in our blood--or rather, one might say, taken out of it--by its cursed assumption of the split between body and soul" (Quoted in Feast of Words, p. 153).

1890 New York, or whether it is a reflection of rural New England or the world in general, Wharton's approach is consistent. Whether that individual is an eighteenth-century Prince of Italy, an aspiring artist on the Hudson River, or a father concerned about his son's involvement in World War I; whether the community is historic or contemporary, complex or straightforward, artistic or agrarian, the modus operandi remains similar in that the struggle of the individual to reconcile his own needs, according to irrelevant values within a conventional framework, informs each novel.

The novels taken for consideration in this study are chosen because they are well-written, and deal specifically with interpersonal relationships. Moreover, chronological order is ignored in favour of thematic juxtapositions and contrasting emphases. Although Summer was published twelve years after The House of Mirth, and seems quite different, there are sufficient similarities to warrant their consideration in the same context. Similarly, in The Custom of the Country, the female protagonist is transformed from victim to victor, so Undine Spragg's evolution logically contrasts with Lily's and Charity's. For the same reason, although Ethan Frome was published in 1911, it more properly complements The Age of Innocence, published in 1920. These five novels separately reveal the wide range of Wharton's artistic sensibilities, and together they address specific aspects concerning the individual in any social structure. By testing certain assumptions about the interrelationship between

the individual and his social and ethical framework, what seems valid and worthwhile in theory, proves irrelevant or self-destructive in practice.

For this reason, Wharton did not endear herself to the critics. Just as her characters are forced to reevaluate their own assumptions about morality, her technique makes the same demands of the reader. Not only does Wharton refuse to spell out any moral lesson according to conventional expectations, but more importantly, she also forces the reader to reassess some basic assumptions about social and sexual roles. Wharton's perceptions about morality, her understanding of society, and her literary technique, thus combine to create a unique perspective in her fiction. But by moving away from Eliot and the traditionalists, and from James and the naturalists, she also moves beyond the expectations of the literary establishment, and makes herself victim to the critical backlash.

II. The Critical Response

Wharton's relationship with the critical audience until very recently has been at best tenuous. Many of her contemporaries felt that she was misguided, immoral, and without artistic or imaginative skill. Moreover, specific myths grew out of misconceptions about her life which suggested that she was a snobbish, affluent society lady who was emotionally unstable, sexually frustrated, and sociologically alienated from the real world, and whose dedication to Henry James and George Eliot was dampened only by her inability to imitate them well. The evolution of these myths is worth tracing with Wharton, because so much is revealed about the critical process. More importantly, such exploration explains why Wharton has not yet secured a prominent position in the literary mainstream.

The limitation around which critical discussion centered for a long time concerned, ironically, Wharton's personal life. What began with tenuous assumptions with critics like Percy Lubbock, V. L. Parrington, E. K. Brown, and others, provided the foundation on which many misconceptions grew, simply because those early assumptions were never tested. By the 1950's, there were two camps: those who felt Wharton was morally reprehensible and artistically limited; and those who felt that, in spite of obvious artistic limitations, Wharton does present perceptions worthy of consideration. By the 1960's, critics were struggling

with the conflict between their own expectations and her inability to satisfy those expectations, although their reservations were not so openly defined. Not until the 1970's do critical assumptions evolve sufficiently to encompass the sensibilities which Wharton addressed sixty years before, assisted, ironically, by Wharton herself with the release of her personal papers in 1968. In their response then, the critics do Wharton a grave injustice: she was expected to perpetuate and reinforce specific assumptions in her fiction, and her failure to comply with such expectations led not to new ways of perceiving, but to a wholesale rejection of her work as being invalid, or irrelevant, or irreverent. She thus was condemned according to criteria which do not apply but which provided critics the opportunity of perpetuating their own beliefs.

Wharton's perceptions jarred the critical audience from the start. While reviewers of The House of Mirth are consistent in their praise for her technique and style,[1] and while some praise her penetrating and relentless judgement,[2] most feel that the book is plotless[3] and Wharton is accused of limited creative

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[1]Th. Bentzon, "Le Monde ou l'on s'amuse aux Etats-Unis," Revue de Deux Mondes (1 November 1906) [data incomplete], in Marlene Springer, A Reference Guide to Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin, (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976), p. 19.

[2]Anonymous, "A Notable Novel," Outlook LXXXI (21 October, 1905), pp. 404-06, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 14.

[3] Anonymous, "Review of The House of Mirth," Academy LXIX (4 November, 1905), p.1155, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 15.

powers,[4] of using, at best, "ephemeral subjects,[5] or at worst, "impleasant"(sic) and uncontrasting characters.[6] Lily is accused of being "coldly corrupt,"[7] of "phenomenal ignorance of money matters,"[8] of being entitled to a "less brutalizing environment," which "any fair-minded creator would have provided . . ."[9] The subject is condemned for its shallowness,[10] for its concern about the "vain and vulgar upper-class";[11] Wharton is condemned for not observing "the tenets of realism,"[12] and for her "indefiniteness [about] the 'better

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[4]Anonymous, "The House of Mirth," Times Literary Supplement , (1 December, 1905), p. 421, in Springer, A Reference Guide, pp. 15-6.

[5]Anonymous, "Mrs. Wharton's Latest Novel", Independent LIX (20 July, 1905), in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 13.

[6]Olivia Howard Dunbar, "A Group of Novels," Critic XLVII (December, 1905), pp. 509-510, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 16.

[7]Anonymous, "Review of The House of Mirth," Saturday Review (London), CI (17 February, 1906), pp. 209-10, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 18.

[8]C. L. Franklin, "Women and Business," Bookman, XXIV (November, 1906), pp. 249-50, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 19.

[9]Anonymous, "Idle Notes by an Idle Reader," Critic XLVIII (May 1906), pp. 463-4, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 18.

[10]Mary Moss, "Notes on New Novels, Atlantic Monthly XCVII (January, 1906), pp. 52-53, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 19.

[11]William Morton Payne, "Recent Fiction," Dial, XL (1 January, 1906), pp. 15-16, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 19.

[12]H. D. Sedgwick, "The Novels of Mrs. Wharton," Atlantic Monthly XCVIII (August, 1906), pp. 217-28, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 19.

part' which Selden has to offer."[13]

The Custom of the Country fares little better: Wharton's reputation is said to be on the decline, and her "heroine is a mere monster of vulgarity . . ."[14] while another comments that "the subject itself, and [Wharton's] treatment of it, are at this stage of the development of fiction decidedly beneath her . . . . The situations are banal, the treatment of feminine nature is unnecessarily coarse."[15] Yet another suggests that "even her skill has not saved her from exaggeration, unrealities, and repetitions."[16]

Summer is seen as a "sordid and ugly story,"[17] and although "one feels pity . . . one also feels dragged without much purpose through these fictional sorrows."[18]

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[13]Alice Meynell, "The House of Mirth," Bookman (London) XXIX (December, 1905), pp. 130-31, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 17.

[14]H. W. B., "Mrs. Wharton's Manner," Nation XCVII (30 October, 1913), pp. 404-5, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 35.

[15] E. F. E., "Edith Wharton's New Novel: An Extremely Conventional Portrayal of the Social Climber," Boston Evening Transcript (18 October, 1913), Pt. 3, p. 8, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 36.

[16]Robert Herrick, "Mrs. Wharton's World," New Republic II (13 February, 1915), pp. 40-42, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 39.

[17]Anonymous, "Novels Whose Scenes are Laid in New England," Review of Reviews LVI (September, 1917), p. 333, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 43.

[18]Anonymous, "The New Books," Outlook CXVI (1 August, 1917), p. 522, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 43.

With Ethan Frome, the praise for Wharton's "structural skill and feeling for style"[19] continues, but she is faulted for her preference for showing "life in its tragic aspects, but without the deep sympathy and tolerance of the greatest novelists."[20] Another suggests that "she does not understand the New England character,"[21] which may be a reflection of the critic's own lack of understanding. Yet another feels that "there are things too terrible in their failure to be told humanly by creature to creature,"[22] while yet another echoes concern for her cruelty, her "utter remorselessness."[23]

With the publication of The Age of Innocence, critics say that Wharton's work is "cold,"[24] that her subject is "trite,"[25] and full of "troops of obsequious and efficient white

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[19]Anonymous, "Half a Dozen Stories," Outlook XCIX (21 October, 1911), p. 405, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 41.

[20]Anonymous, "Three Lives in Supreme Torture," New York Times Book Review (8 October, 1911), p. 603, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 41.

[21]Elizabeth S. Sergeant, "Idealized New England," New Republic III (8 May, 1915), pp. 20-1, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 39-40.

[22]Anonymous, "Review of Ethan Frome," Saturday Review (London) CXII, (18 November, 1911), p. 650, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 41.

[23] F. T. Cooper, "Ethan Frome," Bookman XXXIV (November, 1911), p. 312, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 41-42.

[24]Katherine Mansfield, "Family Portraits," Athenaeum (London) No. 4728 (10 December, 1920), pp. 810-11, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 51.

[25]B. F., "The Age of Innocence," New Republic XXIV (17 November, 1920), pp. 301-02, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 51.

domestics."[26] The story is seen as "thin and familiar,"[27] full of historical inaccuracies," and more importantly, her sympathy for Ellen is unfounded and the subject therefore "lacks conviction of truth;"[28] that although Ellen is said to be charming, she "does not in the least produce that effect."[29]

By suggesting that Wharton's intolerance or her use of abnormal people and situations[30] are limitations in her artistic vision, each critic absolves himself of the need to look beyond his own assumptions and expectations. Consequently, the emphasis does not center on the implications of the issues presented, but instead centers on concerns which have little relation to the substance of the fiction. The criticism that Lily is "coldly corrupt," that Undine is "coarse," and that Summer is "sordid and ugly," all reflect a feeling of distaste for the presentation of the various subjects. The criticism that Wharton does not understand the New England temperament stems from the same response that her subject matter is insignificant. Her

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[26]Anonymous, "The Innocence of New York," Saturday Review (London) CXXX (4 December, 1920), p. 458, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 50.

[27]A. E. W. Mason, "The Age of Innocence," Bookman LII (December, 1920), p. 1195, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 51.

[28]Anonymous, "Mrs. Wharton's Novel of Old New York," Literary Digest LXVIII (5 February, 1921), p. 52, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 53.

[29]Lillian Whiting, "Novels on the Season's List," Nation CXI (27 October, 1920), pp. 479-80, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 53.

[30]Anonymous, "Half a Dozen Stories," Outlook XCIX (21 October, 1911), p. 405, in Springer, A Reference Guide, p. 41.

perceptions are seen as incorrect, or too realistic, or unrealistic, or simply not pleasant.

In 1921, V. L. Parrington sums up these feelings in his discussion of The Age of Innocence, which he feels is affirmation of Wharton's "severe ethical code..." and that,

> . . . she belongs in spite of herself to the caste which she satirizes. . . . If she had lived less easily, if she had been forced to skimp and save and plan, she would have been a greater and richer artist. . . . for Mrs. Wharton to spend her talents upon rich nobles is not less than sheer waste.[31]

He goes on to criticize Wharton for being "unnecessarily irritat[ing] because she reveals so unobtrusively how much she knows and how perfect is her breeding." Such comments may reveal more about the critic's own prejudices and assumptions than they do about Wharton's ability, as well as contradicting other comments about her sordid, coarse, and corrupt characters; yet somehow, Wharton's social position becomes a justification for criticizing her presentation of subject matter, either because she is too closely associated with it, or because she is too far removed from it. But because of Wharton's technical skill, powerful style, and her popularity with the reading public, she could not be ignored on the basis of such assessments.

Consequently, a dichotomy was created by critics trying to assess Wharton's worth against their own particular values. Percy Lubbock epitomizes this dichotomy in an article written in

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[31]V. L. Parrington, "Our Literary Aristocrat", Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, Irving Howe (ed.), (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 151-154.

1915: although he contends that Wharton's novels to date are "penetrating and finely finished studies," his analysis serves to highlight his sense of their limitations more than their qualities. He then sums up: "[The novels'] curious lack of anything that could be disengaged as a philosophy of life, a characteristic synthesis of belief, is no doubt their weakness from one point of view . . ."[32] For Lubbock, as for others, this lack is seen as a limitation, and he attempts to show how Lily's "fineness of grain, her central independence of spirit," saves her from a futile existence through death, which he follows with criticisms about Wharton's presentation.[33] This dichotomy between critical expectations and admiration for her skill and popularity leads to the assumption that Wharton has specific artistic limitations, which she tries to overcome with her choice of subject matter and with her persistence in showing the degraded aspects of life.

Like Lubbock, there were other critics, most notably E. K. Brown, who in 1933, attempted to show that Wharton, in fact, does follow traditional concepts in her literary endeavors, and any discrepancies are a reflection of artistic limitations. Brown suggests not only that she is a disciple of Henry James, but that she is comparable to George Eliot in that both

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[32]Percy Lubbock, "The Novels of Edith Wharton," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 43-60.

[33]Lubbock suggests that Lily lives in such close proximity to those who ostracize her that she could not escape their notice, which seems to miss Wharton's point.

"transcend the limitations of [their] sex [to find] ease in a man's world."[34] In making such comments, Brown reveals more about his own preconceptions than he does about Wharton's ability, and implies that she is judged against a meaningless double standard.

Although Brown points out that Wharton takes umbrage with Eliot's technique of "continuously pausing to denounce and exhort," he clarifies Wharton's comments in his own terms by suggesting that "it is not the morality, but the crudity of its presentation which repels her. For she is too profoundly and pertinaciously occupied with moral issues: her morality is not excrescent but inherent." He does not, however, define the process by which Wharton presents her morality, but simply concludes that hers is a morality that "emerges from the social order and the civilization and cannot be imposed upon it." By comparing Wharton to Eliot in this way, Brown presumes that they are operating under similar criteria, albeit with different techniques, and the failure of Brown and later critics to pin down Wharton's moral vision is seen as a limitation in her abilities.

Another result of Brown's incomplete analysis is the presumption that Wharton is a disciple of Henry James. Brown begins his discussion by quoting Lubbock's statement that a good

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[34]E. K. Brown, "Edith Wharton: The Art of the Novel," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 95-102. Blake Nevius later reiterates this position in his critical discourse, Edith Wharton, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), p. 31.

story is one which "is centered in somebody's consciousness, passed through a fashioned and constituted mind . . ."[35] Without acknowledging that Lubbock is more obviously the Jamesian disciple, Brown follows the Lubbock quotation with Wharton's discussion of "reflecting consciousnesses," already quoted, but worth including again for this purpose:

> In the interest of . . . unity it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole.[36]

As Wharton clearly spells out that her technique is to use reflecting consciousnesses to provide contrasting angles of vision for her own particular literary purposes, Brown reveals his inability to see beyond his own misconceptions. And yet, he proceeds to show that, as the most Jamesian, The Reef is the most successful of her novels. Like the comparison to Eliot, then, the comparison to James also provides criteria by which to judge Wharton's fiction. And naturally, because she does not follow rigidly Jamesian technique or principles, she is considered, at best, a pale imitation.[37]

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[35]Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 15.

[36]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 87-8.

[37]Another reason for such comparisons is the very close friendship that Wharton and James enjoyed, and the high regard which Wharton expressed for James.

The legacy of literary criticism like Brown's and Lubbock's is their influence on subsequent generations of critics who accept such premises without testing their validity. The assumption that Wharton is an affluent society lady who makes frivolous attempts to recreate fiction in the mode of James or Eliot, and who somehow misses the mark in terms of ethical excellence, becomes a fixed and unquestioned premise by most critics.[38] Writing in 1938, Q. D. Leavis weighs Wharton's morality against Eliot's and finds it lacking: "[Wharton] has none of that natural piety . . . and sense of moral order . . . in which George Eliot's local criticisms are embedded and which give the latter her larger stature."[39] And although in 1938, Edmund Wilson suggests in an article pointedly entitled "Justice to Edith Wharton," that the connection to James is irrelevant,[40] such connections continue to be made until the 1970's.[41]

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[38]Lewis suggests that Wharton herself may have contributed to these assumptions because of her reticence and modesty about her literary skill: "From middle age onward, she talked restrainedly about her work-in-progress with a few of her men friends, but for the most part she seems to have limited the talk to matters of technique and organization. She found it hard to believe herself worthy to discourse, from a personal standpoint, upon larger questions of the art of fiction and the creature experience (her collection of essays in this area, in 1925, addressed itself typically to the writing of fiction)" (Biography, p. 297).

[39] Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James' Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton," in Howe, A Collection, p. 87.

[40]Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", in Howe, A Collection , p. 20.

[41] The James connection is mentioned in 1941 by Alfred Kazin, in 1950 by J. L. Jessup, in 1958 by Blake Nevius, in 1961 by Louis Auchincloss, in 1962 by Irving Howe, in 1965 by Millicent Bell, and as recently as 1972 by James Tuttleton.

Other legacies which have done equal harm to Wharton's critical reputation stem from similar misconceptions. Wilson himself goes on to suggest in the same article that Wharton's writings were a theraputic means to reconcile personal unhappiness and that personal contentment leads to a diminishing of her artistic skills, because

> . . . it is sometimes true of women writers--less often, I believe of men--that a manifestation of something like genius may be stimulated by some exceptional emotional strain, but will disappear when the stimulus has passed.

His premise that this "intellectual force . . . evaporates almost completely after 1920," however, has little connection with the facts of her personal life as they were ultimately revealed.[42]

More importantly, such comments imply that generally, female intellectuality is somehow suspect, and that specifically, Wharton's failings as an artist are related directly to her sense of psychological contentment. The underlying implication here is that at best, Wharton's fiction consists of the revelations of a neurotic and unhappy woman, and any lack of morality must therefore be merely a reflection of her state of mind. Consequently, even as Wilson attempts to show justice to Wharton, his underlying assumptions provide another legacy which undermines her artistic reputation because of questions about her emotional stability.

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[42] In Wharton's biography, R. W. B. Lewis reveals that while she experienced traumas and discontentment in her life, she had resolved much of the cause of her unhappiness well before 1920.

Such presumptions begin to colour critical assessments of Wharton's fiction, and premises about her personal life and her limitations as an artist begin to permeate subsequent critical response. Alfred Kazin's comments regarding Wharton's position in American fiction, written in 1941, reflect and build on these conclusions accordingly: "To Edith Wharton, whose very career as a novelist was the tenuous product of so many personal maladjustments, the novel became in involuted expression of self."[43] While acknowledging her technical skill and sense of tragedy, the thrust of his article suggests that Wharton is a victim of her own breeding and that her "characters [are] the last proud affirmation of the caste quality"; that because Wharton is alienated from her New York roots and from the larger part of American society, characters like Selden reflect her personal dilemma. Selden then, comes to represent the touchstone of Wharton's philosophy, and his obvious shortcomings are seen as a reflection of Wharton's own philosophical shortcomings, valid or not.

Kazin concludes that she is a "grande dame" instead of an "objective novelist", that "she had no conception of America as a unified and dynamic economy, or even as a single culture." Moreover, because she is unable to reconcile her hopes with her life, "she ignored the parvenu altogether and sought refuge in nostalgia." Her fiction thus is seen as proof of her

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[43]Alfred Kazin, "Edith Wharton," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 89-94.

sociological alienation from American society, which leads to the conclusion that she is an idealistic, disillusioned aristocrat yearning for a by-gone era, and that her characterizations are expressions of her own empty ideals.

The ultimate detractor, however, is Percy Lubbock, who in 1947 published his book, Portrait of Edith Wharton. Ostensibly an expression "of her as friends knew her and as she lives in their memory,"[44] in actuality, Lubbock's account reveals many of his own prejudices. Lubbock presents Wharton as a "grande dame," but intimates that she is personally unhappy because of her unrequited relationship with Walter Berry.[45] Lubbock further contends that she was discontented with the retinue of clever guests with which she surrounded herself,[46] and that her decorous mien was really her method of exerting control over people and situations for her own particular ends.[47] Lubbock also suggests by implication that she was incapable of independent thought on important matters like Christian morality; he comments that Walter Berry wrongly encouraged Wharton's skepticism about Catholicism, a position which Lubbock

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[44]Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton, (London: J. Cape, 1947), p. 7.

[45]Noted in Edmund Wilson's article, "Edith Wharton: A Memoir by an English Friend," in Howe, A Collection, p. 173.

[46]Also noted in Wilson's article, pp. 174-5.

[47]Lubbock, Portrait, p. 23.

finds personally distasteful.[48]

Later research, however, suggests that much of Lubbock's commentary is highly questionable. Apart from the fact that Wharton's official biography contradicts many of Lubbock's statements about her personal relationships, Lubbock's comments also must be considered as possible revenge for an old battle: later revelations about a conflict concerning his wife,[49] suggest that Gaillard Lapsley's request that Lubbock write Wharton's portrait is the equivalent of asking Brutus to defend Caesar: not only does Lubbock possibly carry a personal grudge against Wharton,[50] but his dedication to Catholic morality raises doubts about his own objectivity on ethical questions.

Apart from such concerns about her personal life, Lubbock's literary evaluations also are highly suspect. As a committed Jamesian disciple, Lubbock weighs everyone against that

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[48]Wilson discusses the validity of Lubbock's assessments in light of the divergence in his beliefs and Wharton's. Noted in op. cit., p. 174.

[49]Biography, p. 475.

[50]Lewis's analysis reveals how extraordinary the choice of Lubbock actually was: "Given all these circumstances, it is profoundly puzzling that Gaillard Lapsley, as her executor, should have invited Percy Lubbock to write the memoir of Edith Wharton after her death, and that the choice should have been applauded by Berensen and Hugh Smith, who were equally privy to the finality of the breach. Even more disconcerting was the warm approval voiced by Edith's old friends when Portrait of Edith Wharton appeared in 1946. Literarily, it is undoubtedly a work of art . . . . But the book's most striking characteristic to the thoughtful reader is the subtly distributed malice toward its subject, a careful, muted downgrading of Edith Wharton as a human being and a writer. The picture that emerges is surreptitously false in many places" (Biography, 515-16).

particular approach; but as an Englishman unfamiliar with the mainstream of twentieth century American literature, except in connection with James, who considered himself out of touch with American concerns, Lubbock is hardly capable of evaluating Wharton's position in the American literary tradition. Yet, he suggests that her expatriation limits her artistic intentions,[51] which only echoes James' particular feelings on that subject,[52] and which has no basis in fact. Lubbock's unquestioning dedication to James and ignorance about twentieth century American literature should have raised serious questions about this commentary as a literary resource in Wharton study. Yet it was praised for its insights and accepted enthusiastically into Wharton criticism.

This then is the legacy provided by prejudice and critical misconceptions. The fact that Lubbock's portrait was considered for a long time a valuable and essential resource on Wharton,[53] reveals the far-reaching effects of such criticisms, in spite of Edmund Wilson's thoughtful response in 1950, which articulates many of the limitations pointed out here, and which culminates in his contention that "Her work . . . has never been . . .

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[51] Lubbock, Portrait, p. 69.

[52] Noted in Lewis, Edith Wharton, p. 567.

[53] Portrait of Edith Wharton is mentioned for its value in Nevius' 1958 study, in 1959 by Marilyn Lyde, and in 1962 by Irving Howe.

appreciated or interpreted as it should be."[54] He also quite correctly predicts that when her personal papers at Yale University are published, many of the "puzzling" aspects of her life will be clarified and will "show her in her full dimensions." Wilson thus reveals his own underlying assumption that a clear understanding of personal history is essential in evaluating an author's fiction; without actually stating the case, he suggests that Wharton at this point is trapped in a conception which does not seem to fit, but that she cannot presently escape because of the inability of critics to reconcile their presumptions about her life with the vision she presents in her fiction. Wilson's psychoanalytical bent restricts him from evaluating Wharton's work in its own terms, but simultaneously, he is confident that time itself and future revelations will secure for Wharton the respect he feels she is due.

The concern which colours every critic's perception for the subsequent fifteen years concerns Wharton's vision of morality. This suggests that E. K. Brown's and Q. D. Leavis' 1930's guidelines continue into the 1950's, and the presumption that good literature should illustrate and reinforce conventional Christian morality goes unquestioned. There are those like Diana Trilling, who attempt to show that in spite of obvious

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[54]Wilson, "A Memoir," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 172-6.

limitations, Wharton still warrants consideration, and those at the other extreme, like F. J. Hoffman and Lionel Trilling, who feel that whatever praise Wharton receives is undeserved, especially as her reputation deteriorates into little more than that of ladies' magazine writer in her later years and beyond. Wharton is so trapped in her role as a well-heeled, haughty, alienated, and romantically-frustrated lady dedicated to by-gone traditions that these assumptions provide the foundation of every critic's assessments.

Diana Trilling, for instance, in 1947 reevaluates The House of Mirth, to show that Wharton, as a good writer, does express a conventional vision of morality. Trilling suggests there are echoes of Henry James

> . . . in Selden's moral elevation and in the inviolability with which he inhabits an insensible world, as well as in his eager appreciation of beauty and his subtle wit. The intellectual of The House of Mirth and, in his quality of spirit, is as much an 'artist' as Lily. Selden, with his decent bachelor quarters, his good worn rugs and books, and his excellent modest teas . . . . argues the thesis that is everywhere implied in Mrs. Wharton's novel, and made explicit in his choice of a manner of life, that mind and grace of spirit reach their best flower in a well-ordered society, sheltered against the rude winds that blow through a more open world.[55]

Such a sympathetic evaluation not only presumes that Selden's high-blown sentiments are a reflection of Wharton's own, but that they reflect in their Jamesian echoes "moral elevation" in an "insensitive world," thereby assuming that there is an

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[55]Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 103-118.

identifiable moral center.[56]

In order to reconcile this premise about Selden with the facts presented, Trilling concludes that his "passions are blocked", and that he reasonably takes Lily's actions as "gross rejection" until she ultimately proves her worth in death. This interpretation shifts the responsibility from Selden onto Lily, who carries not only the weight of her own actions, but also the weight of Selden's inaction. Trilling further contends that "Lily affirms the absolute power of society over the life of the individual," and that Selden is as victimized as is Lily, which justifies his behavior. In so doing, Trilling appoints Selden as the exemplar, without demanding that he be exemplary.

Trilling takes exception, however, with Wharton's failure to provide a "more suitable form of employment for Lily--as, say, a governess or companion," and suggests that the way of life depicted "is bound to confound the modern reader." She concludes that in Lily Bart, Wharton "reveals the accumulated angers of a lifetime up to that point." Trilling's analysis reveals her attempt to pinpoint Wharton's moral perspective, and because this is not possible, any consistencies about Lily's evolution are seen as technical faults. Moreover, by blaming society for the limitations in the individual, Trilling absolves herself of any need to clarify the obvious contradictions.

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[56]Writing in 1959, Marilyn Lyde makes much the same argument, although she confronts the matter from a different angle [Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 114].

While Trilling attempts to rationalize the apparent contradictions, other less sympathetic critics use the lack of moral center as justification for condemning Wharton's approach. Writing in 1949, in "Points of Moral Reference: A Comparative Study of Edith Wharton and F S. Fitzgerald," F. J. Hoffman suggests that Wharton's moralistic perspective becomes outdated, but that because she is so obviously a victim of her own breeding, she can only "scoff at the past and at present distortions of it . . . . which leads usually to empty satire whose only virtue lies in its expedient acceleration of clever means."[57]

Seven years later, in 1956, Lionel Trilling entitles his article on Ethan Frome, "The Morality of Inertia." He comments that Wharton is "a woman in whom we cannot fail to see a limitation of heart, and this limitation makes itself manifest as a literary and moral deficiency of her work . . . . It appears in the deadness of her prose and more flagrantly in the suffering of her characters."[58] Such comments not only echo those of fifty years previously, but reveal that both Hoffman and Trilling begin with the unquestioned assumption that there is a moral center to all good literature, and the failure to provide one, or one as bleak as is Wharton's simply reveals her

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[57]F. J. Hoffman, "Point of Moral Reference: A Comparative Study of Edith Wharton and F. S. Fitzgerald," in Roy Harvey Pearce (ed.), English Institute Essays, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 147-76.

[58]Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 137-46.

weakness. In Hoffman's case, the limitations are seen to result from her breeding and commitment to by-gone values, while Trilling feels simply that Wharton is deficient.

Nowhere does Wharton criticism take on more ludicrous proportions, however, than in J. L. Jessup's 1950 full-length study of American women writers, The Faith of our Feminists. Ostensibly designed to reveal each novelist's "engrossing feminism . . ."[59] Jessup maintains in the Wharton section that "for the space of twenty novels she attempts to show women preeminent, man trailing at heel";[60] that "while none of her fiction lacks implicit statement of the anti-masculinist position, many stories sputter without fire."[61] This, Jessup concludes, is because Wharton creates female characters so superior to the male characters that the stories become unbalanced, as well as lacking credibility:

> The story of Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer depicts not star-crossed lovers, nor even the subdual of masculine lust by feminine chastity. What The Age of Innocence actually concerns itself with is the bleating of a pusillaninous mortal after a divinity . . .[62]

Jessup maintains that through Wharton's fiction, her "essential thesis [is consistent]: man is the lesser woman."[63]

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[59]J. L. Jessup, The Faith of our Feminists, (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), p. 13.

[60]Ibid, p. 14.

[61]Ibid, p. 16.

[62]Ibid, p. 18.

[63]Ibid, p. 20.

In The House of Mirth, Jessup suggests that

> Lily Bart presents herself as no strong character. For sobriety and cool judgement Lawrence Selden offers an ideal foil. But as is consistent with feminine composition, he remains a foil . . . . who intermittently appoints himself to save her from destruction by a frivolous society. [64]

And because Lily finds her own way to "an honourable death," feminism is somehow victorious.[65]

Ethan Frome, Jessup continues, "describes an acute case of frustration, but frustration for Ethan alone; the women manage to have their own way, if only to the extent of ordering about one man between them."[66] Summer "brings about feminine triumph upon a more felicitous level" because of the sympathetic rendering of Charity in comparison to Lawyer Royall and Lucius Harney.[67] The connection here with feminine triumph is tenuous at best, in view of the nature of Charity's relationship with these men, while the sympathetic evaluation of Ethan without even considering Zeena's and Mattie's situations, suggests that Jessup is actually a male chauvinist masquerading as a feminist.

These conclusions suggest that in her endeavor to evaluate Wharton, Jessup loses sight of her primary purpose. She states that male artists are able to render the feminine psyche perfectly, but female artists simply reveal their artistic

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[64] Ibid, p. 22.

[65] Ibid, p. 22.

[66] Ibid, p. 23.

[67] Ibid, p. 24.

limitations in their depictions of men;[68] that while men can acknowledge that they are "somehow worthy of the anguish woman suffers on his account . . . [woman] sees her own sex as bestowing, the other as ungratefully or negligently receiving."[69] The result of this limitation, Jessup feels, is that American female writers do not create female characters with the stature of the Russians' female characters, for instance,[70] which makes these American writers unworthy by comparison and "renders the effects of feminism almost entirely negative."[71] In Jessup's terms, Wharton proves no exception, and reveals that her "fiction denies that she ever entered into a rewarding friendship with a member of the other sex."[72] Such conclusions echo strongly of those from fifty years before, and have little to do with a discussion of Wharton's feminism.

In any case, these conclusions, and the fact that Wharton "failed to learn dependence upon that larger self which people of religion call God,"[73] provide Jessup with reasons for denigrating Wharton: by maintaining her independence from man and from God, Wharton's feminism deprives her of the dependence necessary to reach her potential as an artist. In fact, the only

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[68] Ibid, p. 76.

[69] Ibid, p. 83.

[70] Ibid, p. 84-5.

[71] Ibid, p. 85.

[72] Ibid, p. 92.

[73] Ibid, p. 102.

redeeming grace which Jessup finds in Wharton is the influence of her Episcopalian background which

> contributed restraint, decorum, and an austere quality of worldliness. If with her right hand, Mrs. Wharton sought to deny the font from which she had received baptism, her left hand quietly resumed its hold, so that nearing the end of a long life, she correctly appraised ancestral faith as a shaping influence in her art.[74]

The faith of the feminists thus is revealed as the Episcopalian faith, and any worth in Wharton's fiction is the result of her religious foundations, thereby connecting Wharton with a conventionally-religious moral foundation, however tenuous, as a basis for her artistic vision.

This premise, together with the underlying assumptions about Wharton's personal life, as well as Jessup's own negative evaluation of feminism, and her commitment to Episcopalianism and to the Russian writers, colour her reactions so completely that this study ultimately contradicts itself. That this "feminist" study was considered for a long time an essential literary resource on Wharton reveals not only how critics reinforce their own assumptions, but more importantly, that these assumptions remain unquestioned by too many critics using similar criteria.

While Jessup's book seems merely irrelevant in retrospect, Blake Nevius' 1953 study, Edith Wharton: A Study of her Fiction, is much more insidiously damaging because of its more scholarly basis. Relying heavily on Percy Lubbock's portrait, on facts and

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[74] Ibid, p. 107.

premises regarding Wharton's personal life drawn from A Backward Glance, and from her private papers, and using selected works of fiction, Nevius ostensibly sets out to show that Wharton deservedly needs to be resurrected for serious study on the basis of her careful documentation of the "contrast between the old culture and the new;" because "she is, next to Henry James, [the] most successful novelist of manners"; and because of her ability to exploit "two great and interlocking themes . . . . the first . . . provided by the spectacle of a large and generous nature . . . trapped by circumstances . . . with a meaner nature . . . . [The second] to define the nature and limits of individual responsibility . . . without threatening the structure of society."[75] He further suggests that these themes fall into F. R. Leavis' guidelines for "'the great tradition' in literature, where the drama unfolds itself pre-eminently in moral terms."[76]

In defining his purpose, Nevius suggests that "Wharton is closely allied in craftsmanship and sensibility . . . [with those] who surpassed her in intellectual force: George Eliot and Henry James."[77] These elements provide the criteria by which Nevius approaches his study, and the implications are clear: Nevius assumes, like E. K. Brown, Q. D. Leavis, and Diana

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[75]Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of her Fiction, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), pp. 9-10.

[76]Ibid, p. 10.

[77]Ibid, p. 10.

Trilling, that Wharton does reflect a traditional and identifiable moral standard comparable to Eliot and James, although not as successfully, and therefore, her specific value is based on her ability to emulate, and on her skill as a capable social historian.

In his attempt to define Wharton's value according to such criteria, Nevius reveals many of his own underlying assumptions which, like Jessup, suggests a contradiction in terms. He initially states that Wharton has been unjustly relegated as a Jamesian disciple,[78] and yet, Nevius then suggests that "with certain departures, The Writing of Fiction is a highly simplified restatement of James's basic theory of fiction . . ."[79] Nevius goes on to outline that "for James . . . every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values (importance of subject),"[80] which Nevius feels is echoed, albeit rather obscurely, by Wharton, who suggests "that a good subject . . . must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience."[81] Like Brown before him, then, Nevius also attempts to make Wharton fit into the existing mold, and any inconsistencies are blamed on her obscurity.

Nevius concludes that in spite of "Wharton's occasional oversimplifications, she and James are in perfect agreement",

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[78] Ibid, p. 22.

[79] Ibid, p. 31.

[80] Ibid, p. 31.

[81] Ibid, p. 32.

and that as "her own moral sensibility is progressively inadequate to the demands made upon it by her subjects," she only reveals her limitations.[82] This kind of comparative evaluation by Jamesian criteria continues throughout, with Wharton consistently denigrated: "But James' treatment of moral problems is freer than Edith Wharton's, because he deals more consistently with what, for a lack of a better term, might be called moral universals. Moreover, his tone is seldom ambiguous."[83] Such constant attempts to reveal Wharton as the lesser but imitative James only raises questions regarding Nevius' stated intention of disclaiming comparative analysis when he so obviously feels otherwise.

Nevius continues his discussion with specific reference to The House of Mirth, whose theme, he states, is "the victimizing effect of a particular environment on one of its more helplessly characteristic products."[84] Lily Bart, he feels, "remains, so far as the moral significance of her actions is concerned, until almost the end of the novel an essentially lightweight and static protagonist,"[85] and "there is no possibility of a genuine moral conflict until . . . as a result of suffering she experiences the self-realization which is the condition of any

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[82] Ibid, p. 33.

[83] Ibid, pp. 29-30 specifically, and on pp. 35, 92, 130, 134, 184.

[84] Ibid, p. 56.

[85] Ibid, p. 55.

moral growth."[86] Because of Nevius' commitment to his own assumptions, he is faced with the contradiction between his vision of Wharton as a traditional moralist, who reveals "an almost ironclad rectitude in the treatment of ethical questions,"[87] and his vision of the novel as an expression of naturalism. In his attempt to reconcile these elements, Nevius concludes that the moral significance arises out of the implications of determinism.[88]

More importantly, Nevius suggests that moral questions are secondary because "it was beyond Edith Wharton's powers of sympathy or imagination to create in Gerty or Selden attractive alternatives";[89] and that because of Wharton's failure to center on the "moral conflict instead of the external drama . . . she has learned very lttle from the later Henry James and is still inclined, as the master himself complained, to survey the psychological terrain from too great a height."[90] These conclusions suggest that Nevius, like Diana Trilling before him, sees Wharton's inconsistencies as technical faults, which he ascribes to her limited imagination. This point is reiterated several times: "Although it functioned generally at a mundane level, Edith Wharton's imagination could occasionally be roused

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[86] Ibid, p. 57.

[87] Ibid, p. 113.

[88] Ibid, p. 58.

[89] Ibid, p. 59.

[90] Ibid, p. 60.

to symbol-making activity . . ."[91] Because such comments contradict his initial premise that she has an "extraordinarily fertile imagination,"[92] Nevius's evaluations begin to lose credibility, as do his attempts to explain her morality.

He relates Wharton's sense of morality ultimately to her personal life, and in so doing, he reveals that as Edmund Wilson predicts, Wharton is trapped in an inescapable conception that colours any response to her fiction. Nevius feels that Wharton is "the least 'American' of [the] important novelists"[93] insofar as she reveals little knowledge of nineteenth-century American writers outside of James,[94] and instead suggests that, like James, she feels "the American writer 'must deal more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe,'"[95] which Nevius suggests leads "to conclusions that were extreme and unjustifiable and that betrayed more irritability than good sense."[96] He also states that "she demanded a fixed point of reference, which was provided by the manners of her class, but which in the end proved a handicap since it limited her

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[91] Ibid, p. 129.

[92] Ibid, p. 7.

[93] Ibid, p. 25.

[94] Ibid, p. 24. Nevius quotes Wharton's comment that Melville was merely an adventure writer as proof of her ignorance, but the fact that Melville was not appreciated by literary scholars until the 1940's only provides another example of Nevius' unfair appraisals.

[95] James is quoted in Ibid, p. 24.

[96] Ibid, p. 23.

vision."[97]

Nevius asserts that the men of Wharton's circle, including Walter Berry, lend "their charm, their detachment, their idealistic strength and practical weaknesses, to those of her male characters [like Selden, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer], whom Edith Wharton would have us admire."[98] To suggest that a character like Selden is admirable, to assume that Archer's commitment to empty rituals is positive, to assume that these characters are a reflection of Wharton's own values, is to underestimate her unfairly. But by so doing, Nevius can suggest that the limitations in Wharton's characters are simply reflections of her own limited perspective. Consequently, Nevius concludes that when "the manners which defined her world lost their reality and with it their moral significance, the understanding which she brought to bear on her subject . . . became more superficial."[99] In other words, Nevius suggests that Wharton's dedication to meaningless values so colours her perceptions that her artistic sensibilities become trapped. His discussion therefore becomes circular: her life reflects itself in her art and her art is a reflection of her life, but Nevius fails to consider whether her art reflects life in general and meaningful ways, beyond Wharton herself.

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[97] Ibid, p. 67.

[98] Ibid, pp. 92-4.

[99] Ibid, p. 67.

Nevius' critical bias becomes apparent in his constant comparisons of Wharton with other writers. The Reef echoes "strongly of James" and, "as a vehicle for her maturest style . . . is a tribute to her versatility in adapting style to subject."[100] Ethan Frome is Balzacian in its narrative framework,[101] as is The Custom of the Country, although it also displays many elements of the then popular "new woman" stories which conditioned the public "to meet the most egocentric and dehumanized female in American fiction."[102] The Age of Innocence strikes chords "by its resemblance to that earliest of 'modern novels', The Princess of Cleves," but it echoes of James and Balzac as well.[103] Summer, with its shades of Elsie Venner, is "a conventional nineteenth century novel of seduction. Except for the individuality of Lawyer Royall's contribution, it would be hard to find a triter situation in Edith Wharton's novels."[104]

The House of Mirth is, in Nevius' view, the notable exception: "Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of [the] theme . . . [of] the waste of human and spiritual resources . . ." but he concludes that she was influenced by science and by the "French naturalist

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[100]Ibid, p. 134.

[101]Ibid, p. 154-5.

[102]Ibid, p. 148.

[103]Ibid, p. 183-4.

[104]Ibid, p. 173.

traditions beginning with Flaubert."[105] That is not to suggest that comparisons are not an essential aspect of literary research, but comparisons like these imply that, although Wharton may be masterful in her ability to emulate, she is, however, completely unoriginal.

This same process occurs in his use of Lubbock's evaluations, which pervade the commentary, and which usually are of a negative nature. Nevius quotes Lubbock's statement: "The lively leap of her mind stopped when she was asked to think, I don't say about the meaning and the ends of life, but about almost any theoretic inquiry . . ."[106] Comments like these, with which Nevius seems to agree, are not considered in light of Lubbock's own dedication to the Catholic meaning of life, but rather, as yet further proof of Wharton's particuar intellectual limitations. And in conjunction with the constant comparisons with other writers, such comments reveal more about Nevius' and Lubbock's "trapped sensibilities" than about Wharton herself or her characters, but the end result is that Wharton's value as a literary figure becomes suspect.

This study actually becomes a condemnation of Wharton on the basis of incorrect assumptions about her life and her work because Nevius insists on seeing Wharton in the literary mainstream of the "great tradition". In so doing, he not only

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[105] Ibid , p. 55.

[106] Ibid, p. 167 specifically, but also such quotations appear on pp. 22, 86, 109, 245.

leaves Wharton no avenues for escape, but he also undermines his own purpose, and Wharton's credibility. Because Nevius appears so scholarly and supportive, however, his book was considered into the 1970's the best study available.[107]

While Nevius damns Wharton with faint praise, there are others, in contrast, who do make some attempt to approach her work more openly. Writing in 1958, Louis Coxe attempts to resolve "the problem of telling readers, some in the know, some outside, just what it is that strikes one as distinctive and impressive about [The Age of Innocence]."[108] He concludes that

> . . . one of the graces and delights . . . lies exactly in the multifariousness of its thematic material, in its refusal to tie itself down to meaning . . . . [and that] Wharton's realism strikes one as most sweeping in just her refusal to draw any . . . rightness and wrongness . . . she seems merely to say, that is the way things were for these people.

In this comment, Coxe reveals his attempt to understand the novel in and for itself primarily, rather than as an extension of Wharton's own life or beliefs, with the result that analysis of 1870's New York becomes very meaningful in relation to

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[107]Although Marilyn Lyde outlines many of Nevius' limitations in her 1959 study, as well as pointing out how Nevius boxes himself, and Wharton, into inappropriate classifications, Lyde did not create the impact which Nevius did. Not only is Nevius' contribution to Wharton acknowledged in 1962 by Irving Howe, in 1965 by Grace Kellogg, and in 1972 by Gary Lindberg, but The Bibliography of Americana points to Nevius as an essential resource in Wharton study.

[108]Louis Coxe, "What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 155-61.

America's limitations in general: "We may very well not like what we find. But when we do find it . . .we shall give Edith Wharton more of her due than she has yet received." Although this short article only touches this question, and certainly does not test the premise in relation to her work generally, Coxe does mark a turning point in Wharton criticism; he attempts to separate Wharton from her fiction by not aligning her with any one character or philosophical position. Rather, he suggests that the interplay and juxtapositioning of the characters, including Newland Archer's son, Dallas, reveal the strengths and the limitations of each in their own terms, and in relation to the others. By not narrowing his perspective to a search for moral truth then, Coxe is able to see beyond the usual conceptions.

Another critic who attempts to address Wharton more openly, albeit with a moralistic perspective, is Marilyn Lyde, in her 1959 full-length study, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist. Lyde's analysis seems to have originated, in part, at least, in reaction to Nevius's book, for she initiates her study by outlining reasons for what she considers to be unfair treatment of Wharton's moral vision, which stems, Lyde feels, from misunderstandings about Wharton's intelligence and her shy reticence.[109] Lyde concludes these introductory remarks with the premise which informs her book: by

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[109]Marilyn Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), pp. xiv-xvii.

evaluating the influences on and the ramifications concerning Wharton's moral philosophy, her concept of truth, the role of wealth and the tragic implications of life, the "exact nature of the relation . . . between social convention and morality . . . becomes evident."[110] Lyde suggests that "although belief in a Supreme Being has continued as an active influence in ordinary life, for a great many writers, it has virtually ceased to exist,"[111] and Wharton particularly rejects traditional Christian morality in favour of a rational philosophy based on the influences of Hamilton, Copell, Pascal, and Darwin.[112] By suggesting that Wharton's underlying philosophical tenets do not follow traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, but that her beliefs are based on discernible, logical formulations of thought, Lyde suggests, and in fact, states vehemently, that Wharton does have a strong moral base, albeit a unique one, which can be traced in her background and which is evident in her fiction.

In contrast with those critics who take exception with what is seen as Wharton's immoral or confusing or contradictory vision, Lyde's study becomes an attempt to illustrate the consistency between Wharton's philosophical position and the conflicts presented in the novels. Much of Lyde's study is given over to tracing the extent and impact of the philosophical influences in Wharton's background, together with assessing a

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[110] Ibid, p. xix.

[111] Ibid, p. 126.

[112] Ibid, p. 27.

moral vision based on logic, teleology, and on her love of clarity, order, belief,[113] truth and beauty,[114] which Lyde feels Wharton integrates for her own purposes: "The result was a fusion of all three into a single supreme good--a unity in which belief (the moral sense), beauty (taste), and truth (intelligence), were one. This concept was the foundation of Mrs. Wharton's theory of morality."[115]

The connection between morality and conventions, Lyde suggests, is found in their interplay: ". . . whether it conforms to or challenges the established order, individual morality needs convention as a guide, as a point of reference for determining relative values."[116] While Lyde's approach is limited by sometimes convoluted discussion, by more attention to Wharton's life than to her fiction, and by tenacious dedication to the belief that Wharton does reveal a strong moral center, Lyde does break through the traditional perspective by illustrating some flexibility in her approach, using logic, and punctilious definitions to illustrate her position.

Those critics who follow Coxe and Lyde, however, do not reveal this flexibility, but rather, follow the pattern established by Lubbock and Nevius. In two separate articles written in 1961, Louis Auchincloss ostensibly addresses

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[113] Ibid, p. 48.

[114] Ibid, p. 53.

[115] Ibid, p. 61.

[116] Ibid, p. 94.

Wharton's literary value, but in actuality, he works against his own position. The thrust of the first article is that initially Wharton writes of a world that she knows completely, but as it changes and she loses touch, she becomes embittered towards a society that she does not understand.

And yet, Auchincloss contradicts his own premise in his acknowledgement of her consistent use of satire and in her consistent lack of romance:

> [The Buccaneeers] has more life than its immediate predecessors, but on its very opening page we find its author still laying on satire at the expense of America with the now customary trowel . . . . One cannot feel after [considering the outline of the novel] any keen regret that the story was never finished. Lily Bart's love for Selden is the one hollow note in The House of Mirth. Undine Spragg, in The Custom of the Country is, of course, incapable of love. Love in The Age of Innocence is stifled by the characters themselves . . . [Wharton's] was not a world where romance was apt to flourish.[117]

Auchincloss more accurately seems to take umbrage with her condemnation of American mores and materialism, but rather than addressing the implications of her analysis, he concludes that she lacks romance and is so heavy-handed in her approach that she becomes ineffective.

In the second article, a pamphlet, he continues the same pattern. In this loose, biographical-literary study, he, like Lyde and Nevius, suggests that Wharton has been misunderstood for very specific reasons concerning her personality and

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[117]Louis Auchincloss, "Edith Wharton and her New Yorks," in Howe, A Collection, p. 42.

background,[118] and that she is a writer worthy of note; and yet, in his analysis of her fiction, he condemns almost every novel for specific shortcomings.[119] The two books which escape such comments, The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence, are, Auchincloss suggests, such close reflections of Wharton's own concerns and values that she is able to create with a sure hand.[120] As such biographical connections do not withstand close scrutiny, however, Auchincloss' analogies become suspect.

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[118]Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 5.

[119]Ibid, p. 10: ". . . nothing can save [The Valley of Decision] from its pale and lifeless characters. . ."; p. 18: ". . . the settings and not the characters of [The Fruit of the Tree] fade away"; p. 21: "Ethan Frome is a picture and, as such, one-dimensional"; p. 23: "The final chapter [of The Reef] so jarringly out of tune with the rest of the book . . ."; p. 24: "The flaw in [The Custom of the Country] that keeps it from ranking with its predecessors is that Mrs. Wharton hates Undine too much"; p. 26: "In a surprising insipid little book, French Ways and their Meaning . . .".

[120] Auchincloss suggests that Selden is a carbon-copy of Walter Berry and that Wharton reveals in Selden, her ambiguous feelings for Berry: "I incline to the theory that Mrs. Wharton really intended us to accept this plaster-cast figure for a hero, but that she had a low opinion of heroes in general" (p. 14). As the Berry connection actually relates to Morton Fullerton, such assumptions illlustrate the unreliability of using unsubstantiated preconceptions as a basis for literary research.

"[The Age of Innocence] is Edith Wharton's tribute to her own background, this affirmation that under the thick, smoky glass of convention bloom the fine, fragile flowers of patient suffering and self-sacrifice. To run away from society may be as vulgar in the end as to crash it" (p. 30). As Wharton is more properly Dallas' contemporary, suggesting that Archer embodies Wharton's sensibilities is highly questionable. Furthermore, as she did not, like Archer, succumb to New York rituals, but instead expatriated herself, divorced, and wrote novels, she reveals the kind of courage that Archer lacks.

Following close on Auchincloss is Irving Howe, who reveals similar contradictions in his critical assessments of Wharton's fiction. Sufficiently concerned about her critical reputation to act as editor of a collection of critical essays published in 1962, he provides an opening commentary, as well as an essay on The House of Mirth. He suggests in his opening remarks[121] that the critical response reveals that "it is not good form to claim for Mrs. Wharton the distinction she truly possessed," but in his commentary, he illustrates the same pattern:

> At points of emotional stress . . . she employs an overcharged rhetoric to impose upon her story complexities of meaning it cannot support and intensities of feeling it does not need . . . . She is a writer of limited scope . . . . Mrs. Wharton's intellectual conservatism hardened into an embittered and querulous disdain for modern life; she no longer really knew what was happening in America..."

He then reiterates the usual concerns and assumptions relating to Wharton studies: the disavowal of the Jamesian discipleship; her dedication to American aristocracy; the value of Lubbock's portrait, a reiteration of Edmund Wilson's theory of her personal maladjustments; her "suppressed feminine bitterness, a profound impatience with the claims of the ruling sex," and ultimately, the limitations in Wharton's vision of life: "Where she failed was in giving imaginative embodiment to the human will seeking to resist defeat or move beyond it. She lacked James's ultimate serenity." Howe thus perpetuates every established myth.

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[121]Irving Howe, Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton," in Howe, A Collection, pp. 1-18.

In his discussion of The House of Mirth,[122] Howe suggests that "only dimly, and then after much pain and confusion, does [Lily] realize that this social fall may have positive moral consequences . . . . the meanings of the book emerge through a series of contrasts between a fixed scale of social place and an evolving measure of moral value," while Selden, "who does try to live by cultivated standards, has been forced into a genteel bohemianism and an acceptance of his failure to act with manly decisiveness." Such comments reveal Howe's need to see this novel in traditional moralistic terms, and any discrepancies thus continue to reflect Wharton's own limitations: "[she] believed firmly in the moral positives she had inherited, but she could seldom project them into her work; all too often, they survive only in terms of their violation." Howe's analysis thus adds little to Wharton study.[123]

But such continuing attempts to reassess Wharton's reputation are fruitful insofar as each critic extends the limits of his expectations to some degree, and because interest is generated by others seeking to understand. In 1965, Grace Kellogg spells out her motivation for writing a full-length

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[122]Irving Howe, "A Reading of the House of Mirth," in Howe, A Collection , pp. 119-29.

[123]Howe does suggest, however, that Wharton's vision of the problem "of mediating between the expectations of a commerical society and the ideals of humane civilization is not exactly unknown to us, only on the surface is our society so very different from Lily Bart's." He is one of the first critics to acknowledge the possibility of the relationship between Wharton's fiction and American life.

biography, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton:

> Few American women have aroused as much envenomed hostility in as many people, most of whom never met her, many of whom never even saw her. Few have inspired as much devotion in as great a host of lifelong friends, some of these knowing her only as a legend . . .
>
> It is not my intention to make a scholarly appraisal of her work. Blake Nevius has done that in a fine and sensitive critical analysis. He will not be bettered.
>
> My aim is to make the reader feel a friendly acquaintance with the whole extraordinary body of her writings . . .[124]

In setting out her purpose in this way, Kellogg reveals not only her sense that the response to Wharton has been unfriendly to date, but more importantly, that approaching Wharton from a scholarly perspective does not allow a sympathetic assessment. Kellogg thus attempts, like Lyde before her, to shift away from traditional expectations to consider Wharton from a different perspective. This Kellogg achieves in her very chatty, informal, speculative biography by revealing Wharton's humanness and frailities, her strengths and fears. Because Wharton's private papers were released soon after the publication of this biography, however, and many of Kellogg's speculations were proven inaccurate, this book has no lasting value beyond historical interest.

In contrast to Kellogg's laudatory remarks regarding Nevius's book, Geoffrey Walton begins his 1970 study, Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation, with a quite different opinion: ". . . Blake Nevius, who devoted a whole critical book

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[124]Grace Kellogg, The Two Lives of Edith Wharton, (New York: Appleton-Century Press, 1965), p. xiv.

to the novels, shows less understanding of her than did [others] . . . writing in her lifetime."[125] This comment signifies several assumptions which inform this study; not only does he obviously take exception with Nevius' evaluations, but Walton also faults Nevius for revealing so little understanding about Wharton so long afterward, which discounts the theory that "time improve[s] the critical focus."[126] The implications of this comment suggest that while such prejudiced approaches are understandable in her contemporaries, that similar approaches continue so long is inexcusable. Walton states that he therefore will confine his attention to "Wharton's writings, with mere asides on her life and personality,"[127] In consequence, Walton's study involves a close reading and assessment of the complete body of her fiction, and he comes much closer to evaluating the fiction in its own terms.

He correctly recognizes that Wharton's technique reinforces her vision of society: "The close writing and dramatic planning of the novel are fundamental qualities; Edith Wharton achieves some remarkable juxtapositions of scenes and persons, and the last page, as she puts it, is indeed latent in the first. The tragic effect is cumulative."[128] He takes exception to the

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[125]Geoffrey Walton, Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation, (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1970), p. 7.

[126]Ibid, p. 7.

[127]Ibid, p. 8.

[128]Ibid, p. 48.

theory that Wharton reflects the meaningless values of a by-gone era: "Indeed the constant and energetic play of her irony very seldom permits the reader to rest in one response, nostalgic or otherwise."[129] He also acknowledges her theory regarding the use of reflecting angles of vision: "she changes the angle frequently until the heroine is ready to assume command of the whole situation."[130] Walton thus sees Wharton's use of juxtapositions and contrasting angles of vision as an essential aspect of her technique.

Where Walton fails to escape the conventional viewpoint, however, is in his conclusion that the heroine "assumes command." In his discussion of Lily Bart, for instance, he suggests that

> . . . it is [Lily's] steadily deepening self-awareness and social perceptiveness which, along with her fundamental moral integrity and dignity, give her ultimately her tragic stature. They have been growing throughout the book, in step with the deterioration of her circumstances.[131]

Walton reveals his own demand for moral growth or, at least, for moral self-awareness, which forces him to read into Wharton's theory of reflecting angles of vision elements that are not actually included: Wharton's use of contrasting angles is consistent, which reinforces the ambiguities and undermines the possibility of moral lessons. But in any case, Walton's ability

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[129] Ibid, p. 8.

[130] Ibid, p. 201.

[131] Ibid, p. 61.

to separate the preconceptions about Wharton's life from her fiction is an important step. Although beginning at opposite ends of the literary spectrum, both Kellogg and Walton, like Lyde and Coxe, are able to appreciate Wharton for what she does do, rather than for what she does not do, by evaluating her primarily in her own terms instead of exclusively by their own.

In this way, these critics contrast favourably with Percy Lubbock and Blake Nevius. While there is some difficulty in comparing so many critics, certain differences do become apparent. Lubbock, Nevius, and others represent the mainstream of literary criticism, while Lyde, Coxe, Kellogg, and Walton are less familiar critics. Moreover, Lyde and Kellogg are female, while Walton, a Britisher, feels compelled to defend his right to assess an American writer.[132] In contrast, Lubbock reveals no such insecurity in his assessment of Wharton thirty years earlier, nor do female critics like Q. D. Leavis, Diana Trilling, and J. L. Jessup attempt anaylsis which would set them apart from their male counterparts. This is a rather circuitous way of suggesting that mainstream critics represent and present the status quo, whether man, woman, British, or American, and as such, they reinforce or are reinforced by each other, rather than acknowledging that their own individuality might provide a unique perspective. That role falls to those outside the mainstream, like Lyde, Coxe, Kellogg, and Walton, who reject the conventional viewpoint and attempt to suggest alternative

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[132] Ibid, p.8.

methods of evaluation.

These alternative approaches are usually rejected until there is sufficient innovative analysis to force a general revaluation,[133] which usually takes many years, in part because artistic vision usually supersedes conventional wisdom by several generations, and in part because perpetuating assumptions and preconceptions is much less demanding than assessing each artist in his own terms. In this way, literary criticism follows the same cycle as artistic creation, albeit several generations later: just as writers undermine the conventional approach to literature by testing and stretching the boundaries, so too literary critics become able to understand the effectiveness of those changes only by testing and stretching the boundaries of their own presumptions. There thus may be a gap of many years between a particular artist's vision and the critical acceptance of that vision.

Although in some cases literary criticism never does seem to expand sufficiently to appreciate a particular artistic sensibility, in Wharton's case, the 1970's mark a turning point in critical response. Not only does the process of stretching the boundaries of understanding begin to reveal alternative

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[133]Note, for instance, R. W. B. Lewis, "Edith Wharton and the House of Mirth," in Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition, (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1965), where he argues for revaluation.

approaches, but Wharton earns her due when the critical audience moves beyond Victorian sensibilities to recognize that conventional myths and moralistic platitudes simply blanket the realities of modern existence, and that Wharton's skill lies in her ability to show America and Americans to themselves in excruciatingly honest detail. Rather than becoming dated, the world that Wharton paints, and her vision of it, becomes inevitably and absolutely relevant.

This recognition comes about with critics like James Tuttleton, who includes an assessment of Wharton in his 1972 study, The Novel of Manners in America, and with Gary Lindberg, who in 1975, offers a book-length consideration of her work in Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners. Tuttleton places Wharton "as the major link between the generation of Howells and James and that of Fitzgerald and Lewis . . . ,"[134] and while he does echo the usual concerns that "the rigidity in her conception of the novel" is deplorable, he goes on to defend the validity of her stylistic choice and her artistic vision.[135]

And Lindberg initiates his study by questioning Parrington's 1921 criticism about the insignificance of Wharton's subject manner,[136] a comment with which Lindberg obviously disagrees and which informs his study. He perpetuates

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[134]James Tuttleton, The Novel of Manners in America, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. 123.

[135]Ibid, p. 139.

[136]Gary Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners, (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1975), p. 1.

many of Nevius's assumptions regarding the "trapped sensibility," but unlike Nevius, Lindberg acknowledges the validity of her technique and form, which echoes Lyde's assumptions: "Thus, as manners become laws of thought, they create the nexus of individual and society in Edith Wharton's fiction."[137] Both Tuttleton and Lindberg adhere to the belief that Wharton is dedicated to lost traditions, however, which forces them to continue the struggle of attempting to define the moral perspective in her novels in the traditional manner. Regardless of these limitations, Tuttleton and Lindberg reveal that the sensibility has shifted from demanding that Wharton meet their own artistic expectations towards an acknowledgement of her right to individual expression.

The most important reason for the changing response to Wharton, however, is the fact that her private papers were released by Yale University in 1968, which resulted in the publication in 1975 of R. W. B. Lewis' detailed biography.[138] In this study, Lewis debunks many of the established myths that had evolved about Wharton, specifically relating to her personality and life. She proves to be a witty, charming, and personable individual who attempts to overcome extreme shyness with a reserved demeanour; these facts undermine the stereotypical vision of Wharton as unfriendly, unhappy, harsh, and embittered.

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[137] Ibid, p. 42.

[138] R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

Moreover, the suggestions that she was a frustrated and unsatisfied woman who was kept at arm's length by the man she loved, and who was unable to maintain the desired respectability in her marriage, both prove incorrect in light of later revelations regarding Walter Berry, Edward Wharton, and Morton Fullerton; such revelations become important insofar as biographical connections with her fiction are concerned. Most importantly, in her relationships with Henry James and other intellectual figures, she was so obviously their intellectual and social equal that any suggestion of discipleship becomes meaningless.

The implications of these revelations are profound: Wharton was a very thoughtful woman who had the financial foundation, the literary ambitions, the artistic ability, and the individuality of purpose to live as much as possible in her own terms. As an American in expatriation, liberated from the typical womanly concerns of parenthood and social responsibility, she defined her life according to her own needs: intellectual stimulation and conviviality with kindred spirits; the enrichment and excitement of travel; and the creative fulfillment of writing, interior and exterior decoration, and philanthropic concerns. She was liberated in the 1970's sense of the word, and as such, she does not reveal the kinds of compromise in her life that critics have persisted in seeing in her fiction.

Wharton ultimately is receiving the recognition that she deserves, but the process of reassessment is obviously unreliable: while there is no question that the evolution of the critical sensibilities is typical in regard to Wharton, there are two unforeseen variables which just happen to coincide. Her decision to closet her well-organized and substantial private papers for thirty years suggests that she had some sense of future vindication, at least insofar as she recognized their potential shock value. Moreover, her papers were released at a point when critics were increasingly more sympathetic to alternative approaches, and therefore, other avenues to understanding were created. The critics primed themselves, but Wharton herself provided the stimulus. And these two elements came together at a point when the study of female writers becomes important, at least to female critics, because the 1970's also mark the rise of the Feminist Movement.

The momentum created by these variables and by the search for female writers culminated in an upsurge in Wharton studies, most of which have been written by female critics. Apart from Richard Lawson's brief 1977 study, Edith Wharton, in the Ungar series of introductory mongraphs, the full-length studies include Margaret McDowell's Edith Wharton (1976), Cynthia Griffin Wolff's psychological evalution, A Feast of Words (1977), Elizabeth Ammon's feminist assessment, Edith Wharton's Argument with America (1980), and most recently, Carol Wershoven's study, The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith

Wharton (1982). Each of these critics, to some degree, attempts to reveal how Wharton's femininity, artistic imagination, and technical skill amalgamate in her fiction to provide a vision of America in general and of women in particular worth considering, unembellished by preconceptions about Wharton herself or about her responsibilities as a writer. Each study in its own way is valuable and insightful, and illustrates only how complex and rich in nuances the fiction is that it can withstand such close scrutiny and so many disparate interpretations.

Had Wharton been less scrupulous in compiling her private papers, and had the Feminist Movement not resulted in a tenacious search for female artists, Wharton might never have been freed from many of those preconceptions which shadowed her for sixty years. Instead, Wharton's reassessment would hinge only on the sensibilities of literary criticism as it shifts from complete dedication to the moralistic thrust of the "great tradition" towards a greater acceptance of alternative possibilities. In view of the constant and on-going struggle with Wharton's moral vision, this alone might not have provided the avenue for escape that she obviously needed.

As artists like Wharton sensed the inadequacies of the existing moral order, and acknowledged their own limitations in providing examples of rectitude, they adopted a more restricted perspective or focus. But the critical audience, sensing the same breakdown in moral and social certainties, placed more demands on the artist to provide meaning in an otherwise

meaningless world. And if the message was not forthcoming, or not clear, or unexpected, the artist was rejected for not fulfilling that need. Wharton's inability to pander to this need made her victim to critical disappointment from her contemporaries and from subsequent generations. Now, however, critical assumptions reflect a similar sense of the inadequacies of the existing moral order and critics no longer expect artists to fulfill any spiritual need. Instead, moral concerns are less important than defining a particular artistic vision in its own terms, focused through a particular critical approach. While current criticism acknowledges the element of morality inherent in Wharton's fiction, then, it does not center on a close consideration of the moral implications. For this reason, recent criticism will be considered in later chapters only as applicable to specific issues.

The critical response to Wharton and her fiction has been considered at length because it invariably illustrates a failure to discuss Wharton's novels in her terms. The early critics demanded that she comply with certain moral standards that they espoused themselves, while later critics generally have ignored Wharton's vision of morality. But to disregard the moral implications in Wharton's literary assessments is to miss an essential element in the fiction, for Wharton well understands the discrepancy between established moral and ethical values and the ineffectuality of such values in a world operating under different criteria. What all the critics have neglected to do is

to read Wharton's novels in light of her own critical statements, particularly in relation to her theory concerning "reflecting consciousnesses."

To downplay or to ignore Wharton's vision of morality now is as limiting as earlier attempts to force her into established molds, for her subject clearly is morality, albeit not in the traditional sense of the subject. Instead, she reveals the limitations in existing morality by juxtaposing particular characters against a clearly-defined backdrop of conventional order, and in so doing, debunks the very values that she is expected to perpetuate. Assessing Wharton's vision of morality in relation to her use of point of view is the project which follows in the discussion of the specific texts.

III. The House of Mirth: The Spiritual Quest

Although Wharton published several books before 1905, The House of Mirth is the first novel in which she successfully integrates form with content. Wharton creates in the central character, Lily Bart, a protagonist who is worldly-wise, intelligent, and articulate, but who is financially insecure. Lily inhabits a world where her attributes are recognized and appreciated, but where such qualities are less important than economic power and social viability. In her evolution, Lily reveals her understanding of and her compliance with these assumptions, and that she has absorbed many of the common values of the community. But at the same time, she sets herself apart because of her susceptibility to philosophical principles. Her inability to reconcile these sensibilities with the exigencies of her situation provides the central conflict of the novel, one that obviously sparked the interest of the reading public, for this novel established Wharton's popularity and her literary reputation.

Lily's evolution is presented not only in relation to a very stratified and self-serving community, but in relation to Lawrence Selden, who articulates those philosophical ideals and moral directives to which Lily aspires. The community and Selden thus provide contrasting angles of vision which embody Lily's conflicting needs. But at the same time, Selden reveals

attitudes similar to those he otherwise condemns. Lily, too, wavers between Selden's sporadic idealism and society's conventional expediencies as she slowly falls from grace. And as Lily's position changes, society itself changes in form and style, although not in substance, thereby revealing a constantly shifting focus in this way as well. Without absolutes, any underlying meaning becomes apparent only through the interplay of characters and by assessing the implications arising from the "reflecting consciousnesses." The result is that Wharton undermines many common assumptions concerning the social and economic roles of women in society.[1]

Lily initially accepts specific assumptions about her role. Having been bred to a position of luxurious indulgence, she lacks the financial foundation necessary to maintain her position in the community herself, so she trades for her material comforts by fulfilling certain obligations for various members of society. Although she has been previously

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[1]Griffin Wolff suggests that Wharton breaks through traditional literary expectations with the use of antiphony: "She offers us a tantalizing display of seeingly stock figures--the beautiful suffering heroine and the analytical, judgmental masculine observer. But she turns them askew. Instead of merely observing the woman, we discover her genuine feelings, and we learn what it really means to have become no more than a beautiful object; instead of identifying with the man and accepting his evaluations as the moral center of the novel, we learn that he is nothing more than the unthinking, self-satisfied mouthpiece for the worst of society's prejudices" (Feast of Words, p. 111). Griffin Wolff's analysis certainly reveals one element at work in this novel, but Wharton goes beyond simply analyzing sexual and social roles and to probe the underlying assumptions which guide the characters' actions.

"undisturbed by scruples,"[2] she has now, at twenty-nine, reached the stage where she feels "herself a mere pensioner on the splendour which had once seemed to belong to her" (p. 40) and where the demands placed by her hostesses increase. She thus experiences a sense of resentment for the role she is required to play. But because Lily is "too intelligent not to be honest with herself" (p. 61), she knows that her compliance is essential to maintain the kind of life she wants.

Lily's choices are based, in part, on the limitations she sees in the alternatives. Her friend, Gerty Farish, leads a life free of social obligations, but she has a "horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap" (p. 10). And her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who provides a moral and financial foundation for Lily, "is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties" (p. 13). Both the aunt and Gerty lead lives which are completely unappealing to Lily, which she acknowledges: "[Gerty] likes being good, and I like being happy" (p. 10). In Lily's terms, fulfilling certain social obligations and secretarial functions for her hostesses is a small price to pay for the materialistic rewards which follow, especially in comparison to the alternatives.

Lily also acknowledges that she might marry, but while she recognizes that this is the expedient route, something holds her

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[2] Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, (New York: Scribners, 1905), p. 24. All further references are from this edition.

back. Her recognition of her own priorities, and her inability to comply with the convention of marriage, sets her "apart from the crowd" (p. 3), and "distinguish[es] her from the herd of her sex" (p. 7). But at the same time, this uniqueness inhibits her from ensuring her own financial security until all other options become less appealing than marriage. Consequently, although she senses that marriage has its drawbacks, it also provides the most viable avenue to fulfilling her financial needs: "The certainty that she could marry Percy Gryce when she pleased had lifted a heavy load from her mind. . ." (p. 77). Left to her own devices, Lily analyzes her choices and takes the expedient route; she thus overcomes her hesitation and commits herself to a marriage of convenience.

Inherent in Lily's analysis are certain assumptions about her community generally, and about her own role specifically. As a woman without family or position, she is free to lead a minimal existence like Gerty, or to lead a narrow existence like Mrs. Peniston, but these alternatives do not provide for Lily's social needs. She is also free to marry, although this alternative demands her compliance with a convention she finds distasteful: "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (p. 9). While she sees specific limitations in marriage then, she also sees a certain loss of dignity in trading personal services for material comfort. Lily's options, therefore, are clearly-defined, in spite of her reservations about the

compromises she must make in each case.

Because the choices available for Lily in this society are so limited, she must assert her position and ensure her viability by capitalizing on her physical attributes in accordance with conventional expectations: "If I were shabby, no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself . . . . Who wants a dingy woman?" (p. 17-18). In Lily's terms, and in society's terms, her value is as a commodity which she has shaped into fine material (p. 7), and which she uses to provide for her social well-being, initially as a sought-after guest, and soon, hopefully, as Percy Gryce's wife. She knows in very realistic terms what her value is, and she knows how to sell it at the highest possible price. In her role in this community, then, she complies with social expectations, although not without reservations.

But Lily has an attraction to the romantic, which is embodied in Lawrence Selden. He provides an ethical perspective on Lily's pragmatic decision by defining success in terms of personal freedom, freedom "from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit--" (p. 108). For Lily, nothing appeals more than success defined in Selden's terms, for she sees escape from her mounting financial pressures, as well as escape from a marriage she does not want. Selden thus offers Lily a perspective which appeals to her romantic nature and which is much more attractive than the course she has chosen for herself.

More importantly, in his philosophical assessments, Selden also raises specific questions concerning Lily's worth. He finds her "diverting" (p. 5), and recognizes her quality: "Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine" (p. 7). But at the same time, he questions the value of such qualities: ". . . was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?" (p. 7) In so doing, Selden poses a philosophical question which reshapes the usual assumptions about womanly worth. He does not judge the quality of her attributes; instead, he questions what value those attributes have. This is an important distinction between Selden and Lily: whereas she unquestioningly accepts such standards as essential to her existence in this society, he questions what merit these standards have, and in the broader sense, what purpose such standards serve.

Selden then, provides the criteria by which Lily assesses and is assessed. She recognizes, however, that he does not follow his own principles, which he rationalizes: ". . . I have tried to remain amphibious: it's all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air" (p. 111). By so justifying his role, he establishes himself as a "spectator" (p. 5), with the right to judge Lily differently than he himself is judged. He establishes principles which bear no relation to the exigencies of Lily's situation, nor to his own, but he does provide valid

ethical assessments on the conventions of Lily's world.[3]

Lily and Selden provide the predominant angles of vision, and the contrasting focus reveals the limitations in attempting to live by Selden's philosophical rhetoric in the face of economic necessity. Lily knows that Percy Gryce can provide for her social and economic needs, but at a crucial point, she is drawn not to him, but to Selden, who provides an ethical perspective on her actions. Because she is, by nature, pliant (p. 59), and has a "faculty for adapting herself, and entering into other people's feelings. . ." (p. 84), she shifts her perspective to Selden and her perceptions change accordingly:

> Lily smiled at her classification of her friends. How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement (p. 88).

In the face of the ethical standard which Selden represents, the urgency to marry disappears. The shallowness of the community becomes apparent, and her desire to obtain financial security becomes unimportant until Percy Gryce is no longer available or willing to marry her.

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[3]Griffin Wolff suggests that Selden believes "that life fully led must necessarily satisfy both his own moral habit of self-righteous otherworldliness and the indulgence of his keenest sensibilities; and the fact that these two appetites might be mutually contradictory is a problem that Selden has no capability to confront. Given the attitudes of the society of which he is a part, it is not surprising that Selden chooses instead to project these ambivilences into his notions of femininity" (Feast of Words, p. 121).

The pattern established regarding her tentative marriage and subsequent renunciation establishes the framework for what follows. In Selden's desire to assess Lily's value, in "putting her skills to the test" (p. 4), he encourages her escape from the conventional: ". . . your genius lies in converting impulses into intentions" (p. 107). But as Lily points out, he does not provide any practical assistance to her: "Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" (p. 114). She also recognizes his lack of emotional commitment: ". . . your're so sure of me that you can amuse yourself with experiments" (p. 116). Selden's scientific detachment provides the naturalist dimensions of Lily's situation, and his failure to provide viable, practical alternatives reveals that his involvement is strictly theoretical. In any case, his position absolves him of any responsability for Lily, although he articulates consistent standards for her to follow.

When Lily is with Selden, on the other hand, she sees the validity in his comments, and this provides her life with meaning beyond mere survival, and in terms she can understand: "Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truth?" (p. 112). But while she glories in her spiritual growth, her need to survive remains an essential issue to her, if not to Selden, which cannot be ignored: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison

house of fears" (p. 102). She somehow must resolve the contradiction between her spiritual aspirations and her financial requirements by herself, but against Selden's standards. The fear that Lily feels is her recognition of the impossibility of such a task.

The other angle of vision is created by society at large, which provides a pragmatic contrast to Selden's perspective. The Trenor-Dorset group are the ruling denizens who have updated Mrs. Peniston's ritualistic punctilio for their own utilitarian purposes. They recognize that the momentum for their society is provided by the constant alignment and realignment of loyalites based on desperate power struggles which occur beneath a decorous surface, apart from occasional indiscreet eruptions. The struggles depicted are between those who use and those who are used, but because the loyalties are shifting constantly, these distinctions become blurred as each tries to achieve, to maintain, or to redesign a particular position. This is the society for which Lily is created, and where she tries to maintain her somewhat tenuous hold; this is also the society which judges Lily as harshly as she judges society.

In discussing Lily's missed opportunity with Percy Gryce, Judy Trenor counterpoints Selden's influence with pragmatic clarity, and in so doing, echoes Lily's own realistic evaluation: "It was the voice of her own conscience which spoke to her through Mrs. Trenor's reproachful accents" (p. 120). Although unaware of the precariousness of Lily's position, Mrs.

Trenor understands that Lily's chances of marrying are decreasing, and is exasperated by her failure to act upon an opportunity which has the ingredients for success. As Mrs. Trenor has herself followed this expedient route into a finanacially secure but loveless marriage (p. 129), she cannot understand Lily's hesitation. The focus provided by Mrs. Trenor is one of pragmatic sensibility: to achieve opulent luxury in exchange for marriage vows is fair value, as she testifies by using Gus Trenor to establish her position in society.

The commitment to useful expediency revealed by Mrs. Trenor is echoed continuously by every member of this society, and changes only in relation to the constant power struggles and shifting loyalties. Gus Trenor uses Simon Rosedale to make money on the stock market, and Rosedale in turn, uses Trenor to gain access into society (p. 130). Mrs. Van Osburgh uses Percy Gryce to secure a marriage for her daughter, and Percy uses Mrs. Van Osburgh to provide for his social and emotional needs (p. 156). Lily uses Gus Trenor to invest in the stock market, and Trenor uses Lily to shore up his ego (p. 130). Selden uses Lily to test his philosophical theories, and Lily uses Selden to stimulate her spiritual needs. Mrs. Peniston uses Lily for her social skills (p. 173), and for the opportunity to practise charity, and Lily uses Mrs. Peniston for a permanent base. Mrs. Dorset offers Lily the comforts and pleasures of a Mediterranean cruise with the tacit understanding that in exchange, Lily will keep Mr. Dorset amused and busy (p. 304). Rosedale wants to use Lily

to secure his social footing, and he, in turn, offers Lily financial freedom, which she refuses (pp. 194-5).

Lily's error is not that she participates in these negotiations, but that she becomes inconsistent under Selden's influence, and as a female afloat with neither husband nor financial footing, she must rely completely on her own social skills and acumen. Carrie Fisher reveals the consistency of purpose required for success in these terms: she offers social instruction and discreet arrangements, and is not only accepted, but financially maintained in exchange for services rendered. But Lily hesitates at crucial moments and, as a result, loses credibility when credibility is her only resource. Seen from the Trenors' and the Dorsets' and Mrs. Peniston's and Carrie Fisher's perspective, Lily's assets become outweighed by her liabilities: because she hesitates at crucial moments, and does not seem to play the games by the established rules, her value decreases in their eyes. And from this perspective, the criticisms are valid, for Lily does not appear to fulfill her part of the bargain.

When the focus shifts from the Dorsets to the Wellingtons and Brys, then to the Gormers and to Rosedale, and then to Mrs. Hatch, the same principles apply. Just as Lily innocently alienates Mrs. Trenor, so she alienates Mrs. Dorset, the Wellingtons and Brys, and Mattie Gormer, each of whom exerts control over Lily's existence in very practical terms. Although she continues to need them more than ever once she is

disinherited, they no longer need her. Mrs. Gormer rejects Lily in favour of Mrs. Dorset after using Lily as a stepping-stone to higher society (p. 395-7). Rosedale, who offers marriage to Lily when the match seems beneficial, rejects her later on the basis of her lack of usefulness (p. 409).

She outlives their need of her and is forced into ever more peripheral situations until she loses her foothold completely and must attempt to cope in a world she does not understand: "The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel" (p. 441). Her mastery of the social skills which initially ensured her survival ultimately becomes meaningless in a world with different rules. Lily flounders because she is without consistency of purpose, and in so doing, she loses her survival instinct. She becomes a parasite rather than a committed and equal member in the game of life. While the focus shifts from group to group, the implications are consistent; value is not ascertained in aesthetic worth, but in fair exchange.

At the other extreme, Gerty reveals the emptiness of life devoid of glamour and frivolity:

> . . . being fatally poor and dingy, it was wise of Gerty to have taken up philanthrophy and symphony concerts; but there was something irritating in her assumption that existence yielded no higher pleasures, and that one might get as much interest and excitement out of life in a cramped flat as in the spendours of the Van Osburg establishment (p. 142).

While Gerty is "good," and does overcome her own petty jealousy

at a crucial point, she is "a parasite in the moral order. . ."(p. 241), leading a minimal existence reduced to its most essential needs, and reduced to the simplest philosophy: to be good in the charitable sense. Yet, in spite of her adherence to Christian doctrine, she is impotent in assisting Lily beyond expressing outrage, and beyond offering alternatives which are meaningless to Lily: "Miss Farish could see no hope for her friend but in a life completely reorganized and detached from its old associations. . ."(p. 432). Gerty's method of dealing with life is through the renunciation of all desires, and her example seems to Lily only an empty and pathetic alternative: "Oh, Gerty, I wasn't meant to be good. . ." (p. 427). Gerty exemplifies life according to Selden's criteria in the "republic of the spirit," but ironically, she is able to do so only because she lacks the needs, vitality, and the individuality which attracts Selden to Lily, thereby revealing the limitations in Selden's perspective.

In the other extreme, Lily's aunt offers a vision of life dedicated to empty ritual and moralistic platitudes. She is a "looker-on at life" (p. 58), who is dedicated to the punctilios of society which she enjoys from a protected vantage point, thereby never having to test the attitudes she perpetuates. Financially secure, "she ha[s] the kind of moral mauvaise honte which makes the public display of selfishness difficult, though it does not interfere with its private indulgence" (p. 57). Lily relies financially on Mrs. Peniston and therefore is victimized

by this perverse application of charity: ". . . Mrs. Peniston liked the periodical recurrence of gratitude evoked by unexpected cheques, and was perhaps shrewd enough to perceive that such a method of giving kept alive in her niece a salutary sense of dependence" (p. 60). This rigorous dedication to appearance, and the lack of genuine charity, make Mrs. Peniston a dangerous adversary.

When Lily needs financial assistance to repay gambling debts, she is judged by outdated and meaningless guidelines, and made to suffer for a lesson in morality which has little to do with the actual situation. When she disinherits Lily, Mrs. Peniston illustrates her belief that moral lessons are sometimes learned only by great sacrifice, and the lesson learned outweighs any personal needs. In Gerty and Mrs. Peniston, then, are contrasting views of orthodox values: Gerty is all substance and no form in that she has sacrificed herself to the extent that she is completely ineffectual; and Mrs. Peniston is all form and no substance in that her appearance of moral rectitude outweighs any genuine compassion. Both are, however, in their own ways as self-serving as everyone else in this society.

And in the same way, Selden is equally self-serving. His condemnation of Lily's apparent liaison with Gus Trenor closely echoes Selden's own liaison with Mrs. Dorset; Selden's actions are condoned, however, while Lily's are condemned. And by aligning himself against Lily in this and at other crucial instances, Selden reveals the duplicity in his nature. He talks

ideals, but his words become empty rhetoric in the face of his own actions. Selden, however, ignores the discrepancy between his philosophical analysis and his actual deeds as his vision blurs and becomes more conventional. In so doing, Selden reveals that the aesthetic ideal is subject to capriciousness and to realistic compromise.

Another perspective is offered by Rosedale, whose rise in society counterpoints Lily's decline. Rosedale's realistic and pragmatic approach is based on his assumption that mutually exclusive arrangements provide the basis for all relationships, and he therefore is untroubled by questions of ethics. When he considers marriage to Lily an asset to both of them, he suggests such an arrangement, but when the relationship is no longer beneficial to both, he withdraws the offer for lack of potential return. Instead, he suggests that she capitalize on the only resource now available: incriminating letters which not only will stop Mrs. Dorset's vendetta against Lily, but which will reestablish her footing in society on her own terms.

But to do so also compromises Selden, and Lily is incapable of such an act. Selden epitomizes for Lily the ideal to which she aspires, and regardless of his own culpability, crushing Selden as a means of ensuring her own survival is tantamount to crushing the ideal, which is impossible. Lily's choices, therefore, are reduced to the absolute essence: she can survive by compromising the ideal, or she can honour the ideal by sacrificing her life. Rosedale provides the perspective of a

survivor who is guided by his instincts and who is cognisant not only of the rules, but also of the most productive strategies. He shows Lily how to survive, and in so doing, echoes the commitment to expediency which Lily herself revealed when she was within and he was without. This reversal of roles suggests how important expedient self-interest is for survival. More importantly, it reveals the consistency of purpose required in comparison to Lily's own inconsistency.

This then is the essential issue in Lily's evolution. She is sufficiently confident to act independently, although never without consideration for the possible dangers: "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (p. 22). Under Selden's influence, however, the screen drops at crucial moments, which leads to her inconsistency. The impulse to set herself apart from the herd of her sex is the same quality that guides her to an imprudent visit to Selden's apartment: just as her physical needs require that she make herself desirable, so her spiritual needs draw her to Selden. And buying clothes at a time when she should husband her meagre resources stems from the same impulse as making a donation to one of Gerty's charities: "The satisfaction derived from this act was all that the most ardent moralist could have desired" (p. 180). Her acts of self-indulgence, then, are as important to her well-being as her acts of charity, and stem from the same sensibility.

In the same way, her need for comfort and luxury guides her to short-term compromises rather than long-term decisions: ". . . almost at once, she had felt the insidious charm of slipping back into a life where every material difficulty was smoothed away" (p. 377). Without consistency, she is subject to the vagaries of those who play on her conflicting needs. Consequently, Lily does not grow or learn because she acts on impulses based on either ethical or selfish intentions which at various times are equally important. She fails to measure the long-term effects of her impulsive intentions, and any noble expression becomes a futile act in the face of the consequences. When she chooses to protect Selden by sacrificing her own life, then, she acts on the same impulse by which she contributes to charity at the cost of her financial security.

What then are the implications? Lily's decision to protect Selden seems on the surface to reveal inner growth and dedication to the ideal, yet the fact remains that she suffers a meaningless death which serves only to reveal Selden's weaknesses. Throughout Lily's decline, he offers her no support beyond empty rhetoric, harsh and unthoughtful judgements, and a vision of life completely disconnected from the exigencies of her life. Even in death, he condemns Lily for the appearance of compromise (p. 531), and his final evaluation reveals only his own egocentricity: "It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction . . ." (p. 532). He fails to understand that Lily,

removed from all those elements which give meaning and pleasure to her life, has, in fact, atrophied. Moreover, in her death, she becomes extinct, not as an exemplar of the ideal, but as a pathetic victim dedicated to aesthetics which are completely disconnected from her situation. When Selden gives to Lily's corpse "the word which made all clear" (p. 533), she cannot hear and he does not understand, and the word becomes as meaningless as Lily's life. And herein lies the answer to Selden's question regarding Lily's worth.

From Selden's perspective, however, his experiment is a success. He establishes himself as a spectator, and he is consistent to that aim. He also is consistent in his role as moral instructor to Lily, which allows him to test not only his theoretical beliefs, but to evaluate Lily's worth in relation to those beliefs. And in his terms, Lily ultimately fulfills his expectations: by complying with philosophical principles, she proves her value to him, and dies as an admirable example of noble self-sacrifice. The irony is, of course, that Selden himself is not noble, nor does he comply with the principles he establishes for her, which suggests that there is a discrepancy between the theory and practice of standard morality. Selden's inability to see the contradiction suggests that hypocrisy is an inherent aspect of such beliefs.

From the perspective of society at large, everyone reveals attitudes which are equally self-serving or ineffectual. Gerty recognizes value in her friend, but offers nothing but

moralistic platitudes, Mrs. Peniston judges Lily by invalid standards and suggests that moral rectitude may be a justification for petty vindictiveness. The Trenor-Dorset group reveal their dedication to expediency and to appearances, while Mrs. Gormer and Rosedale illustrate the importance of survival techniques in conjunction with consistency of purpose.

All these people, regardless of social or financial position, however, reveal no concern beyond their own immediate needs; they also reveal that acceptance in this society depends only on the economic assumption of fair exchange for services rendered, whether of a social or financial nature, which suggests that exemplary behavior or living by ethical ideals is not possible in the real world. When Lily asks Rosedale whether truth alters a situation, he replies that ". . . it does in novels, but I'm certain it don't in real life" (p. 412). Whereas Selden refuses to acknowledge that theoretical ethics are potentially destructive in practice, then, Rosedale has a much more realistic perspective, nor does Rosedale share Selden's hypocrisy as a result. In any case, this society seems able to exist quite happily without, an ethical standard, and in fact, seems quite oblivious to its lack, which suggests that the traditional conception of Christian morality no longer provides, if it ever did provide, the social framework for the community. Instead, the shared, commonly-accepted beliefs relate to more expedient concerns, such as economic well-being, social acceptance, and power politics. And as is apparent in the

various interrelationships, this framework is as valid and as viable as any Christian framework, although, as is also apparent in most of the interrelationships, the spiritual level is missing. As this society nevertheless is consistent in its attitude and approach, there is a viable, identifiable standard of behavior to follow.

Lily, however, is caught between these two quite contradictory perspectives. She initially seems to represent the well-bred, well-mannered, and well-endowed woman who, regardless of financial instability, has formed herself into a social and physical exemplar, and thereby seems able to support her needs, fulfilling the goal which everyone expects of her. But in her journey towards fulfilling her own and everyone else's expectations, she seems calculating, insincere, and guided only by expediency and economic need. Conversely, when she attempts to follow Selden's philosophical principles, she not only fails to achieve the expected goals, but she falls from grace and into obscurity and death, thereby twisting the conventional belief that adherence to moral values provides its own rewards, for Lily's reward, so far as her society is concerned, is a secure marriage, which she is denied by following an ethical standard. Therefore, Lily's suffering is the direct result of her attempt to live by ethical standards rather than by expedient self-interest. [4]

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[4]In The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (East Brunswick, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1982), Carol Wershoven suggests that there is no contradiction in Lily's evolution: "But as the distance between Selden and Lily widens .

Lily's evolution thus suggests that she is ill-equipped to address her own needs or those of her society using such standards.

This conclusion arises through Wharton's use of point of view. Although she uses an omniscient narrator, she manipulates the traditional approach in that there is no moral center around which characters and events evolve. Nor does any character escape analysis, with the result that any sympathy for Lily, or Selden, or anyone else, for that matter, is tempered by an acknowledgement of their particular limitations.[5] In so doing,

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[4](cont'd) . . Lily develops her own moral strength . . . . And ironically, in Selden's presence, when he is embarrassed by her misery and openness, Lily performs her noblest act: she burns those letters, which are the key to her social rehabilitation. Lily's fall is a learning process for her in many ways" (p. 52). Wershoven's conclusion echoes strongly of earlier critics who attempted to justify Lily's suffering in moral terms. But the fact remains that Lily is consistent in her attitudes and behavior from beginning to end, and her death is meaningless. Wershoven later reiterates her position: "The Lily who snubs a miserable charwoman at the beginning of the novel . . . is not the same character who holds Nettie's baby on her lap. There is no dramatic conversion of Lily in the novel, from socialite to little sister of the poor, but there is a steady character development" (p. 58). Wershoven, however, fails to reveal convincingly how or where that development occurs.

[5]Griffin Wolff suggests that the introduction of Nettie and her baby provides an alternative and viable perspective: "As inhabitants of the House of Mourning, they give a moral focus to the satire. Lily's powerful identification with the baby gives silent testimony to the infantilizing force of the mutilating image of women that society fosters. Finally, this scene gives poignant evidence of Lily's inability to conceive of herself in any other way than as the object of aesthetic attention" (Feast of Words, p. 130). Griffin Wolff's analysis suggests that Nettie's experience reveals growth in suffering; yet Lily's own evolution contradicts this premise. Moreover, Griffin Wolff's suggestion that the baby signifies Lily's own plight seems less likely than that the baby symbolizes Lily's desire to be born again in a new form, in a different milieu, with different values and needs.

Wharton undermines the traditional role of the novelist; rather than holding up an ideal through example and presentation, she reveals the actual from every possible angle, constantly re-evaluating as the focus shifts. The reader is left to draw conclusions from the interplay of points of view and their attendant implications.

And in Lily's evolution, the implications are clear: she suffers and dies because her role in this society provides so few avenues to fulfillment. As a woman without resources or family support, Lily has clearly-defined avenues available in order to ensure her social and material needs. But because none of the alternatives appeals to Lily, she is forced to compromise on issues which strike at the center of her emotional well-being. To suggest that Lily's expectations are unreasonable then, is irrelevant, for the point is that Lily aspires to the same materialistic pleasures as most of those around her. But to obtain such pleasures, she must either marry or commit herself to the on-going power struggles of this society. The alternative which Selden provides appeals to Lily because it allows her to escape such emotional compromise, although she compromises with her life instead. That death in Selden's terms appeals more than life in society's terms suggests that the choices available to her are inadequate or insufficient. As a result, Lily opts out of an existence which does not serve her needs.

IV. Summer: The Sexual Delimma

Summer is one of the least considered of the major novels, but it also is, ironically, one that drew specific commentary from Wharton: "the tale was written at a high pitch of creative joy, but amid a thousand interruptions . . . . Yet I do not remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene or the creatures peopling it."[1] On the surface, the lack of critical interest is understandable, for in many ways, the plot seems reductive, the issues obvious, and the subject trite. Moreover, the novel is so understated that one can easily miss the subtleties, with the result that Summer is either simply categorized as a "bildungsroman,"[2] or it is relegated to the author's "lesser works." But in light of Wharton's use of "reflecting angles of vision," Summer demands further consideration.

This novel is a study in nuances and innuendo, enhanced by technical devices, which allows Wharton to reduce a complex, and morally-loaded situation, to its most essential elements. In so doing, she not only assesses a situation considered somewhat sordid and inappropriate, but she provides a revealing study of

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[1] A Backward Glance, p. 356.

[2] The Introduction to the Harper and Row edition, written by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, focuses on this interpretation. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

sexual relationships unadorned by moral certainties or platitudes. Consequently, Wharton's affection for this novel is most likely a reflection of her pleasure in successfully implementing her theories of rhetoric by unifying form with content.

Initially, Summer seems to bear little relation to Wharton's other novels. The central character, Charity Royall, is young, uneducated, and inarticulate, and she is without the sophisticated maturity which Lily Bart, for instance, reveals. Moreover, Lily's community is represented by the very stratified and complex layers of New York society, while Charity's community is a small, rural New England village. In this context, Charity's "psychological evolution" seems purposeless, for so much about her circumstances is insignificant. And yet, Charity's struggle to reconcile her personal needs within the social framework is as revealing as Lily's struggle in her own community.

But whereas Lily's evolution is revealed in the interplay of various society members, Charity's evolution is presented differently: juxtaposed against Charity are the angles of vision provided by Lawyer Royall and Lucius Harney, both of whom are more educated and sophisticated than Charity, but who both share specific assumptions with each other and with her. In Royall's case, those shared assumptions relate to the rules of conduct and the moral directives of North Dormer, while in Harney's case, those shared assumptions relate to a sense of the

potentiality of life outside the restrictive boundaries of the village. Charity thus is torn between Royall and Harney as she attempts to reconcile the conflict between her social needs and her emotional drives. The interplay of these characters, within a social structure which is as clearly-defined as it is straightforward, allows Wharton to test specific assumptions centered in the sexual arena. In so doing, the consequences become portentous, and the underlying implications self-evident.

For Lily, the stratified layers of New York society are represented by a plethora of different types, but for Charity the conventions of her small village are revealed as a single mentality which creates a communal consciousness. Lacking even the distinction of the town's namesake, "Dormer, where North Dormer went for its apples,"[3] this village "is at all times an empty place" (p. 9). North Dormer maintains a library where "no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves" (p. 11), and it lacks any vital connections with the outside world: "There it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities" (pp. 10-11). It in fact epitomizes the French meaning of the verb, dormir: to sleep. Without outside stimulation or new ideas, North Dormer remains inward-looking and stagnant, and is capable

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[3]Edith Wharton, Summer. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 19. All further references to this text are from this edition.

only of perpetuating established values and standards.

Consequently, certain assumptions provide the unquestioned creed for the community. These assumptions are as basic as a rationale for a lack of ambition: "No one is rich in North Dormer" (p. 30). Or, these assumptions serve to reinforce the community's sense of worth in relation to its very small perspective: "[Charity] knew that, compared to the place she had come from, North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization. Everyone in the village had told her so ever since she had been brought there as a child" (p. 11). While this community may lack the subtlety and nuances of larger, more sophisticated towns and cities then, it does reveal a consistency of beliefs which furnishes each member with unquestioned guidelines for behavior, and which provides a clearly-defined social framework, albeit one that is lifeless and which provides little opportunity for personal growth.

Within this framework, Lawyer Royall embodies the lassitude of the village. Having begun his legal career away from North Dormer, he returned because he lacked the courage to stay away: "I was a damn fool ever to leave Nettleton. It was Mrs. Royall that made me do it" (p. 28). Although he recognizes his folly, however, and although Mrs. Royall is no longer alive to hold him, Royall remains in North Dormer. His main purpose stems from his role as guardian to Charity, but this role is questionable because she is stronger: ". . . lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in lawyer Royall's house" (P. 23). As

the acknowledged preeminent citizen of the community, then, lawyer Royall only reveals how limited are the expectations in this village.

Any other purpose stems from Royall's dedication to an almost non-existent legal practise and to the ritual of routine:

> It was this habit to walk to his office twice a day, morning and afternoon . . . . Before going in he stepped into the post-office for his mail--usually an empty ceremony . . . . and then went over to the store . . . . he was unwilling that his rare clients should surprise him sitting, clerkless and unoccupied, in his dusty office (p. 36-7).

The routine thus sustains and fills an otherwise empty existence, but ironically, it also pointedly illustrates how meaningless is that routine. In any case, he maintains a commitment to ritual and to decorum in keeping with his station, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the values of his community. North Dormer generally and Royall specifically thus provide an example of a community ground down by its own inertia, revealing that lifelessness in the very fabric of the community. In this way, Royall and the community provide one angle of vision.

Against that backdrop is the angle of vision provided by Charity. Many of her attitudes and responses mirror those of North Dormer, and there is reflected in her values and beliefs a certain compliance with the accepted rules of conduct. Charity's library routine is similar to Royall's office routine in that she provides a lethargic service to an uninterested public, although her commitment to such rituals is less finely-tuned:

"The hours of the Hatchard Memorial Library were from three to five; and Charity Royall's sense of duty usually kept her at her desk until nearly half-past four" (p. 20). And although her sense of North Dormer's importance is diminished and her need for knowledge increased by a trip to nearby but larger Nettleton, her "thirst for information" lasts only until "the impresssion of Nettleton began to fade, and she found it easier to take North Dormer as the norm of the universe than to go on reading" (p. 10). Her compliance with community standards therefore stems from the extremely limited nature of her experience, but more importantly, she also lacks the ambition and intellectual curiosity to break through the confines of her existence.

She is not, however, completely submerged because of her heritage: "Charity was not very clear about the mountain; but she knew it was a bad place, and a shame to have come from . . ." (p. 12). She and the commmunity both accept her inferiority in some undefined way, which effects Charity's sense of herself. In this way, Charity reveals that she has absorbed the values and beliefs of the community, even including those which are detrimental to her own sense of emotional well-being.

In spite of her acceptance of North Dormer conventions, however, Charity does reveal a certain quality which sets her apart: "She was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded" (p. 21). Charity's sensual

response to certain kinds of stimuli does not flourish within the confines of the lifeless village; but in the surrounding countryside, she reacts instinctively to the luxuriousness of the pastoral environment: "Generally at such times she did not think of anything but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being" (p. 21). She is drawn into nature, then, to fulfill a very specific need: just as Royall epitomizes the lethargic inertia of North Dormer, so Charity symbolizes the fertile anticipation of the spring countryside, where her natural impulses are given free rein. That is not to suggest that she is without the restricting influences of the village, for those values and beliefs do not become completely submerged; but at various times, the natural, instinctive part of her nature becomes the more powerful element.

For example, when she goes to Nettleton as part of a church group outing, she responds to the plethora of novel sensations:

> In the course of that incredible day Charity Royall had, for the first and only time, experienced railway travel, looked into shops with plate glass fronts, tasted cocoanut pie, sat in a theatre, and listened to a gentleman saying unintelligible things before pictures that she would have enjoyed looking at if his explanations had not prevented her from understanding them (p. 10).

Although in this case, the stimuli is provided by the results of civilization rather than by nature, her response is similar in that she reacts to the sights and sounds and tastes of the experience rather than to any intellectual connotations. This sensuous level in Charity supersedes her conventional side when the stimulous is unique or exhilarating or when it contrasts

with the lifelessness of North Dormer.

Those same felt responses also guide her instinctually in her interrelationships in the community and with Royall. Early on, ". . . [Charity] had taken the measure of most things about her. She knew that Mrs. Royall was sad and timid and weak; she knew that lawyer Royall was harsh and violent, and still weaker" (p. 24). When the community feels for propriety's sake that Charity should leave Royall's house and North Dormer to attend school elsewhere, Royall reluctantly agrees, but Charity baulks (p. 26), thereby asserting herself against the norm for her own purposes. But at the same time, by reacting against Miss Hatchard's advice to leave North Dormer, Charity actually acquiesces to Royall's silent wish that she remain, which he rewards with a gift (p. 27). Charity's actions suggest that, in her terms, the exertion of power may contain specific elements of submission.

Later however, when Royall makes sexual advances to her, any compassion disappears: "She was not frightened, she simply felt a deep disgust . . . . Then a belated sense of fear came to her with the consciousness of victory . . . ." (pp. 29-30). When he offers marriage, she reacts instinctively: "'Marry you? Me? . . . . How long is it since you've looked at yourself in the glass?'" (p. 34). In this confrontation with Royall, Charity reveals the philosophical guidelines of her existence: in her instinctual assessments of varying strengths and weaknesses, she informs her relationships with an underlying power structure, a

power structure where she is able to maintain some sense of control, but at the same time, she is guided not by intellectual or material concerns, but by her uncalculated response to the physical and sensual manifestations of life. Therefore, she rejects Royall because she finds him physically unattractive, but just as importantly, because she finds him weak.

The interplay between Charity and Royall provides the predominant angles of vision, and the contrasting focus reveals the limitations in each of their perspectives. Royall's actions reveal a complete understanding and acceptance of the symbiotic relationship between men and women from the conventional, male point-of-view: in order for men to satisfy their physical needs, they must either use women who are willing to give themselves, or negotiate a marriage contract. When Charity rejects both alternatives, she renders Royall into a position of dependence by virtue of the possibilities she represents: "She had never put it to herself in those terms; but she knew her power, knew what it was made of, and hated it" (p. 23). She understands the rules of conventional sexual relationships sufficiently to maintain control over Royall and to keep him off-balance, but she does not comply with those rules herself, except superficially.

There is an acceptance then, by both Charity and Royall, of a non-verbal level of communication and negotiation where she is the acknowledged victor: "She needed no-one to defend her: his humbled pride was her surest protection" (p. 38). Ironically

however, the basis of her superiority over Royall is at best tenuous, for on more practical, functional levels, she depends on him for her sustenance and well-being, for whatever position she maintains in the village, and for her job in the library (p. 34), the income from which gives her an illusory feeling of independence: "'So's to get away when I want to'" (p. 32). In feeling that she can leave North Dormer when she chooses, Charity becomes willing to remain, just as in feeling that she is more powerful than Royall, she feels secure in her role in the community. And Royall perpetuates Charity's illusions in an attempt to obtain her favour, which she instinctively withholds.

In contrast to The House of Mirth then, which deals with the conflict between ethical principles and expedient realities, Summer addresses the issue of sexuality in relation to conventional notions and interpersonal negotiations. But whereas Lily Bart initially presents a very pragmatic perspective which inevitably is overshadowed by her aspirations to the ideal, Charity initially is guided by an illusory sense of her own power which is tested in the forum of economic realities and in the face of her own sexual needs.

The juxtaposition of Charity and Royall provides the necessary starting point: Royall is the epitome of small-town conventionality, who, as a middle-aged male, had clearly-defined options available in order to gratify his sexual needs. His lack of success stems not from the acknowledgement of those needs, but because Charity does not respond according to his

expectations, thereby making him victim to emotional blackmail. Were she operating completely within Royall's moral framework, Charity would secure her own economic well-being through marriage. Her failure to follow such guidelines suggests that while she has an instinctual understanding of sexual politics, she operates according to different criteria in response to her own particular needs.

With Lucius Harney's arrival in North Dormer, yet another angle of vision is provided, which reflects against both Charity and Royall. As an outsider, from the city (p. 8), Harney does not accept the inflexibility of established standards: his belief that North Dormer and environs will provide architectural examples beyond the popular ones in Plymouth and Salem, mirrors his failure to accept the inevitability of the library collection's decay. His response towards his aunt, a respected community member, whom he speaks of "as if she were a querulous baby. . ." (p. 51), reflects a level of sophistication, knowledge, and worldliness quite foreign to the little village.

When Charity sees Harney for the first time, the same June wind which awakens her senses also blows his hat across her path, with immediate results: "Her heart contracted a little and the shrinking that sometimes came over her when she saw people with holiday faces made her draw back into the house. . ." (p. 8). She withdraws initially from his lively euphoria because he represents the unknown and the unfamilar. But just as her initiation to Nettleton "had shown her that North Dormer was a

small place" (p. 10), so Harney's entry into Charity's world recreates that feeling: "The sight of the stranger once more revived memories of Nettleton, and North Dormer shrank back to its real size" (p. 10). Harney thus provides the stimulus for Charity to reevaluate the quality of her life in North Dormer: "How I hate everything!" (p. 9). Although Charity's inarticulateness reduces her reaction to a broad condemnation, which she repeats (p. 12), at that moment, she revolts against the lifelessness of North Dormer and turns psychologically towards the sensuousness of the pastoral surroundings and Harney's potentiality. When she steps from Royall's house, then, she also moves towards her sexual and sensual needs which Harney embodies.

Consequently, her response to Harney contrasts significantly with her response to Royall: "She had liked the young man's looks . . . . his smile shy yet confident, as if he knew lots of things she never dreamed of, and yet wouldn't for the world have had her feel his superiority" (p. 22). Mixed up in her physical attraction is a response to his differences and to his obvious sophistication, which reshapes her perspective and confuses her: ". . . the young man . . . had made her feel for the first time, what might be the sweetness of dependence" (p. 23). Hence, her attraction to Harney mirrors Royall's attraction to her, at least insofar as emotional acquiescence is concerned, with Charity willing to assume with Harney the role which she forces on Royall. What she sees in Royall as weakness

then, becomes, in herself, in the right circumstances, sweet submission, which she, like Royall, defines in very conventional terms: "She . . . saw herself a bride in low-necked satin, walking down an aisle with Lucius Harney. He would kiss her as they left the church. . ." (p. 40). While Royall expresses his desires concerning Charity to her, however, she keeps her imaginings concerning Harney to herself.

Moreover, although Charity instinctually assesses Royall's motivations, she is confused by Harney's ways: "Her bewilderment was complete: the more she wished to appear to understand him the more unintelligible his remarks became . . . . and the weight of her ignorance settled down on her again like a pall" (p. 17). She senses that Harney operates according to a different code of conduct, and her failure to comprehend that code places her at a disadvantage, which is reinforced as he continually disarms her defences, and undermines her assumptions: "Her heart was ravaged by life's cruellest discovery: the first creature who had come toward her out the wilderness had brought her anguish instead of joy" (pp. 44-5). As Charity responds to Harney's uniqueness and warmth, and as her need for him grows, so grows ironically her perplexity and her sense of inadequacy as she becomes more and more unsure of her footing. In so doing, she moves into an unknown territory which is as intimidating as it is exhilarating, but which she instinctively wants and needs. In contrast to her response to Royall, whom Charity understands but rejects, in her response to

Harney, any attraction is counterbalanced by her complete lack of understanding.

And yet, Charity sees similarities in Harney and Royall: "Charity divined that the young man symbolized all [Royall's] ruined and unforgotten past" (p. 68). Just as Harney originates in the larger, unknown world away from North Dormer, so Royall experienced other places in his youth, and the implication is that Royall revealed potentiality, albeit unrealized potential, which continues to echo in his consciousness. Royall thus responds instinctually to Harney in very specific ways.

Similarly, Charity senses that Harney also responds to Royall:

> Charity had only a dim understanding of her guardian's needs; but she knew he felt himself above the people among whom he lived, and she saw that Lucius Harney thought him so. She was surprised to find how well he seemed to talk now that he had a listener who understood him; and she was equally struck by young Harney's friendly deference (p. 70).

Harney and Royall share an affinity in intellect and in social assumptions which go beyond North Dormer perceptions and beyond Charity's experience. One result of this affinity is that they each provide intellectual stimulation for the other, which Charity senses, and which pointedly illustrates the disparity between their level of sophistication and her own.

Another result is that Royall is able to assess Harney differently, which leads to Royall's interference in their relationship: "'I guess he's the kind that's heard the same thing before. Anyhow, he took it quietly enough'" (p. 113). By

breaking up the relationship, Royall seems to exercise his paternal responsibilities. But at the same time, his interference is highly ironic in view of his own attraction to Charity, which suggests that Royall is hypocritical and self-serving. And as weak as Royall is, he senses that he is stronger than Harney: "And I can put things to him so he won't be long deciding . . . . He's soft: I could see that'" (p. 118). To Royall, Harney appears not as the manifestation of potentiality which Charity perceives, but as a younger version of Royall: weak, self-serving, and self-interested, without even those few values which Royall recognizes in himself: "'. . . there's one thing as old as the hills and as plain as daylight: if he'd wanted you the right way he'd have said so'" (p. 116). From Royall's perspective, Harney's attraction to Charity mirrors Royall's own attraction, but while Royall focuses his desires in the "right way," through the conventional method of marriage, Harney does not, which Royall condemns.

The interplay between these three characters provides the "reflecting consciousnesses" necessary for revealing Charity's psychological evolution. Although Harney's motivations are the least apparent, Royall's assessments later prove accurate, which suggests that Harney's uniqueness and worldliness are compellingly attractive only to someone as responsive as is Charity to his charm: ". . . all that had happened to her within the last few weeks had stirred her to the sleeping depths" (p. 59). Moreover, her need for him forces her out of her

established role: "she had always kept to herself, contemptuously aloof from village lovemaking, without exactly knowing whether her fierce pride was due to the sense of her tainted origin, or whether she was reserving herself for a more brilliant fate" (p. 61). Her lack of involvement normally protects her from the vagaries of adolescent indulgence, but ironically, her isolation also leaves her unprepared to deal with the kinds of feelings which Harney awakens in her.

Harney also provides positive impressions about her place of birth: "The words thrilled her. They seemed the clue to her own revolts and defiances, and she longed to have him tell her more" (p. 65). Through Harney, Charity obtains a new sense of her sexual and sensual needs, but perhaps more importantly, he offers her a conception of herself and her heritage which sharply contradicts North Dormer assumptions. Naturally then, because he makes her feel unique, she is able to augment her own sense of self-worth vicariously. In their relationship, Harney provides Charity with the vision which she herself lacks, and she is drawn to him as inevitably as to a bright summer day.

Harney reshapes her perceptions, but not completely, however. In her relationship with the community, Charity maintains a sense of independence and aloofness as a means of compensating for her feelings of inferiority. In so doing, she develops a feeling of pride and maintains a sense of freedom and control over her existence, as limiting as she recognizes that existence to be. But Charity knows that by moving beyond the

moral boundaries of her community, she forfeits that security: ". . . she did not want it known to all the countryside how many hours of the long June days she spent with him" (p. 62). In this way, she acknowledges that her relationship with Harney lies outside conventional boundaries.

She is not troubled by the fact, but she is troubled by the possible repercussions: "What she feared most was that the inevitable comments should reach Mr. Royall" (p. 62). Although she acknowledges her power over Royall in the normal scheme of events, she knows that her connection with Harney makes her vulnerable: "Mr. Royall might, as she phrased it, make her 'pay for it'. How, she did not know; and her fear was the greater because it was undefinable" (p. 62). And yet, any insecurity or fear is overshadowed by the need which Harney fulfills.

Here then is the essence of Charity's dilemma: she fights the values and standards of North Dormer because they are so personally unfulfilling, but at the same time, because of her lack of experience and her personal limitations, she cannot segregate herself from those values, nor is she capable of replacing them with others more suitable to her needs. She attempts to comply, therefore, with community conventions, but only superficially, with the inevitable result that she falls victim to more precise standards. Moreover, the implication is that Charity's natural impulses, if harnessed, would lead not to Harney's confusing yet exhilarating world, but to Royall's predictable and socially-secure world. Seen from one perspective

then, from the conventional viewpoint of Royall and the community, Charity suffers because she is not completely dedicated to the customs of her community. [4]

But this perspective denies the forces at work in Charity, and suggests that to maintain her security, she must necessarily suppress her sexual and sensual needs, a position to which Charity ironically adheres: ". . .she saw the vigorous lines of his young throat, and the root of the muscles where they joined the chest . . . . In every pulse of her rigid body she was aware of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her; but something kept her from moving" (pp. 103-5). The "something" which stops her is the inhibiting force of conventions, which Charity conjures up in visions of Royall interfering (p. 103), of "the thing that did happen between young men and girls, and that North Dormer ignored in public and snickered over on the sly" (p. 105), of "what had happened to Ally Hawes's sister, Julia, and had ended in her going to Nettleton, and in people's never mentioning her name" (p. 105). For Charity, the fear of ridicule and ostracization from the community outweighs her own pressing needs, but only insofar as possible discovery and exposure are

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[4]Griffin Wolff suggests that this assumption provides the underlying meaning in the novel: "It is undeniable that we relinquish something significant--glorious--when we submit to the repressive process of civilization, specifically, we give up the fleeting ecstasy of unmitigated sensual indulgence. Yet in the end, we gain more than we lose: love, a kind of emotion that finds many different meanings. . ."(Feast of Words, p. 293). This interpretation, however, does not concur with the implications of Charity's evolution and with the denouement of the novel.

concerned.

The precariousness of Charity's position is apparent when Harney takes her to Nettleton's Independence Day celebrations. Her senses are assaulted by the noises and colours, by the excitement of the festivities and the thrill of new experiences, by her rapture at a fireworks display, and her instinctual impulses surge to the surface. When they kiss, her reaction is the natural outgrowth of her felt responses to her surroundings, and as Harney provides the physical manifestation of those yearnings, resistance is not even a possibility. Yet, she is devastated when Royall sees her, ". . . hatless, dishevelled, with [Harney's] arm about her" and makes a drunken accusation: "You whore--you damn--bareheaded whore, you!" (p. 151). From Royall's perspective, Charity appears guilty, and from Charity's empathetic perspective, this assessment seems correct, which only reinforces her sense of her own vulnerability: ". . . the secretive instinct of the animal in pain was so strong in her . . ." (p. 154). However superficial her adherence to community standards is then, she remains susceptible when judged against standards which she herself accepts.

In Charity's terms, complying with such moral standards necessitates the denial of her essential self, which forces her to reject those standards as a means of assuaging her pain. This she does by choosing to leave North Dormer, ostensibly to return to the mountain, but ironically, by meeting Harney instead, who gentles her and disarms any residual defences by kissing her

again, "but tenderly, almost fraternally, as if he had guessed her confused pain, and wanted her to know he understood it" (p. 164-5). For Charity then, Harney's advances are somehow quite different from Royall's, simply by virtue of her rejection of Royall and her need for what Harney provides. Hence, Charity moves outside conventional boundaries, and she becomes free to follow her own instincts and natural impulses.

And whereas she exerts power over Royall, with Harney, she becomes totally submerged to his will as a means of fulfilling her own needs:

> . . . she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will. It was not that she felt in him any ascendancy of character--there were moments already when she knew she was the stronger--but all the rest of life had become a mere cloudy rim about the central glory of their passion. Whenever she stopped thinking about that for a moment she felt as she sometimes did after lying on the grass and staring up too long at the sky; her eyes were so full of light that everything about her was a blur (pp. 175-6).

She thus breaks free from North Dormer conventions and becomes completely subjugated to Harney. When he convinces her to return to the village, she does, but with a quite different attitude: "Since her return . . . she had lived at North Dormer as if she were suspended in the void" (p. 174). Charity ostensibly rejects a system of values which is unworkable, in favour of a route which is much more compelling.

Her decision to free herself from conventional restriction, then, is a defence against pain, and is necessary for her

well-being. Harney provides Charity with a more natural framework where she flourishes in response to his nurturing, and where she comes to life in a way hitherto unknown within the confines of the village:

> The only reality was the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils. She had lived all her life among people whose sensibilities seemed to have withered for lack of use; and more wonderful, at first than Harney's endearments, were the words that were a part of them. She had always thought of love as something confused and furtive, and he made it as bright and open as the summer air (p. 180).

Lovemaking becomes the intrinsic expression of her new reality, and of her new self, and while she acknowledges that Harney has a life away from her, everything seems meaningless in the context of their communion: "It seemed as if the places he had been in, and the people he had been with, must cease to exist when he left them, just as her own life was suspended in his absence" (p. 184). Therefore, negotiation and manipulation, power and control, become unnecessary to her emotional well-being because she feels that this relationship does not exist within a conventional framework.

And yet, Charity's assumptions about their relationship prove illusory when she sees Harney with Annabel Balch at a public ceremony:

> Behind the frail screen of her lover's caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people--with other women--his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man's life is entangled. Of all these she knew nothing, except what he had told her of his architectural aspirations. (p. 197).

Because she rejects community standards, she mistakenly presumes that Harney does as well. And because she has so little understanding of his values and beliefs, she operates in a void, guided only by her instinctual submission to their mutual need and pleasure, which she is forced to acknowledge may not be sufficient for him, although it is magnificent enough for her to reshape her whole existence.

While in one way, Harney's actions may seem a betrayal of the most elemental kind of trust, the issue really concerns the importance of sexual favours as a negotiating factor in social relationships, which Charity begins to sense: "She understood now the case of girls like herself to whom this kind of thing happened. They gave all they had, but their all was not enough: It could not buy more than a few moments. . . ." (p. 198). In acknowledging her connection with the human community, she also acknowledges her own naivity, and therefore, loses confidence in their relationship: "The sense of lastingness was gone from her and every moment with Harney would now be ringed with doubt" (p. 203). By assessing their relationship in such conventional terms, Charity also loses any sense of its uniqueness.

Royall reinforces her fears when he confronts Harney and Charity: "'And you know why you ain't asked her to marry you, and why you don't need to. It's because you hadn't need to, nor any man either. I'm the only one that was fool enough not to know that . . .'" (p. 207). There is, in his outburst, the tacit acceptance that men's sexual needs are more pressing and more

instinctual than are women's, whose sexuality is used only as a bargaining tool for negotiating marriage.

Royall's insinuation is an acknowledgement of the underlying moral structure of male-female relationships based on man's sexual attraction for a woman who uses that attraction for her own purposes. Royall perpetuates the conventional view that men are subject to manipulation by and to negotiation with the women they admire, and that marriage and security provide the basis for negotiation. But this view does not acknowledge woman's sexual needs, nor does it acknowledge any priority beyond economic security or social position as a criterion in these negotiations.

In contrast to Royall then, Charity provides the perspective of a female for whom economic security and social position matter far less than her instictual response to natural or unique stimuli. But from Royall's perspective, if Charity does not use her sexual favours for negotiating marriage, the only other options are to remain chaste, or be forced beyond the boundaries of the community, as is Julia Hawes. These options suggest that women either do not have sexual needs, or they must be suppressed or at best subjugated to economic and social concerns. Those who do acknowledge and address their own needs become tainted and lose the respectability necessary for existence within the social framework.

When Royall attacks Charity, he feels that she has betrayed him in relation to these assumptions. Whereas he treats Charity

like a respectable woman and satisfies his sexual needs with Julia Hawes, Harney uses Charity for his physical needs and saves his respect for Annabelle Balch. Royall's anger is directed at his own incorrect assumptions about Charity's commitment to respectability. Regardless however, there is little difference between Royall and Harney in their relationships beyond the fact that Charity responds to one and not to the other, with the result that Royall feels betrayed.

From Charity's perspective, when she frees herself from conventional morality, respectability and marriage negotiations are irrelevant in the context of her own sexuality. But when Harney promises marriage, he moves their relationship into a more conventional framework and thereby aligns himself with Royall. More importantly, Harney pointedly reveals to Charity that she has nothing left to offer in exchange for his marriage vow.

In one way then, Charity is deceived by Harney, but in another way, each chooses a relationship unencumbered by the usual negotiations and agreements, and they each benefit from that relationship: "From the first she had needed him more than he had wanted her, and the power that had swept them together had been as far beyond resistance as a great gale . . ." (p. 230). The difference between them, however, is that Charity is only one element in Harney's life, while Harney becomes her whole existence. Moreover, Harney does not endanger his position within the community by indulging in the relationship, while

Charity concedes all her defences as her need for him grows.

And because he is so essential to her sense of self-worth, without his nurturing, her sense of independence disappears. Just as she earlier lacked the ambition and intellectual curiosity to capitalize on the "thirst for information" she found in Nettleton, so she again becomes lethargic and incapable of sustaining herself outside conventional boundaries: ". . . though she had not had the strength to shake off the spell that bound her to him she had lost all spontaneity of feeling, and seemed to herself to be passively awaiting a fate she could not avert" (p. 214). With Royall as the catalyst, then, Harney and Charity move their relationship inside conventional boundaries.

From Harney's perspective, he and Charity share an affinity uninhibited by moral restraints, and when he capitalizes on that affinity, he only takes what is offered freely, just as Charity takes what he freely offers her. In this way, they are without obligations to each other and are without the usual restraints which inform conventional relationships. But at other times, he also mirrors the attitudes and perceptions of Royall, which suggests that Harney is cognisant of and versed in sexual conventions, and that he simply takes advantage, as Royall suggests, of Charity's ingenuousness. By variously mirroring Charity's spontaneity and Royall's assumptions, Harney reflects the underlying philosophy of each, and reveals a perspective unencumbered by commitment to any particular approach. The positive consequence of such adaptability is that Harney

responds sincerely to Charity's natural instincts, while simultaneously enjoying and sharing Royall's more worldly intellectual perceptions, while simultaneously sharing Annabelle Balch's commitment to respectability.

The negative aspect of this adaptability is that he is without a consistent moral framework, which makes him susceptible to whomever exerts sufficient pressure at any given time. When Charity makes herself available to him, he responds to her. But when Royall exerts pressure, Harney adapts again, which reshapes his relationship with Charity and leaves her floundering. And finally, in his commitment to Annabelle Balch, he deserts Charity completely in favour of the social pressure of a respectable engagement. In one way then, Harney's adaptability is that which allows Charity to move beyond conventional restrictions, but ironically, that same adaptability undermines her position when he abruptly changes direction. Harney's involvement with Charity and the community thus reveals the consequences of relationships which are not informed with a consistency of beliefs, at least to those who fall victim to such inconsistencies.

When Harney leaves North Dormer, his legacy of the relationship is a guilty conscience, while Charity's legacy is the fact of her pregnancy and the realization that her options have decreased significantly. But she is influenced less by the exigencies of her situation than by her own feelings of inferiority: "Charity had never been able to picture herself as

his wife; had never been able to arrest the vision and follow it out in its daily consequences. . ." (p. 220). Although her emotional and physical well-being depend on her ability to make demands of Harney, she is inhibited: ". . . she had never known how to adapt herself . . .(p. 220). In her relationship with Harney, the exercise of power is contained in her submission, and just as she cannot abort his child, so she cannot adapt to her changed circumstances: "She knew she had it in her power to [make things hard]; she held his fate in her hands. All she had to do was tell him the truth; but that was the very fact that held her back . . ." (p. 234). Charity thus is trapped by her own nature: she can neither adopt a more pragmatic approach, nor can she assert herself with Harney as her situation demands.

More importantly, without Harney's stimulation, her framework shrinks back to clearly-defined boundaries: "Her five minutes face to face with Mr. Royall has stripped her of her last illusion, and brought her back to North Dormer's point of view" (p. 234). Her relationship with Harney provides a way for Charity to escape the debilitating aspects of her existence, but their interplay also reveals the danger in such vicarious escapes. When Harney leaves, her illusions of independence disappear, and she sees the world through North Dormer eyes and with North Dormer values.

She cannot remain in the village, but nor can she escape, like Julia Hawes, to Nettleton, so the only other option is the mountain, where Charity hopes for refuge. But when she goes

there, she finds neither refuge nor help; instead, she finds a way of life which is completely alienating. She sees not the refuge she needs, but only a conception of this community which exactly mirrors North Dormer perceptions:

> She herself felt as remote from the poor creature she had seen lowered into her hastily dug grave as if the height of the heavens had divided them. She had seen poverty and misfortune in her life, but in a community where poor thrifty Mrs. Hawes and the industrious Ally represented the nearest approach to destitution there was nothing to suggest the savage misery of the Mountain farmers (p. 259).

Although the mountain community had always represented a viable escape route, this option only becomes another shattered illusion.

Because she judges the Mountain in the same way as North Dormer judges her, her options finally are reduced to absolutely simple choices: ". . . to live, to choose, to act, to make herself a place among these people--or to go back to the life she had left. A mortal lassitude weighed on her" (p. 260-1). Charity must choose between a community which is completely alien to her experience, or one which she knows is lifeless. While ". . . her mind revolted at the thought of becoming one of the miserable herd from which she sprung" (p. 261), she also feels she cannot ". . . remain at North Dormer", although ". . . everything beyond [that decision] was darkness" (p. 263-4). In that darkness, she is reduced finally to physical as well as spiritual inertia: she is without power, without choice, without options.

She is without even the sustenance which Harney's potentiality provided: ". . . Harney's image had been blurred . . . .she thought of him as so remote from her that he seemed hardly more than a memory. In her fagged and floating mind only one sensation had the weight of reality; it was the bodily burden of her child" (p. 264-5). Charity's dream of bliss thus is reduced to a burden of responsiblity and a choice between two communities which are equally debilitating. When she breaks free from the restrictions of the community to enrich her life then, she ironically also breaks free from its protective restraints, which leaves her defenceless, and which she is forced finally to acknowledge: she is without options in a world which judges her as harshly as she judges herself.

When Royall seeks her out and again offers marriage, her response reflects this understanding: "Her whole body began to tremble with the dread of her own weakness . . . . she was not sure if she was rejecting what he offered, or already struggling against the temptation of taking up what she no longer had a right to" (p. 270). Whereas she previously maintained a strong sense of her own needs and rejected Royall's advances outright, when the magnitude of her dilemma is clear, she responds to the expediencies of her situation: ". . . she had only a confused sensation of slipping down a smooth irresistible current; and she abandoned herself to the feeling as a refuge from the torment of thought" (p. 273). By suppressing herself in this way, she is able to cope with the exigencies of her situation,

but at the same time, ironically, she denies everything that gives her life meaning.

Consequently, she accepts the inevitability of her future, but she also accepts her own diminishment: ". . . she followed Mr. Royall as passively as a tired child . . ." (p. 274); she "sat down obediently, and Mr. Royall, his hands behind his back, paced slowly up and down the room" (p. 276); and she ". . . had the feeling that if she ceased to keep close to him, and do what he told her to do, the world would slip away from beneath her feet" (p. 277). Finally, she acquiesces to their marriage as if it were out of her control:

> After another interval the lady on the bench stood up, and taking her hand put it in Mr. Royall's. It lay enclosed in his strong palm and she felt a ring that was too big for her being slipped onto her thin finger. She understood then that she was married. . ." (p. 278)

In this reversion to childlike compliance, Charity suppresses her adult drives in favour of the security which submission provides. Paradoxically, however, she obtains security only in exchange for sexual favours in marriage, which suggests that Charity's options do not provide any avenues to reconcile her adult drives with her social and economic needs. Moreover, the insidious implication is that female sexuality is best controlled by childlike compliance.

When she later assesses her actions, she lay "trembling with a fear that ran through her veins like ice. 'What have I done? Oh, what have I done?'" (p. 283). In Charity's terms, she has ensured her own survival at the cost of her spiritual

well-being and at the cost of any possibility for happiness, which makes her simultaneously "feel ashamed and yet secure" (p. 291). Her physical survival thus bears little relation to her emotional needs, and her shame reflects this understanding. She becomes trapped by her ever-decreasing options in a world she cannot escape, but which does not acknowledge or even recognize as valid or legitimate her sexual and sensual impulses.

When she returns to Royall's house in North Dormer, then, her life effectively is over: just as she steps from the house towards Harney on a sunny spring morning, rejecting North Dormer and full of her own potentiality, so she now returns to that house in cold autumn moonlight, burdened by responsibility, emptied of possibilities or hope, and married to a man as lifeless as their community.[5]

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[5]Griffin Wolff suggests that Summer reveals the process of maturation that Wharton had experienced to date, that the denouement points to Wharton's own acceptance of the consequences of adulthood: "Ultimately, if a woman is to develop completely, she must cross the threshhold and go out for a while--and then, willingly and with fully informed adult knowledge, return and recross it--'come back for good'. This second crossing is the acknowledgement that no one can be free of her social heritage, that she carries it with her in stored memories and associations that may never be expunged" (Feast of Words, p. 294). While this analysis of the effect of society on the individual is no doubt correct, this interpretation not only ignores the child-like imagery of the closing pages and the implications concerning Charity's relationship with Royall, but more importantly, it also ignores the cold, dark imagery which permeates the latter part of the novel and which Griffin Wolff herself points out that Wharton uses to illustrate a sense of "emotional deprivation" (Feast of Words, p. 15).

In Edith Wharton's Argument with America (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1980), Elizabeth Ammons, in contrast, offers a feminist perspective: "Thematically, the book is Wharton's bluntest criticism of the patriarchal sexual economy. The final union between Charity and Royall is not merely depressing; it is sick . . . . Just the thought of

From Royall's perspective, however, Charity's options are clear-cut: she either seeks marriage or she is a whore, and her apparent inconsistencies only confuse him, rendering him variously malleable, querulous, and resentful. Not only does he fail to understand that Charity's own sexual needs may be pressing, but more importantly, he is incapable of understanding why she rejects his offer of financial security and a respectable marriage in favour of a sexually gratifying relationship built only on an illusory sense of freedom and mutual acquiescence. His assumption that Charity wants and needs the protection of marriage nevertheless proves accurate, which suggests that he senses her commitment to conventional standards.

As compassionate as Royall ultimately seems, however, the fact remains that by marrying Charity, he moves their relationship into the sexual arena, and thereby places their relationship completely inside conventional boundaries. Royall is guided by a system of values which provides avenues for his own gratification. At the same time, he ensures that the system is perpetuated. Whereas Harney adapts to whichever value system proves expedient or rewarding, Royall reveals a consistency of beliefs; and yet, the fact remains that they both have avenues for addressing their needs which are socially acceptable and attainable. Royall's relationship with Charity, like Harney's,

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[5](cont'd) marrying this old man disgusts Charity; yet in the end she is Mrs. Royall" (Argument, pp. 133-4).

then, ultimately is self-serving and self-interested, but ironically, Royall's actions are reinforced by his moral framework and seem philanthropic in the context of Charity's situation.[6]

But for Charity, compliance with that framework only reveals the limitations in existing morality. Her reduction and ultimate victimization by Harney and Royall does not stem from vindictiveness or malevolence, for each fulfills Charity's needs in very specific ways and in her own terms. Her terms change, however, in her evolution from a state of fertile anticipation into one of lifeless inertia. If Charity had a stronger sense of herself, or if she were more intellectually curious, she might escape to the mountain, as does her mother. Or she might go to Nettleton, as does Julia Hawes. But the point is that Charity is not emotionally or intellectually capable of acting on such options. Or, if Charity revealed less dedication to conventional standards, like Harney, or more, like Royall, she might make the demands necessary to provide for herself, as does Annabelle Balch. But the point again is that Charity lacks Harney's

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[6]Ammons touches on this point as well: "The old man marries Charity because he is mortally lonely; he needs her and sincerely wants to help her. Still, the fact that his paternalism has a benevolent side does not free it from being repugnant, as Wharton underscores by making his marriage to Charity figuratively incestuous. And the union he forces on his foster child without her willing consent implies incest to suggest the fact that American marriage itself symbolically is incestuous. As Wharton can show clearly in this book because of its unsophisticated milieu, the institution of marriage is at bottom a paternalistic and unhealthy extension of the relationship between father and daughter" (Argument, p. 137).

adaptability, just as she lacks Royall's dedication, although she has sufficient acumen to sense that her compliance with community conventions works against her own sensual impulses.

The struggle revealed instead concerns the possibilities for Charity to fulfill her own needs within a clearly-defined framework. In spite of her emotional and intellectual limitations, Charity initially has a well-developed sense of her own power which allows her to revolt arbitrarily against trivial or meaningless standards. But when Harney stimulates her and she revolts against more essential, less flexible standards, she reveals that her power is at best illusory. Because she fails to negotiate along conventional lines with either man, but at the same time, attempts to remain within the communal framework, however superficially, she is destined to fall victim variously to less conventional or more stringent demands. Moreover, when faced ultimately with conformity or rejection, she must finally accept that she has lost any control or choice she might have had. At this most basic level, Charity must deny herself or she must leave, and because she cannot visualize an existence beyond North Dormer, she capitulates completely and opts for a spiritless existence as a means of ensuring her own survival.

Underlying this whole conflict is an assessment of the double standard in the sexual arena, as well as an assessment of the consequences of that double standard. At issue is the use of female sexuality as a negotiating factor in marriage: women exchange sexual favours for financial security and social

prestige, which suggests not only that respectable women are without sexual urges, but that materialistic concerns are the overriding consideration in the marriage market. To test these assumptions, Wharton creates in Charity a character whose sexuality is her most essential aspect, and for whom materialism is irrelevant, at least insofar as she takes her security for granted. While these qualities set Charity apart in very specific ways, she still shares many of the values and beliefs of the community and accepts her place therein, seeking escape only momentarily and vicariously. Nor is Wharton particularly interested in those who escape or ignore conventional restrictions. Instead, she creates an average, naive, and somewhat limited individual who must attempt to reconcile her need within a moral framework which fails to acknowledge those needs and which makes inflexible demands for conformity.

In a larger sense then, Wharton reveals the difficulties involved for those whose needs are not met within the framework of their existence by playing several characters off against each other. Harney provides the perspective of expedient adaptability: his rapport and communion with Charity reveals the positive side of that adaptability, and yet, his inconsistency leaves her floundering when she is most vulnerable. In contrast, Royall illustrates unquestioned dedication to conventional morality: his commitment to Charity reveals the positive side of that dedication, but he also condemns Charity to a spiritless existence. And together, Harney and Royall share specific common

assumptions about their own sexual needs and about the avenues available to them for gratification.

Reflecting against them is Charity herself, who also shares specific common assumptions with each, but who is condemned by the same standards which provide for Harney and Royall. This suggests that the double-standard denies her avenues to gratification because of incorrect assumptions about the nature of female sexuality. Ironically, however, she is victimized because she moves away from those restrictions, because she fails to make the demands necessary to ensure her own security, which suggests that the conventions are meant to protect as well as to restrain. By breaking away from the moral framework in her search for self then, she paradoxically loses herself to those who are able to take control.

The interplay of Charity, Royall, and Harney in the context of the sexual arena provides the contrasting angles of vision necessary for evaluating each in his own terms and against the others. In so doing, the limitations in each becomes apparent, thereby suggesting that there is no underlying consciousness to provide a lesson, no moral touchstone to justify the occurrence of pain and suffering: Harney's morality is reduced to self-interested expediency; Royall's to self-serving inertia; Charity's to denial and lifelessness. Although conventional values and beliefs prove inadequate for anyone whose needs move beyond conventional expectations, those values are perpetuated by those whose needs are served.

V. The Custom of the Country: The Material Drive

Although lacking the subtle understatement of Summer, and the sympathetic immediacy of The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country contributes to the Wharton canon by presenting a vision of America which is as disturbing as it is revealing. The most ambitious of the major novels, it is, at the same time, the least successful, simply because Wharton's subject is so broad, and the implications so far-reaching that the focus becomes diffused and unclear. And yet, it is possible to clarify Wharton's assessment of America in this novel, and to understand the implications, by interpreting The Custom of the Country according to her technique of "reflecting angles of vision" and by not seeking any moral directives within the narrative.

In the central character, Undine Spragg, Wharton creates a young woman who takes control of her own destiny. Whereas Lily and Charity are inculcated with the values of their community and are partially committed to those values, Undine, by contrast, moves beyond the limits of her own community, and seems to adapt, albeit superficially, to every community which variously attracts her. In so doing, she develops the desire and the momentum necessary to move from unsophisticated, small town Midwestern beginnings through the various levels of New York society, and ultimately, into a kind of international community of her own design. In her evolution, she addresses only her own

needs, and she refuses to subjugate herself to anyone who attempts to inhibit her progress.

Undine thus reveals the very qualities which Lily and Charity lack: in contrast to Charity, Undine is incapable of denying her own essential self; in contrast to Lily, Undine clearly defines her goals and negotiates however callously to ensure her own gratification. These distinctions between Lily and Charity and Undine become important in addressing Wharton's assessments of social and sexual roles, because here, the emphasis shifts from woman as victim to woman as victimizer.[1] Whereas Lily and Charity are incapable of escaping their moral framework, Undine strives to learn the skills of admission to each community only as a means of gratifying her own superficial sense of what she feels admission will provide, although as a woman, she is restricted to the marriage market as a means of achieving her goals.

At the same time, Wharton assesses the implications of Undine's _modus operandi_ by contrasting her with Ralph Marvell, her eventual husband and a member of New York society, who at

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[1]Lewis points out that in the early stages of her work on _The Custom of the Country_, Wharton was fascinated with Nietzsche: "_Beyond Good and Evil_, _The Will to Power_, _The Genealogy of Morals_ were all in her inventory of favorites this year [1908]--and she found them full of originality and poetry . . . . What she especially admired was Nietzsche's exhilarating 'power of breaking through the conventions', and she thought that it was 'saluatory now and then to be made to realize "Die Unwerthung aller Werthe' [the reevaluation of all values'] and really get back to a wholesome basis of naked instinct" (_Biography_, p. 230). The premises in Nietzsche which fascinated Wharton found fruition in Undine's characterization and in her evolution.

times dominates the narrative completely. Both these characters are products of their particular environment, albeit modified according to the changing values they encounter, and as such, the options available for seeking gratification fall within clearly-defined boundaries. Undine and Marvell also are juxtaposed against a plethora of other characters who represent various levels of American society at home and abroad, and who provide a criterion for established and newly-evolving mores. The interplay between Undine and Marvell, in relation to a continuously-changing backdrop, points to the central conflict: Undine's ability to adapt to a society in transition contrasts with Marvell's inability to adapt to that society, and their evolution reveals the kinds of skills and dedication of purpose required to survive and to succeed. Because of the emphasis on adaptability, Wharton utilizes a naturalistic structure, but at the same time, she establishes a situation which tests naturalism as a philosophical framework. In this sense, Undine and Marvell embody particular philosophical positions, and their evolution is at times more consistent than plausible.

But Wharton broadens her scope further. On one level, the interplay between Undine and Marvell reveals the conflict between completely opposing sensibilities in a society more dedicated to material well-being than to spiritual values. On another level, Undine and Marvell provide the vehicle to assess the evolution of the American value system in general terms: Undine's background and her commitment to materialism contrasts

with Marvell's own background and his commitment to the altruistic; and together, their marriage symbolizes the amalgam of values which provide the foundation of American cultural guidelines, just as their separation and divorce points to the incompatibility of such contradictory values and the inevitable consequences. On this symbolic level, Undine and Marvell, and later Undine alone, embody small town, Midwestern values, ritualized New York standards, and the customs of a society in transition, and which, thereby, reveals the evolution of the American cultural consciousness. On yet another level, that national consciousness is contrasted with France to point to specific cultural differences between French customs and the American tendency to adapt to new perceptions and possibilities as they arise.

Hence, Undine is the vehicle by which America's cultural evolution is assessed in its own terms and against a contrasting and more rigid national perspective. In a sense then, Undine's evolution assumes epic proportions, as she provides the means to assess America's adaptability as a cultural phenomena, and Undine becomes a somewhat ironic epic heroine.[2]

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[2]Griffin Wolff disagrees with this definition however: "The Custom of the Country furnishes enough subject for several tragedies, yet it is not an epic. Its sweep is gargantuan: the aim of its conquest is very nearly as large as the ambition of its heroine; its mood is martial, furious, and devastating. But it is not an epic. . . .It is the cosmopolitan debacle that Wharton fixes upon with such ruthlessness; the epic is outside the walls, just within shouting distance" (Feast of Words, p. 231). But insofar as Undine embodies the characteristics of the American cultural consciousness, and her own evolution mirrors the national evolution, the term, epic, does seem apt.

Consequently, Undine must be completely consistent in order to fulfill such a broad function and to contrast against so many characters and in so many situations. Once her philosophical framework is established, then, her motivations are subservient to her actions. This consistency provides a measure against which the issues become apparent, but at the same time, the presentation becomes tedious and Undine's evolution monotonous. Moreover, without a moral directive to explain Undine's success, her evolution seems to serve no purpose at all. But regardless of the lack of character development and spontaneity, the use of reflecting angles of vision is consistent, and Undine's evolution is extremely revealing as a means to assess the scope of Wharton's vision. In creating a saga of such proportions, Wharton is handicapped not by the narrowness of her vision, but by the breadth of her vision and by her understanding of the people and country she assesses.[3] In order to address the issues in the manner which the subject demands, however, this

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[2](cont'd) Ammons describes the novel differently again: "The image of a warrior queen borne in triumph by captive princes not only describes the structure of The Custom of the Country, which Wharton called a 'chronicle novel' and which, in place of a conventional plot, recounts a series of campaigns, each followed by its brief 'progress' in the regal sense of the term. The image also describes Undine's character: her capacity to wield and embody power" (Argument, p. 105).

[3]Ammons suggests that "the novel is Wharton's tour de force on the marriage question (and perhaps the best novel she ever wrote): it throws a brilliant satiric light on the institute of marriage, stripping it of all sentiment and sentimentality" (Argument, p. 97). While there is no doubt that the business of marriage provides the dominant chord in this novel, and that there are satiric elements at play, Wharton moves far beyond a discussion of marriage in her assessment of the American psyche.

overly-long novel must be discussed at some length.

Unlike Lily's attraction to the spiritual and Charity's attraction to the emotional, Undine is attracted to the materialistic and the worldly, and this dedication establishes her framework for existence. From relatively humble, small-town beginnings, she capitalizes on her father's growing financial success and redefines her needs according to her growing awareness of alternative possibilities, beginning with the comparative merits of vacation spots. Undine initially discovers the ". . . . gentility of summer vacations at the Mealey Housen, whither her parents, forsaking their squalid suburb, had moved in the first flush of their rising fortunes."[4] She quickly realizes, however, that the Mealey House is inadequate according to more worldly perceptions: ". . . the southern visitor's dismay, her repugnances, her recoil from the faces, the food, the amusements, the general bareness and stridency of the scene, were a terrible initiation to Undine" (p. 54). Because she responds to the perceptions of those around her who seem to know more than she does, Undine fails to develop a criterion for judgement herself, and so attempts to comply with an ever-changing value system.

Consequently, although she acts immediately on her companion's perceptions, and changes the Great Lakes resort for one in Virginia, any contentment again proves fleeting when a

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[4]Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 52. All further references to this text are from this edition.

supercilious guest criticizes the locale and the inhabitants: "The place was forever blighted for [Undine]. . . . But Miss Wincher's depreciatory talk had opened ampler vistas, and the pioneer blood in Undine would not let her rest" (p. 56). Thence to Skog Harbour, Maine, thence to New York, "with no better success" (p. 57).

This pattern of defining her own needs only in relation to the perceptions of others becomes double-edged insofar as Undine's ambitions are concerned. In one way, she is able, unlike her parents, to perceive a vision of existence beyond her own humble beginnings, and that perception, that pioneer spirit, allows her to create goals which give her life meaning. But at the same time, she redefines her role and her needs in response to each new circumstance and according to standards which she does not necessarily understand:

> Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses (p. 19).

The ambition which pulls her away from Apex City and towards New York society thus is, ironically, the same quality which leaves her without a clearly-defined social framework.

This pattern is repeated in her sexual relationships as well. When she initially arrives in New York and is attracted to a ". . . handsome Austrian ridingmaster . . . [she] pledg[es] herself to him," until she discovers, through a friend's investigation, that he is a sham, ". . . in the light of which

discoveries Undine noticed that his lips were too red and that his hair was pommaded" (pp. 25-6). And although she was engaged to Millard Binch for two years, when Elmer Moffatt arrives in Apex, Undine is so taken with his "look of jovial cunning" and his "faintly impudent tilt of the head" that she quickly elopes with him (pp. 108-110). When she encounters him several years later in New York, however, after being initiated into society, she reassesses him through different eyes: "[What] Undine had formerly though 'smart'. . . now struck her as merely vulgar. She felt that in the Marvell set Elmer Moffatt would have been stamped as 'not a gentleman'" (p. 108). As a very pliant student of manners, her impressions are not formed according to any inherent value system, nor does she judge according to her own Midwestern criteria, but rather, she assesses according to the various role models who influence her perceptions.

In Undine's terms, therefore, choosing the correct role model and patterning her response accordingly not only gives definition to her goals and needs, but provides the criteria by which to assess her progress. The limitation in this approach occurs when she chooses an incorrect or irrelevant role model as the standard for behavior, as when she initially assumes that Marvell is insignificant:

> Even now it seemed incredible that [Popple] should not turn out to be more distinguished than young Marvell: [Popple] seemed so much more in the key of the world she read about in the Sunday papers--the dazzling, auriferous world of the Van Degens, the Driscolls and their peers (p. 23).

Her standard for judgement in New York initially is established

by the society pages, and she defines her goal in terms of the meretricious splendour of the newly-arrived and the newly-affluent, but when Mrs. Heeny redefines the social order for Undine, she immediately reshapes her ambitions and fixes her perceptions on Mrs. Heeny's criteria. In this way, Undine's framework expands simply through her exposure to alternative possibilities, and she adapts her criteria for judging men accordingly.

For Undine, however, sexual relationships are intertwined inexorably with social relationships, which forces her to redefine her own social role and expectations as well. When she is invited into the Marvell-Dagonet world, not only is she disappointed that her hostess does not live on Fifth Avenue, but Mrs. Fairford's house and the meal do not comply with Undine's expectations: the house itself is

> . . . small and rather shabby . . . [with] no guilding, no lavish diffusion of light . . . the room they sat in after dinner . . . reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex . . . . The dinner too was disappointing . . . . and she began to suspect that it wasn't a real 'dinner party' . . . (pp. 31-2).

The conversation also is confusing: "The talk ran more on general questions, and less on people, than she was used to . . ." (p. 35) Moreover, "all the ladies in Apex City were more voluble than Mrs. Fairford . . . conversation seemed to be a concert and not a solo" (p. 34). On the basis of Mrs. Heeny's evaluation of the social order and the Marvell's place in that order, Undine's own standards prove unworkable, with the result that she is without touchstones in this new conception of social

ritual: "All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations, and abbreviations . . ." (p. 37). Consequently, she misreads certain cues and misunderstands certain conventions.

But overriding all her confusion are several factors which sustain her throughout the evening; one assumption is that Ralph Marvell, "this brilliant youth--she now felt that he was brilliant . . . had really no eyes for any one but herself. . ." (p. 39). And regardless of her lack of understanding about the conventions of this world, and her lack of enthusiasm, if this world is considered the best part of society, then Undine unquestionably wants to be initiated into it, which is possible because of Marvell's attraction to her. More importantly, there is no doubt in Undine's mind that an advantageous marriage is the most productive avenue to social success. Without any understanding of the underlying values of this community, she therefore begins to modify her behavior accordingly.

She learns, for instance, that visiting art galleries and attending the opera in the sanctity of a box are expected of young ladies of distinction, along with specific compliance to form. At the gallery, she mimics those around her: "As Undine made her way [around the gallery] . . . she was aware of attracting almost as much notice as in the street, and she flung herself into rapt attitudes before the canvases, scribbling notes in the catalogue in imitation of a tall girl in sables . . ." (p. 48). Her pose brings her to the attention of Peter Van

Degen, ". . . the supreme exponent . . . of those crowning arts that made all life seem stale and unprofitable outside the magic of the Society Column" (p. 49-50). Her superficial compliance with society's forms along with her own physical attributes, thus provide an immediate return.

She capitalizes on this advantage by demanding and receiving from her father the price of a private box at the opera (p. 59), where, with her school friend, Mabel Liscomb, Undine's transformation continues: "Undine had already become aware that Mabel, planted, blond and brimming, too near the edge of the box, was somehow out of scale and out of drawing; and the freedom of her demonstrations increased the effect of disproportion" (p. 63). In assessing the differences between Mabel and herself, Undine touches on the essence of her own approach: "And [Mabel] had a way of trumpeting out her ignorance that jarred on Undine's subtler methods. It was precisely at this point that there dawned on Undine what was to be one of the guiding principles of her career: 'It's better to watch than to ask questions'" (p. 65). Undine's subtlety, then, along with her pliancy, provide the guidelines for her actions.

She not only redefines her own style, but when Marvell later approaches her, she also reassesses her own assumptions about sexual roles: "She had always associated finish and refinement entirely with her own sex, but she began to think they might be even more agreeable in a man" (pp. 69-70). In conversation with him, the sexual ritual also takes on

completely different connotations:

> . . . the instinct of sex told her that, under his quiet words, he was throbbing with the sense of her proximity. And his self-restraint sobered her, made her refrain from the flashing and fidgeting which were the only way she knew of taking part in the immemorial love-dance (p. 70).

By the end of the evening, she masters her role sufficiently enough, albeit quite superficially, to ensure her engagement and subsequent marriage to Marvell two months later.

That is not to suggest, however, that in spite of such adaptability that Undine is without any cultural guidelines. On her mother's side, Undine's grandfather "drifted into the ministry . . . . [but] it didn't pay him anything like as well, so finally he opened a drugstore, and he did first-rate at that too, though his heart was always in the pulpit" (p. 80). Spiritual conviction thus takes second place to economic concerns, and reward is measured mainly by financial success. At the same time, ironically, his success leads to land speculation, which in turn leads to bankruptcy, which suggests that success, if uncontrolled, may lead readily to excess and to unhappiness.

Her father, on the other hand, was "poor and [his] early married life had been a protracted struggle, darkened by domestic affliction" through the deaths of two of his children from typhoid (p. 80), although circumstances change:

> Mr. Spragg had 'helped out' his ruined father-in-law [by taking over some land for a bad debt], and had vowed on his children's graves that no Apex child should ever again drink poisoned water--and out of those two disinterested impulses, by some impressive law of compensation, material prosperity had come (p. 81).

Mr. Spragg's example suggests that clearly-defined goals, in conjunction with clearly-defined impulses, create the singularity of purpose necessary for success, which he builds on to increase his prosperity.

Consequently, although her parents are "'plain people' and had not yet learned to be ashamed of it" (pp. 81-2), and although they seem dreary and limited in the context of New York society, they both pass along to Undine specific elements which inform her existence, although she reshapes those elements according to her ability to imitate. From her father, "Undine derive[s] her overflowing activity" and dedication of purpose (p. 119). From her grandfather, she derives the tendency of excessiveness: "There was something still better beyond, then--more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her!" (p. 54). This genealogical account of Undine's character not only accounts for her idiosyncratic qualities, but such historic connections also provide the naturalist dimensions of her evolution.

But while her father's and grandfather's dedication to materialism stems in part from altruism or at least economic priorities, Undine's dedication stems completely from self-interest and self-indulgence. The need to discover and be accepted in the best spot stems from the same need to know and be accepted by the best people in New York. She thus retains only the drive for success, the desire for worldly aggrandisement, without retaining any of the virtuous or

expedient underpinnings of her forebears.

The nature of Undine's terms for success reaches to the very heart of American cultural assumptions. The principle on which America was founded was the desire to improve the quality of life, which originally was defined in terms of religious freedom and freedom from class barriers and restrictions. In theory, that desire means that good works provide the key to spiritual contentment, and any economic reward is coincidental. In Undine's grandfather, the religious and the economic are comfortably intertwined; in Undine's father, the commitment to good works leads coincidentally to financial prosperity. In this sense, the basis of American philosophy seems to provide the freedom to be, the freedom to do, in whatever terms the individual defines, with the underlying assumption that striving for particular goals leads to spiritual and financial rewards for the individual, and to benefits for the community in general.

But in Undine's drive towards materialistic success and social acceptance, there is no spiritual or beneficient connection. She sees the worldly rewards, but those rewards are disconnected completely from any philosophical framework, nor does she have any reservations about the value system which this society reveals: "As her imagination developed the details of the scene . . . it became clear to her that fashionable society was horribly immoral . . ." (p. 62). In Undine then, something vital is lost in the cultural evolution. Whereas the

materialistic rewards initially represented, or at least were seen to represent, the embodiment of spiritual and moral ideals, in Undine, the materialistic reward becomes an end in itself.

Moreover, although she has drives and skills similar to her father, unlike him, she restricts her search for worldly success to the marriage market, where she plies her own attributes as carefully as would a businessman market his product. In contrast to Lily's attraction to the ideal, then, and in contrast to Charity's instinctual response to the sensuous, Undine is guided by her unquestioned dedication to the materialistic and to the worldly, where the only possibility for success in her own terms is to sell her product, herself, to the most tempting bidder. In this way, Undine is the child of her background, although she redefines those cultural assumptions only in terms of self-interest and in relation to her sexual role. The implication is, however, that freedom from religious and social persecution means, for Undine, freedom from religious and social responsibility, thereby raising specific questions about the nature of those cultural assumptions.

Hence, Undine's development does not concern spiritual development or emotional fulfillment but, rather, it concerns her physical transformation into a social exemplar and a successful woman according to the criteria available to her, and according to her own needs, ambitions, and abilities. Her understanding of what constitutes a good marriage changes, but her assumption that she must marry well is taken for granted

both by her and by her parents. Initially, they annul her marriage to Moffatt as an unsuitable match, and later, they acquiesce to a move to New York, which is as importunate for them as it is auspicious for her. Moreover, Undine's demands for dresses and opera seats are fulfilled, in spite of Mr. Spragg's growing financial pressures, which suggests that Undine must present herself in the best possible light and in the best circumstances, regardless of the cost. The same attitude is reflected in Mrs. Heeny, and in Mabel Liscomb, who take for granted that Undine is husband-hunting. Her ambitions therefore are defined by those around her in relation to conventional expectations.

But the abilities which drive her father in business are transformed in Undine into social acumen and subtle adaptability, which she capitalizes on in her search for a husband. The custom of the country here then concerns the custom of marriage as a means for woman to fulfill her ambitions. Consequently, although Undine leaves Apex City behind, she carries with her to New York and to Ralph Marvell the same sensibility which initially guided her to Elmer Moffatt; not love or even affection, but rather, an attraction to and a premonition of something beyond and better than her present horizons, which she does not try to assess, but which, ironically, gives meaning to her life, albeit in purely materialistic terms. Undine's emotional needs and spiritual values are overwhelmed completely by her dedication to power,

position, and materialism; the result of a complex system of values and moral guidelines meant to enhance life, but which are reduced only to the physical manifestation thereof. Her evolution reveals the possibilities for fulfillment according to this criterion; her perspective provides one angle of vision.

Juxtaposed against Undine is the angle of vision provided by Ralph Marvell. Unlike Undine, who rejects her birthplace, Marvell perpetuates the traditions of his own:

> For four or five generations it had been the rule of both [the Dagonet and Marvell] houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live 'like a gentleman'--that is, with tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations . . . and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and 'business' honor (p. 75).

In his compliance with the expectations of family and community, he becomes committed to "desultory dabbling with life": a law career which is the "least real thing in his life", and an interest in literary and artistic pursuits, the results of which are "charming things, if only he had known how to finish them!" (p. 75). Neither business nor aesthetic success therefore is relevant in the context of his priorities.

Marvell also responds to "the world of wonders within him" (p. 75), and defines his purpose accordingly: "What he wanted most, now that the first flutter of being was over, was to learn and to do--to know what the great people had thought, think about their thinking, and then launch his own boat: write some good verse if possible; if not, then critical prose" (p. 77).

His commitment to ethical and aesthetic concerns, combined with his very strong sense of traditional values and his distaste for the materialistic expediencies of the business world, place him comfortably within his community.

He does, however, deviate from family traditions in one particular way: "Ralph had never taken his mother's social faiths very seriously. Surveying the march of civilization from a loftier angle, he had early mingled with the Invaders and curiously observed their rites and customs" (pp. 78-9). He responds to these newcomers with self-righteous smugness because he feels secure in his own role, and in his assumptions. For the same reason, because he feels so secure, he also responds to Undine, who seems to provide a focus for his interests:

> It was incredible that she too should be destined to swell the ranks of the cheaply fashionable; yet were not her very freshness, her malleability, the mark of her fate? . . . . To save her from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission--the 'call' for which his life had obscurely waited? (p. 82).

Undine seems to provide for Marvell the means to realize his own altruism. Consequently, he enjoys her lack of proficiency in social skills at the onset of their relationship as proof of her ingenuousness.

But just as Undine mistakenly ascribes certain characteristics to Marvell on the basis of his position in society, so he also errs in his assumptions about her. Although Undine's perceptions are totally externalized, and Marvell senses that she is without "any sense of relative values" (p. 83), he perceives a similarity between his parents and her own:

"Here was no retrospective pretense of an opulent past, such as the other Invaders were given to . . . . The fact drew [the Spraggs] much closer to the Dagonet ideals than any sham elegance in the past tense" (pp. 81-2). On the basis of this perception, he mistakenly assumes that Undine also shares his disinterest in opulent trappings and, like himself, would aspire to a more altruistic plane, if given the proper guidance, which he willingly does.

From Undine's perspective, however, Marvell provides the key to a world of style; but she mistakenly assumes that he also provides the key to the materialistic pleasures she wants: "She had fancied Ralph's wooing would at once admit her to all his social privileges; but he had shown a puzzling reluctance to introduce her to the Van Degen set, where he came and went with such familiarity . . ." (p. 93). Marvell's underlying purpose is to keep Undine away from the very set to which her ambitions, ironically, are directed. Reconcilation of such opposing sensibilities is impossible, but they nevertheless marry.

When Mr. Spragg raises concerns about Marvell's ability to support Undine, and attempts "to make her see that she owed it to herself to do better" (p. 123), Undine reveals her underlying motivations: "Did [Mr. Spragg] suppose she was marrying for money? Didn't he see it was all a question, now and here, of the kind of people she wanted to 'go with'?" (p. 123). So far as Mr. Spragg understands, she is marrying to ensure her financial well-being, but Undine is interested in money only as an avenue

to social success, which she thinks Marvell will ensure. If the Marvell-Dagonet family is of the best quality, then Undine unquestionably wants the best, regardless of financial or social uncertainties.

Undine's and Marvell's relationship thus reveals the consequences in attempting to unify completely opposing sensibilities. Marvell feels that a frugal existence helps them to clarify their values. In Europe, then, Undine wants excitement, but he is content to "lie in wait for adjectives" (p. 146), and to glory in the focus that she provides for him: ". . . it's all these months together, it's all our happiness--it's the meaning of life that I've found, and it's you dearest, you who've given it to me!" (p. 153). Marvell uses Undine to provide for his emotional well-being, and to give his life purpose.

But at the same time, because of her demands, he is forced to acknowledge her limitations:

> Her mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie schoolhouse in which she had been educated; and her ideals seemed to Ralph as pathetic as the ornaments made of corks and cigar bands . . . . He was beginning to understand this, and learning to adapt himself to the narrow compass of her experience. The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience; and he would not yet own to himself that her pliancy and variety were imitative rather than spontaneous (p. 147-8).

In his attempt to adapt to Undine's frame of reference, Marvell becomes embroiled in financial worries and compromises, and when they return to New York, he drops his literary pursuits and his law career for an unsuccessful job selling real estate and for

the "incessant struggle to make money enough to satisfy her increasing exactions. That was where the 'call' had led him . . ." (p. 218). Marvell's involvement with Undine leads not to her spiritual growth, as he hoped, but ironically, to his own pursuit of the materialistic.

Marvell's general deterioration and ultimate destruction reveals the limitations in his perspective: having been inculcated with a value system more related to esoteric concerns and more attentive to form than to materialistic accumulation and practicalities, he nevertheless adapts to the changing face of New York society in a way which his mother cannot, thereby suggesting that Marvell sees possibilities beyond her narrow focus. But by accepting the possibility of such alternatives, however smugly, he loses the protection which exclusion provides.

In his assumption that the Spraggs and the Dagonets share a similarity in values, he points to his own community's social evolution: "Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable . . ." (p. 74). The qualities which informed his ancestor's perceptions reflect those of Undine's grandfather and father, and provide a feasible amalgam of altruistic ideals and materialistic reward, which Mr. Dagonet reveals yet, at least insofar as negotiating with Mr. Spragg over Marvell's marriage contract: "It will pay us both in the end to keep him out of business . . . . The

retort drew a grunt of amusement from Mr. Spragg; and the eyes of the two men met in unexpected understanding" (p. 121-2). But in contrast to Mr. Dagonet, in Marvell, hard-edged pragmatism is overshadowed by philosophical niceties, with the result that he is singularly unprepared for the role he adopts: "He knew that 'business' had created its own special morality; and his musings on man's relation to his self-imposed laws had shown him how little human conduct is generally troubled about its own sanctions. He had a vivid sense of the things a man of his kind didn't do . . ." (p. 258-9). In contrast to his grandfather then, Marvell is not comfortable with the expediencies of his role.

Hence, Marvell provides a contrasting perspective on the evolution of the American ethical code: just as Undine's sensibilities have evolved to the point where her quest for materialstic reward lacks any philosophical underpinnings, so Marvell's sensibilties are refined to the point where his altruistic tendencies lack any pragmatic foundation. And he is in his way as limited as Undine is in hers. By defining his whole existence only in relation to Undine's response to his vision, without including any possibility for benefit to himself, except vicariously, he is destined to lose himself completely to her more definite aims:

> 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 (p. 165).

Like Undine then, Marvell too has lost something vital in the cultural evolution, which suggests that altruism without reward is as limiting as self-aggrandisement is without beneficence.[5] While Undine instinctually adapts, however, in contrast, Marvell responds to alternative possibilities, but he lacks the dedication and skills for the demands placed on him. As a result, he flounders in the conflict between his own ideals and his half-hearted attempt to adapt to a world which he recognizes operates according to more pragmatic concerns.

Consequently, he attempts to adapt to a role which is as unfulfilling as it is confusing. When he goes into business, there is a tacit understanding by both parties:

> The real estate brokers who had taken him into partnership had done so only with the hope of profiting by his social connections; and in this respect the alliance had been a failure. It was in such directions that he most lacked facility, and so far he had been of use to his partners only as an office-drudge" (p 257).

The partners assume that Marvell will capitalize on his position for his own benefit, and by which, they also will benefit. But in assessing Mr. Spragg's business attitude, Marvell also points to his own limitations in this area: "As far as Ralph knew, his father-in-law's business record was unblemished; yet one felt in him an elasticity of adjustment not allowed for in the Dagonet

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[5]Griffin Wolff interprets their relationship in another way which suggests much the same contrast: "Thus by a kind of perverse symmetry, Ralph and Undine have been contaminated in opposite ways: the Marvells have denied any direct expression of energy or aggression, and the Spraggs have taken the normal capacity for initiative and inflated it beyond reason. Their offspring are complementary anamorphoses, parables of defect and excess" (Feast of Words, p. 243).

code" (p. 259). From Marvell's perspective, success in the business world depends on his ability to shift his perceptions, to adapt his own code for more utilitarian purposes: ". . . quick decisions were essential to effective action, and brooding over ethical shades of difference might work more ill than good in a world committed to swift adjustments" (p. 261). When a business opportunity arises, Marvell suppresses his ethical misgivings by responding to Mr. Spragg's more pragmatic assessment. In so doing, Marvell fulfills his obligations to his business partners, and he underwrites his wife's expenditures. His decision to comply with the exigencies of his situation does reap the expected financial rewards, but the magnitude of his concession is lost in a sea of bills and in a disinterested wife.

Most importantly, Marvell also sacrifices the foundations which give his life meaning: ". . . he was getting to have the drifting dependence on 'luck' of the man conscious of his inability to direct his life" (p. 264). In his attempt to redefine his role according to his wife's expectations, and according to more profitable criteria, he finally must acknowledge the difference between Undine's value system and his own: "She wanted to enjoy herself, and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity--the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security" (pp. 223-4). Even as he complies with her expectations and thereby loses himself, he

also realizes, as she does, that he is incapable of adapting as she wants: ". . . it was plain . . . that he would not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was man's natural tribute to woman's merits" (p. 227). In his attraction and commitment to Undine, however altruistic his motives might have been, he moves beyond the protection of his own world by trying to compete in hers.

In so doing, he commits himself to a contest which tests his altruistic tendencies in response to a wife who is completely oblivious to any other standard than her own, and in a world which operates according to a different criterion, as one of his more philosophical friends observes: ". . . even [Marvell] has to conform to an environment where all the romantic values are reversed" (p. 207). In consequence, he is drawn towards a wife and a world he understands, but which, ironically, seems meaningless. But as meaningless as he perceives his wife and that world to be in the context of his own beliefs, the fact remains that he becomes so completely enveloped in that system that he becomes totally dependent on it, and ultimately loses himself to it, beyond the hope that his son will succeed where Marvell himself fails.

From Undine's perspective, however, there is no confusion between her methods and her goals. She realizes as soon as she is married that she has misjudged Marvell's potential to fulfill her needs, and that Mrs. Heeny's assessment of the social order is outdated, if not incorrect: "[Undine] had found out that she

had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous" (p 193). When she attempts to coerce Marvell for her own interests, as she does with her parents, and when her usual methods fail, she arbitrarily rejects her marriage as unproductive. Her desire to sail home from Europe on Van Degen's motor launch thus stems from the same desire as her decision to reset the Dagonet rings and her distaste at discovering her pregnancy: for Marvell, family rings and pregnancy symbolize the continuity of tradition and the perpetuation of certain standards, in contrast to the elegant and meaningless decadence of the Van Degen yacht, but Undine sees only the restriction of a pregnancy, and the unfashionableness of family heirlooms, in contrast to the possibilities in sailing home on a luxury yacht belonging to the one man who seems to epitomize her expectations.

When she shrugs off Marvell then, she is responding to her own value system: "Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's to her credit to want to change" (p. 96). Even as her outward polish and subtlety of approach increases, she continues to follow her own customs. There can be no hesitation about disengaging herself from an unproductive relationship simply because men and marriage provide the avenue to success so vital to Undine's well-being. Marriage is not a love-match, then, but a business arrangement, and success depends on her ability to redefine her frame of reference as quickly and as often as necessary. The

fact that the frame of reference continuously changes suggests how elusive fulfillment is.

In Undine's attempt to redefine her goals according to more lucrative possibilities, she once more commits herself to the "Sunday Supplement" criteria for elegance. In contrast to the Marvell family's distaste for Van Degen, Undine senses that with him lies her future: "There was more similarity of tastes between them . . . . She felt the strength of Van Degen's contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy: that was the only kind of 'exclusiveness' that impressed her" (p. 192). In her attraction to him, just as in her earlier attraction to Marvell, she mistakenly assumes that Van Degen will fulfill her expectations, and plots accordingly:

> ". . . her impatience to enjoy was curbed by an instinct for holding off and biding her time that resembled the patient skill with which her father had conducted the sale of his 'bad' real estate in the Pure Water Move days" (p. 201).

Although her patience and acumen does lead to the commitment from Van Degen which she needs to begin divorce proceedings from Marvell, she mistakenly assumes that she and Van Degen are similar in every respect, and so she miscalculates. She incorrectly assumes that they share a commitment to each other, and that their verbal agreement is reciprocal.

Moreover, Undine misjudges in another way in that she presumes to achieve her goal of marriage by offering her sexual favours outside the safety of the marriage contract, thereby undercutting her own position: "She had voluntarily stepped

outside of her social frame . . ." (p. 370). Van Degen, on the other hand, feels no such commitment and deserts her, leaving only a pearl necklace as payment for services rendered (p. 379). Whereas her rejection of Marvell stems from her clear-sighted assessment of his inability to fulfill her needs, in contrast, her rejection by Van Degen occurs because she fulfills his needs too readily, without following through on the fine points of negotiation. Unlike Marvell, Van Degen operates only in relation to self-interest, like Undine, but he has a hypocritical level to his relationships, which Undine does not. More importantly, her failure with Van Degen pointedly illustrates that the business of marriage requires scrupulous negotiations and good instincts.

In her dealings with both Marvell and Van Degen, Undine also reveals her failure to understand either man's motivations beyond the most superficial level. She sees in Marvell only his position in society, and she sees in Van Degen only the meretricious splendour which informs his existence. Although she does not lose sight of her goal, which in this case is defined in response to her need for materialistic gratification, disconnected from Marvell's disapproval and his financial instability, her goal is unfulfilled through Van Degen because of her lack of judgement. Not only does the "Sunday Supplement" fail to provide her with the complete picture of Van Degen that she needs for success, just as Mrs. Heeny failed to provide the complete picture of the Marvell family, but Undine also presumes

that she and Van Degen are similar in every respect, which, in fact, they are not.

Undine thus comes up against customs and standards which are quite different to her own. New York is a community which amalgamates new families with old, position with power, and power with wealth. At one extreme are the Dagonet-Marvell elders, who refuse to adapt to a society which has reformed itself:

> Mrs. Marvell's classification of the world into the visited and the unvisited was as obsolete as a mediaeval cosmogony. Some of those whom Washington Square left unvisited were the centre of social systems far outside its ken, and as indifferent to its opinions as the constellations to the reckonings of the astronomers; and all those systems joyously revolved about their central sun of gold (p. 193).

The elders are able to exclude themselves from a society which has no interest in them, and are able to maintain a modest if contented existence, but their offspring sense the limitations in such isolation: "Mr. Dagonet was always pleasant to see and hear, but his sarcasms were growing faint and recondite: they had as little bearing on life as the humours of a Restoration Comedy" (p. 311). The younger generation thus acknowledge but do not perpetuate such standards.

Because Ralph and his cousin, Clare, both sense in their own way and according to their own needs that the elders are anachronistic, they adapt accordingly. Ralph becomes entrepreneurial, while Clare marries Peter Van Degen to ensure her financial well-being and her position in the social evolution, in spite of her reservations about his other

qualities: "Poor Clare repented, indeed--she wanted it clearly understood--but she repented in the Van Degen diamonds, and the Van Degen motor bore her broken heart from opera to ball" (pp. 76-7). But just as Marvell's new role is spiritually unfulfilling, so Clare remains unfulfilled as well. She therefore turns to Ralph for the sustenance she does not find in her marriage, which suggests that Ralph's and Clare's modifications are as insufficient as the Dagonet's isolation.

In any case, Clare reveals, like Van Degen, a level of hypocrisy in her relationships which contrasts to Marvell, who cannot reconcile his ideals with the facts of his existence: "No, he didn't feel as Clare felt . . . . he could not conceive that tenderness and desire could ever again be one for him: such a notion as that seemed part of the monstrous sentimental muddle on which his life had gone aground" (p. 426). For Van Degen and Clare, there is a tacit understanding of what each provides for the other, and at what cost: she provides him with the respectability of established society, in exchange for financial well-being and social relevance, and each adapts his own framework accordingly, accepting that hypocrisy is an essential aspect of that framework, unlike the elder Dagonets, whose dedication to rigid and inflexible standards is ultimately as meaningless as Ralph Marvell's dedication to altruism.

In contrast to Peter and Clare Van Degen, Marvell and Undine share specific qualities which set them apart. Like Undine, Marvell lacks the hypocritical level necessary to adapt

completely into this world. Like Marvell, Undine misjudges because of her failure to assess the implications thoroughly. But unlike Marvell, Undine loses her ground only momentarily, and she never loses sight of her goals. Undine's difficulties then, and her evolution, in contrast to and in relation with Marvell's difficulties, are reflected against a society in flux, where old customs are meaningless, where the present generation selectively adapts according to individual needs, and where hypocrisy provides a means of addressing the inadequacies in a changing value system.

In contrast to the Van Degens, and in spite of her adaptability, Undine reveals specific limitations. When she ignores the telegram requesting her return to Marvell, she does not only because she feels it is a ploy to inhibit her freedom, but also because her loyalties have shifted to Van Degen and the possibilities which he represents. Therefore, her need for him and her commitment to him overshadow any compassion she might feel for Marvell, and she so reacts: "So malleable outwardly, she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (p. 224). When Van Degen, through Indiana Frusk, suggests that the double-standard stops when illness intervenes, and that Undine should have responded to Marvell, she points out the inherent hypocrisy, with little effect.

In this way, she differs from those around her, for Undine continuously attempts to reconcile her private needs with her public role, and does not comply with the double-standard

revealed in most of the relationships: "She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability . . ." (p. 354). In her earlier commitment to Marvell, she attains respectability without amusement, and in her relationship with Van Degen, she ultimately is forced to realize that she obtains amusement, but without the respectability of the marriage contract. Whereas this society adapts itself to the complex hypocrisy of public marriages and private relationships, Undine, in contrast, is inhibited in this particular regard. That is not to suggest that she finds illicit relationships immoral; rather, she finds the custom incompatible with her needs and expectations in a "well-ordered life". More importantly, she reveals that at this most essential level, she remains disconnected and disenchanted, which suggests that even in Undine's clearly-defined terms of reference and dedication to goals, there are limits to her adaptability.

While Undine contrasts with established New York society in one way, her father provides a contrasting perspective on the limits of adaptability. When the Spraggs come to New York, Undine's father carries with him a complex business morality, but he operates within clearly-defined limits and in relation to clearly-defined standards, which he feels Elmer Moffatt, for instance, does not comply with in his own dealings, and whom Mr. Spragg considers a "cutthroat" (p. 263). But the pragmatic framework which serves Mr. Spragg well in Apex does not lead to

equal success in New York: "For some time past, Mr. Spragg had been rather continuously overworked . . . . He had never quite regained, in New York, the financial security of his Apex days. Since he had changed his base of operations his affairs had followed an uncertain course . . ." (p. 302). Out of his element, he is unable to adapt at all, and so follows his own customs in a society which operates according to a different value system.

Whereas Undine responds, at least superficially, and conforms so far as she is able, Mr. Spragg, in contrast, is unable to adapt at all, and the gap between father and daughter so widens that they completely lose touch with each other's sensibilities: ". . . all she cared for, and attached importance to, was as removed from her parent's conception of life as her impatient greed from their passive stoicism" (p. 318). Just as the Dagonets provide an example of traditional values for Marvell, so the Spraggs provide an example of established values for Undine. But just as the Dagonets become anachronistic so far as Marvell is concerned, so the Spraggs become ineffectual so far as Undine is concerned. Having been forced out of their own social framework in Apex by a daughter who sees nothing beyond her own ambitions, they are condemned to a meaningless existence dedicated to her well-being at the cost of their own.

In contrast to the Dagonets then, who refuse to accept that the world and the customs have changed, Mr. Spragg attempts to live by his own values in a world with different customs. But

both are, in any case, doomed to extinction, and Mr. Spragg is transformed by his displacement from a confident Apex businessman into an unsuccessful New York entrepreneur, into a pathetic, dislocated pilgrim dedicated to a meaningless study of European hotel rooms. The example provided by Mr. Spragg suggests, therefore, that Undine's adaptability is a reflection of her survival instinct.

Adaptability thus becomes the common thread and provides the means to assess all the interrelationships. The unquestioned dedication of the Dagonets to past values and the dislocated dedication of the Spraggs contrasts with Marvell's half-hearted suppression of values, and suggests that social evolution is not only inevitable, but necessary if the community is to remain viable and relevant. The Van Degen group, and specifically Clare, modifies the customs of the past, maintaining a superficial compliance with form and traditions, but the form lacks moral substance, the traditions only serve appearance, and the social framework is adapted to economic expediencies as a means of ensuring comfort and pleasure. Thereby, society reshapes and reforms itself according to a changing value system. Those that do adapt, like Clare, place their social and material needs before any others, which Marvell, in contrast, is unable to do.

Undine, however, brings a different sensibility to her relationships, mirrored in her girlhood friends. Like Undine, Mabel and Indiana define their existence in relation to

marriage, social position and affluence. When they divorce, they too are complying with the Apex principle of "doing better." Moreover, these women do not dabble in illicit relationships for pleasure, but only as a means to ensure their own goals, in spite of the possibility of scandal. The Apex women therefore operate within the boundaries of their own social framework, although their terms change as they become more worldly and sophisticated. They see better opportunities, and they instinctually redefine their goals according to their own physical and social evolution. So far as Indiana and Mabel are concerned, Undine's motivations are correct, and her decision to divorce well-founded; she simply lacks the necessary skill to follow through successfully: "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!" (p. 344). Like Undine, then, Mabel and Indiana are without moral inhibitions, and are dedicated to materialistic well-being and social position, which makes them seem compassionless, unethical, and mercenary while, at the same time, they seem simple and unassuming.

But regardless of individual qualities, the Apex women and the Van Degen group all reveal a vision of existence free from moral ambiguities, ethical values, and dedicated to their own self-aggrandisement. In this way, and regardless of social nuances, the newcomers and established society are at a comparable stage in the social evolution. In contrast to Mr. Dagonet's and Mr. Spragg's alienation from each other and from

society in general, the newcomers intermingle freely with the not-so-new and with the old families, thereby suggesting that commonality of purpose, in this case, the pursuit of power, position, and wealth, ultimately creates its own social framework, regardless of regional nuances. Those that adapt to this framework and comply with its standard survive and succeed, and those that do not are destined for alienation and extinction.

Undine thus is typical of her sex, her class, and her generation, and her evolution must be assessed on several different levels. As she flounders in the face of Van Degen's rejection, she assesses herself only in relation to those around her: "[Indiana] still did and was all that Undine had so sedulously learned not to be and to do; but to dwell on these obstacles to her success was but to be more deeply impressed by the fact that [Indiana] nevertheless succeeded" (p. 345). Inherent in this assessment is the fact that Undine cannot admit defeat, for to do so diminishes her in relation to everyone around her, and because she sees herself only as others see her, she would necessarily lose all avenues to self-esteem by withdrawing from the competition. Moreover, because she defines her whole existence in terms of materialistic and social success, by giving up those goals and admitting failure, she also would lose everything which gives her life meaning, without which, her life would become as purposeless as Marvell's and her father's. Lacking an emotional or spiritual framework, she is

driven in an illusive pursuit of other people's goals as a means, paradoxically, of escaping potential oblivion.

In contrast to Marvell, who understands the system but cannot conform, Undine strives to conform, but is limited by her lack of understanding. This lack, ironically, is that which continuously expands her perceptions: as options are lost, she seeks new options, always better and more lucrative, as a means to give definition to her needs and to justify her existence. Paradoxically then, her limitations provide avenues for her perceptions to expand, albeit superficially and always in reaction to newly-acquired role models. Her ability to adapt to the terms of success defined by those around her thus provides her raison d'etre, and she mirrors exactly the value system of her society.

In this way, Undine reveals the struggle involved in complying with the social framework, but on a different level, she also becomes the embodiment of the cultural consciousness, in that her evolution is fixed clearly in the historical context and in relation to the cultural evolution of America. The implication, then, is that Undine symbolizes not only a generation for whom adaptability is the common characteristic, but she also symbolizes a country which lacks an ethical framework, and which, therefore, continuously seeks beyond its present horizons as a means to escape its own limitations. Undine's evolution thus assumes epic proportions insofar as she provides a means to assess the cultural phenomena of

adaptability.

Because of the complex nature of her role, Undine's actions must be completely consistent in order that the phenomena be assessed. Once her modus operandi is established, what she does to resolve her difficulties matters far more than her underlying motivations. For instance, even while she pursues Van Degen in France, she becomes aware of alternative possibilities in the transformation of Miss Wincher of Potash Springs into the Marquise de Trezac in France:

> Once more all the accepted values were reversed, and it turned out that Miss Wincher had been in possession of some key to success on which Undine had not yet put her hand. To know that others were indifferent to what she thought important was to cheapen all present pleasure and turn the whole force of her desires in a new direction (p. 286).

Because of Miss Wincher's successful transformation, Undine perceives a vision of existence beyond Marvell, beyond Van Degen, beyond the limits of New York, replaced with the French sensibilities of Raymond de Chelles, the world of the French landed gentry, and their American wives, "the women who had married into the French aristocracy, and who led, in the high-walled houses beyond the Seine which she once thought so dull and dingy, a life that made her own seem as undistinguished as the social existence of the Mealey House" (p. 286). Just as her perceptions change in accordance with the possibilities of alternative vacation spots, so her perceptions change in relation to Miss Wincher's success.

When Van Degen throws her over, revealed by Indiana specifically, and New York society generally, Undine responds accordingly: "Her evening at the opera had shown her the impossibility of remaining in New York. She had neither the skill nor the power to fight the forces of indifference leagued against her . . ." (pp. 376-7). As she rejected Marvell's world without realy understanding it, so she rejects Van Degen's world in the same way, except in this case, that conclusion is forced on her by a community whose nuances she fails to grasp. Her lack of success in New York, together with the possibilities available in France, allows her to give definition to her needs in relation to a new social framework, while Miss Wincher's transformation gives redefinition to Undine's goals in terms of a new social exemplar.

She thus is neither destroyed nor changed by her difficulties, but instead, she instinctually redefines her goals in relation to the options available. In one way, Undine is rejected by the community she represents, but in another, more far-reaching way, she applies and follows the laissez-faire attitude of her society. When she underwrites her escape by selling Van Degen's pearls, she is without moral misgivings and merely capitalizes on her losses. In so doing, she attempts to turn failure into success by adapting her needs to her options.

Undine's consistency and her sojourn in France therefore provide Wharton with the means not only of reflecting Undine's value system against that of France, but to reveal the logical

consequences of the American value system in practise. When Chelles offers marriage, Undine's and Marvell's child provides the only avenue to social acceptance and success available to her and, consequently, her survival requires that she demand from Marvell the only element left which gives his own life meaning. In acknowledging his needs, she must deny her own, which is impossible, and hence, from Undine's perspective, the issue is clear-cut and straightforward. When she initiates legal proceedings against Marvell, then, her actions are justified in and for themselves, nor are compassion or pity even a consideration. Moreover, her actions are reinforced and supported by a legal system more interested in material rights than in moral considerations.

From Marvell's perspective, however, he is once again pitted against an adversary with a much stronger survival instinct, and when his half-hearted attempt at adapting fails, he flounders in the recognition of his own pathetic helplessness: "He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in a mediaeval armour . . . . the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him" (p. 469). In his role as maladjusted idealist, Marvell reflects against Undine's unquestioned and unhesitating pragmatism, and their interplay reveals the consequences of such a union.

But on another level, the consequences of their relationship symbolize the inevitable evolution of the American

ethic. Because of the nature of altruism and materialism respectively, their initial attraction to and sense of potential in each other soon proves unworkable and contradictory to their own expectations and aims, and suggests not only that the materialistic tendency leads only to greater demands and more expectations, but that ultimately, regardless of any intrinsic values and needs, any opposing sensibilities are destroyed by the magnitude of such an all-encompassing, dynamic, and self-serving, albeit meaningless framework. What remains is a value system dedicated to the rewards, but oblivious to, unaware of, and disinterested in the fact that the rewards are only a means to a greater, long-forgotten end.

Consequently, when Undine overpowers Marvell, she does not act with malice or with vindictiveness, but with the understanding that he stands in the way of her progress and goals, and so must be manipulated. From his perspective, Marvell removes himself from a world with which he cannot cope, just as the underlying values are removed from a world dedicated to different priorities. From Undine's perspective, her pragmatic self-interest leads to success in her terms insofar as she obtains the avenue to marriage essential to her well-being, just as pragmatic self-interest provides the criteria for her society.

Once married to Chelles, however, her actions and the outcome are predictable in that she provides a vehicle by which the author can assess American culture in relation to French

culture and customs. Just as Undine's superficial compliance with convention serves her purposes in New York, so she adapts again in France, although she is confronted with a system which is as exacting as it is inflexible. Not only does Chelles define her role according to centuries of traditions, but she fails to absorb him either intellectually, or sexually, and her physical attributes and social graces fail to impress the French community: "But a woman has got to be something more than good-looking to have a chance to be intimate with them: she's got to know what's being said about things" (p. 541). Those qualities which inform Undine's existence thus are viewed as insufficient for her husband's needs and irrelevant insofar as the community is concerned, and suggests that Undine and Chelles maintain completely contradictory priorities.

While she masters the skills of admission to French society sufficiently to obtain access, her lack of understanding about the underlying value system leaves her predictably discontented, which Chelles assesses in terms of his own folly: ". . . and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!1" (p. 545). Chelles shares Marvell's sensibilities in their dedication to traditions. But in contrast to Marvell, Chelles is completely inflexible, as is the community he inhabits. His inflexibility ensures his emotional well-being, just as the French community's inflexibility ensures its own perpetuation. Hence, Undine's

criticisms of the French community are rejected as invalid, irrelevant, or irreverent, in contrast to the adaptability revealed by the New York community. And whereas Marvell loses his own well-being by attending to Undine's needs, Chelles, in contrast, refuses to adapt at all.

The limitations in Undine's value system become apparent when pitted against a more exacting standard. Unable to "find a crack in the strong armour of her husband's habits and prejudices" (p. 547), isolated from the social scene and the frivolities which give her life meaning, Undine subsequently flounders without direction or purpose in a community which fails to acknowledge her needs. Without any touchstones, she is reduced by her fear of "social reprobation" (p. 564), to silent acquiescence, and is trapped in a country estate, where on "one of the chief distractions [is] . . . to invent ways of annoying her mother-in-law . . ." (p. 518). From Chelles' perspective, the customs provide a social framework which serves every need and every situation, in spite of any apparent inconsistencies or idiosyncratic needs. From Undine's perspective, however, Chelles' dedication to such a rigid code destroys her self-esteem and leaves her struggling to maintain her identity as she fights against customs which she does not understand. By reflecting Undine against Chelles, then, Wharton makes apparent the flimsiness of the American value system and the insensitive

and mindless rigidity of the French value system.[6]

When Elmer Moffatt reenters Undine's life, then, he provides a role model for Undine by which she is able to redefine her existence according to more attractive and lucrative possibilities. In spite of her experience with Chelles, Undine remains completely consistent, given the proper stimulus:

> The Driscolls, and Shallums, and Mrs. Rolliver! How carelessly [Moffatt] rolled off their names! One could see from his tone that he was one of them and wanted her to know it. And nothing could have given her a completer sense of his achievement--of the number of millions he must be worth (p.534).

Through Moffatt, Undine is able to redefine her role in the American cultural context, which counterbalances and offsets the French conception of her irrelevancy.

More importantly, he reinforces her identity and recreates meaning in her life: "Here was some one who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, elequent, and interesting" (p. 536). He redefines

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[6]Wershoven comes to much the same conclusion, albeit in different terms: "But the contrast of the American outsider and the French insider reveals not only the errors of American attitudes by the hypocrisies of French ways and their resemblances to certain American attitudes. Chief among the similarities of the two groups is the mercenary nature of their supposed romances. The marriage of Raymond and Undine is one of mutual exploitation, for Chelles expects to profit by it financially, as his brother Hubert does when he marries another American heiress, aptly named Miss Looty Arlington" (Female Intruder, p. 68).

her life at its most essential level. Undine instinctually senses that if Elmer Moffatt can buy his way into New York society, then given enough money, she could buy her way back into society as well. Her connection with Moffatt provides her with the cultural, social, and materialistic framework she needs, but more importantly, their mutual assumptions about wealth as the avenue to power give definition to Undine's life and create specific goals. Undine's response to Moffatt so revives and restores her that she feels "ashamed of her tame acceptance of her fate" (p. 537), and she becomes driven to succeed according to this new possibility as a means of escaping her present, debilitating circumstance.

Moffatt reinforces Undine's value system in another way as well:

> . . . [He] 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 symbols stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue . . . . . To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence, and as she listened to him the vision of the things he could have unrolled itself before her like the the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror (p. 537-38).

According to their sexual roles then, each strives for the best, which Moffatt achieves through business deals that are underhanded, with dubious connections all the way to Congress, and which Undine achieves through self-serving marriage contracts and a legal system concerned only with property and material rights. For both Marvell and Undine, financial reward

and material comfort are the criteria for measuring success, and achieving such material recognition provides its own justification. Moffatt's dedication to the world of business reflects against Undine's dedication to the business of marriage, and in this sense, they are kindred.

Their shared assumptions and similarity in values suggests that Moffatt can fulfill Undine's needs in every way: he is rich, he is accepted at home and abroad; and he understands her needs and excesses, and willingly indulges them. Moreover, they are culturally and socially compatible, which, in response to Undine's experience with Chelles, becomes an essential aspect if she is to maintain any identity at all. She thus discovers the means to ingratiate herself to Moffatt by developing some adeptness at ferreting out the collectibles which he admires (p. 561), and by acquiring "as much of the jargon as a pretty woman needs to produce the impression of being well-informed . . ." (p. 561) In so doing, she hopes to become a part of his collection.

Hence, the pattern repeats itself, and Undine escapes to a more lucrative opportunity with her image restored, her values reinforced, and her goals redefined in relation to her own social framework. By contrasting Undine against Moffatt in this way, the similarity in their values system is revealed, albeit according to their sexual roles, as is the optimistic expectation by which they maintain their equilibrium and their momentum, in spite of any setbacks.

And yet, the ultimate irony is that, despite her social and material success, Undine's modus operandi does not provide for fulfillment even in her own terms. By marrying Moffatt, she receives the recognition and prestige she requires:

> It was only necessary to give people the time to pretend they had forgotten; and already they were pretending beautifully. The French world had of course held out the longest; it had strongholds she might never capture. But already, secederers were beginning to show themselves . . . (p. 590).

In reaching this pinnacle, Undine conforms to ever more punctilious standards of etiquette in order to fulfill her superficial sense of what each role requires. The result is that in her social evolution, she becomes alienated from Moffatt, in spite of their kindredship:

> . . . he had given her all she had ever wished for . . . he had made up to her for all her failures and blunders . . . . But there were [times] when she saw his defects and was irritated by them: when his loudness and redness, his misplaced joviality, his familiarity with the servants, his alternative swagger and ceremony with her friends, jarred on perceptions that had developed in her unawares (p. 591).

While she obtains amusement with Moffatt, then, her standards of respectability evolve beyond his own, which diminishes her contentment. However superficial her mimicry is, and regardless of her frustrations in dealing with such standards, she nevertheless is inculcated with the form if not the substance of her role models, which suggests that she internalizes standards which have no meaning for her, but which, ironically, deny her the possibility of fulfillment.

More importantly, the drive and momentum by which she achieves her success also ensure that she remain disconnected: "Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want, if she knew about them" (p. 591). When an ambassadorship is mentioned she focuses on that possibility, but the position is less important than the fact that she instinctually looks beyond her present horizons for more lucrative possibilities, which leaves her disenchanted with her present boundaries. She thus is trapped in a continuous search for something more and different as a means to compensate for her feelings of inadequacy and discontentment, which, ironically, remains elusive and unobtainable by virtue of her lack of understanding and commitment.

That need for the unobtainable, however, serves her well insofar as she continuously expands the boundaries of her perceptions and strives for ever more lucrative possibilities. By which, in her terms and in the terms of her society, she is extremely successful. In the sense that she evolves into a physical and social exemplar, Undine maintains control of her own destiny, within the social framework and according to the possibilities which arise within her sexual role. Her dedication of purpose ensures that she provide for her own needs, and the consequences fall to those who attempt to stand in her way. That Undine adapts so well to this framework with so little understanding pointedly reveals how flimsy is the assumption

that wealth is a criterion for worth. That she remains unfulfilled suggests that without any intrinsic values, Undine's ambitions and momentum only provide an escape from the meaninglessness of her life.

To suggest, however, that Wharton's purpose is simply to illustrate the kind of self-serving and callous adaptability required to survive and to succeed in this society is to ignore the implications of the various levels of interplay, although this element certainly is essential and provides the unifying framework of the discourse. On this level, Undine's unquestioned dedication to physical and material values reflects against Lily's commitment to the spiritual and against Charity's instinctual response to the sensual, and together, they reveal the essence of woman in the larger framework of Wharton's perceptions.

Lily's attempt to maintain values in a world operating according to more expedient concerns leads to her death; Charity's attempt to fulfill her sensual needs in a world which fails to acknowledge those needs leads to her emotional destruction; and Undine's conformity to the materialistic pursuits of everyone around her leads to frustration and discontentment. The evolution of these characters suggests, therefore, that in the context of American society, the roles available to women do not serve their spiritual or emotional needs, and attempting to fulfill those needs is a meaningless and futile exercise which leads to death or to life-in-death or

to an endless pursuit to escape inadequacy.

But given these options, Undine's evolution suggests that in spite of specific limitations, her priorities are the least self-destructive, however destructive she is to others. In this way, Undine illustrates that survival necessitates the transformation of woman from victim to victimizer as a means of maintaining control over her own destiny in a world dedicated to its own self-aggrandisement. By adapting to the customs and conventions of her society, rather than fighting against those standards as Lily and Charity do, Undine is successful in her own terms and according to her peers, and that, ultimately, is all that matters to her and to this society, despite any personal frustration or spiritual discontentment.

And this perception informs the larger issue in The Custom of the Country: an assessment of the cultural evolution of America. On this level, Undine not only contrasts with her parents and her Apex friends to provide an historical and regional context, but she also contrasts with Marvell and his family and against various segments of New York society in order to cover the full range of American sensibilities. The analysis considers the phenemona of the cultural identity of a whole nation as it was originally conceived, and how that identity evolves in relation to changing perceptions and concerns. By reflecting Undine and Marvell against each other and against others, the interplay of characters points to the transformation of the American ethic from a socially responsible and

individually productive system into one which is without intrinsic values and concerned only with self-aggrandisement as a measure of worth.

Wharton's purpose, however, is not only to address the nature of this evolution, but to reveal what the implications are for a society driven by such criteria. For this reason, Undine provides the consistency necessary to measure the phenomenon in and for itself, in relation to the needs of the individual, as a unifying force for society generally, and in comparison to the cultural framework of French society. Because Undine lacks any inherant values, she is driven is pursuit of material and social goals as a way to define her existence, but which always prove inadequate and insufficient, with the result that she continually modifies and adapts her perceptions in order to escape her own meaninglessness. And because Undine mirrors the priorities and concerns of those around her, regardless of social and regional nuances, she symbolizes a whole generation driven in the same meaningless pursuit. By consistently adapting to constantly-changing criteria, Undine and her society expand their perceptions and their expectations and reap great material success.

But at the same time, such rewards prove inadequate insofar as individual needs are concerned, are destructive to those who do not comply, and become insubstantial in comparison to more rigid standards, which suggests that adaptability as a philosophical framework reveals specific limitations, in spite

of the worldly rewards. In order to address the ramifications of this issue, Undine's character is not developed fully, nor does she change or grow except physically and socially. Moreover, her movement up the social scale becomes as tedious as it is inevitable, despite her temporary setbacks and frustration. Although she tests the bounds of verisimilitude, however, Undine unquestionably serves the purpose in revealing Wharton's vision of America. As bleak as that vision is, it nonetheless results from a clear-sighted understanding and assessment of a society justifying its perpetuation by trying to escape from its inadequacies.

VI. Ethan Frome: The Dutiful Sacrifice

Although Wharton focuses on women in The House of Mirth, Summer, and The Custom of the Country, she is obviously interested in men's roles in society as well, for in Ethan Frome and The Age of Innocence, men become the central characters. In other novels which focus on men, like The Valley of Decision, with its political emphasis, A Son at the Front, with its subject of war, and Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, with their portraits of the artist, the social evolution of the individual becomes less important in relation to these special interests. But those novels concerned specifically with inter-personal relationships from a male perspective, provide an effective counterpoint to Wharton's assessments of women in society. In a sense then, the link moves from Lily and Charity to Marvell, who, like them, unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile his personal needs within a social framework operating by more expedient and self-serving criteria.

While Marvell's evolution is only one of a multitude of issues presented in The Custom of the Country, the evolution of the central characters in Ethan Frome and The Age of Innocence provides the unifying issue of the discourse in these novels. Moreover, not only do the protagonists, Ethan Frome and Newland Archer, experience the same kind of struggle as do Marvell, Lily, and Charity, but Wharton remains consistent in her

approach: like the others, Ethan and Newland are segregated from their communities in very particular ways, and, like Marvell, Ethan and Newland accept certain assumptions about their social and marital responsibilities, and comply with certain conventions. Similarly, Wharton's technique is consistent in her use of reflecting angles of vision. Here, however, she contrasts female characters with the central male characters as a means of creating interplay without resolution. But as in the other novels, the evolution of the central characters provides the means to assess moral guidelines which work against the needs of the individual.

In Ethan Frome, Wharton utilizes the same setting as in Summer, although the harsh vitality of a New England winter transforms the scene. Moreover, Wharton adds a first-person narrator who interacts with Ethan and frames the interplay between the three central characters, Ethan, Zenobia Frome, and Mattie Silver. By utilizing a narrator to add another angle of vision, Wharton provides a means not only to assess the relationship in its own terms, but also according to an outsider who witnesses the consequences of that relationship twenty-four years later. The essential concern thus is two-fold, or rather, the essential concern continues beyond the immediate crisis and into an evaluation of the consequences of that crisis over the course of a lifetime, by someone who is sensitive to Ethan's environment and influences, but who is objective enough to provide a contrasting perspective from the larger, outside

world.[1]

In this way then, the long-term consequences of Ethan's actions are made apparent from the start, which the narrator reveals in his assessments of Ethan's repressed potential and in his meagre existence. Neither the narrator, nor Ethan, however, provides or suggests a resolution to the conflict presented. Rather, a very complex issue is reduced to its most essential level, where the setting, the interplay of a few characters, a final ironic reversal, and time itself, allow the implications to speak for themselves.

At the onset, the narrator provides specific details about Ethan's historical and cultural influences. Situated in a rural, forgotten area of New England, Starkfield is, as the name implies, a village which contrasts with the natural vigor of the surroundings: "I had been struck by the contrast between the

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[1]In her introduction to the Modern Student's Library Edition of Ethan Frome, written in 1922, Wharton emphasizes the importance of the narrator: ". . . only the narrator of the tale has scope enough to see it all, to resolve it back into simplicity, and to put it in its rightful place among his larger catagories" ["Introduction to Ethan Frome" in Ethan Frome, (New York: Scribner's Research Anthologies, 1968), p. 71]. Griffin Wolff goes on to suggest that ". . . the relation of the tale to the narrator's larger catagories . . . [is] the primary interest, the focus of the story as Wharton defined it" (Feast of Words, p. 162). While the importance of the narrator should not be ignored, the interplay between Ethan and Mattie and Zeena provides the dominant chord in the tale and should not be downplayed, which Griffin Wolff herself later acknowledges: "Not situation alone, not narrator alone, but each illuminating the other . . ." (p. 163). She does maintain, however, that the tale is largely a figment of the narrator's imagination, and as such, is suspect, which allows her to move her discussion into psychological analysis and away from the implications of Ethan's situation.

vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community."[2] This contrast between the surroundings and the inhabitants occurs, in part, because the latter unquestioningly accept their own insignificance in relation to the forces of nature which envelop their existence: "I began to understand why Starkfield emerged from its six months' siege like a starved garrison capitulating without quarter"(p. 11). Because the narrator visits Starkfield in winter, he perceives a vision of existence reduced to its most essential elements insofar as one must either escape or remain and accept: "'Most of the smart ones get away'"(p. 11). In those that remain, the narrator senses resignation and acceptance: "All the dwellers in Starkfield, as in more notable communities, had had troubles enough of their own to make them comparatively indifferent to those of their neighbours . . ."(p. 11). Even the community's most pre-eminent citizen, Mrs. Hale, with whom the narrator lodges, is in reduced circumstances, which she accepts with "decent dignity" (p. 11).

The narrator's response reveals his understanding of a community where survival is the most important issue, and for some, the only issue. He enjoys listening to Mrs. Hale's "chronicles" about the community, not because like her, he ". . . felt, or affected, any social superiority to the people about her . . ."(p. 11), but because, like Mrs. Hale, he is able to perceive and to assess the community on a different level: ". .

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[2]Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome, (New York: Scribners Research Anthologies, 1968), p. 10. All further references to this text are from this edition.

. it was only that the accident of a finer sensibility and a little more education had put just enough distance between herself and her neighbours to enable her to judge them with detachment"(p. 11). Like Mrs. Hale then, the narrator accepts the community as a cohesive unit which has evolved in its own terms and according to its particular needs, but like Mrs. Hale, the narrator also is able to perceive the significance of the evolution on the inhabitants.

While the narrator understands the community's evolution, he senses that Ethan's personal evolution is more complex: ". . . he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man" (p. 9). The magnitude of this contradiction is reinforced by his dedication to a role which is so obviously debilitating: "That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now" (p. 10). Given the generalities of Ethan's background, and his accident twenty-four years previously (p. 10), the narrator cannot reconcile the image of Ethan's potential with the reality of his existence, and enquiries to Mrs. Hale are as unproductive as Harmon Gow's ingenuous assessment: "Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts, and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps" (p. 10). This assumption by the narrator, as well as his understanding of a community which allows such tragedy to perpetuate itself unchecked, allows him to reach through his own perceptions into

Ethan's past: without the trollies, bicycles. and communication systems now common to the area, "Twenty years earlier the means of resistance must have been far fewer, and the enemy in command of almost all the lines of access between the beleagured villages . . ." (p. 11). The narrator recreates in his mind a vision of an earlier time, when the community was more isolated, when winter was a domineering enemy, and Ethan a young man.

Just as Charity's evolution reflects her instinctual response to the natural fertility of a rural summer, so Ethan's evolution reflects that same rural environment at a different stage, when isolation, monotony, and deadness become the common characteristics of the area and the inhabitants, and particularly Ethan:

> He seemed a part of the mute meloncholy landsdcape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it . . . . the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters (p. 12).

Whereas Charity reflects the fertility of her environment, Ethan reflects the winter of his environment, which seems premature for a man of his stature, and more advanced than his age and circumstances would suggest, even in the bleak and dead hostility of a rural New England winter. The narrator senses that Ethan is integrated into his community, and in some ways symbolizes his environment, but that, also, Ethan somehow is set apart by virtue of his mien, his circumstances, and by the gaps

in his history.

The narrator's curiosity is aroused further when other contradictions become apparent. He discovers that Ethan, like the "smart ones", escaped Starkfield for Florida, and that he enjoyed the experience: "I was down there once, and for a good while afterward, I could call up the sight of it in winter. But now it's all snowed under" (p. 12). Ethan's response suggests that although he accepts the virtues of alternative possibilities, escape for him became only a temporary phenomenon which, for a time, provided a means of coping with the more debilitating aspects of his existence. Moreover, when he encounters a technical volume, Ethan reveals a contrast between his public image and his actual intellectual capacity, which the narrator notes: "I wondered less at his words than at the queer note of resentment in his voice. He was evidently surprised and slightly aggrieved at his own ignorance" (p. 13). In their interrelationship, then, as brief and as superficial as it is, the narrator and Ethan reflect each other's sensibilities and assumptions.

From Ethan's perspective, the narrator revives memories and possibilites beyond the narrow restraints of Starkfield, while from the narrator's perspective, Ethan not only symbolizes the stagnant inertia of a whole community, but stands out as more tormented and more stoic, thereby reinforcing his tragic dimensions: "Such tastes and acquirements in a man of his condition made the contrast more poignant between his outer

situation and his inner needs . . ." (p. 13). Because these men are thrown together regularly, and because of their rapport, the narrator becomes obsessed with Ethan's evolution.

When a snowstorm cripples the community, the narrator is taken symbolically into Ethan's past, arriving by horse-drawn sled to an isolated, decaying farm which is barely surviving winter's onslaught. The front narrative frame thus provides a means of reaching into Ethan's past and into his perceptions, while at the same time, forcing an assessment of his actions according to the more objective, less narrow sensibilities of the narrator. Layering the angles of vision also anticipates the narrator's immediate reaction to the facts of Ethan's life in the end frame, which contrasts sharply with Ethan's own stoic acceptance. In so doing, the meaning in the gap is effectively, and silently, provided. The interplay between these characters therefore provides a means to assess Ethan in his own terms and also acccording to a sympathetic outsider who does not share Ethan's assumptions, but who is nevertheless driven to understand his predicament.

Consequently, although the narrator disappears, Ethan's evolution is presented in relation to the long-term effects of those choices made twenty-four years before. As a young man, Ethan expands his horizons through an engineering course, which, together with a "slight engineering job in Florida, put in his way during his period of study at Worchester, increased his faith in his ability as well as his eagerness to see the world .

. ." (p. 28). By initially leaving Starkfield for school and for travel, Ethan reveals a need for stimulus not available in his small community, but he is pulled back by circumstances: "Fust(sic) his father got a kick, out haying, and went soft in the brain, and gave money away like Bible texts afore he died. Then his mother went queer and dragged along for years as weak as a baby . . ." (p. 12). In spite of his personal ambitions, Ethan fulfills his filial duty, and his existence is reduced to a silent and lonely vigil over his weak and ailing mother.

That Ethan complies so readily to such a debilitating role suggests that when a choice must be made, he suppresses his own needs in favour of family and community expectations. His own needs therefore become subservient to the needs of those who rely on his sense of duty and responsibility, which for Ethan is defined in terms of the material maintenance of a helpless, dying woman. Ethan gives up his own goals and dreams, beyond the odd reminder of what he might have achieved, given different circumstances.

This role is so contradictory with his needs, however, that when Zeena comes to nurse his mother, Ethan reacts instinctively: "After the mortal silence of his long imprisonment Zeena's volubility was music to his ears" (p. 27-8). In a sense, she becomes mother-like, nurturing and providing an avenue for him to redefine his role along less debilitating lines, albeit according to her own expectations: "The mere fact of obeying [Zeena's] orders, of feeling free to

go about his business again and talk with other men, restored his shaken balance and magnified his sense of what he owed her" (p. 28). Ethan's response to his mother first and then to Zeena suggests that he is driven less by personal ambition than by a value system which puts his mother's well-being ahead of his own, and which provides him with a conventional social framework.

This value system, together with his acquiescent nature and his fear of loneliness on the farm in winter, leads to an almost-instinctual demand for what Zeena provides and represents: ". . . when he saw her preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him" (p. 28). Ethan chooses marriage then, not for romantic reasons, but as an escape from loneliness and as a way to define and to give meaning to his life. In so doing, he places the responsibility for his own well-being with a woman who does not necessarily recognize or understand his needs, but who does furnish him with a framework for existence. Marriage to Zeena thus provides Ethan an escape from his own sense of inadequacy.

Moreover, because he does not envision escape from the farm without Zeena's assistance, he reveals how tenuous is his sense of individuality and independence, given the choice between making his own way and relying on Zeena for support. Ethan's understanding of his own limitations is revealed in his decision

to marry Zeena, and marriage becomes his attempt to reconcile the contradictions between his needs and the social framework he requires. Ethan is so unfulfilled by the relationship, however, that providing for his social well-being becomes tantamount to denying his spiritual and emotional well-being, although he accepts the consequences of that choice.

Like Ethan, Zeena also reveals specific contradictions in her nature, and in her expectations about the marriage. On the one hand, ". . . she had let her husband see from the first that life on an isolated farm was not what she had expected when she married" (p. 28). But on the other hand, remaining in this small community is important to her well-being:

> She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity (p. 28).

Like Ethan then, who defines his role according to filial and conventional expectations, Zeena also defines her identity according to her social framework. Remaining in Starkfield is as important to Zeena's emotional well-being as escaping is for Ethan's own well-being, in spite of her constant complaints to the contrary.

As a result, Ethan and Zeena remain in Starkfield, where she becomes absorbed with her deteriorating health and with Ethan's inadequacies as a husband: "when she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in his power to remedy . . ." (p. 28) They are trapped by their mutual need for

each other in that Ethan supports her, while she gives a focus to his existence according to conventional expectations. That fulfilling these needs is so debilitating to both raises specific questions concerning the nature of interpersonal relationships: from Ethan's perspective, the marriage inhibits the possibility of broadening his horizons or fulfilling his emotional needs, while from Zeena's perspective, the marriage condemns her to an existence out of keeping with her expectations. Each needs the other, but at the same time, each resents the restraints which go along with the benefits.

When Mattie Silver comes to assist in the household, she fills the same role that Zeena originally filled insofar as Mattie gives meaning to Ethan's life beyond the confines of his present situation. Ethan feels the limitations in his relationship with Zeena, not because he resents his role, but because that role is so disconnected from everything he values: "By nature grave and inarticulate, he admired recklessness and gaiety in others and was warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse" (p. 27). Mattie's liveliness, her cheery disposition and her youthful enthusiasm (p. 17), contrast sharply with Zeena'a silent, aging pessimism.

Hence, Mattie fills the gap in Ethan's existence:

> But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth . . . . She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will (pp. 17-18).

Insofar as she admires his knowledge and understanding, in contrast to Zeena's complaints about his inabilities, Mattie reinforces Ethan's self-image. Whereas his duties on the farm are completely disconnected from his real interests, Mattie's response makes those interests seem relevant and important and admirable. Moreover, she awakens his sexual needs as well: "And there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy . . ." (p. 18). Mattie's response to Ethan reveals the emotional, intellectual, and sexual limitations of his existence, and his attraction to her is almost instinctual, as repressed as such instincts are within the social conventions of his community.

As a married man, Ethan's duty is to his wife and to his farm, and he accepts this role as unquestioningly as he earlier accepts his responsibilities to his mother. But whereas his response to Zeena is defined by the legitimacy of the marriage contract, as unfulfilling as that becomes for both of them, his response to Mattie cannot be realized through such conventional avenues. Ethan therefore restricts himself to twinges of jealousy, to intimate moments of innocent pleasure, and to supplementing her housekeeping efforts to maintain peace in the household. Compensating for the limitations in his existence is at best vicarious and tenuous, and lies clearly within the bounds of conventional morality: "The fact that he had no right to show his feelings, and thus provoke the expression of hers, made him attach a fantastic importance to every change in her

look and tone" (p. 21). As repressed as his instincts are, however, and as limited as his perceptions may be, Ethan is drawn inevitably towards the possibilities which Mattie represents.

From Mattie's perspective, her relationship with Ethan encompasses more practical concerns. Mattie comes to the Frome household because her father's economic failures and her background leave her unprepared for more lucrative possibilities:

> ". . . . Mattie, at twenty, was left alone to make her way . . . . For this purpose, her equipment, though varied, was inadequate. She could trim a hat, make molasses candy, recite . . . and play . . . . When she tried to extend the field of her activity in the direction of stenography and bookkeeping her health broke down and six months on her feet behind the counter of a department store did not tend to restore it (p. 25).

Like Lily, Mattie's options are limited by her background, and similarly, she also is taken in by an equally unfriendly and disapproving relative, albeit on a completely different social and economic level: "Zenobia was doubtful of the girl's efficiency, but [was] tempted by the freedom to find fault without much risk of losing her; and so Mattie came to Starkfield" (p. 25). Mattie maintains the house, and Ethan maintains the farm, and Zeena rules them both with a critical eye: "Zenobia's fault-finding was of the silent kind, but not the less discouraging for that" (p. 25). Just as Ethan does not question his role in his relationship with Zeena, so Mattie unquestioningly accepts her role as well, but while Ethan's commitment stems from his sense of responsibility, Mattie's

commitment results from the dearth of alternate possibilities: "'Where'd I go, if I did [leave]?'" (p. 22). Mattie is victimized, therefore, by economic realities, while Ethan is victimized by his sense of duty.

But just as Ethan's role is insufficient for him, so Mattie's role is insufficient for her, beyond the basic one of survival. She goes to the occasional dance, but Ethan's attentions and his interests strike such a responsive chord in her that her position in the Frome household is jeopardized. Hence, Mattie also reveals a contradiction between her role and her expectations insofar as her increasing affection for Ethan is counterbalanced by Zeena's growing animosity, which makes Mattie's position precarious: "[Ethan's dread] was formed of Zeena's obstinate silence, of Mattie's sudden look of warning . . ." (p. 25). Mattie needs the affection which Ethan provides, but she needs to maintain her economic security as well, which inhibits her response to Ethan.

Within the narrow confines of the farmhouse, then, and isolated by winter weather and their own sensibilities, Ethan, Zeena, and Mattie are forced to confront their own and each others's contradictions. Zeena's unhappiness is reflected in her constant complaints and declining health, but the essential issue is her emotional well-being: "Zeena took the view that Mattie was bound to make the best of Starkfield since she hadn't any other place to go to; but this did not strike Ethan as conclusive. Zeena, at any rate, did not apply the principle in

her own case" (p. 24). For Zeena, defining her existence according to the narrow confines of Starkfield demeans her sense of self-worth, and because she cannot accept her own limitations, she points to those around her instead. By suggesting that Ethan and Mattie do not fulfill her expectations, Zeena compensates for her own unfulfilled needs. In this sense, Zeena's spiritual partner is Undine, in that both look to and blame others for their own unhappiness. But Zeena, like Mattie, has few options. Because Zeena needs to feel superior and in control, she is restricted to a role which is necessary for her well-being, but which is, at the same time, debilitating. Moreover, Zeena's position is increasingly threatened by Ethan's growing affection for Mattie.[3]

From Mattie's perspective, she must usurp Zeena's position in the household in order to obtain the security necessary for her own well-being. But such an action is impossible by virtue of Mattie's inability to see beyond her own limitations and Zeena's power, with the result that Mattie is drawn towards a crisis for which she is ill-equipped, but which nevertheless is

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[3]Ammons interprets Zeena's role differently: "Ethan Frome maintains that witches are real. There are women whose occupation in life consists of making other people unhappy. Ethan Frome includes three. Ethan's mother, housebound and isolated . . . . Zeena's hypochondria, her frigidity, her taciturnity broken only by querulous nagging, her drab appearance--these make her an unsympathetic charactger . . . . Mattie Silver is merely spared the gradual disintegration into queerness . . ." (Argument, p. 68-9). Ammons' analysis, however, fails to acknowledge the underlying implications in Zeena's actions and her attitude, nor does Ammons consider the limitations in Zeena's role, which she herself understands.

inevitable because of her need for Ethan's support and attention. Both Zeena and Mattie thus are threatened by the other, but lack any avenues to reconciliation.

For Ethan, his desire to escape Starkfield is not so much a wish for more lucrative possibilities, as that his existence provides so little spiritual sustenance. Mattie reveals to Ethan, however, that marriage itself is not the cause of his unhappiness, but rather, that his relationship with Zeena is lifeless:

> For years that quiet company [in the graveyard] had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. 'We never got away--how should you?' seemed to be written on every headstone; and whenever he went in or out of his gate he thought with a shiver, 'I shall just go on living here till I join them'. But now all desire for change had vanished, and the sight of the little enclosure gave him a warm sense of continuance and stability (p. 22).

Ethan's unhappiness, therefore, is not caused by the role of husband and Starkfield resident which he feels compelled to play, but rather, because he chose the wrong wife.

In his attraction to Mattie, he continues to define his existence according to conventional assumptions, and imagines her replacing Zeena as a means of fulfilling his expectations from life. But his adherence to such conventional guidelines paradoxically inhibits the fulfillment of such expectations, simply by virtue of his sense of responsibility to Zeena. She, Mattie, and Ethan thus all attempt to escape their entrapment by feeding on the potentiality each finds in the others.

When Zeena unexpectently leaves the farm overnight, Ethan and Mattie are afforded the opportunity to test their relationship. As attracted as they are to each other, they are restrained by their own inhibitions and by Zeena's presence, with the result that any intimacy is at best sporadic: "Ethan, a moment earlier, had felt himself on the brink of eloquence; but the mention of Zeena had paralyzed him. Mattie seemed to feel the contagion of his embarrassment . . ." (p. 32). In spite of several such awkward moments, they manage to create a scene of domestic ease, which suggests real possibilities, given different circumstances:

> They spoke of every-day things, of the prospect of snow, of the next church sociable, of the loves and quarrels of Starkfield. The commonplace nature of what they said produced in Ethan an illusion of long-established intimacy which no outburst of emotion could have given, and he set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so . . . (p. 33)

More than that, Mattie's reliance on Ethan allows him to assert himself in a way unknown with Zeena: "Completely reassured, [Mattie] shone on him through tear-hung lashes, and his soul swelled with pride as he saw how his tone subdued her. She did not even ask what he had done . . . .he had never known such a thrilling sense of mastery" (p. 33). When they are able to enclose themselves in the illusion which the scene suggests, Ethan not only finds a way to provide meaning in his existence, but he also is able to redefine his own role in more positive terms. Whereas Zeena maintains the dominant role in their relationship, Ethan becomes the dominant member with Mattie, and

she becomes subservient to his authority.

Such illusions are quite temporary, however, for Zeena never quite disappears, and the mention of her name, the breaking of her pickle dish, and the antics of the cat, all reassert her authority within the house: "The cat, who had been a puzzled observer . . . jumped up into Zeena's chair, rolled itself into a ball, and lay watching them with narrowed eyes" (p. 33). When Mattie sits in Zeena's chair, neither Ethan nor Mattie are comfortable: "It was almost as if the other face, the face of the superseded woman, had obliterated that of the intruder" (p. 33). As much as Mattie and Ethan respond to each other's needs, and as much as they sense the potentiality in the other, they are both controlled by other, more inhibiting restraints which they define in relation to Zeena's authoritative position within the household.

Zeena's authority, however, is less a concern than is Ethan's and Mattie's own ethical framework. As inarticulate as they are, they share specific moral assumptions which are so integral that no communication is necessary. Instead, mere allusions to sexual intimacies strike Ethan as "vulgar and out-of-place" and create acute embarrassment for Mattie, who "blush[es] to the roots of her hair" (p. 34). And what seems natural "under the open irresponsible night," takes on different connotations inside: "Now, in the warm lamplit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed infinitely farther away from him and more unapproachable" (p.

34). From Mattie's perspective, the sexual relationship cannot be disassociated from the marriage contract, and because Ethan is married, sexual attraction does not lead to sexual gratification: "She pronounced the word married as if her voice caressed it. It seemed a rustling covert leading to enchanted glades" (p. 34). Unlike Charity then, who cannot deny her sexual needs, Mattie curbs her sexual instincts according to conventional restraints, in spite of her acknowledgement of the possibilities which Ethan represents.

From Ethan's perspective, his fantasies are restricted to clearly-defined moral limits: "Ethan had imagined that his allusion might open the way to the accepted pleasantries, and these perhaps in turn to a harmless caress, if only a mere touch of her hand" (p. 34). That he feels a caress is harmless suggests that anything more is harmful, which carries much meaning in its implications: not only would a sexual attachment be harmful to Mattie insofar as her own position is concerned, but such an attachment would also undermine his commitment to Zeena, thereby creating a harmful situation for everyone involved. And yet, his need for Mattie cannot be suppressed completely, which he confronts by touching her sewing material and achieving symbolic, albeit brief, gratification:

> The return to reality was as painful as the return to consciousness after taking an anaesthetic. His body and brain ached with indescribable weariness, and he could think of nothing to say or to do that should arrest the mad flight of the moments (p. 35).

By finding a harmless culmination to the intimacy of the

evening, Ethan reveals how inhibited he is by sexual taboos.

In spite of his need for Mattie and his distaste for Zeena, however, he is incapable of moving beyond the ethical guidelines and the conventional assumptions of his community. Not surprisingly then, Ethan and Mattie do not capitalize on Zeena's absence, not only because her authority permeates the house, but more importantly, because Ethan and Mattie are trapped by their own inhibitions, in spite of the positive reinforcement and the potentiality which they perceive in each other.

Ethan's moral inhibitions and acquiescent qualities also leave him powerless in countermanding Zeena's authority. When she decides that Mattie must leave, Ethan is forced to confront the meagreness of his existence:

> All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn, had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others (p. 41).

In spite of Mattie's influence, there is no question in Ethan's mind that Zeena controls his emotional well-being, just as there is no question that she controls Mattie's economic well-being (p. 42), both of which are sacrificed, ironically, by Zeena to ensure her own economic and emotional security.

Ethan therefore considers every possible alternative to escape Zeena's control, including his taking Mattie out west and leaving Zeena with the farm; but he just as quickly rejects this possibility, not only because the farm would not sell, but

because Zeena could not manage it alone, while he would be without resources to support Mattie out west. In rejecting this option, Ethan reveals his compliance with a custom which places the financial and material responsibility for Zeena and Mattie with him, in spite of his limited resources and his lack of affection for Zeena. He places these demands on himself according to his belief that he must provide not only for Zeena as his wife, but for Mattie as well as a result of their emotional commitment.

As he becomes more desperate, he considers the possibility of defrauding his neighbours, but he is again inhibited by the moral implications:

> . . . he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had had the heart to desert her, he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him (p. 48).

Ethan thus is bound by his own limitations. By deserting Zeena, he evades his marital obligations; by losing Mattie, he denies his emotional needs; and by using his neighbours, he ignores his social responsibilities. And because of his sexual inhibitions, he cannot demand that Mattie remain. Ethan's moral and ethical framework therefore denies him the possibility of reconciling such disparate needs, and he flounders in the face of this realization.

Zeena's confidence is restored, then, while Ethan and Mattie face the consequences of her departure. Their imminent separation leads not only to the open affection which they

hitherto denied themselves, but also to an acknowledgement of their feelings: "They had never before avowed their inclination so openly, and Ethan, for a moment, had the illusion that he was a free man, wooing the girl he meant to marry" (p. 52). Their relationship therefore is accelerated by circumstance, and Ethan overcomes his sexual inhibitions, but only by maintaining his illusions about the legitimacy of their relationship.

Finally, however, each acknowledges the consequences of their separation: "'Ethan, where'll I go if I leave you? I don't know how to get along alone. You said so yourself just now. Nobody but you was ever good to me'" (p. 55). Mattie needs to be provided for, to be protected and taken care of, while Ethan needs the sustenance which she offers, in contrast to the empty silence which awaits him with Zeena:

> The words were like fragments torn from his heart. With them came the hated vision of the house he was going back to--of the stairs he would have to go up every night, of the woman who would wait for him there . . . . Mattie's avowal . . . made the other vision more abhorrent, the other life more intolerable to return to . . . (p. 55).

As debilitating as Ethan's future is, however, and as empty as Mattie's future seems, they both unquestioningly accept Ethan's inability to break free: "'I'm tied hand and foot, Matt. There isn't a thing I can do'" (p. 53). So locked in is Ethan by his compliance to duty that when Mattie suggests that they kill themselves, death becomes the only viable alternative.

The ethical guidelines which inform Ethan's existence prove in application to be extremely limiting. Ethan's sense that he

can escape to a city or to the west proves as illusory as his furtive moments with Mattie, for Ethan's whole existence is defined only by conventional and moral guidelines which have little relation to his real needs. Only by complying with such guidelines, however, does he achieve any legitimacy, and when the illusions break down, he is left with nothing to compensate for his sacrifice. Death with Mattie therefore provides a means not only to escape Zeena, but to escape from his own moral and social restraints.

Ethan's evolution reveals his underlying motivations in relation to his social and ethical framework, but these motivations also are assessed by the perceptions of the narrator and of Mrs. Hale, which extend twenty-four years beyond the tale. Ethan's options, like Lily's, are limited by his own perceptions and values, nor is Ethan capable of compromising his beliefs, as detrimental as such compliance is to his emotional and spiritual well-being. But unlike Lily, whose escape through death is successful, Ethan survives, like Charity, to face in his day-to-day existence the consequences of his beliefs. When the narrator enters the Frome household, he is confronted with the realization that Mattie as well as Ethan survived the suicide attempt, and that she, Zeena, and Ethan are all caricatures of their younger selves.

As a crippled, whining invalid, Mattie ironically achieves the security and attention essential to her well-being: "there was no-where else for her to go" (p. 59). As the mainstay of the

household, Zeena ironically maintains the authority she needs: "Zeena's done for [Mattie], and done for Ethan, as good as she could" (p. 59). And as the financial support for both women, Ethan remains with Zeena without losing Mattie, thereby ironically reconciling his conflict. From each of their perspectives, then, the contradictions are reconciled, albeit ironically, and with overtones of the macabre.

The paradox is, however, that Ethan's attempt to escape through death condemns him instead, like Charity, to a life-in-death existence, without hope and without escape from the responsiblities which bind him: "But sometimes the two of them get going at each other, and then Ethan's face'd break your heart . . . . When I see that, I think it's him that suffers most . . ." (p. 59). From the narrator's perspective, Ethan's life becomes a tragedy of immense proportions, not because he was forced to choose and chose wrongly, but because his criteria for choosing are insufficient or inadequate or wrong: "I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues" (p. 59). Ethan's compliance with conventional guidelines, marital duty, and social responsibility thus leads to a life of repressed potential and stoic endurance. In this sense, the narrator's feeling that the deeper meaning lies in the gaps is true insofar as the meaning is revealed implicitly in Ethan's meaningless, minimal existence.

As a result, Ethan's evolution provides a means of assessing the limitations of the moral and social guidelines which inform his existence. By locating him clearly within his community, Ethan becomes not a rebel attempting to escape responsibility, but rather, a typical community member, driven by the same concerns and necessities as his fellows. But because Ethan is exposed briefly to outside stimuli, he recognizes that life should expand beyond mere survival, which sets him apart and makes him susceptible to alternative possibilities. Even within the very small range of his sensibilities then, Ethan understands that complying with conventional expectations regarding moral duty and social responsiblity is debilitating, and yet, he is compelled to follow such guidelines and cannot acknowledge that escape is possible, in spite of his recognition of alternatives.

In order to reveal the implications of this fact, duty becomes a querulous old woman, while sustenance is a compellingly helpless young girl, and the three are pitted against each other in an isolated, alienating community where survival becomes an end in itself. By reducing their struggle to these essential terms, Zeena's need for Ethan's compliance contrasts with his adherence to marital responsibility, and Mattie's need for Ethan's support contrasts with his attraction to her potentiality. Ultimately however, duty wins, while Mattie's potential is transformed into a nightmarish, inescapable reminder of a long-forgotten dream.

Because Zeena and Mattie both fulfill their own needs, however ironically, while Ethan fulfills only his marital responsibilities, also ironically, the limitations in Ethan's ethical framework become apparent, which is reinforced by the narrator's perceptions. Ethan's existence becomes a life-in-death struggle to cope in a completely meaningless framework, where the ability to endure ultimately overrides all other concerns. The issue at hand then, is not that Ethan is without choice, but that his choices are limited by a value system which does not address his needs, but which he unquestioningly accepts.

Wharton's purpose, as a result, is not to reveal how limited Ethan's existence is, but rather, to reveal why his life becomes so limited in the face of his own expectations. Moreover, the narrator does not express his misgivings to Ethan, for such assessments not only are futile insofar as Ethan is concerned, but self-evident as well. The narrative frame nevertheless provides a window on a social situation which is reduced to its most essential elements, and which thereby points to the destructiveness of social duty and moral responsibility to those whose needs are not served within the framework.

In this way, Ethan's evolution mirrors Marvell's victimization by Undine. When Ethan and Marvell each marry, they assume unquestioningly the inherent financial and social responsibility of their role, in spite of any distaste or discontentment or unhappiness, and no-one questions their duty

to provide for the material needs and social well-being of their wives. When Undine rejects Marvell, she pointedly reveals that he has not fulfilled his social obligations or his marital responsibilities according to her criteria, as demanding as that criteria might be. Ethan also is unable to provide for Zeena's social and material comforts, but unlike Undine, Zeena is not driven to escape, which forces Ethan and Zeena to confront continuously the limitations which each acknowledges in the other, and which, therefore, perpetuates the debilitating aspects of their relationship. Regardless of the differences in Marvell's and Ethan's social and economic positions, then, they are both committed to roles which are personally unfulfilling and emotionally enervating.[4]

Men as well as women therefore are susceptible to victimization when their actions become inhibited by ethical and social guidelines which prove incompatible with individual needs. Marvell's death and Ethan's life in death occur as a result of their compliance with social expectations and moral responsibilities, rather than through moral weakness or social

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[4]Lewis quotes Wharton's reaction to Percy Lubbock's disapproval about a play which addressed marital relationships from the female perspective: "And I wonder, among all the tangles of this mortal coil, which one contains tighter knots to undo, and consequently suggests more tugging, and pain, and diversified elements of misery, than the marriage tie--and which, consequently, is more 'made to the hand' of the psychologist and the dramatist" (Biography, p. 252). Although Ethan's and Marvell's evolution address the limitations in marriage from the male perspective, the substance of her comment is fitting in any case, simply because marriage is the most sought after and the least escapable of the social institutions, and provides the vehicle for Wharton's assessments of society.

irresponsibility. While this assessment of Marvell may not stand out in relation to all the other assessments presented in The Custom of the Country, in Ethan Frome, the narrator assures that the underlying motivations in Ethan's evolution are clear. In Ethan's compliance with the social and sexual guidelines of his community, he becomes trapped in a role which is self-destructive so far as his individual needs are concerned. Those values which are meant to enhance the personal and spiritual life of the individual thus become highly suspect to those willing to face their implications.

VII. The Age of Innocence: The Intellectual Compromise

While Ethan Frome is the most popular of Wharton's novels, The Age of Innocence, awarded the Pulitzer Prize, is the most revered. Although there is some difficulty in explaining why this novel stands out over more ambitious and more moving works, two reasons suggest themselves. First, The Age of Innocence is gentle in its condemnations of society, more palatable, and less jarring to conventional sensibilities. Historical distance is created within the narrative so that its assessments of society seem less threatening, at times tinged with nostalgia. Second, and more importantly, the nature of the central character creates a sympathetic response. Because Newland Archer is intelligent, thoughtful, and articulate, his struggle to reconcile his personal needs within a restrictive and clearly-defined social order is presented with subtlety and compassion. But in fact, Wharton's view of the individual's relation to society is probably more bleak and more insidious in this novel than in any of her earlier works. In The Age of Innocence, she reveals the emotional evolution of a man who rationalizes his compliance with society's demands, which reveals thereby how society perpetuates itself, and at what cost. Like Ethan Frome, then, The Age of Innocence presents, from a male perspective, the struggle to reconcile personal needs within the social framework.

Newland Archer is the central consciousness in The Age of Innocence, and his conflict, like Ethan's, revolves around his marital responsibilities. But Newland's evolution, unlike Ethan's, reveals the details which lead to his eventual capitulation to social pressures. Wharton utilizes a limited omniscient narrator to focus primarily on Newland, but his angle of vision contrasts with May Welland, who embodies the values of New York, and with Ellen Olenska, his intimate friend, who embodies his personal needs. As an active and interested participant in society, Newland understands the nuances of his and everyone else's role, and he appreciates the fine points of discrimination and punctilio which define society's form and create meaning in the lives of the participants. While he shares these assumptions and beliefs with May, at the same time he sets himself apart intellectually, which draws him to Ellen, who provides a different vision of life and drastically alters his perceptions. Newland becomes torn between his social and moral obligations to May Welland, and his sense of life's exciting potential which Ellen represents. The interplay between these characters provides the central conflict in the novel, one which remains irreconcilable because no certain moral vision is provided. Instead, the implications speak for themselves.

Like all of Wharton's characters, Newland operates within an exacting social framework. In the refined atmosphere of 1870 New York society, civilization appears to be at an advanced stage of the evolutionary scale. And yet, the taboos which

define the boundaries of punctilio are used in the same way as aboriginal taboos are used to protect the tribe from the unknown: ". . . what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago.[1] For this reason, certain members of society are given the responsibility for defining and defending the boundaries from intrusions: "The whole of the club turned instinctively, waiting to hear what the old man had to say; for old Mr. Jackson was as great an authority on 'family' as Lawrence Lefferts was on 'form'" (p. 7). Hence, good taste provides the criteria for assessing the unfamiliar, usually as unsuitable or inadequate, and thereby protecting the group from foreign influences. At the same time, good taste leads to the perpetuation of existing standards, which creates formalized rules of conduct to govern every aspect of existence.

Those who do not comply, like Mrs. Manson Mingott, with her "characteristic independence," which she acts on "in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties" (p. 25), and Julius Beaufort, who has a "cool domineering way and [takes] . . . shortcuts through the conventions" (p. 28), each have a very strong sense of their own priorities, which gives them emotional freedom from the social dictums that surround them, and which they can afford to indulge. As a result, they establish rather

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[1]Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, (New York: Random House Ltd., 1920), p. 2. All further references to this text are from this edition.

than follow trends, which is accepted in Mrs. Mingott because of her respected family connections and because she is "fascinating" (p. 26), and which is accepted in Beaufort because of his style: "Mr. Beaufort's secret, people were agreed, was the way he carried things off . . . . for over twenty years now people had said they were 'going to the Beauforts' with the same tone of security as if they had said they were going to Mrs. Manson Mingott's . . ." (p. 18). The community expands the boundaries of good taste to include Mrs. Mingott and Beaufort because their lack of conformity falls within acceptable limits. Some slight variation is permitted within the social framework then, but most conform to established standards. By acquiescing to the communal framework, most establish a sense of self, albeit one ironically defined according to common standards rather than to individual needs.

Newland initially accepts such standards as necessary, while still setting himself apart. Although one convention "seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded . . ." (p. 3), at the same time, "in matters intellectual and artistic [he] felt himself distinctly the superior of those chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world than any other man of the number" (p. 6). The consequences of this self-assessment are far-reaching, for he understands himself to be more enlightened than those around him, but he accepts the validity of

unenlightened perceptions in his peers:

> Singly they betrayed their inferiority; but grouped together they represented 'New York', and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral. He instinctively felt that in this respect it would be troublesome--and also rather bad form--to strike out for himself (p. 6).

Newland's sense of intellectual superiority provides him with an appreciation for the unconventional and the extraordinary, like Mrs. Mingott, and like Ellen later proves to be, but his social commitment grounds his responses firmly in the conventional and in conformity.

This contradiction is not troubling so long as Newland does not try to reconcile these responses, either in relation to his own pursuits, or in his expectations in a wife: "How this miracle of fire and ice was to be created, and to sustain itself in a harsh world, he had never taken the time to find out; but he was content to hold his view without analyzing it . . ." (p. 5). In deciding to marry May Welland, however, Newland is forced to address the consequences of such disparities, and his engagement and subsequent marriage tests his ability to fulfill all his expectations from life.

In May, Newland sees a social partner, but not an intellectual companion. When he assesses their relationship objectively, he rejects all that she represents: ". . . he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured . . . because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to . . ." (p. 43). Moreover, Newland is able to foresee a vision of their future together,

unencumbered by romantic overtones: ". . . with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on one side and hypocrisy on the other" (p. 41). Despite his intellectual assessments of May's limitations and their future together, Newland still is drawn to her: "The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done" (p. 14). The qualities which attract Newland to May, then, are the same qualities for which he paradoxically condemns her, depending on his social or intellectual needs of the moment. The result is that May cannot possibly meet all of Newland's needs, because if she were capable of fulfilling his intellectual aspirations, she would simultaneously lose those conventional qualities which bind them together. Newland thus is drawn towards a role which addresses his emotional well-being, but which simultaneously seems foreboding.

While May satisfies Newland's social needs, Ellen Olenska stimulates his intellect. On the one hand, she affronts his sense of propriety: "Nothing could be in worse taste than misplaced flippancy . . . . [and her comments] struck [him] as [a] . . . disrespectful way of describing New York society" (p. 15). But at the same time, she provides a vision of existence

unbounded by punctilio: "It was undeniably exciting to meet a lady who found the van der Luyden's Duke dull, and dared to utter the opinion. He longed to question her, to hear more about the life of which her careless words had given so illuminating a glimpse . . ." (p. 63). While her lack of familiarity with local customs alienates most of the community, her uniqueness strikes a responsive chord in Newland and he defends her right to be different (p. 38). When he visits her home, he is further stimulated: "The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure" (pp. 68-9). Just as meeting Ellen initially leads to a critical assessment of May (p. 44), so visiting Ellen's home leads to a critical assessment of his future home with May, with equally negative results.

More than that, Ellen also points to the limitations in society by revealing the flimsiness of accepted forms: "He coloured a little, stared at her--and suddenly felt the penetration of the remark. At a stroke she had pricked the van der Luydens and they collapsed. He laughed, and sacrificed them" (p. 73). Newland is drawn to Ellen because she reshapes his perceptions on every level, and makes him aware of possibilities beyond the conventional framework. But those qualities which allow Ellen to assess the community objectively are, ironically, the same qualities which jar on Newland's conventional sensibilities, which makes Ellen equally incapable of fulfilling both his social and intellectual needs.

The conflict which is brought to the surface thus centers on Newland's contradictory needs. He normally maintains his equilibrium because of the nature of his intellectual framework: ". . . . he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (p. 2). This stance allows Newland to maintain a sense of superiority, a feeling for his own uniqueness, without ever testing that individuality, as Mrs. Mingott and Beaufort test theirs. Newland instead conforms to clearly-defined and predictable standards, while intellectually setting himself apart, which Ellen pointedly reveals: "He did not mind being flippant about New York, but disliked to hear anyone else take the same tone" (p. 72). What he couches in intellectual superiority she reveals as hypocrisy, and he is forced to address the underlying implications of her assessments, not only in relation to the alternatives she represents, but regarding his compliance with a role they both acknowledge is inadequate in very particular ways.

To suggest, then, that Ellen simply points out the foibles of New York society is not the real issue, for Newland himself is well-aware of those limitations. Rather, she stimulates him to reassess his perceptions: ". . . she was rendering what might prove the first of their mutual services by making him look at his native city objectively. Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, it looked disconcertingly small and distant . . ." (p. 74). But when he is away from Ellen, "New York again

became vast and imminent, and May Welland the loveliest woman in it" (p. 77). Hence, Newland is pulled between contrasting influences which variously shape his responses: his conventionality and his dedication to form drive him to May and all that she represents, in spite of his recognition of her limitations and the drawbacks he foresees in their marriage. But his need to assert his individuality pulls him to Ellen and the possibilities which she represents, in spite of her unfamiliar ways. Confronting this conflict becomes Newland's overriding concern; his perspective provides one angle of vision.

While Newland is drawn to Ellen for her uniqueness, she is drawn to him for quite different reasons. Having been raised somewhat haphazardly at home and abroad by a peculiar aunt, Ellen is not inculcated with the same punctilious standards as is Newland, although she has some understanding of the values if not the form of New York society. She therefore has little appreciation for the formalized graces of society, nor does she understand the total compliance required for acceptance.

At the same time, she sees the benefit of acquiescence to common standards: "Why not make one's own fashions? But I suppose I've lived too independently; at any rate, I want to do what you all do--I want to feel cared for and safe" (p. 72). Ellen thus is, in the broadest sense, homeless, for she disassociates herself from her European husband and community, but she is insufficiently versed in New York customs to avoid the pitfalls which surround her. This somewhat precarious

position is made more so because she wants a divorce, and she lacks the financial independence necessary to overcome this social obstacle.

Whereas Newland is entrenched firmly within his community then, and yearns for independence, Ellen in contrast is an outsider who sees the advantages in a well-defined social structure: "I don't always remember that everything here is good that was--that was bad where I've come from . . . . I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again . . ." (p. 62). In spite of her understanding of the limitations in New York society, she sees her family home as a refuge from unhappiness, and she sees conformity as a means of obtaining psychological security. She is attracted to Newland because she senses that in their intellectual compatibility she will learn to adapt to community expectations.

Ellen's attempt to conform, however, is inhibited by her personal qualities: ". . . there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which . . . struck [Newland] as highly trained and full of conscious power" (p. 58). Ellen's sense of self is so well-developed that she cannot conform as the community expects. Not only is her dress considered indecent (p. 7), and her house unfashionable (p. 72), but her own customs and her reflections on New York customs appear disrespectful. Moreover, she involves herself in inappropriate relationships with Beaufort (p. 36), and with Mrs. Struthers (p. 76); nor does

Ellen realize the magnitude of the family's rally: "The Lovell Mingotts' dinner . . . . ought to have taught her the narrowness of her escape; but either she had been all along unaware of having skirted disaster, or else she had lost sight of it . . ." (p. 72). Ellen's sense that New York will provide a sanctuary proves illusory, for she is continuously confronted by meaningless standards by which her actions are assessed.

More than that, Ellen instinctually responds to her own value system rather than to common standards: she enjoys Beaufort's company, she likes the diversion at Mrs. Struthers, and the propriety of such liaisons matters little to her. When she pursues a divorce, she assumes, because the "legislation favours divorce" (p. 109), and because she is guiltless (p. 170), that the matter is straightforward, but when Newland explains the social implications, Ellen realizes that personal issues are decided not according to personal needs, but according to arbitrary rules of decorum. In acquiescing to social expectations, Ellen reveals how important is her desire to belong, given that the conventions make so little sense. Each time she confronts such meaningless standards, she must struggle to suppress her own individuality in order to become part of the community.

While Ellen's evolution reveals her attempt to adapt to community expectations, Newland's evolution moves in the opposite direction. Given Ellen's stimulation, he attempts to influence May's perceptions in the same way that Ellen

influences him. May does not respond, however, and only makes him see how convention-bound and predictable they both are:

> His heart sank, for he saw that he was saying all the things that young men in the same situation were expected to say, and that she was making the answers that instinct and tradition taught her to make--even to the point of calling him original (p. 81).

He realizes that they are completely unoriginal, and that there is no spontaneity in their relationship, beyond very slight variations in form. The customs and traditions which he defends with Ellen thus become oppressive in relation to May, for her unquestioned compliance only reinforces his own conservative tendencies: "We're all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We're like patterns stencilled on a wall. Can't you and I strike out for ourselves, May?" (p. 81). Because of his growing sense of the inadequacies in his role, Newland needs to break away from his own predictability. But May believes such things only happen in novels, and without her encouragement and Ellen's continued stimulation, Newland's revolt is short-lived.

In spite of his assertions to the contrary, he lacks the ability to act on alternatives which are contrary to accepted values: "During this interval [Ellen] had become a less vivid and importunate image, receding from his foreground as May Welland resumed her rightful place in it" (p. 91). Newland is conventional because he looks to the social framework to define the role and identity which he cannot define for himself. But because the social framework does not address the idiosyncratic

needs of the individual, that element remains unfulfilled, and Newland continuously attempts to assert himself to compensate for the inherent inadequacies he sees, although such assertions are unsuccessful for very particular reasons.

In his discussions with Ellen regarding her divorce, Newland reveals the contradictory elements which guide his actions. In his relationship with Ellen, he realizes how inadequate his attitude towards divorce actually is (p. 94). At the same time, he responds instinctively to her nearness: ". . . as he approached her door, he was once more conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values . . ." (p. 102). Given these two factors, Newland addresses Ellen's situation in personal rather than general terms, and in so doing, he expands his perceptions beyond the limits of conventional assumptions. And yet, when faced with the details of Ellen's situation, he misreads her responses and mistakenly assumes that she will embarrass the family. Whereas Newland communicates with May perfectly by look and through inference, with Ellen, such communication is not possible, which makes her victim to his incorrect assumptions.

More importantly, their inability to understand each other's motivations allows him to assess her situation only according to his own conventional value system, and her needs become irrelevant in relation to the common good: "The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any

convention that keeps the family together-protects the children if there are any,' he rambled on, pouring out all the stock phrases . . ." (p. 110). As much as Newland wants, and needs, to break away from the attitudes which bind him, when tested, he is incapable of moving beyond his own assumptions, except fleetingly. The result is that he knows his value system is inadequate, but he lacks the ability to modify it except in the most superficial and socially-acceptable way. Consequently, when May announces her willingness to marry early and soon, Newland acquiesces to the role he is expected to fulfill, not because he wants to, but because he does not know how to escape.

In contrast to Newland, May provides the perspective of one completely at ease with and fulfilled by her role. For May, life is defined by conventional values, social punctilio, and ingenuous expectations: "She was frank . . . because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against . . ." (p. 42). She unquestioningly accepts the values of her society, relying on her instincts and training to see her through every situation, and she senses, correctly, that Newland shares those values: "Of course I should hate [being vulgar]--so would you . . ." (p. 82) When Newland presses her to break with conventions, she is incapable of even considering the possibility: "She looked a little bored by his insistence. She knew very well they couldn't, but it was troublesome to have to produce a reason" (p. 82). She is completely comfortable in her role because her needs are so

easily provided for within the social framework.

She reveals the minimal extent of her individuality in the early announcement of their engagement, and in agreeing to an early marriage, but only after serious consideration of Newland's motivations. May offers to release Newland from his obligation because she feels that is the morally-correct course, which, despite the personal sacrifice, she attempts to follow. While May's sacrifice is based only on a superficial, and incorrect, assessment of Newland's situation, she nevertheless is reinforced by her own moral courage: "I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong--an unfairness--to somebody else. And I want to believe that it would be the same with you" (p. 148). Wanting to believe that Newland shares her beliefs almost makes it so, and when he evades her question and responds with similar platitudes, her courage disappears in relief. May thus relies on her social instincts and her moral guidelines to see her through the crisis, and these instincts prove completely adequate to the circumstances. She takes Newland at face value because that is all she sees, nor is she capable of understanding Newland's sporadic, rebellious protestations. And because Newland is dishonest with her, she has no reason to doubt his sincerity. Marriage to Newland thus fulfills May's social and moral expectations completely, because she is reinforced by everyone around her.

In May's approach to life then, the social framework is inexorably bound together with the moral code. Both Newland and

May understand the conventions which govern their lives, but whereas Newland doubts the validity of conventions which seem so limiting in application, May has no doubts at all. Nor does she have any reason for doubting, so long as she only associates with those that follow the same value system as she does. By conforming to a clearly-defined and punctilious framework, May is provided a way to address the world comfortably, and to find meaning in her life according to well-established criteria. Lacking any sense of alternative possibilities, May does not sense any limitations in her perspective, nor does assessing her value system ever become a possibility.

Instead, May uses her moral guidelines to address her social relationships. When she seeks affirmation from Newland that they share similar values, she also seeks affirmation that they are sufficiently compatible to marry. And because she accepts everything at face value, Newland's response seems to reinforce her beliefs, which justifies her decision to marry him. Unlike Undine then, for whom financial considerations provide the only criterion in marriage negotiations, and unlike Charity, who is guided by her sexual needs, May's actions suggest that moral considerations outweigh all others insofar as marriage is concerned. By integrating a moral code into her social framework, May is provided a means to address every situation which threatens her emotional well-being, and to ignore every situation which does not reinforce it. The irony is, of course, that Newland does not completely share May's

values, although she thinks that he does. His dishonesty is irrelevant, however, because he threatens her well-being only fleetingly, and in a way which she can comfortably address.

While May does not differentiate between the social and the moral order, Ellen, on the other hand, constantly assesses the implications of every social dictum for any underlying validity. When she and Newland finally clarify the misunderstanding over her divorce, he wants to break his engagment to May, but Ellen disagrees: "I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard--and unnecessary" (p. 172). Newland is able to convince Ellen not to sue for divorce because she clearly sees the moral implications:

> . . . you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before--and it's better than anything I've known . . . . I can't go back now to that other way of thinking (pp. 172-3).

Ellen's response suggests that when conventions support ethics, when form supports substance, she conforms as readily as May does to social standards.

In this way, the social code provides Ellen with values which are meaningful to her and essential to her well-being, but only when the relevance is clear: "I <u>was</u> lonely; I <u>was</u> afraid. But the emptiness and the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I'm like a child going at night into a room where there's always a light" (p. 173). Sacrificing her relationship with Newland is tantamount to asserting her right

to admission to the New York community, because compliance with the moral principle forces her to suppress, in favour of the common good and her own spiritual growth, much that is instinctual to her nature. The irony is that only she and Newland are aware of her sacrifice.[2]

Nor does she gain admission to New York, because she continues to disregard the meaningless conventions which govern the lives of the community, but against which her actions are measured. In contrast to May, Ellen's struggle with society at large and with her own nature reveals the consequences for those who do not unquestioningly accept the amalgam of the social and the moral order. While Ellen finds a way to achieve meaning in a life which has lost all purpose, she does not achieve the sanctuary she hopes to find, which suggests that in Newland's

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[2]Ammons suggests that the interplay betweeen Newland and May and Ellen contains different connotations: "Hostility among women is an important factor in this system, which is most clearly spelled out in The Age of Innocence. . . .Since it is frequently women who are charged with keeping other women 'in their place,' often the enemies of Wharton's heroines, toward whom they rightly feel hostile, are not men; they are other women who have been taught to act as the patriarchate's repressive agents, explicitly or implicitly. Rivalry and hostility between women are thus guaranteed, as in the cases of May Welland and Ellen Olenska or Bessy Westmore and Justine Brent. Each twosome is made up of a conventional and an unconventional woman, one the unthinking product of patriarchal mores and the other a rebel against them" (Argument, p. 151). While there is no question that the conventional is contrasted with the unconventional, Ammons' interpretation seems to reduce a very complex moral issue to feminist terms. In so doing, she seems to miss the implications provided by the interplay of characters. Moreover, in The House of Mirth and Summer, for instance, men are used to embody the conventional and the unconventional, which suggests that in the broadest sense, the issues are more social and moral than sexual.

world, social punctilio matters far more than moral rectitude.

In contrast to Ellen's and May's options, Newland's options are less clear. From the start, he sets himself apart, critical of the conformity which surrounds him, but equally critical of those who are different. Newland presumes that he can actively participate in his world without completely committing himself, and as a young, single man, that may be possible, or at least, Newland so convinces himself. He initially seems more enlightened than hypocritical, more thoughtful than dishonest, but through his commitment to May and his involvement with Ellen, the limitations in Newland's perspective become increasingly apparent.

He senses May's shortcomings from the start, albeit stimulated by Ellen's potentiality, and yet he continues on a course with ever-decreasing avenues for reconcilation. When he runs to May in Florida, he actually is running away from Ellen, thereby suggesting that he lacks the courage to address the unfamiliar, except sporadically, which is confirmed when May offers to release Newland from their commitment. Although Newland is pleasurably shocked at her "reckless unorthodoxy" (p. 149), the fact remains that he declines her offer, in spite of the inherent hypocrisy in continuing a relationship which he acknowledges is unfulfilling for him and dishonest for her.

This suggests that Newland is incapable of escaping from the role he has defined for himself, due to social pressures, May's expectations, and most importantly, because of his own

reservations. Social obligations for Newland, therefore, have little to do with moral obligations: he is variously hypocritical, dishonest, and is driven only by his own needs rather than by consideration for others. That is not to suggest that Newland is exceptionally weak or evil or immoral, for the point is that without May's naive compliance, and without Ellen's dedication to principle, Newland is ill-equipped to address his situation productively. As much as Newland loves the social order, then, there is little relation between it and his personal needs and the moral code so far as any reconciliation is concerned.

Hence, Newland's evolution does not reveal the reasons why he is unfulfilled by his role, for that is clear from the start. Rather, his evolution reveals the consequences to those who accept their place in a community, but who cannot fulfill every need within the social framework. For instance, he justifies his attentions to Ellen in terms of philosophical niceties, but at the same time, he condemns her relationship with Beaufort, rejecting her, pitying her, for her involvement with someone Newland considers socially inferior. Newland applies a double standard because so far as he is concerned, there is a great difference between Beaufort and himself, and Newland feels that Ellen's inability to see the difference is a reflection of her limitations, rather than an example of his own confusion.

He also fails to see that he expects Ellen to follow a different standard from his own, which she does, ironically,

because of his sociological and philosophical advice. But when he realizes the implications of her compliance, he rejects the consequences: "If we do this now, it will be worse afterword--worse for every one--" (p. 174). What Newland espouses in theory, then, proves to have little relevance in practice, and he flounders in the contradiction between her moral standard and his own need. While he flounders, however, Ellen does not, nor does May, and when she agrees to an early marriage, Newland complies fatalistically.

Although Newland acts as if he is without control over his life, however, the fact remains that he makes choices at crucial points all along the way. When he goes to May in Florida, when he declines her offer, when he condemns Ellen for real or imagined actions, Newland assesses and responds according to a value system dominated by his social instincts. His marriage to May thus tests the validity of such criteria in the face of his moral framework and his intellectual aspirations.

Predictably, Newland's marriage becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. His intellectual expectations quickly disappear:

> Archer had reverted to all his old inherited ideas about marriage. It was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives . . . . There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free . . . (p. 196)

Moreover, May does not encourage his idiosyncratic needs: not only does she dislike travel and meeting new people, but she carries New York values and assumptions everywhere she goes. Their home is as typical as Newland foresaw, as are their

vacations in Newport. Their life, in short, offers no more than he expected: "She had represented peace, stability, comradeship, and the steadying sense of an inescapable duty" (p. 208). By relying on his social instincts, Newland achieves the socially-correct and comfortable position he sought.

While he complies with the expectations of his role, and fulfills his social and marital responsibilities, however, he cannot ignore the inherent limitations: "It surprised him that life should be going on in the old way when his own reactions to it had so completely changed" (p. 206). In spite of his attempt to suppress his sense of Ellen, the effect of her stimulation stays with him in some small way. Yet he chooses not to seek her out until the dull inevitability of his existence and several missed opportunities shake him from his lethargic compliance: "His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him, and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen" (p. 228). His decision to marry May thus proves to be extremely limiting in application because there is nothing in his life which provides for spiritual or intellectual stimulation. While May actualizes his social priorities then, Ellen continues to represent life's potentiality, and he is driven to her in an attempt to provide his existence with meaning. But as a married man, his options and opportunities are considerably narrowed, as are the possibilities for gratifying his need.

As unfulfilling as his relationship is with May, however, Newland is equally unfulfilled by Ellen. Although she represents everything he wishes to escape to, when they finally meet, Newland disapproves of her hotel, is confused by her actions, and fails to understand her intentions without detailed clarification. Moreover, he looks to her regarding his own unhappiness: "I'm the man who married one woman because another told him to . . . . You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It's beyond human enduring--that's all" (pp. 243-4). He continues to apply a double-standard with Ellen by placing the responsibility for his situation with her and absolving himself of any responsibility for his own actions. He also desires that she remain separated from her estranged husband, in spite of the social consequences and her ostracization from the family, while at the same time, he complies with her request that he remain with May.[3] His philosphical assessments and advice therefore continue to be self-serving and inconsistent.

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[3]Wershoven interprets the situation differently: "Ellen, the intruder, embodies those values of loyalty and decency, of sacrifice of the individual for the good of others, which New York gives lip service to but does not live by. And now Ellen holds Archer to his own words, for by denying Ellen the freedom of a divorce, Archer has chosen to live by the standards of New York. Ellen holds him to the consequences of that choice" (Female Intruder, p. 85). Wershoven's analysis suggests that Newland and Ellen exert absolute control over each other, where, in fact, both are masters of their own destiny. Ellen, however, never loses sight of this fact, while Newland wants Ellen, or May, or society, to make his choices for him as a means of escaping his own confusion. The irony is, of course, that relying on others only increases his confusion and his unhappiness.

Ellen, in contrast, is completely consistent because she responds only to her own clearly-defined moral beliefs:

> . . . if it's not worth while to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery--then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them--all these things are a sham or a dream (p. 244).

Requesting that Newland remain with May provides the means for Ellen to test her own spiritual commitment, but in so doing, she paradoxically inhibits Newland from testing his own moral strength: "But after a moment the sense of waste and ruin overcame him. There they were . . . so chained to their separate destinies that they might as well have been half the world apart" (p. 245). Hence, Ellen's moral virtue is self-serving, and Newland is denied the nurture and the encouragement vital for him to escape from the unhappiness of his marriage.

In placing the responsibility for his well-being with someone else whom he so completely misunderstands, Newland is victimized by her good intentions and by his own limitations. Just as his decision to marry May proves debilitating, then, so his need for Ellen is equally unproductive, and the possibilities for reconciling his conflict are reduced further.

When Newland is with Ellen, he has a "sense of having slipped through the meshes oftime and space" (p. 231), and this illusion provides him with a way to cope, albeit temporarily.[4]

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[4]Griffin Wolff suggests that Newland's sense of reality is the central issue in the novel: "His yearning for Ellen is indescribably intense, yet for the most part it belongs to another world . . . . He searches out the house that Ellen lives in much as one might visit the hermitage of some transfigured

Ellen agrees to occasional meetings, but only according to specific criteria:

> It was the perfect balance she had held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred and yet tranquilized him . . . . No; she would go only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to Archer, a temptation to fall away from the standard they had both set up (p. 248).

The irony is that Ellen establishes the standard, and Newland deludes himself that their relationship operates on an esoteric plane, imbued only with intrinsic value:

> . . . he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which [Ellen] throned . . . . Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities . . . . Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency . . . (p. 265).

While such illusions allow him to function as May's husband, the real world intrudes (p. 269), and his connection with Ellen begins to overwhelm him to the point of indiscretion (p. 262).

Living within Ellen's guidelines proves as unworkable to Newland as living within May's social framework, but when he seeks Ellen out to make the illusions real, she refuses to comply: "And you'll sit beside me, and we'll look, not at visions, but at realities" (p. 292). Whereas Newland places their relationship in a spiritual context, Ellen does not: "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress--since I can't be your wife?" (p. 292). When he suggests that they run away together, Ellen sees the

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[4](cont'd) saint . . . he sustains a private shrine to the man he might have been at a different time and in a different place . . ." (Feast of Words, p. 327).

meaninglessness in such platitudes: "Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there?" (p. 293). She provides no opportunity for Newland to perpetuate his illusions, and refuses to indulge his fantasies: "For us? But there is no us in that sense" (p. 294). He is left only with a vision of "deadly monotony" (p. 296) which awaits him without Ellen and with May as his wife. Each avenue that Newland tries, then, proves equally futile.

The only option finally left for Newland to escape his vision of deadly monotony, short of May's death, is through an illicit relationship. In considering this alternative, Newland confronts a convention which works completely against his intentions: ". . . in Archer's little world no one laughed at a wife deceived, and a certain measure of contempt was attached to men who continued their philandering after marriage . . . . Archer had always shared this view . . ." (pp. 308-9). In making illicit relationships socially unacceptable, and in making marriage a sacred trust, husband and wife are inexorably bound to form the basic social unit, and deceiving a spouse is tantamount to undermining the foundations of the social system. Loyalty in marriage becomes a personal symbol of one's commitment to the social structure, while disregard for the marriage contract becomes a disavowal of social responsibilities. While there are notable exceptions, most comply, at least superficially, and thereby, the social structure is protected and perpetuated.

When the individual is not fulfilled within marriage, as Newland is not, he must either suppress his needs, as Newland initially does, or he must reject the value system which forbids gratification, as Newland ultimately tries: "Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man; their situation, therefore, resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment" (p. 309). Finally then, Newland's conflict is reduced to the most essential level: in order to create meaning in his life, Newland must reject the values which inform his existence. But at the same time, he sees the limitations in following such a course: "Did she really imagine that he and she could live like this? And if not, what else did she imagine?" (p. 311). At this most essential level, his spiritual and social needs are irreconcilable.

He cannot accept that reconciliation is impossible, however, although his attempt to consummate the affair only reveals how much the social animal Newland is: "'I don't profess to be different from my kind. I'm consumed by the same wants and the same longings'" (p. 314). When Ellen points out the obvious contradictions (p. 315), Newland sees only that this, as his final option, must work. That the affair is not consummated suggests Newland only deludes himself, while Ellen, who returns to Europe, and May, who intervenes, do not. Newland deludes himself further with schemes to follow Ellen to Europe, because without her, he is doomed to the role he so desperately wants to escape. Without Ellen, without options, and with May's

pregnancy, Newland finally and inevitably acquiesces to a role he knows is as debilitating as it is essential.

From Ellen's perspective, the issue concerns her own needs. As sensitive and responsive as she is to Newland, Ellen knows that her understanding of the consequences outweighs Newland's: "No you're not! You've never been beyond. And I have . . . . and I know what it looks like there" (p. 294). But while Newland defines his rebellion in social terms, Ellen sees only the moral implications, which makes her choices much more clear-cut and self-evident: "Shall I--once come to you; and then go home? . . . . I can't stay here and lie to the people who've been good to me . . . . [nor can I go away with you] and destroy their lives, when they've helped me to remake mine" (p. 314-5). The irony is, of course, that Ellen's assessment suggests that there are degrees of wrong-doing and methods of atonement, which she uses to justify her actions: ". . . he saw that her face . . . was flooded with a deep inner radiance . . . . he felt that he had never before beheld love visible" (p. 316). Hence, Ellen's commitment to moral principles is overshadowed by less rational needs when faced with the complete denial of self which her position demands.

In contrast to Newland's confusion between social conventions and moral guidelines, Ellen reveals that separating the social and moral code provides no better criteria for reconciling disparities, and her position proves as limited as Newland's: the only way that she can maintain her principles is

to justify her need for Newland within a moral framework, and to rationalize the fulfillment of appetites not provided for in her value system. By so doing, she becomes self-serving and hypocritical, not because she is weak and immoral, but because there is no other avenue to reconciliation available. When she leaves New York unfulfilled, she only reveals the limits of her hypocrisy.[5]

And like Ellen, May also sees to her own needs. When her well-being is actually threatened, in spite of her earlier assertion, she does make her "own happiness out of an unfairness," which she acknowledges years later to her son: "She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (p. 359). Fulfilling the conventional role of wife and mother, within a reassuring and predictable framework, provides meaning in May's life, but, paradoxically, she can achieve fulfillment in her terms only if Newland remains unfulfilled in his terms. May's compassion, therefore, is limited, and her understanding is restricted to a subtle form of

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[5]Wershoven suggests that Ellen provides the example of a "moral positive," articulated by the tutor, Monsieur Riviere: "It's worth everything, isn't it, to keep one's intellectual liberty, not to enslave one's powers of appreciation, one's critical independence? . . . . This statement stands in direct opposition to the attitudes and behavior of Old New York, and is a code that only one character in the novel besides Riviere himself lives by. Only Ellen Olenska can fully 'look life in the face,' and only she escapes from New York with her identity intact" (Female Intruder, p. 93). This interpretation, however, suggests that Ellen has lost nothing, nor has she given anything up which she values, which seems to contradict her own struggles and the compromises she makes.

coercion: "'No;, I wasn't sure then--but I told [Ellen] I was. And you see I was right', she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory" (p. 346). From May's perspective, she simply forces Newland to clarify his priorities, and to accept the responsibilities which his social and marital role requires.

The fact remains, however, that May is hypocritical in placing her own needs ahead of Newland's and ahead of her moral principles. In spite of the immense differences in their social and economic positions, May, like Zeena in Ethan Frome, ensures her own well-being, and is as self-serving, regardless of the cost to others. But whereas Zeena does not espouse moral principles, May does, which suggests that her sensibilities are more refined. And yet, when her security is actually threatened, her moral principles prove irrelevant and unworkable. May's actions reveal that the moral and social order cannot be inexorably bound together because on crucial issues, personal needs supersede ethics. Like Ellen then, May ultimately serves herself first, although in May's case, her personal and social expectations are so intertwined that in serving herself, she also serves the larger framework. Her moral lapse therefore becomes irrelevant because her actions are necessary to her well-being and essential to her social commitment. Nor are her values ever tested either by a husband who is incapable of further rebellion, or by a society which shares the same assumptions. And any hypocrisy disappears in the face of her own contentment.

From Newland's perspective, the consequences are quite different. Acquiescing to his marital responsibilities is an acknowledgement of his commitment to the social order, and seems to provide a reconciliation to the crisis. But his evolution does not end here. Like Ethan, the consequences of Newland's conflict are assessed after thirty years, although without a narrator; Newland assesses his own life, as does his grown son, Dallas, who provides a modern, more objective contrast. Newland knows that in complying with the requirements of his role, he has fulfilled May's expectations: by adopting a "pretense of sameness, a kind of innocent family hypocrisy . . . . [May dies] thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own . . ." (p. 351). Newland takes solace that he has provided for May's well-being, if not his own. His assessment of his community life is equally revealing: "He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante; but he had had high things to contemplate, and great things to delight in . . ." (p. 349). Newland rationalizes not only the limitations in his relationship with May, but also the dearth of accomplishments he so wanted as a young man.

But just as Newland earlier blames Ellen for his entrapment in marriage, so he continues to look elsewhere to justify the course his life has taken: ". . . he saw into what a deep rut he had sunk. The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else" (p. 354). He thus evolves

exactly as he feared, without any personal attributes or accomplishments to set him apart, and is comforted only by the fact that he fulfills his marital obligations and social responsibilities. In a sense then, his evolution symbolizes the course of Everyman's life: Newland takes pride in his children, in his few accomplishments, and he lives according to standards which are reinforced and perpetuated by everyone around him. In so doing, he ensures the perpetuation of his community, and sees its inherent value. By conforming to May's expectations, then, Newland allows the social order to dominate and to provide for every need, and any hypocrisy or shortcomings are submerged in the larger framework.

But at the same time, the inherent limitations in his existence are obvious. Every element in his life and an essential part of his nature all point Newland in the direction his life ultimately takes, and yet, he senses the limitations in his role: "Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been [futile] . . . . The chances had been too decidedly against him" (p. 350). Acknowledging that he has missed something, while denying the possibility of attainment, reveals the exact nature of Newland's dilemma: he knows life should contain more than his life does, but reaching out for what Ellen represents, for something so intangible and transient, flower-like, requires that he also escape the taboos which define his existence, and which seem

very tangible and intransigent. Newland's dilemma is not a matter of courage, however, nor fear. Rather, Newland knows that if he were to escape his values and deny everything which gives his life meaning, he also thereby would lose himself.

But understanding this conflict does not justify his choice, which he almost acknowledges: "There are moments when a man's imagination, so easily subdued to what it lives in, suddenly rises above its daily level, and surveys the long windings of destiny. Archer hung there and wondered . . ." (pp. 354-5). In his wonderment, Newland reveals that a life which could have provided limitless opportunities instead is lost to "dull duty" (p. 350), which is, according to his own assessments as a young man, insufficient and inadequate. His life proves to be in his own terms, "sham" and "deadly monotony", in spite of his rationalizations to the contrary.

Moreover, those values and conventions to which Newland sacrifices his individuality prove as transient as Newland's hopes, which Dallas pointedly reveals (p. 359). The final irony is that what seemed so permanent and self-perpetuating disappears in the face of more expedient, and humanistic, guidelines, except in those people, like Newland, who cannot adapt. And Newland, like others of his kind, becomes anachronistic and out-of-step with a society which re-forms itself.[6]

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[6]Wershoven comes to much the same conclusion in her comparison of The Age of Innocence and The Valley of Decision: "Eventually, Odo and Archer lose nearly everything, because even the past they half-heartedly embrace is lost. And . . . Archer, a

His understanding of his own limitations is revealed in his final decision not to reintroduce himself to Ellen, for they are, as he earlier sensed, worlds apart.[7]

What then of the moral implications in Newland's evolution? Like Ethan, Newland is typical of his time and place, and similarly, he sets himself apart, which leads to conflict, not between Newland and his community, but within himself. As an active and committed member of society, his need to feel a part of a clearly-defined social structure is incompatible with his need to assert his individuality. But as an intelligent and thoughtful man, Newland faces this dilemma by pursuing every possible avenue to reconciliation, albeit unsuccessfully.

His commitment to May is legitimate in the sense that he marries her, while his connection with Ellen is illicit from

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[6](cont'd) disappointed man, justifies his life in old age by explaining, 'After all, there was good in the old ways . . .' (Female Intruder, p. 39).

[7]Wershoven suggests that whereas Newland's life is limited by his duality, Ellen, in contrast, has resolved her own conflict: "The most satisfying final impression is that of a free Ellen Olenska, who, having been expelled from New York, has lived as an independent woman, safe from her husband, surrounded by the culture and vanity of Paris. The apartment that Archer gazes at, at the end of the novel, is 'many windowed . . . pleasantly balconied,' and it seems as though the sun has just left it. The expulsion of Ellen from the suffocation of New York has released her to the light and openness of a new life" (Female Intruder, p. 90). This conclusion, however, ignores Ellen's own loss, a relationship with Newland, the man for whom she was willing to sacrifice her beliefs and moral standards, nor does Wershoven consider the fact that Ellen wanted to live in America, as an American, which is what leads to her struggles with and capitulation to the social and moral guidelines of the New York community, in spite of her understanding of the prevailing hypocrisy.

start to finish, which suggests that acquiescing to conventional duties and responsibilities is somehow more legitimate than breaking away. In one way then, Newland's evolution suggests that involvement in the social order necessitates the denial of individual pursuits in favour of broader, more all-encompassing concerns. In exchange for such denial, those that comply are rewarded with the emotional reinforcement and security which belonging provides, and which, in Newland's case, is made palatable because his capitulation and rationalizations are presented in such compassionate, gentle terms.

But ultimately, Newland's actions must be assessed in dispassionate terms. Although May is quite different from Zeena Frome, and Ellen quite different from Mattie Silver, the analogies between Ethan's and Newland's situation suggest that in the most essential way, there is little difference at all. Both Ethan and Newland choose to commit themselves to life-long roles which they know are debilitating and unrewarding, and in so doing, they each fulfill their social and marital obligations. This suggests that within any community, regardless of size or sophistication, any individual, regardless of intelligence and knowledge, is guided by moral values which bear little relation to his or to her idiosyncratic needs.

In the interplay between Newland, Ellen, and May, the limitations of this dichotomy are revealed from every angle: May defines her own needs in relation to an amalgam of social expectations and moral guidelines; Ellen suppresses her own

needs in response only to conventions which actualize specific moral principles; and Newland uses moral principles to reinforce both his personal and his social sensibilities, depending on his needs of the moment. And yet, regardless of the particular approach, not May, nor Ellen, nor Newland escape hypocrisy, self-interest, and inconsideration, which suggests that when tested, moral guidelines prove incompatible with individual needs. May's choices suggest that unquestioning compliance are the least self-destructive and the most rewarding, while Ellen's choices reveal the strength of character required for moral commitment. But Newland, less superficial than May, and less committed than Ellen, sees the inherent limitations in every possibility. When forced to choose, however, Newland, like Ethan, follows the morally-correct course, and condemns himself to a role which is not as meagre as Ethan's, but which is spiritually and intellectually inadequate. The choices available to Newland thus provide no avenue to reconciliation. More importantly, his evolution reveals not the joy to be found in life's potentiality, but rather, the struggle involved in accepting so much less.

VIII. Conclusion

In her novels, Edith Wharton makes certain sweeping assumptions about the nature of society generally, and about social behavior specifically. Her characters all are located firmly within a social context, and whether that context encompasses the punctilious world of Newland Archer's New York, or the stratified world of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, or whether society is represented by the small New England communities of Charity Royall's North Dormer or Ethan Frome's Starkfield, each provides a clearly-defined framework for the individual to operate within. Similarly, all of Wharton's protagonists experience varying degrees and different kinds of frustration at having to conform to the commonly-accepted assumptions of their communities. In Wharton's view, then, the social framework demands as much of the individual as it provides.

In this sense, Wharton is a naturalist, but her perceptions go beyond these limits. In her concern for the social structure, she inevitably addresses the moral structure, for, as is apparent in her fiction, the two are inexorably bound together. That is not to suggest that Wharton sees the world as a moral place; on the contrary, she sees a world where greed, fear, selfishness, egocentricity, frivolousness, and empty ritualistic convention have replaced rectitude, charity and compassion as the guidelines for life. As a result, society provides

lip-service to traditional Christian moral beliefs, but in practice, ethics become platitudes, standards expedients, and values political. What interests Wharton is the contradiction between established ethical standards and the actual workings of society.

Wharton's perspective is unique in that she was inculcated with the values and morals of the nineteenth century, but looked forward to the twentieth century in her concerns, her evaluations, and her techniques. She also brought to her fiction an amalgam of philosophical thought and literary theories which she reworked to encompass her particular perceptions about life. The result is that Wharton developed a literary technique and a vision of life which, at her best, earns her a place of distinction in the American literary mainstream.

In each of the novels discussed here, Wharton provides assessments of traditional Christian moral doctrine. The usual conception of such beliefs is that they provide positive, commonly-accepted guidelines for the individual and for the community, with those shared values furnishing not only a commonly-acknowledged framework for existence, but a means for achieving spiritual fulfillment. In this way, the commitment to shared moral values also provides a standard of conduct which allows every individual to co-exist with his neighbours, and together, to form, at the most basic level, a civilized society.

Wharton, however, does not assume that Christian values and beliefs inform the social framework. This position may be a

reflection of her acknowledged commitment to agnosticism, but more probably, it simply reveals her perceptions about American society. Wharton suggests that society more properly can be understood in terms of Darwinian and Spencerian ethics. In such terms, the community's commitment is to survival, adaptation, and most importantly perhaps, to the achievement and maintenance of power. Obviously then, there is a contradiction between conventional moral assumptions and social practices.

Wharton accepts this contradiction, but what she does question, and what provides the central focus in the novels, is the problem for those who do not adapt unquestioningly to such social guidelines. Instead, she focuses on those who feel the need for a spiritual level to their existence, and considers the possibilities for fulfilling that need within a spirit-less framework. In The House of Mirth, for instance, Selden provides the example of Darwinian adaptation: in his need for philsophical principles, he falls back on traditional idioms concerning the "republic of the spirit" and romantic ideals, but he never loses sight of the dichotomy between such beliefs and the exigencies of life. Therefore, Selden sustains his need by restricting those principles to a philosophical level, and he becomes variously conventional, hypocritical, and expedient in his interrelationships with society and with Lily.

She, on the other hand, reveals the inherent danger in attempting to fulfill her spiritual needs by taking such philosophical principles to heart. Under Selden's influence, she

too falls back on traditional moral principles, but in so doing, she, unlike Selden, loses sight of the commonly-accepted rules of conduct for her society. Once her personal framework changes, she becomes out-of-step with everyone else, including Selden, until, ultimately, she is rejected and subsequently ejected by the community.

Lily's evolution, in relation to Selden and the various levels of New York society, suggests that expediency and self-interest in themselves can provide an acceptable social framework, albeit one without any acknowledgement of spiritual levels, so long as every member accepts or adapts to the underlying rules and conventions. But when an individual's personal needs cannot be met within that framework, he can only fall back on traditional moral values which are of little use in a society operating under different criteria. The implication is that for those whose needs require something beyond this criterion, the individual who follows moral principles is ill-equipped to make the kinds of choices necessary for survival.

Similarly, in Summer, Charity experiences her sexual awakening, not from the perspective of youthful experimentation culminating in a mature relationship, but from the perspective of a young girl left to carry the burden of responsibility for her part in a shared intimacy, where her existence is defined not in terms of spiritual fulfillment, but in relation to survival. By ensuring her life, she destroys her spirit, and in

so doing, reduces the romantic ideal to absolutely simple terms.

Unlike Lily, then, who is intelligent and articulate, a fashionable and active, if somewhat uncommitted member of her society, Charity is neither articulate nor fashionable, nor particularly intelligent, but neither is she completely committed to her small community either. Charity is out-of-step because of specific sexual and sensual needs which are not acknowledged within North Dormer, but unlike Lily, Charity is much less able to define the nature of her unfulfilled need. But there is really little difference between Lily's sophisticated, thoughtful response to her spiritual needs in the context of her complex and manipulative society, and Charity's instinctual reaction to her undefined needs in the context of her own artless little village. The kinds of pressures felt by Lily thus are not exclusive to sophisticated society, but are felt in any community by anyone who attempts to stand apart.

Nor do such attempts only occur in intelligent and articulate individuals who are able to grapple with and to comprehend the nature of their struggle in philosophical terms; rather, anyone whose needs move beyond conventional expectations, even at the most basic level, is subject to similar repercussions. For Charity, the struggle arises in the dichotomy between her own sexual and sensual impulses and the restrictions of a community which fails to acknowledge those needs within the moral framework. And just as Lily's aspirations to the ideal are tested under the most extreme conditions, so

Charity's sense of her own power and independence are similarly tested by the introduction of an outsider who brings all the underlying tensions to the surface. Charity's evolution suggests that she has few avenues to fulfill her personal needs within the social framework. More importantly, her inability to make demands on those who make demands of her leaves her victimized by those who are able to exert control.

In Ethan Frome, this struggle is presented in a similar rural context, but from a male perspective, which suggests that victimization is not restricted only to women. After struggling with the conflict between his sense of duty and his desire for emotional fulfillment, Ethan's ultimate decision to adhere to responsiblity leads not to spiritual growth, but to a life-in-death prison where pain, suffering, and endurance provide the substance of his empty existence. By trying to accommodate everyone who makes demands of him, Ethan not only fails to fulfill his own needs, except ironically, but he also dedicates himself to a role which is as tormented as it is reponsible.

Newland Archer's evolution in The Age of Innocence presents a similar situation, which, on the surface, seems much more compassionate than Ethan's treatment. But like the other characters, Newland's conflict must be viewed in relation to those around him: Ellen offers a vision of life unencumbered by conventional restraints. In spite of his attraction to Ellen, however, Newland is intimidated by his own inhibitions and by

the pressure brought to bear on him by those who profit from his compliance. When he capitulates to May and to the expectations of society, he is absorbed completely into it, thereby suggesting that individuality is a fragile commodity at best, which deteriorates without constant nurturing. In view of the fact that Newland initially articulates the limitations that he later perpetuates, any attempt to justify his actions according to a moral standard rings hollow. Instead, his actions serve only to undermine any commitment to responsibility achieved at such a high price.

Wharton presents in Newland's evolution a detailed examination of a man for whom established rituals, clearly-defined roles, and commitment to responsibility ultimately outweigh any spiritual or idiosyncratic needs to the extent that his individuality is sacrificed for the perpetuation of the species. Newland is as trapped in his world as Ethan is in his, and the sympathetic rendering of Newland's struggle only reinforces the tragic implications. Just as Lily's and Ethan's morally-correct decisions lead to tragedy, so too does Newland's struggle actually undermine the validity of moral rectitude as a guideline for existence, simply because it becomes so limiting in application.

Newland's and Ethan's capitulation to responsibility ultimately becomes as empty and meaningless as the twenty-four or thirty year gap in their lives. And their commitment to responsiblity contrasts with Lily's and Charity's need for a

similar commitment from men who cannot deliver. Regardless of the social milieu, then, or education or sophistication, men are trapped by their sense of responsibility in conventional terms, and women have little option but to play on that sense of responsibility as a means of ensuring their own survival. Those that question this criterion, whether man or woman, become involved in a futile struggle using ethical values which provide no avenues for spiritual growth or personal fulfillment. Consequently, the individual becomes trapped or victimized or absorbed by adherence to inescapable values which prove in application to be shallow, empty, and ineffectual.

While most of Wharton's fiction addresses the victim, in The Custom of the Country she creates a protagonist who epitomizes the American commitment to expediency. Undine is a vulgar, young upstart, without values, traditions, or moral beliefs, and as such, she seems destined for an unfulfilled and worthless existence; yet she is extremely successful, outlining her goals and capitalizing on her resources, untroubled by attacks of conscience which might otherwise slow her progress. Undine is successful simply because she in unhindered by moral rectitude, and for this reason, she not only survives, but succeeds in her own terms.

The Custom of the Country alienated the critical audience simply because Wharton's vision of the American cultural consciousness has such portentous implications. She reveals the evolution of a society which is guided by materialism and by its

need for self-aggrandisement, and she points out with didactic precision the consequences to those who do not conform. By locating Undine's evolution in an historical context, and by contrasting American mores with French customs, Undine's limitations become apparent, especially in contrast with Ralph Marvell's philosophical beliefs. The interplay of characters suggests, however, that Undine may be despicable, but she embodies the customs of a country which places self-aggrandisment before every other consideration. In this sense then, Undine is America, and the critics' distaste is a reflection of their inability to address the implications.

Wharton creates a world without absolutes because she sees a world without absolutes, and in this sense, she is completely modern in her sensibilities. And for the same reason, nineteenth-century literary techniques were inadequate to her needs, forcing her to develop her own approach. By presenting an issue through contrasting angles of vision, she moves beyond a moral center to present characters and events relative to each other, without explanation or resolution. Wharton's technique frees her from pointing to any underlying meaning in the text; instead, she places the responsibility with the reader to take from the interplay the implications which arise.

That is not to suggest that there is no meaning, but only that it is elusive. This is partially because Wharton begins with very basic assumptions about the roles of men and women in society, about the sexual make-up of men and women, about

aesthetic and intellectual concerns. She then creates a situation which tests these assumptions under the most extreme conditions for their validity. Nor does she provide any easy solutions. The difficulty arises with those who try to justify any character's evolution according to traditional conceptions, which for a long time, critics attempted to do. But as there are no absolutes in life, Wharton provides no absolutes in her fiction. Consequently, the reader must break free from his own assumptions and let the implications speak for themselves. In this way, the meaning becomes clear when the reader questions the assumptions usually taken for granted. In this sense, Wharton unifies form with content consistently and effectively.

Whereas critics always felt that there is a great variation in the quality of Wharton's novels, the variation actually concerns the nature of the subject matter. In those novels which address sexuality, spiritual commitment, material success, duty and responsibility, the subjects are universal. There is a similar universality in several other novels which sets them apart as well: in A Son at the Front, written in 1923, Wharton addresses the conflict between heroism and survival from the point of view of those left at home, while in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, her discussion of the role of the artist is a timeless issue. At her most successful then, Wharton deals with universal assumptions and all-encompassing concerns.

At her less successful, Wharton applies the same techniques, but her subject matter makes these novels less

effective. In The Valley of Decision, the historic setting and the panoramic vision diffuses the central issue concerning political ideologies, while in The Fruit of the Tree, which addresses labour practices and euthanasia, the assumptions remain unclear and diffused. In addressing issues which are more political than universal, there is some difficulty for the reader in initially defining the angles of vision, and more importantly, in then addressing the implications which arise from their interplay, simply because the issues in the broadest sense may not be relevant. In those novels where the perspective is narrowed to deal with timely issues, Wharton forfeits the universality which informs her best work.

By understanding that the unevenness of Wharton's oeuvre is created not by technical or artistic limitations, but by differences in subject matter, one also understands why her emphasis changes after 1920. The breakdown of the moral order which Wharton pinpointed in her early work was followed by the breakdown of the social order as a result of the cataclysmic effects of the war, and many of the sociological assumptions which informed the consciousness of the general populace disappeared, or at least these assumptions were narrowed, or reinterpreted, or watered down by a populace which no longer took any beliefs for granted. Charity Royall's sexual inhibitions, for instance, were tossed aside in the Roaring Twenties, while Ethan's and Newland's sense of duty and responsibility was redefined by a generation which had lost all

sense of continuity. The result of these and so many other social changes was that specific assumptions no longer provided common cultural guidelines, nor could any social standards be defined very readily in broad terms.

In those novels written after the war which focus on sociological concerns, then, Wharton's assessments are less impressive, simply because they lack the universality of the good pre-war novels. In Glimpses of the Moon, for instance, written between The Age of Innocence and A Son at the Front, Wharton examines the consequences for those who are committed to the superfical lifestyle of the "lost generation" in Europe after the war; but the assumptions which inform the actions of the characters are uncertain and the meaning unclear. Similarly, in The Children, written in 1928, Wharton addresses the issue of multiple marriages and the consequences to the offspring of such matches, but again, the issue is more timely than timeless.[1] As the social order broke down, there was some difficulty in encompassing issues which struck at the heart of society's consciousness, which explains why in the later good novels, Wharton recreates an earlier standard, or focuses on unversal issues such as war or the creative process, as opposed to

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[1]Wharton herself acknowledged the impact of the war and the consequences to her as a writer: "Before the war you could write fiction without indicating the period, the present being assumed. The war has put an end to that for a long time, and everything will soon have to be timed with reference to it. . . .the face of the world is changing so rapidly that the poor novelist is left breathless and mute, unless like Mr. Wells, he can treat things 'topically,' which I never could" (Quoted in Biography, p. 423).

specific sociological or political concerns.

As a result, Wharton's skill does not become inadequate to the requirements of a changing social structure, and there are equally weak and outstanding novels at either end of her long writing career. Rather, the great span of her subject matter suggests that her interests ranged from the political to the sociological, but at her most successful, she touches the pulse of life. At her best, she defines the consciousness of a nation in terms which remain as relevant now as when the novels were initially published. She not only captures the inherent contradictions in the American psyche, but she defines and analyzes those qualities which set Americans apart in terms which have proven completely accurate. By focusing on American mores and values, then, Wharton gave America a picture of itself in excruciatingly honest detail, and in terms which ultimately cannot be ignored. She broke away from the limitations of the past, and she foresaw something of America's future, and as a result, she forged a position for herself in the literary mainstream which has not yet been fully acknowledged. As readers become more willing to accept the implications of Wharton's artistic vision, however, her position in the American literary tradition will be proclaimed.

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