

# UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

May 1941

*I hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under my supervision by* Walter Brewster Greenwood  
*entitled* Edith Wharton: Her Materials and Methods

*be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements for the degree of* \_\_\_\_\_

*Approved by:*

William Smith Clark

Francis W. Chandler (reserved)



EDITH WHARTON:  
HER MATERIALS AND METHODS

A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School  
of the University of Cincinnati  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1942

by

Walter Brewster Greenwood

A.B. Transylvania College 1934  
M.A. Columbia University 1935



UMI Number: DP15792

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI**®

---

UMI Microform DP15792

Copyright 2009 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC  
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway  
PO Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction .....	1
II. Mrs. Wharton's Materials .....	7
1. The American Scene .....	7
III. Mrs. Wharton's Methods .....	66
1. The Novelist as Conscious Artist ...	66
2. Form .....	71
3. The Morally Significant Theme .....	79
4. The Sensitive Character .....	108
5. The Selective Process .....	133
6. Crucial Moments .....	137
7. The Point of View .....	158
8. Lapse of Time .....	179
9. Diction, Imagery .....	198
10. Irony .....	206
11. The Creative Process .....	213
12. Discipline and Integrity .....	222
IV. Conclusion .....	228

## I. Introduction

Woodsmen have adopted a practice to avoid danger in travelling over rough country. The custom is expressed in the maxim: "Don't go over anything you can go around." When the hunter's smooth path is obstructed, it is safer and more efficient for him to maintain his customary stride, and to skirt the object rather than to jump over it, or struggle through it.

The method of woodsmen has not been without its lesson for the literary critic. He, too, has discovered that to go around is easier than to go through. For many critics, the discovery of a literary obstacle in their path is a signal to strike out on a circuitous trail that will lead around the annoyance and into the even path that lies beyond. Any writer who does not fit into the pattern of his age may be such an obstacle.

The university wits of the sixteenth century applied the method to Shakespeare. Donne and Blake were ignored or avoided by many of their contemporaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Robert Browning's slow rise to fame is a more recent example of such avoidance. The willingness of American critics to avoid and evade the unusual figure is revealed in their attitude toward Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. After the French and English critics had accepted the former,

the Americans ventured a serious evaluation, but not until they had for generations followed the even path of poetical development which was clearly marked by Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Lanier, Aldrich, and Stedman. By following the main road, critics could ignore and condemn the Leaves of Grass which littered the trail as early as 1855. Clemens the buffoon had his audience, but Clemens the pessimist was to be avoided. The man who wrote Roughing It, Tom Sawyer, and Life on the Mississippi was a part of the literary trail; the author of Joan of Arc, The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg, and What Is Man ?, however, was, until recently, an obstacle to be "got around."

The conviction that critical interpretation of Edith Wharton has been taking the escape of "discreet avoidance" prompted this particular investigation. Stephen Crane and Frank Norris appeared on the literary scene at the same time as Mrs. Wharton. Naturalism, to which she would so consistently object, was then at its beginning in this country. By 1915, and especially after the war, the naturalistic school was decidedly in the ascendency. From that time until her death, Mrs. Wharton was working in opposition to the general direction of fictional subject and method. She followed the older traditions, both in her insistence upon form and in her interpretation of life as having purpose. Because she could not be interpreted as the result of nineteenth-century science,

Darwin, Freud, or Watson, many historians of American fiction have avoided giving her any serious consideration. It is a strange commentary on American criticism that a French critic, writing in 1935, could say of an English critic, Percy Lubbock, that his study was "le plus approfondi...jusqu'à cette date (1915); cette étude reste la meilleure."<sup>1</sup>

E.K. Brown's study, a full-length volume, has replaced Lubbock's, and it, now, "reste la meilleure." It replaced, also, the brief study made by Robert Morss Lovett for the Modern American Writers series in 1925.<sup>2</sup> Both Lovett and Brown neglected to make an analysis of Mrs. Wharton's methods. Like so many other critics, they say that Mrs. Wharton is an artist, even a consummate one, but neither makes a serious attempt to reveal her artistic principles or her use of those principles in practice. Lovett is antagonistic, opposing her doctrine of moral responsibility without isolating its presence in her fiction. Brown is thorough in his treatment of all aspects of her work, but the bulk of his study is devoted to a detailed synopsis of her fiction, poetry, travels, and criticism without helpful discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Brown, E.K., Edith Wharton, Paris, Librairie E. Droz, p.339.
  2. Edith Wharton, New York, McBride.
  3. In Chapter XI, pp.200-217, called "Les Theories Sur Le Roman." Brown discusses L'Imagination Créatrice, Le Créateur et Son Milieu, Théorie et Emploi du Conte, and Le Point de Vue.

In less extensive criticisms,<sup>1</sup> only Percy Lubbock, already mentioned, and Joseph Warren Beach have made efforts to evaluate Mrs. Wharton's theories. Lubbock defended her use of "ethical responsibility" as a theme. In the twenty-five years since the appearance of his essay, her work has increased vastly in bulk, providing new evidence for a re-appraisal of the subject. Beach confines his discussion to her use of the technique of limited point of view.<sup>2</sup> The other evaluations of her work have been, for the most part, not only brief but also without much concern for technique.

Mrs. Wharton's place as a critic of American civilization has been neglected in discussions of her work. Again it is only Brown who has offered anything in this direction.<sup>3</sup> His French background has given him a helpful perspective, but also enough limitations to allow a native interpretation to be presented without apology. Most critics have contented themselves with obvious generalizations about Mrs. Wharton's Americanism.

It appears, then, that no extensive or organized analysis has been made of Edith Wharton's artistic methods and practices,

- 
1. For a full list, see the bibliography, part II.
  2. The Twentieth Century Novel, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1932, pp.291-303.
  3. Chapter XIII, pp.235-255.

and that the only analysis of her American scene has been given through foreign eyes. Her prominence in the development of American fiction and her contribution to its theory would justify the former study. The peculiar nature of her scene, nowhere else in fiction so intimately revealed by a writer, justifies the latter. Since both subject and method are inseparable in Mrs. Wharton's mind and work, it would be impossible to discuss them independently. An understanding of one depends upon a knowledge of the other.

Just where Mrs. Wharton will stand among the twentieth century creators of American fiction only time will reveal. Arthur Hobson Quinn regards her as the "supreme artist of modern American fiction,"<sup>1</sup> but Parrington and Lewisohn would place her at the other extreme. The fact remains, however, that she will always deserve consideration. Whether she is exalted as an artist or derided as the magnifier of trivialities will be determined by future generations. But so long as fiction is regarded as a form of art, she will have to be studied as a contributor to its development in America and in the world. Of recent American writers, only Henry James and Willa Cather have shown an artistic seriousness comparable to hers. Secondly, she will remain a major

---

1. American Fiction, New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936, p. 550.

figure in American culture because she has left an important social document: the record of a faded society whose failure, despite its advantages, to produce a significant culture or lasting tradition, is an inescapable part of the story of America.

Between 1890 and 1937 Edith Newbold Jones Wharton produced fifty-three volumes of fiction, poetry, and criticism.<sup>1</sup> In them she reveals that she was by temperament and training an artist, by birth and affection an American. In both respects she will always remain an important figure.

---

1. A detailed, chronological list of her works is given in the bibliography.

## II. MRS. WHARTON'S MATERIALS

### 1. The American Scene

The external facts in the life of Edith Wharton can be quickly stated. Her life lay largely in her books. In them will be found the true Edith Wharton, rather than in details of time, place, and event. Yet, in order to evaluate with accuracy her position as a social historian, it is necessary to show her relationship to the scenes and people she uses in her fiction.

Edith Newbold Jones was born in 1862 in East Twenty Third Street, then a fashionable residential district of New York. Although she regards her family as "middle-class," it must be remembered that her conception of aristocracy was European and that, if New York City ever possessed an aristocratic group, her family was of it. Her mother insisted upon the distinction, and it was she who found only four or five families in town whose pedigree would lead back to the titled classes of the ancestral country. Her own family belonged, Mrs. Wharton says,

to the same group as this little aristocratic nucleus. The Schermerhorns, Joneses, Pendletons, on my father's side; the Stevenses, Ledyards, Rhinelanders on my mother's; the Gallatins on both, seem all to have belonged to the same prosperous class of merchants, bankers and lawyers.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. A Backward Glance, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1934, p.11.

Her childhood was a sheltered one, her contacts with the world being confined to associations with cousins, aunts and uncles who belonged to the same small circle. Her education, especially in foreign languages, was provided through tutors, but most of it was derived through her own reading in her father's well-stocked library. The first few summers of her life were spent in Newport, Rhode Island, where the family maintained a summer home. The event that provided a cast of mind which would ultimately differentiate her from most of her contemporaries, even among her own class, was the six years the family spent in Europe. Although European travel was usual, a sojourn of that length was quite uncommon.

Her European visit was the result of a force making for change in the history of her New York: the rise of the new aristocracy of wealth. The depreciation of currency following the Civil War had reduced her father's income so much that "in common with many of his friends and relations, he had gone to Europe to economize, letting his town and country houses for six years to some of the profiteers of the day."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's European residence increased her awareness of beauty. She was never thereafter satisfied with America.

---

1. Ibid., p.44.

Eight years of a highly sheltered existence followed, in New York and Newport, with her father's library supplying the food for her imagination. She appeared in society, attended the opera, made the "tribal" calls, always following the ritual of her small social group. During those eight years, from her tenth birthday until she came out on the eighteenth, she participated in the activities which were to provide the substance for her social histories. At that period, however, she could think only of Europe, and the interval of eight years was long. She had been promised that the family would return when they could afford it. Her father's growing illness induced the second journey abroad, and its happiness was darkened by his growing weakness. When he died, the family returned to New York for two more winters. In 1885 Edith Jones married Edward Wharton of Boston. From each June until February she and her husband lived in Newport. During the other four months of the year they travelled in Europe, and it was then that she really felt "alive."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's interest in literature was never long absent. In 1880 her first work, her poetic "babblings" as she calls them, appeared in the Atlantic Monthly through the recommendation of Longfellow, a friend of the family. After

---

1. Ibid., p.91.

her marriage, her literary creations increased in quantity. It was not long before the annual trips to Europe were combined with professional tasks in the form of travelogues and studies of buildings and gardens for the American magazines. With the growing success of her literary career she found it necessary to eliminate the annual trip to Europe and devote her time more largely to her work. At the beginning of the century the Whartons built a home near Lenox, in the hills of western Massachusetts. The winters were spent in a small house in New York, to avoid the New England cold that her husband so much disliked. Even New York proved to be too severe a climate for him, and in 1907 they established a residence in Paris, but returned to Lenox each summer. Until 1920 the apartment in a stately Louis XIV hotel of the rue de Varenne in the Faubourg Saint-Germain was her home.

The sorrow she felt upon the death of her husband in 1915, after long illness, was relieved to some extent by increased attention to her literary labors and more especially by her organization of relief work in France in 1914, first with the Red Cross, and later as President of the Accueil Franco-American, which cared for refugees. Her services to France and Belgium were of great value and were recognized officially by those nations. After the war Mrs. Wharton lived in Paris or at her winter home, Sainte Claire le Chatteau, at Hyères. She died at the latter place on August 11, 1937.

If the life of Mrs. Wharton was without much excitement, it provided her with an unusual opportunity as a social historian. She was among the last of those who saw the New York "aborigines" disappear from the "reservation,"<sup>1</sup> and no one could question her position as a part of that society. Her extended travels and residence in Europe gave her a perspective from which to view that vanishing society, and her familiarity with the society of France provided a standard of comparison with which she could measure the weaknesses and virtues of her own New York. Her travels and family gave her also a very helpful acquaintance with men of letters and artists. A Backward Glance is almost a catalogue of their names. She seems to have known them all, and to have been at ease among them. Although her friendship did not carry her outside her own class, she was able to find much in common with the intellectual leaders of her age, despite the feeling among the members of her immediate family that artists and thinkers were dangerous.

Mrs. Wharton's New York was in the throes of a severe change. It is apparent that she lived through two social and political upheavals: one following the Civil War and another following the World War. Of both she was keenly aware, but it

---

1. The figure is used by Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence.

was the first that she felt more personally and in which she was more deeply interested. From 1860 to 1890, when she was growing up in New York and abroad, when she was first becoming aware of people and traditions, the United States was passing through a period of such rapid and sweeping changes that a true picture of that period is difficult to paint. An integrated treatment through art that would reveal the salient details of the social revolution in the whole country will probably never be given. Mrs. Wharton made herself the historian of one small segment of the greater area, choosing a narrowed, rather well-defined group in a particular locality. New York City became the cynosure of her attention; the older families which possessed stability, manners and traditions was her subject. Her story is really the history of the decline of her people, an account of the efforts, more gracious than forceful, of a social group supported by family solidarity to withstand the attacks of a new society, erecting itself in their midst on a foundation of money.

Mrs. Wharton's backward glances, cast near the end of her life, threw into a clearer light the fact that the New York of her childhood was no more. No historian could deny the validity of her conclusion. In the 1890's New York was the mecca of financiers, a kingdom of Goulds, Fisks, and

and Tweeds. New York the center of culture and social distinction, the New York of the hierarchy personified in Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant seemed to have disappeared with the echoes of the Civil War cannon. The changes were made slowly, but the result was inevitable. In the 'eighties the first influx of the wealthy occupied itself with attempts to conform, to become a part of the existing traditions.<sup>1</sup> All the new wealth could not be assimilated, however, and gradually the old families lost their power and authority. The complete destruction of the New York tradition did not arrive until the second decade of the twentieth century, when another war destroyed the last remnants of its meaning.

What Mrs. Wharton discovered to be happening in her native city was by no means a localized condition. Economically, politically, and culturally, the Civil War brought forth a new nation, unwilling to grant room to the old. When the superior power of industry over agriculture was once definitely ascertained, commerce became the ruler. And the money-changers drove all else from the temple.

A novelist who attempted to record these alterations through the whole nation would have been faced with an impossible task. Had Mrs. Wharton tried to include in her can-

---

1. Rosedale, in The House of Mirth, is an interesting example of the effort.

was more of the total scene, she would have been a much greater figure in our literary history. It is also possible that a decision to include more would have resulted in her complete failure. Hudson River Bracketed is evidence enough that her work becomes unconvincing as soon as she goes beyond the confines of her own precinct. Her importance as a social historian may be lessened because she was the recorder of only a small segment of American life in a particular period; but her instinct as an artist is sure. Consequently, her limited view is authoritative. When the story of America from 1860 to 1920 comes to be written, the work of Edith Wharton must be regarded as offering important evidence,

In addition to its authoritativeness as a picture of a particular period, Mrs. Wharton's fiction will furnish another important source to the historian of America. Although the scene is limited in her novels to a very small geographic area, that area is second to none in significance. In no other part of the country can the clash between the forces of tradition and money be so clearly traced. New York society of the 'sixties, with its roots buried deep among the Dutch patroons of the early seventeenth century, and the English crown-licensed merchants of succeeding generations, had a traditional solidarity and permanence that could be rivalled in America only by Boston. It was to New York, also, that the greatest wealth came during the Gilded Age. The most solidified society clash-

ed with the greatest accumulations of wealth in Mrs. Wharton's New York. The struggle that took place in the whole nation was most clearly discernible there because the forces in combat were most representative of their groups. The same story is told, after all, by both Mrs. Wharton and Henry Adams.

Mrs. Wharton's interpretation of American life is not a happy one. Less inclusive than the pessimistic survey made by Henry Adams, her conclusions in fiction are inescapably severe in their condemnation of American frivolity, shallowness, and futility. She saw the destruction of the last remnants of a stagnant aristocracy, and the growth of a pagan society of money worshippers. In comparison with the civilization she had seen in Europe as a child, the old New York of the 'seventies and 'eighties was distinguished only by its narrowness; but the new society that erected itself was worse, substituting an unprincipled worship of power and success for its predecessor's worship of dignity and tradition. If the timidity and passivity of the old is bad, as the picture of Lawrence Selden reveals, the new visitation of men of action, personified in Elmer Moffett, is a less satisfactory change. Mrs. Wharton's whole story is one of prolonged defeat; the nostalgic love she displays for her old New York is not so much an objective admiration as it is the result of a real-

ization that the new society of the 'twenties is so much worse by comparison.

The rapid rise of a wealthy class following the Civil War made serious inroads upon the established society of her own people which had previously controlled New York, living in comfortable leisure but without affluence. The economic upheaval did for many of the New York families exactly what it did for her own: forced them to submit to the robber barons. Her family leased the town house and the country house, went to Europe and then watched, during the next twenty years the gradual disintegration of the manners and traditions for which they stood.

The old society was weak and helpless, submitting to its conquerors rather than fighting against them. But the new was completely worthless. At first there was an attempt at amalgamation and the conquerors tried to dress themselves in the habiliments of the conquered. But as time passed the wealthy increased in number, the old was discovered to be too weak to absorb the new, and the New York of the Raycies, Delanes, Ralstons, Wellands and Archers became the New York of the Spraggs, Mrs. Pulsifers, Osbornes and Manfords. The residents of Mrs. Wharton's old New York were artists and the members of the new group were unwilling to take the time to learn. It was the art of living in which they specialized, and the wealthy bar-

barians, loaded with their commercial instincts, had neither time nor inclination to invest the several generations of time that is needed to learn the art.<sup>1</sup>

Only a few of Mrs. Wharton's later works are related to the period following the World War, the date which she chooses as a line of demarcation for the culminating change in the progress of society. With that period she is utterly disgusted and unfamiliar. Her lasting fiction has as its subject and scene the older New York, the society she knew as a young woman and an earlier period of which she had learned through her family and friends. Her observations on the post World War period are inconclusive and can serve only as a vantage point from which the post Civil War attitude can be viewed. False Dawn goes as far back as the 'forties, The Old Maid to the 'fifties, but the remainder of the significant social studies are of the period between 1870 and 1910.<sup>2</sup>

The future historian of America will be most interested in Mrs. Wharton's conception of the demolished order that was the culmination of one era in American history and whose de-

- 
1. Several of Mrs. Wharton's short stories about artists state or imply her belief that it takes several generations of training to make a painter or a sculptor.
  2. The significant books that depict the period are as follows: The Touchstone (1890's), Sanctuary (90's), The House of Mirth (80's), The Fruit of the Tree (1910's), The Reef (1900's), The Age of Innocence (1870's), The Spark (60's), New Year's Day (70's), The Buccaneers (80's), and The Custom of the Country (1900's). The short stories follow much the same range, the bulk falling into the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

cline is the story of the growth of a different social temperament and philosophy. Her fiction reveals the essential nature of the "closed shop" that has been called New York's Four Hundred. Mrs. Wharton was in the fortunate position of being able to understand that society when it had unchallenged priority and strength, and then to watch it disappear under the avalanche of gold.

The first conclusion that can be drawn is that at its best the New York of the late nineteenth century had tremendous weaknesses. The sensitive souls that Mrs. Wharton so much admired could not live in the narrow solidity and regularity that condemned every innovation and ostracized the non-conforming spirit. New York's unwillingness to encourage or even support those members that had aspirations toward higher things was the great tragedy of an era in American life that came close to producing an art, a culture, and a tradition.

Mrs. Wharton was completely dissatisfied with New York. The city was without beauty: it had no architecture worth a second glance, no art, no civic interest in communal beauty. The residents were blind to culture, lacking taste in art, regarding its creation as "Bohemian", and dreading the presence of any intellectual interests. The natives were pathetically timid in the presence of any decision; and yet hopelessly

provincial and isolated, confident of the immaculate superiority of their own way of life over than of European civilizations. The people were without religion; the men without strength; the women finding their strength in the weakness of men; and the relation between men and women was similar to that of both to the church: it was without emotion or enthusiasm. Men chose their wives with the same ritualism with which they worshipped their God, out of respect to the family pattern. "Conform or perish" was the unwritten law of the people; stagnation was the inevitable result.

The vision of Beauty which Mrs. Wharton had as a child in her European visits never disappeared, and she could never afterwards be satisfied with the vulgarity and ugliness of the physical appearance of New York City.

Happy misfortune, which gave me, for the rest of my life, that background of beauty and old established order ! I did not know how deeply I had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York.<sup>1</sup>

The tone of dissatisfaction with the country's architecture can be found casually inserted in many passages: "The day was radiant, metallic; one of those searching American days so calculated to reveal the shortcomings of our street-cleaning and the excesses of our architecture."<sup>2</sup>

---

1. A Backward Glance, p.44.

2. The Descent of Man, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1904, p. 186.

How could I understand that people who had seen Rome and Seville, Paris and London, could come back to live contentedly between Washington Square and the Central Park... This little low-studded rectangular New York, cursed with its universal chocolate-coloured coating of the most hideous stone ever quarried, this cramped horizontal gridiron of a town without towers, porticoes, fountains or perspectives, hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness...<sup>1</sup>

Just as her society could live contentedly in the deadly uniformity of mean ugliness in architecture, it was equally willing to live without paintings on the walls, or with bad ones.<sup>2</sup> False Dawn is nothing so much as a bitter cry against the barbaric taste of New York which smugly declines to view the new, original art that Ruskin and the Rossettis were discovering, preferring bad reproductions of the standard masters that were badly hung in dreary museums. The career of the painter Keniston in "The Recovery" reflects the feeling that the art of painting was not understood in America. Here he was famous and worshipped. When he went abroad he discovered how poor was his work, how superficial and meaningless had been the admiration of the American critics.<sup>3</sup>

The unwillingness of the New Yorkers of the period to interest themselves in art or architecture was only an outward indication of an internal emptiness. They possessed no culture of any sort, and the consistent barrenness of their

---

1. A Backward Glance, p.55.

2. Mrs. Wharton's first book was nothing less than a handbook for interior decorators, The Decoration of Houses. She felt that one was needed.

3. Crucial Instances, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1901, p.63 ff.

architectural creations was matched by a uniform lethargy in the presence of any art, any cultural movements or even intellectual stimulation. The libraries in their homes resembled medieval tombs, in which books were kept but never read. When Mrs. Wharton does describe a library, the books are found to be nothing more than false backs, or to contain uncut leaves. The opera was to them a pretty display of colors and costumes, at which they could reveal their possession of a box ((to be given to poorer relatives on Wednesday nights) and visit the same people with whom they had had lunch. The music meant nothing; it merely forced them to talk louder. The indifference to books and music reached the category of dread, and the fear was symptomatic of an unwillingness to disturb any of their intellectual moulds. "No one in our set had any intellectual interests," she says, simply.<sup>1</sup>

None of my relations ever spoke to me of my books, either to praise or blame -- they simply ignored them; and among the immense tribe of my New York cousins, though it included many with whom I was on terms of affectionate intimacy, the subject was avoided as though it were a kind of family disgrace, which might be condoned but could not be forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

The existence of a writer was not so disgraceful as it was dangerous. An author might be a thinker, and any directed thought might disturb routine. Of one of her characters, Mrs.

---

1. A Backward Glance, p.88.

2. Ibid., p.144.

Wharton writes,

He and Major Detrancy had one trait in common -- the extreme caution of the old New Yorker. They viewed with instinctive distrust anything likely to derange their habits, diminish their comfort, or lay on them any unwonted responsibility, civic or social.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently "Old New York always thought away whatever interfered with the perfect propriety of its arrangements."<sup>2</sup> The persistent refusal to engage themselves in any intellectual interest, the fear that thought and experience (the emotional excitement of music or the new vision a book might give) might shake them into changing their opinions or their rituals -- all this resulted in a complete stagnation. Delia Lovell becomes aware of her defeat, but only after she had lived long enough to have grown children:

Now, as Delia glanced about her at the Leopold Robert lithographs, the family daguerreotypes, the rosewood and mahogany, she understood that she was looking at the walls of her own grave.

The change had come on the day when Charlotte Lovell, cowering on that very lounge, had made her terrible avowal. Then for the first time Delia, with a kind of fearful exaltation, had heard the blind forces of life groping and crying underfoot. But on that day also she had known herself excluded from them, doomed to dwell among shadows. Life had passed her by, and left her with the Ralstons.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. The Spark, Appkton, New York, 1924, p.59.
  2. The Old Maid, Appleton, New York, 1924, p. 165.
  3. Ibid., p.129.

Life passed them all by, and Mrs. Wharton's New Yorkers spent their days in smug complacency. The community was solidified around a few accepted ideas that could be encompassed in the phrase "what has been is right"; it judged all actions according to traditional practices rather than intelligence; it enclosed only the people bearing the approved names; it opposed every innovation, either in church or politics; it followed a routine so strict that all action was automatic; and the result was that it created for itself a body of conventions that suffocated all vitality.

The stagnation based on an unquestioning acceptance of an ancestor-decreed ritualism provoked an amazing timidity and eventually a provincialism that only ignorance could rival. All of Mrs. Wharton's characters are afraid to act; afraid because their actions may be in opposition to revered tradition. They are even afraid to question the validity of the tradition. Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden torment themselves because marriage without a sustaining income is alien to their group; Newland Archer is afraid to express his affection for Madame Olenska because she is a married woman, and later withdraws from recommending a divorce, which he knew she should seek, because a divorce would scandalize the family. He conforms, and lives the rest of his life under a shadow of melancholy. Precedent has replaced life for him.

Mrs. Fetherel, in "Expiation", may be suspected to be a portrait of Mrs. Wharton herself since the character in the story has written a novel revealing the habits of the inner circle of New York society. She withstands quietly the tacit disapproval of her family, but Mrs. Wharton adds this comment:

Mrs. Fetherel, as the publication of her novel testified, was in theory a woman of independent views; and if in practice she sometimes failed to live up to her standard, it was rather from an irresistible tendency to adapt herself to her environment than any conscious lack of moral courage.<sup>1</sup>

The acceptance of the ritual in Mrs. Wharton's characters, their timidity in the presence of anything suggesting a different course of action, is well illustrated in "The Long Run." The woman here has presented herself at the home of the man, bringing all her possessions except her husband, and prepared to stay. The man's reaction reveals the central vacuity of the whole social regime:

I had always looked on our love for each other, our possible relation to each other, as such situations are looked on in what is called society. I had supposed her, for all her freedom and originality, to be just as tacitly subservient to that view as I was: ready to take what she wanted on the terms on which society concedes their taking, and to pay for it by the usual restrictions, concealments and hypocrisies. In short, I supposed that she would 'play the game' --

---

1. The Descent of Man, p.215.

look for her own safety, and expect me to look out for it. It sounds cheap enough, put that way -- but it's the rule we live under, all of us. And the amazement of finding her, suddenly out of it, left me, for an awful minute, stammering at her like a gracious dolt...<sup>1</sup>

The experience of Mrs. Hazeldean in New Year's Day is very similar. Her lover expresses a similar amazement when she refuses to marry him after her husband's death. The proposal was in accordance with the code; the refusal could never be explained to him.

Another example of the same tendency toward the unthinking acceptance of prescribed ideas and a timid refusal to investigate the unusual can be found in a brief description of Miss Talcott, in "A Cup of Cold Water." She was

too young to distinguish the intermediate tints of the moral spectrum; and her judgments were further simplified by a peculiar concreteness of mind. Her bringing-up had fostered this tendency and she was surrounded by people who focussed life in the same way.<sup>2</sup>

In the minds of these conformists what was new could easily be confused with what was unpleasant. Anything new was almost immediately regarded as unpleasant; and both were treated in the same fashion: they were to be ignored. A scandal in the family was uniformly eliminated by the simple expediency of removing the miscreant from the scene of action. At all hazards, the rebel who has failed to follow the rules and reg-

---

1. Xingu, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1914, p. 218.

2. The Greater Inclination, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1899, p. 185.

ulations must be banished. The banishment is not so much a punishment as a precaution against any continuous reminder of the mere fact of non-conformance. In the old society things new were like things unpleasant in that they must be "hushed up." People, ideas and actions were alike measured by their willingness to conform to the pattern, and usually the new could not be amalgamated with the old. The solution was to ignore them.

Luckily the scandal was hushed up: the phrase blazed out against the dark background of Kate's misery. That was doubtless what most people felt -- the words represented the consensus of respectable opinion. The best way of repairing a fault was to hide it: to tear up the floor and bury the victim at night. Above all, no coroner and no autopsy.<sup>1</sup>

The direct statements that Mrs. Wharton makes concerning this quality of stagnant immobility and studied avoidance of the disagreeable can easily be found in her autobiography. Near the end of her life, when the more sweeping upheaval of the World War had thoroughly destroyed the society she knew, her attitude changes to one of commiseration for the glories that were lost. She reveals in A Backward Glance her admiration for certain aspects of old New York society. But even the veil of time was unable to cover her perception of this vital weakness that made it fall before the first onslaught of vitality in a new group. "The weakness of the social structure of my

---

1. Sanctuary, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1903, p. 59.

parents' day was a blind dread of innovation, an instinctive shrinking from responsibility."<sup>1</sup>

A little world so well-ordered and well-to-do does not often produce either eagles or fanatics, and both seem to have been conspicuously absent from the circle in which my forbears moved. In old-established and powerful societies originality of character is smiled at, and even encouraged to assert itself; but conformity is the bane of middle-class communities...<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton, it must be remembered, considered New York society to be distinctly middle-class.

One other method, in addition to the demands for conformity among its members, was used by the New York Mrs. Wharton satirized in its seeking after strength. It refused to acknowledge the superiority of any other country, or age, or group of people. Europe, which Mrs. Wharton always recognized as the fountain-head of culture and beauty, was to the Fishers, the Spraggs, the Wellands, and even Lily Bart a place to which one might escape when New York proved socially uncomfortable and also a place in which one could purchase trinkets and gowns. As for America outside of New York City, aside from Newport and Westchester County, it simply did not exist. To Europe one went on a honeymoon, or to avoid the harsh New York winter if one were not well. The land west of the Hudson River

---

1. A Backward Glance, p.22.

2. Ibid., p.23.

was only the place from which came those annoying people who had bad manners and who had made their money in shoe-polish or railroads. On this point again, her evidence may be accepted directly:

It was thought vulgar and snobbish to try to make the acquaintance, in London, Paris, or Rome, of people of the class corresponding to their own. The Americans who forced their way into good society in Europe were said to be those who were shut out from it at home; and the self-respecting American on his travels frequented only the little "colonies" of his compatriots already settled in the European capitals, and only their most irreproachable members! ... And as for the American women who had themselves presented at the English court -- well, one had only to see with whom they associated at home!<sup>1</sup>

Whatever may have been the virtues of a social mind devoted to blind conformance and smug complacency, and there were some, Mrs. Wharton's evidence is all on the side of its destructive powers. It supported institutions: the church, the home, marriage, and manners, but it destroyed individuals. All of Mrs. Wharton's major characters, with the exception of Madame Olenska, are helplessly weak. They are interesting to her because they were willing to try to revolt, but they were never strong enough to succeed. There was something in the hot-house environment of the New York in which they grew which enervated the whole tribe.

---

1. Ibid., p.62.

The weakness is especially discernable in the men. It would almost appear that Mrs. Wharton, in her interpretation of the male in America, was creating a gallery of evidence to support a conclusion made by George Cabot Lodge in 1904: "We are a dying race, as every race must be of which the men are, as men and not accumulators, third-rate."<sup>1</sup> Even as accumulators, Mrs. Wharton's men have no distinction. They are helpless, colorless and unhappy, fragile physically and undernourished spiritually, docile in their slavery to women and their "obligations," and productive of no ideas, no art, and of only enough money to keep the women in the restless luxury of a sterile ease.

A few sentences from the autobiography show the root of the weakness of the men, and the cause of their extinction. They had no reason for being.

Even the acquiring of wealth had ceased to interest the little society into which I was born. In the case of some of its members, such as the Astors and Goeleys, great fortunes, originating in a fabulous increase of New York real estate values, had been fostered by judicious investments and prudent administration; but of feverish money-making, in Wall Street or in railways, ... I heard nothing in my youth. Some of my father's friends may have been bankers, others have followed one of the liberal professions, usually the law; in fact almost all the young men I knew read law for a while after leaving college, though comparatively few practiced it in after years. But for the most

---

1. Quoted in Brooks, Van Wyck, "Literary Life in America," in Three Essays on America, New York, E.P. Dutton and Co., 1934, p. 199.

part my father's contemporaries, and those of my brothers' also, were men of leisure... It will probably seem unbelievable to present-day readers that only one of my own near relations, and not one of my husband's, was in "business."...

Their most frequent distraction was dining out or dinner giving. Sometimes the dinners were stately and ceremonious, but more often they were intimate and sociable, though always the occasion of much excellent food and old wine being admirably served, and discussed with suitable gravity.<sup>1</sup>

The two men whom , it would be presumed, Mrs. Wharton knew most intimately, her father and husband, are recalled in the autobiography with tenderness and respect. But they evidently were without force, and made no impression on Mrs. Wharton or anybody else. Both were physically weak, it is true, but even in their periods of well-being they seemed to live in seclusion. Their power might be summed up in their ability to discuss excellent food and old wine with "suitable gravity." The whole conception of both men that remains after the autobiography is read is that of gentle folk living in quiet unhappiness, fearing that something would happen to disturb, ever so slightly, this delicate social organism their parents had built and which they must continue without modification. Theirs is the saddest story; life passed them by, as it did Delia Ralston, but they had not even the satisfaction

---

1. A Backward Glance, pp.56-57.

of knowing it. Of her father, she writes:

Arctic explorations especially absorbed him, and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure.<sup>1</sup>

Her husband must have been equally lonely. She informs the world that he liked society and, in London, mingled with the sporting set. Other than these two facts there is practically no mention of him in the whole autobiography. By profession he was a banker, but he seems never to have been occupied with the problems of any bank, living in Europe for half the year when he was well, and all during the last years of his life. His prolonged illness was neurasthenia, which fits perfectly into the general scheme of his existence. Mr. Wharton was at least forty years old when their domestic arrangements are in the condition here revealed:

I had been taught to treat my brothers, who were so much older than myself, with filial deference, and it seemed a sacrilege to go against their judgment and my mother's. We could not raise a loan, since my property was in trust, and my husband had only a small allowance from his father. In those days it was thought dishonourable to take financial risks one might be unable to meet; and how were we to live for the rest of the year, since neither of us could have earned a penny?<sup>2</sup>

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 98.

The underscored line is a key to the whole character of Mrs. Wharton's men. That she could earn no money was understandable enough, in view of the customs of the time; but Mr. Wharton evidently felt no compunction about admitting an equal helplessness in the presence of reality. Just as pathetic, and just as unapologetically recorded, is the statement of the circumstances of his final illness:

... and for a long time my husband's family would not see, or at any rate acknowledge, the gravity of his state, and any kind of consecutive treatment was therefore impossible.<sup>1</sup>

Stagnant is a mild word to apply to a society that succeeded in producing men of that quality. Mrs. Wharton's fiction is full of men who are willing to live their lives in a weak acceptance of a course of action prescribed by tradition or family, unwilling or unable to analyze their actions or pursue any prompting of their own souls. The resemblance between father and husband and the characters in the fiction is too striking to be overlooked. In all the male characters there is a loneliness due in part to cravings. Newland Archer and Lawrence Selden fit the pattern completely. Archer consigns his energy to charity boards and museums just as Mrs. Wharton's father and uncles did. Ralph Marvell submits to the crude unselfishness of Undine Spragg with a quiet resignation which becomes believ-

---

1. Ibid., p.326.

able only when we are familiar with the remainder of the Whar-  
ton men. Martin Boyne in The Children, Jim Manford in Twilight  
Sleep, Harney in Summer, Nick Lansing in The Glimpses of the  
Moon, Lewis Tarrant in Hudson River Bracketed, and the Ralstons  
in The Old Maid are all members of the same group of ineffectuals.  
They act in accordance with a peculiar code of chivalry in which  
the central doctrine seems to be that no gentleman would oppose  
the law of the tribe, fight for his dreams, or even raise his  
voice.

A description of Lily Bart's father, that might otherwise  
go unnoticed, illustrates this shadowy quality in the New York  
man:

To his wife he no longer counted: he had be-  
come extinct when he ceased to fulfil his  
purpose. [The family was ruined financially.]  
Lily's feelings were softer... She seemed  
always to have seen him through a blur --  
first of sleepiness, then of distance and  
indifference -- and now the fog had thicken-  
ed till he was almost indistinguishable.<sup>1</sup>

Newland Archer is to some degree aware that the life he  
is leading is tame and colorless, and that he exists in a cul-  
de-sac. His major efforts toward finding freedom lead to a  
quietly tragic failure. The root of his great defectiveness  
as a man of action can better be seen in a smaller incident.  
The refusing to run off with another woman, leaving a pregnant

---

1. The House of Mirth, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

wife, can not prove Archer to be without force, but a minor incident does:

The next afternoon Archer sat smoking sullenly in his study. He had failed to stop at his club on the way up from the office where he exercised the profession of the law in the leisurely manner common to well-to-do New Yorkers of his class. He was out of spirits and slightly out of temper, and a haunting horror of doing the same thing every day at the same hour besieged his brain.

"Sameness -- sameness !" he muttered, the word running through his head like a persecuting tune as he saw the familiar tall-hatted figures lounging behind the plate-glass; and because he usually dropped in at the club at that hour he had gone home instead.<sup>1</sup>

To get out of the rut into which he is sinking, Archer makes a desperate change: he goes home instead of to his club ! ✓

Two passages from The Custom of the Country serve to classify Ralph Marvell, perhaps the most conspicuous weakling of them all, as the extreme example of the listless male.

Nothing in the Dagonet and Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule of both 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 a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and 'business' honour.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. The Age of Innocence, New York, Appleton, 1920, p. 82.

2. The Custom of the Country, p. 75.

Near the end of Ralph's tragic relation with Undine Spragg, when the court had awarded his son to her after he had declined to contest the divorce suit, Mrs. Wharton writes:

Ralph's whole body throbbed with rage against the influence that had reduced him to such weakness. Then, gradually, he saw that the weakness was innate in him. He had been eloquent enough, in his free youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came to show his contempt for them they had mysteriously mastered him, deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing. As he looked back it seemed as though even his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by this inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had thought about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his life but the foolish passion he had been trying so hard to think out of existence.<sup>1</sup>

What was true of the men was equally true of the women, except those rebels in whom Mrs. Wharton was most interested, such as Lily Bart and Madame Olenska. The average woman of New York society was as spiritless as the men, as futile and as colorless. Their purpose in life was to be an adornment, to display the acquired luxury of the family. They thought not, and neither did they feel. Intellect and emotion were alien qualities, bred out of the truly pedigreed stock. Mrs. Wharton is a little more lenient in her interpretation of the women, attributing to the passivity of the male the indifference and shallowness of the female. The great tragedy of life among

---

1. The Custom of the Country, p. 437.

these people is the one which arose from the custom of the country, and that custom was the man's habit of showering his women with a protection that stifled them. The process is explained conveniently in the life of Ralph Marvell:

Charles Bowen, an American living in France, is discussing with a friend the extravagance of Undine Spragg which is forcing her husband, Marvell, to overwork himself. He holds that the weak point of American marriage is that the average husband "looks down" on his wife, that she is not allowed to share in the real business of life, nor is her judgment sought in serious decisions. Undine's extravagance, he thinks, arises from her husband's unwillingness to tell her how severe his work is becoming; and, if he did tell her, she would be bored and aggrieved.

'And whose fault is that ? The man's again -- I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work ? Simply because we don't take enough interest in them.'

'You don't ? The American man doesn't -- the most slaving, self-effacing, self-sacrificing ?'

'Yes, and the most indifferent: there's the point. The 'slaving's' no argument against the indifference. To slave for a woman is part of the old American tradition; lots of people give their lives for dogmas they've ceased to believe in ...

.....

'Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing ? Because

she's so important to them that they make it worth her while ! She's not a parenthesis, as she is here -- she's in the very middle of the picture.<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Marvell's subservience to the selfish cruelty of his wife is all the more compelling evidence of the man's habitual attitude toward woman in New York's society because Undine Spragg had absolutely nothing to evoke admiration. But even when the woman is as admirable as life in New York made it possible for her to be, Mrs. Wharton is still displeased with the result, and more displeased with the man's acceptance of it. The realization by Newland Archer that May Welland is a shallow creature without a mind or an opinion, possessing only a studied timidity, is apparent through the whole of The Age of Innocence. In one of the short stories, "A Cup of Cold Water," Mrs. Wharton becomes more openly satirical and her opinion of the New York woman is more concretely presented. Miss Talcott, the subject, is beautiful, of excellent family, and as well-bred and cultured as the indifference of her society toward beauty and ideas would allow. Woburn is watching her as she dances:

Her ideas had the brilliant bloom and audacious irrelevance of those tropical orchids which strike root in air. Miss Talcott's opinions had no connection with the actual; her very materialism had the grace of artificiality. Woburn had been enchanted once by seeing her helpless before a smoking lamp: she had been obliged to ring for a servant

---

1. The Custom of the Country, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916, pp. 206-207.

because she did not know how to put it out.<sup>1</sup>

He stood in the doorway, studying the pretty manoeuvres of the women and the resigned amenities of their partners. Was it possible that these were his friends ? These mincing women, all paint and dye and whalebone, these apathetic men who looked as much alike as the figures that children cut out of a folded sheet of paper ?<sup>2</sup>

As he considers the men, Woburn places them professionally. There was one who made his pile in wrecking railroads; the political lawyer, who had been mixed up to his own advantage in an ugly lobbying transaction; and one whose recent failure had ruined his friends and associates, but had not visibly affected the welfare of his large and expensive family; and there were others of the same type.

And the women ? Well, the women knew all about the men, and flattered them and married them and tried to catch them for their daughters. It was a domino-party at which the guests were forbidden to unmask, though they all saw through each other's disguises.<sup>3</sup>

This story was written just before the opening of the twentieth century, when the business integrity of the New York man had been dissipated in the rush toward wealth. It is not a fair picture of the Wharton man of an earlier generation; but the attitude of the women toward them is still the same. If the man is a good provider, all is well. If the man sells

- 
1. The Greater Inclination, pp. 190-191.
  2. Ibid., pp. 194-195.
  3. Ibid., p. 196.

his soul in the process, it is not for the woman to realize that, or care if she did understand.

The women in this society are created, then, to be fragile flowers, nurtured in innocence. They are taught to accept the moral leadership of the men. Since the men have no moral strength to offer, it is understandable that the women should possess none. The direct evidence in Mrs. Wharton's autobiography supports the conception presented in her fiction. She alludes to Buchan's explanation that Scott's inability to create a lifelike woman of his own class was because in his generation gentlewomen were "a toast and little else."

Nothing could be truer. Child-bearing was their task, fine needlework their recreation, being respected their privilege. Only in aristocratic society, and in the most sophisticated capitals of Europe, had they added to this repertory a good many private distractions. In the upper middle class 'the ladies, God bless 'em' sums it up.<sup>1</sup>

Probably no one of Mrs. Wharton's women is as true to the race as May Welland. Although we see her largely through the eyes of Newland Archer, her personality and function is none the less clear. Archer is comparing his marriage with that of Olenska to the Polish nobleman:

What could he and she [Archer and his wife] really know of each other, since it was his duty, as a 'decent' fellow, to conceal his past from her, and hers, as a marriageable

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 16.

girl, to have no past to conceal... He perceived that such a happy marriage, presupposed on her part the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and 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.<sup>1</sup>

It is revealed in the course of the book that May Welland is not so ignorant as Archer presumes, that her ignorance is a studied affectation, and her dependance upon Archer's inherited chivalry her greatest strength. The hypocrisy is to be found on both sides. Archer's is physical, his wife's spiritual. Archer expresses his awareness of the essential hypocrisy of the whole social world: "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs."<sup>2</sup>

The tragic futility in the life of Mrs. ~~Anna~~ Leath must be traced back to the cultivated indecision and weakness that Mrs. Wharton seems to regard as the distinguishing characteristic of the American woman of this "upper middle-class."<sup>3</sup>

In the early pages of The House of Mirth, Selden asks Lily Bart: "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're brought up for?" She replies: "I suppose so. What else is there?"<sup>4</sup> The rest of the book might be interpreted as an answer

---

1. The Age of Innocence, pp. 40-41.

2. Ibid., p. 42.

3. See The Reef, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912, pp.28, 294.

4. The House of Mirth, p. 13.

to her question, and the discovery that there is nothing else. Lily is honest enough with herself to realize that most of the men she knew were not worth marrying (she had lived in Europe too long to be completely a May Welland) and the only one she could have married, Selden, was too timid to risk the high adventure. She could have conformed to the New York code, and married Percy Gryce; but she refused to conform. So she perished.

These creations of Mrs. Wharton's were a race of men afraid of their own shadows, and a race of women clinging helplessly to their stiffly-pressed coat tails. It is no wonder that they accomplished so little. Their tragedy is all the greater because they should have been capable of erecting a cultured and creative society. Instead, their abject conformance to tradition, routine, and convention left them without a spontaneous emotion. The disdain for emotionalism destroyed the meaning of two great institutions that other aristocratic societies most firmly supported: marriage and the church. The "passive openness to the finer sensations" and the "cultivated insincerity" of the Dagonet-Marvell group left no outlet for an enthusiastic relationship with man or God.

The marriage bond was a contract of convenience. The male claimed his mate with the same justification that he possessed everything else: by hereditary right. Courtship was conducted with all the formality of a minuet, and with as much abandon. It was an intricate game that the lovers played, filled with

a simulated ardor which nobody believed was real and which would have been regarded as being in very bad taste if it were real. Even if love could be included among the "finer sensations" to which they could be open, they were still constrained to be passive about it. Marriage meant nothing more than the last act of a Commedia dell' arte, the plot of which was outlined in the registry of births.

Delia Lovell thinks of the impending marriage of her cousin Charlotte,

who was making a match exactly like Delia's own; marrying a Ralston of the Waverly Place branch, then which nothing could be safer, sounder or more -- well, usual. Delia did not know why the word had occurred to her, for it could hardly be postulated, even of the young women of her own narrow clan, that they 'usually' married Ralstons; but the soundness, safeness, and suitability of the arrangement, did make it typical of the kind of alliance which a nice girl in the nicest set could serenely and blushing-ly forecast for herself.<sup>1</sup>

It is as a protest against this kind of marriage that Ralph Marvell, half a century later, follows a passionate impulse and weds Undine Spragg. The marriage-making around him, he thinks:

ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange. His mother, he knew, had no such ambitions for him: she would have liked him to fancy a "nice girl" like Harriet Ray. Harriet Ray was neither vulgar nor ambitious. She re-

---

1. The Old Maid, pp. 13-14.

garded Washington Square as the birthplace of Society, knew by heart all the cousinships of early New York, hated motor-cars, could not make herself understood on the telephone, and was determined, if she married, never to receive a divorced woman.<sup>1</sup>

Romantic attachments were wholly distrusted. Relationships were carefully weighed and measured, and no marriage could be encouraged unless it had the complete approval of whole batteries of cousins and aunts and uncles.

The background for this marriage of social convenience is provided by an accepted double standard. Newland Archer's attitude toward his future wife, referred to above, that she should have no past to conceal and that he should conceal his, is the accepted code which provides the safe escape of whatever emotional disturbances may arise among the males. The problem of Olenska's relationship with her European husband provokes him to a further, more revealing, meditation on the New York attitude toward marriage:

He [Archer] passed for a young man who had not been afraid of risks, and he knew that his secret love-affair with poor silly Mrs. Thorley Rushworth had not been too secret to invest him with a becoming air of adventure. ... The affair had been of the kind that most of the young men of his age had been through, and emerged from with calm consciences and an undisturbed belief in the abysmal distinction between the women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed -- and pitied.

---

1. The Custom of the Country, p. 78.

In this view they were sedulously abetted by their mothers, aunts, and other elderly female relatives who all shared Mrs. Archer's belief that when "such things happened" it was undoubtedly foolish of the man, but somehow always criminal of the woman... The only thing to do was to persuade him, as early as possible, to marry a nice girl, and then trust to her to look after him.<sup>1</sup>

No more convincing illustration of the complete acceptance of this hypocrisy can be found than in the action of Delia Ralston who, upon being informed by Charlotte that she can not marry Joe Ralston, and, suspecting that the reason may be the discovery by Charlotte of his "past", immediately excuses him of any possible indiscretion because it is "the expected thing." When Delia learns, however, that the indiscretion has been Charlotte's, the tribal instinct leads her to insist upon the prevention of the marriage and the "hushing up" of the whole business.<sup>2</sup>

The other institution which suffered beneath the New Yorker's indifference and formalism was the church. In her autobiography and fiction alike, Mrs. Wharton regards the church in America as having no vital part in the life of the people. The church, as an institution, and religion, as a ceremony, were acceptable enough; but when religion became emotional or even inspirational, or when the church became forceful, then the members were disturbed and almost resentful. Religious

---

1. The Age of Innocence, pp. 94-5.  
2. The Old Maid, p. 28.

experience was to be allied with all other experience in that it should be the "usual and expected", the same experience that had been known in the family for generations and generations. As soon as it became personal or unusual it was felt to be in bad taste.

The observance of Sunday at Belloment was chiefly marked by the punctual appearance of the smart omnibus destined to convey the household to the little church at the gates. Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance, since by standing there it not only bore witness to the orthodox intentions of the family, but made Mrs. Trenor feel, when she finally heard it drive away, that she had somehow vicariously made use of it.<sup>1</sup>

The religious practices in Mrs. Wharton's own family were probably more sincere than those of Mrs. Trenor, but underneath her statements there lies the suggestion of the church's inconsequentiality in the life of the people. "Going to church on Sunday morning was no more than an inescapable family duty," she tells us in "A Little Girl's New York." The other recollections of her religious life include only the memory that the church edifice was an architectural monstrosity and that the rector had a pleasant voice and could read the Bible with a full understanding of its literary beauties.<sup>2</sup> When Moody and

---

1. The House of Mirth, p. 80.

2. "A Little Girl's New York," Harper's Magazine, March, 1938, p. 362.

Sankey were holding their revival meetings in Madison Square Garden, her people had a tendency to associate the meetings with Barnum's three-ring circus, held in the same building.

The New York of my childhood was averse to any sort of pious exhibitionism... The impression of the meetings was gathered from the comments of my father's friends, from whom, I fear, St. Francis of Assisi and Savonarola would have received small encouragement. My mother, at any rate, gave none to the revivalists.<sup>3</sup>

The church Mrs. Wharton knew was, of course, the Episcopal, and to this "happy chance" she owed her "early saturation with the noble cadences of the Book of Common Prayer, and reverence for an ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs."<sup>2</sup>

The feeling that the church was a moribund institution is so strong in Mrs. Wharton that its decline into mere ritualism becomes a figure of speech. In "The Pelican" she regards the audience's attendance at the lectures of the sham-intellectual, Mrs. Amyot, as being in conformance to "a social obligation, like going to church."<sup>3</sup> In another story appears this passage:

To Lydia this view of life had become a matter of course, just as lumbering about in her mother-

- 
1. Ibid., p. 364.
  2. A Backward Glance, p. 10.
  3. The Greater Inclination, p. 59.

in-law's landau had come to seem the only possible means of locomotion, and listen every Sunday to a fashionable Presbyterian divine the inevitable atonement for having thought oneself bored on the other six days of the week.<sup>1</sup>

In The Fruit of the Tree there can be found the most serious and prolonged discussion of the place of Christianity in the modern world. The problem arises in the mind of Justine Brent, the heroine, when she attempts to reconcile the demands of medical science that Bessy Westmore be kept alive, even though her chance for recovery is negligible and her pain is unbearable. The rector of St. Anne's attempts to explain to her the position of the church in the matter, but Mrs. Wharton allows his defence to be incredibly unconvincing in the face of Justine Brent's irreligious common sense.<sup>2</sup>

In general, then, Mrs. Wharton's condemnation of New York society in the last half of the nineteenth century is thorough and devastating. These people had no perception of beauty, no culture, no interest in things intellectual; they were timid, provincial and smug, opposed vehemently to every change that might disturb the narrow routine which was engaged in producing more duplicates of the traditional pattern. All that they achieved was a life devoid of passion, either for man or God,

- 
1. "Souls Belated," in The Greater Inclination, p. 88.
  2. The Fruit of the Tree, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907, pp. 402-418.

and a race of women so vapid and shallow that they seemed not incongruous as they leaned for support on the men without spines.

There were a few qualities possessed by Mrs. Wharton's New York people that she found admirable. The good qualities, however, were those she discovered in looking back; her awareness of the faults overshadows her regard for the excellences except in the last years of her life when a nostalgia for the past makes conspicuous and beautiful the things that are no more.

In the old New York there were manners, ethics, traditions, solidarity and loyalty. If the body of customs and manners were routine; if the ethics grew from habit rather than morality; if the traditions were the result of blind instinct; and if the solidarity and loyalty of the group were timidly protective in its purpose rather than humane; the fact remains that old New York had those virtues. The manners, ethics, traditions, and solidarity may have been bloodless and superficial, but they were better than the complete absence of all standards that the new New York substituted in the twentieth century as a social framework.

Mrs. Wharton's defence of the vanished civilization of which her fiction is largely a satire, can be found almost without exception in the books that were written after the World War. The most direct statement of her changed attitude

is found in A Backward Glance:

The readers ( and I should doubtless have been among them) who twenty years ago would have smiled at the idea that time could transform a group of bourgeois colonials and their republican descendants into a sort of social aristocracy, are now better able to measure the formative value of nearly three hundred years of social observance: the concerted living up to long-established standards of honour and conduct, or education and manners. The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists... have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country. Even negatively, these traditions have acquired, with the passing of time, an unsuspected value. When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine could ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to try for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance.<sup>1</sup>

/ In The Age of Innocence, the incident of the business failure of the Beauforts, through the questionable practices of Julius Beaufort, becomes the occasion for Mrs. Wharton to remind us that a business irregularity in old New York was heartily condemned and that "those who broke the law of probity must pay; and every one was aware that even Beaufort and Beaufort's wife would be offered up unflinchingly to this principle."<sup>2</sup>

The body of manners and the strength of an ethical code are important elements in Mrs. Wharton's fictional scene. Be-

- 
1. A Backward Glance, p. 5.
  2. The Age of Innocence, p. 271.

cause these enter into conflict with rebellious individuals of high spirit, she had a living subject. Since her sympathy lay on the side of the individual, the main body of her fiction is a quiet objection to the stifling inhumanity that constituted that old society. That old society becomes admirable in retrospect, when Mrs. Wharton realizes that the new order shows all the vices of the old, and none of the virtues. She saw the problem clearly as early as 1909:

It was Mr. Grew's notion that, in the rough and hurrying current of a new civilization, the little pods of leisure and enjoyment must nurture delicate growths, material graces as well as moral refinements, likely to be uprooted and swept away by the rush of the main torrent.<sup>1</sup>

The rush of the main torrent swept away all the stagnant cultural instincts that Mrs. Wharton had earlier despised. When they were gone, she realized that there remained nothing to nurture the delicate growths, material graces and moral refinements.

Marriage, ritualistic as it was, she regarded as superior to the abandonment of the institution. In Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive love without marriage is shown to be an impossible solution to the problem. Divorce, ~~displayed~~ in The Children and The Custom of the Country, is just as bad. The sanctity and permanence of marriage, which sometimes destroyed the in-

---

1. "His Father's Son," Tales of Men and Ghosts, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, p. 43.

individual, and the hypocritical continuation of it after fidelity had disappeared, were better by contrast than the unfeeling selfishness of the Wheaters in The Children and of Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country. The new dispensation, which regarded marriage as a personal and not a social problem, made it into a farce. Individualism sacrificed on the altar of marriage was not a happy solution, but in retrospect it seemed better than the destruction of the altar and everything represented by church tradition.

As marriage became a civil rite rather than a religious one, and its perpetuation a problem for lawyers rather than parents or priests, the meaning of the church declined still further. In the older times it was a check against a too sweeping individualism. In the latter years of Mrs. Wharton's life she regarded it as having become absolutely meaningless, or else a kind of minor circus. In both alternatives there was something undesirable. To Kate Clephane of The Mother's Recompense the church on the continent was a social plaything. In America, when she needed its help, she found that her faith in it had so disappeared that she yearned for the security of Roman Catholicism. The picture of Vance Weston's grandmother in Hudson River Bracketed is an unfeeling satire on the religious enthusiasm of the "new people," and the attitude of Mrs. Wharton seems to be in conformity with that of her parents in regarding revivalistic religion as a cousin to the circus. The

church, in America, had become in the twentieth century either unnecessary to the life of the people, or too theatrical to be sincere. The severe formality of the old was, by contrast, better.<sup>1</sup>

When New York society supported culture, especially the creation of literature, another spiritual destruction took place. The indifference, the quiet antagonism that were prevalent in Mrs. Wharton's childhood, gave way to a tasteless fervor. Her most open condemnation of the new creative impulse is found in Hudson River Bracketed. Vance Weston is a graduate of a mid-western college, but he has never heard of Coleridge or Marlowe. It is to such an untutored Goth that literary New York opens its arms. Literary New York is represented by the Bohemian "Vinegar Tree" group of self-complacent moderns, and also by Mrs. Pulsifer, the wealthy patron who has confused the artistic with the unique, and the excellent with the notorious. The novel is full of allusions to the fact that the new writers have divorced themselves from the past, and have found nothing to replace it.<sup>2</sup>

Ethics in business went the way of other New York traditions. Elmer Moffett's ruthlessness and success replace the older unwillingness to take advantage of a rival's weakness, within the law or without. Moffett bargains with his friendships, repu-

- 
1. Nothing could be more convincing on this point than Mrs. Wharton's grim despair at the Manford woman in Twilight Sleep who calls some Indian mystic "the busy man's Christ."
  2. In Hudson River Bracketed Mrs. Wharton has repeated in fictional form the accusation against the shallowness of American fiction which is more seriously stated in her critical work.

tations, and honor to gain his ends in business. He succeeds as dramatically as Ralph Marvell, following the older code, fails.<sup>1</sup> Material progress as the ideal, with the chains of ethical consciousness removed, might be considered as the custom of the country from which the novel takes its name. At least the unscrupulous business man is symptomatic of new customs.

Integrity in general seems to be missing from the new way of American life. Nick and Susan Lansing, in The Glimpses of the Moon,<sup>1</sup> are perfectly willing to live as open parasites on the bounty of their wealthier friends. Their marriage is planned with the knowledge that they can spend several years living on the wedding presents they can sell and also as more or less permanent guests of their friends. The fact that their emotional disturbances prevent a continuation of the scheme does not eliminate the meaning of their plan, or Mrs. Wharton's feeling that the new race of Americans is entirely capable of indulging in it. Lily Bart could not stoop that low: the money she discovered was a "gift" from Gus Trenor she returned as her last conscious act. Nick and Susan are completely without her scruples.

The greatest tragedy arising from the new American social scheme occurred among the children born into the post-war world. They were without parents, or any very definite ones; they had

---

1. The Glimpses of the Moon, New York, Appleton, 1922.

no homes except a series of hotels and steamships; they had no friends, except the fellow-travellers who were also going nowhere. In a word, they had no roots. The Children<sup>2</sup> is a gay, careless story, on the surface; but underneath there lies Mrs. Wharton's great pity for a generation of youngsters whose parents have been corrupted by wealth to the extent that they think it can buy happiness for themselves and their children. Money is to replace attention, love, comradeship, and security. That money could not do these things, and the Wheeler parents hoped it would, is the tragedy of the children. Paul Marvell, Ralph Marvell's son born in New York, faces the same predicament. No custom of the country is more devastating in its implications than the one which leaves young Ralph, aged nine, standing alone and helpless among the "new" books in his "new" father's library. With all semblance of family solidarity gone, all sense of social responsibility in their parents destroyed, the children of the new dispensation are helpless creatures in a mad world.

Mrs. Wharton's picture of American life since 1870 is, in general, a discouraging one. The smug provincialism she saw in New York as a child, and satirized as a mature novelist, has turned to a rootless indifference to all standards and values.

---

1. Appleton, New York, 1927.

The blind traditionalism, which once she found so restrictive and sterile, has been swept away on a wave of money. And there is nothing left -- nothing.

Mrs. Wharton's interpretation of American life appears, at first, to be wholly condemnatory. She pictures the hopeless futility in the lives of a group of people who might have been expected to be leaders of the nation and the group most productive of a civilized culture. There is an appealing irony in the fate of her people. It would be unfair, however, to concentrate on her pessimism and ignore her positive contributions to American fiction. Although she may not be, as Arthur Hobson Quinn believes, the greatest American novelist of the twentieth century, she is not, on the other hand, merely a mild variety of Ambrose Bierce. Her interpretation of her country and its people is carefully considered, serious, and profound. Her contribution to the development of fiction is equally serious. Her vision of life transcends the insignificance she found, as a realist, in America. Her characters and problems belong to a world vaster in extent than their actual geographic scene.

There can be no question of Mrs. Wharton's right to an important position as a social historian. She was no superficial observer striving to arrive at startling conclusions or shocking paradoxes about America. The tradition of honesty, especially intellectual honesty, was strong in her. Nothing

but absolute accuracy would suffice. She had, also, an unusual opportunity because of her distinguished social position. Her family moved within the circles of the country's oldest, and was part of that inner group. She had personal contacts possessed by few other novelists. She lived so long among her people that she came to know them as could no mere reporter-observer. She wrote what she knew. Never again will her scene need to be interpreted in fiction. There can never be a challenge to her right to sovereignty over her subject.

Her honesty and opportunity were combined with perspective. She knew her New York, but she also knew life in similar circles of Paris and London. Her perspective came both from her residence abroad and her natural aloofness of temperament. She had the valuable power to be at once part of her scene and yet able to project herself out of and above it. Her novels are priceless depositories of information to those scholars who are interested in the small group of families who tried to rule New York's social kingdom in the eighteen seventies and eighties. Her novels are valuable evidence which might be fitted into the larger picture of an era that might be called the Decline of the East, or the Rise of the Common Man, or the Growth of Democracy and the Machine.

Mrs. Wharton's weakness as a historian is inherent in her greatness. The meticulous care with which she analyzed the New York of her childhood prevented her from extending her gaze be-

yond that city. The variety of subjects contained within the American scene is tremendous. She can not be ignored because she limited herself to a small area. In it she found all the fictional material she wanted. Nevertheless, her specialization is a limitation, and probably one that will alienate many readers.

Nathaniel Hawthorne most closely resembles Mrs. Wharton in possessing a narrow interest, but his justification is easily found when it is remembered that he lived in an agricultural age, before the masses of laboring people came to occupy the important numerical position they were to hold several decades later. New England, during his maturity, was admittedly the center of American cultural and spiritual life. If he cultivated his own garden, it was the same garden that provided nourishment for almost all of America.

William Dean Howells, in comparison with Hawthorne, was a writer of catholic interests. He was familiar with Ohio, Boston, New York, and Venice. In those places he learned to be at home, and to use all four as material for his fiction. As a boy and young man he was part of the spirit of the frontier west; later he joined the Brahmin easterners in Cambridge, after an apprenticeship as a consul to Venice. When New York became the literary capital he moved there, and near the end of his life he was developing fictional material completely divorced from the submissive subjects of his New England days. He had a personal

concern for the proper interpretation of the lives of many types of American people: frontier farmer, Boston preacher, New York business man, and Chicago factory worker. The problems of Silas Lapham are much closer to the heart of the American people than those of Newland Archer. Howells himself was closer to the hearts of the American people.

Only Henry James seems to have been more narrow in his outlook than Mrs. Wharton. The characters that interested him, the situations into which he put them, and the background against which both were shown, have even less amplitude than hers. Her people were tethered in a small pasture, soon exhausted. His were sooner emaciated, being forced to find sustenance in the void of internationalism.

After Howells and James had cleared the ground and given the novel wider acceptance as an art form, a great number of American writers appeared who, unlike Howells, felt no scruples against frank honesty, and unlike James, had their feet firmly planted on the solid earth.

Sinclair Lewis immediately presents himself as the leader among the critics in fiction. He has given the American language some new symbols, so thorough was America's acceptance of his opinion of its middle-class life. He went to the heart of of the American scene for his material, and his Babbitts and Cornplows remain in the American mind because they came out of the thick of its life. Lewis had a range of subject-matter that

Mrs. Wharton could well have envied. The small town, with its standardized culture, and the Babbitt of the standardized thinking, do not exclude from his vision the Vermont journalist, or the Rockefeller Institute scientist, or the freshwater college preacher. Mrs. Wharton may have taught Sinclair Lewis that American culture was superficial, and American life ritualistic. He went on from there, becoming more inclusive in the compass of his condemnations, and more open in his satire.

In the same way that Mr. Lewis surpasses Mrs. Wharton as a satirist, Willa Cather excels her as a prophet of the man of spirit and rebellion. Miss Cather is concerned with the American character who aspires to higher levels of existence and a greater liberty of personal expression. The author of The Song of the Lark surpasses her contemporary because, again, of a greater range of interest and sympathy. In Miss Cather's books there are larks, priests, soldiers, bridge builders, and Bohemian peasants. All these people are amalgamated by the spirit of the new country. Her story of America consequently is more appealing and convincing.

What has been said of the work of Willa Cather may be repeated, with reservations, regarding the work of Ellen Glasgow, James Lane Allen, Phil Stong, Louis Bromfield, Ruth Suckow, and Edna Ferber. These writers have failed, obviously, in greater and lesser degrees, to reach the level of artistry achieved by Mrs. Wharton. It is apparent, too, that they have no humanistic

spirit to give them a vision of a greater America. They have shown Americans in typical settings, usually rural, at grips with life. In given rural settings the people can take root, and their existence have a lasting meaning.

At the other extreme from this group, which might be labeled the "mild" realists, there stand the offspring of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. These naturalists, pessimistic realists, pornographic photographers, or proponents of the cult of cruelty, have been inclusively condemned by Mrs. Wharton because they have no sense of proportion, refuse to limit themselves by artistic selection, and have created "abnormalities."

To visualize clearly the issue between Mrs. Wharton and Dreiser-Wolfe-Hemingway-Farrell-Faulkner-Anderson-Caldwell-Steinbeck-et al it will be necessary to consider the latter only as they show common qualities. They interpret human action as being guided by animal impulse only, and the American branch of the race as being symbolized by an oppressed weakling who must kill or be killed. Their method and form grow out of their philosophy of life, and to them must be given the same privilege and immunity as was given Mrs. Wharton. If life is meaningless, it may best be recorded in a fiction that also lacks design; if life is chaotic, it may best be reflected without form. The crucial point in Mrs. Wharton's accusation is in the result of fictional method. She says that her rivals produce abnormalities instead of characters. Their typical character is poor, impulsive,

lustful, unintellectual, and without a sense of social or ethical responsibility. They are exactly the opposite of Mrs. Wharton's typical characters.

The point of the whole argument lies in Mrs. Wharton's unwillingness to accept these moronic abnormalities as belonging to any fiction, least of all to American fiction. Her reaction to the crudities of her country is different from Henry James', who felt that the weakness of America as a subject for art lay in the rudimentary nature of its social system. He, therefore, sought a different scene. She preferred to remain in America, and to find in it the portions of life that did lend themselves to artistic portrayal and synthesis. The backwoodsman, the factory hand, the mountaineer, and the illiterate tenant farmer may be crude, impulsive and animal. It is unfortunate, Mrs. Wharton would argue, that these people do exist in America; and their existence is no reason for their use in fiction. They are poor subjects. The artist should recognize the fact, and seek elsewhere for material.

While Mrs. Wharton agrees that the absence of a developed society makes the task of American writers additionally difficult, she condemns the American audience and American editors for making the subject of the native novelist even more narrow. The failure of the American novelist has been the result of the demand for Main Street books. The novel by Lewis that gave the school its name, she admires, but she resents the

alacrity with which other writers have utilized the same subject, and only that subject. It seems, she says, that all native books must be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually. The Main Street novel was established as a canon, difficult to dislodge.<sup>1</sup> American novels have developed as a result a low average of culture, situation, and intrinsic interest; they have developed also a style of depicting this dead level of existence, varying from the photographic to the pornographic.<sup>2</sup>

The novelist's field, then, even the American novelist's, is limited only by his own abilities. It depends not on the social background, but on his manner of seeing the background. American novelists have focused their interest, apparently, upon one stratum of culture, one class of people, and one theme: that life is dull. A great argument will yield a greater fiction than the perpetual chroicling of small beer; but American life seems almost purposely contrived to eliminate great arguments.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's condemnation of American fiction is serious, and springs largely from her feeling that our writers have only partially viewed their background and natural subject-matter. Her opinion does not arise from either superiority or indifference. A Backward Glance is full of recollections of her many friends who were creators of fiction. She pays high tribute to William Dean Howells as a man, carefully refraining from

---

1. "The Great American Novel," Yale Review, July, 1927, p.648.

2. Ibid., p. 649.

3. Ibid., p. 649.

expressing any opinion about his works. Her essay on Brownell, whom she regards as our best critic, shows familiarity with his American Prose Masters, and her evaluation of his opinions about Cooper, Poet and Hawthorne reveals full knowledge of their works. It is true, on the other hand, that she holds American fiction in slight regard. In The Writing of Fiction she mentions only James, Hawthorne, and Poe. James is the only one she considers seriously. She finds much to be condemned, and little to be praised, in the new writers. She objects to the unwillingness of Americans, except James, to interest themselves in technique, using that word to mean an artist's regard for form and manner. Her dissatisfaction arose from the feeling that her compatriots were using an unnecessarily narrow subject matter and disregarding its possible moral significance.

In "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," Mrs. Wharton accuses the twentieth century author of ignoring responsibility to his audience, and the practices of the past. Two devices make her indignant: the attempts of the new schools to create new forms, or rather, to use no form; and the treatment of the subject to show that life is without purpose.

They reduce to the vanishing point any will to action, and their personages are helpless puppets on a sluggish stream of fatality. That many commit acts of violence does not disprove this: they drift into them like somnambulists, and the onlookers or partici-

pants are as spectral as the fugitive apparitions of a dream.<sup>1</sup>

This complaint against the American novelist's choice of a plebian subject and his colorless treatment of it sounds as if it might be an indirect defence of Mrs. Wharton's own novels.

To counteract evanescence [her later contemporaries] use exaggerated physical realism, superficial disguises as singularities of dialect and slang. To facilitate their realism they naturally incline to situate their tales among the least developed classes; and young novelists are frequently praised for choosing the 'real America' as the scene of their fiction -- as though the chief intellectual and moral resources of the country lay among the poor whites of the Appalachians, or their counterparts in other regions.<sup>2</sup>

The reason that native novelists depict the primitive, she continues, is not because they are convinced that by that method they present the real America, but rather because of the ease of describing rudimentary characters, "moved from the cradle to the grave by the same unchanging handful of instincts and prejudices." Much more difficult is the task of following the actions of persons in whom education and opportunity have developed a more complex psychology. The subjects of modern fiction, too, lack the significance that she demands of fiction, because, in their animal simplicity, they are completely trivial. The American writer can not defend the

- 
1. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," Saturday Review of Literature, January 29, 1934, p. 40.
  2. Ibid., p. 41.

telling of that particular story rather than another one. There is no excuse for it at all.

Mrs. Wharton has reason for her stories. They have been born out of a desire to give them a significance that will make them meaningful to all people at all time. When William Faulkner's description of a rape in a Memphis bordello becomes a footnote, with definitions, in a sociology text book, Mrs. Wharton's sensitive characters will be admired and understood. Her fictional problem, the study of man's obligation to his fellows and to his own soul, will still be vital. Her fiction will always be read because there will always be intelligent people to respond to the significance of her theme. Moral responsibility is of universal interest, and its audience is potentially universal.

### III. MRS. WHARTON'S METHODS

#### 1. The novelist as conscious artist

Mrs. Wharton regards the novel as an art form and the novelist as an artist. She demands for him both materials and methods. For her own methods she studied the European novelists; her materials she sought in her own land. Her major works, with few exceptions, have an American setting and characters. Although she was never satisfied with the cultural level of her countrymen, she does not use them merely to show their inferiority to the products of the higher European civilization. She employed the American scene because it was the only one she knew, and because she was convinced that a novelist must be steeped in his background. Her instinct as a story-teller directed her to use the material nearest to hand, most familiarly her own.<sup>1</sup> She never "attached much importance to subject. Every incident, every situation, about me," she said, "is perpetually presenting itself in the light of story telling material. The possibilities of a given subject are whatever a given imagination can make them."<sup>2</sup>

These confessions, written near the end of her long career, show that she was guided by two essential rules. The first was

- 
1. "Confessions of a Novelist", Atlantic Monthly, April, 1933, p. 386.
  2. Ibid., p. 385.

that a novelist should deal only with what is in his reach, figuratively and literally; the second that the value of a subject depends wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see into it. She knew that some subjects were too shallow, and that the only one she knew and consequently could use, fell most completely within the condemned category. To depict her subject, fashionable New York, she needed no encyclopedias or notebooks. Her problem was to extract "the typical human significance which is the story teller's excuse for telling one story rather than another." It was her task to discover in what respect irresponsible pleasure-seekers could be said to have any deeper bearing on "the woe of the world" than the people comprising such a society could guess. Her answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. "Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's subject, scene, and characters, are automatically presented and accepted as something outside her control. The function of the writer is, consequently, to make the best use of the materials given. Technique is her greatest interest, and the contribution she made to fiction lies chiefly in her efforts to discover and utilize the best methods.

---

1. Ibid., p.386. Mrs. Wharton repeats these words in her introduction to the World Classics edition of The House of Mirth.

Mrs. Wharton's statement that there "can be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to what it ought to have been about" eliminates the condemnation of critics who relegate her into ~~im~~importance because she lacks substance. Her defence would be that she used the subject she knew, as every novelist must; that she devoted her energy to giving her subject depth, through her vision, and to giving her stories form, through her mastery of the technical machinery.

Mrs. Wharton, as a result, has made a significant contribution to the theory of fiction in a series of articles, prefaces, certain letters, and in her book, The Writing of Fiction. She has always been interested in the forms of fiction, in its technique, its past, its difficulties, its possibilities, and its uses. She found the creation of good fiction a matter for study, analysis, and the application of intelligent discipline.

It is remarkable that Mrs. Wharton's interest should center in technical problems. Her early environment was not conducive to any serious interest in literature, least of all in fiction. The New York of her childhood vigorously opposed creative artistry. Her interest in fiction continued, nevertheless, despite the indifference of her family and friends. She became, in the course of some forty years of observation, study, and practice, one of America's few, and best, theorists. Before she made her analyses, American fiction had lacked even the expected proportion of serious students.

In comparison with her compatriots, Mrs. Wharton's critical equipment is notably superior. She is more complete than Poe or Hawthorne, more catholic in taste than Frank Norris, more intellectually independent than William Dean Howells, and more forthright and explicit than Henry James. The limited number of Americans with whom she can be compared as a critic of fiction is indicative of her importance.

Her critical treatises are not free from the failings of her predecessors. It is to be expected that a writer, in discussing his art, will provide an ex-post facto defense of his own practices. Some, like Norris, will see in literature a demonstration of his philosophy of life; some, like Howells, will be limited by taste and environment; and others, like James, will be unable to present the problems in simple, concise language. Mrs. Wharton is only less guilty of all these weaknesses.

During her long career, her principles have not changed. What she said in 1905 she said in 1915, again in 1925, and finally in 1936. The evidence on this point is important because the frequent statements of the same idea show that her doctrines have been carefully thought through.

A serious difficulty in discussing the art of fiction, and in commenting on any discussion of it, lies in the confusion of terms. When the science of semantics comes to be applied to the terminology of fiction, it will find itself assuming a difficult task. Although telling a story is one of the oldest arts, it has

taken, in the novel, its most recent form. Consequently it lacks a tradition of criticism. The desire to tell a story is as old as man, but the desire to find out how it should be told can be traced only as far back as the eighteenth century. The novel itself, in the form we know, is no older than that.

Mrs. Wharton does not provide the concise discussion of technique that might be expected to come from her careful pen and severely analytical mind. She is too tolerant to be dogmatic, too liberal to be narrow in her opinions, too informed to be content with platitudes, and too sincere and serious to be superficial. "To treat of the practice of fiction is to deal with the newest, most fluid and least formulated of the arts," she says.<sup>1</sup> In her definite critical theories and her wide practice she has helped, however, to clarify the problems and formulate the doctrines of the new form.

Doctrines imply rules, and rules imply limitations. Mrs. Wharton would be the first to insist that limitations and rules must be held tentatively. The criterion of a formula, of a method is its success, which alone must eventually be the determinant. Rules and limitations never can be applied, it is equally true, to the writer who is ~~again~~. The great artist, as

---

1. Wharton, Edith, The Writing of Fiction, Charles Scribner's New York, 1925, p. 1.

Arnold has said of Shakespeare, is free. The great novelist is free of method, forms and classifications. Mrs. Wharton holds the opinion that her doctrines, whatever their value, are transcended by the practices of the masters. After the technical ingredients are combined in their proper proportions, the problem must come back to the immeasurable element in all art: genius.

Outside genius, however, there are methods the artist may use to create satisfactorily, even excellent fiction. In her analysis of specific methods and materials to be used in writing, Mrs. Wharton has drawn many illuminating conclusions. Her conclusions tell much about fiction, and more about her own work.

## 2. Form

The quotation on the title page of Mrs. Wharton's The Writing of Fiction is a confusing line from Traherne: "Order the beauty even of Beauty Is." It is the central idea of all her theories, and it might well have stood as a subtitle to the volume. "Order" is the paragon of her fictional art, just as it is her desire in life patterns and her ideal for social organisms. The neat consistency among the various facets of her interests all spring from this demand for order. The meaning of the term order is clarified by the use of the word she writes synonymously with it -- form. Form is the center of her aesthetic creed. It is

form that provides beauty, form that raises fiction into the realm of art.

Some forty-five different technical problems are discussed by Mrs. Wharton in her actual criticism. She writes of representation, inspiration, objectivity, selection, plot, and point of view. A refrain of "form, form, form," courses through the discussions. Without it no novelist can achieve distinction, and no fiction can be great.

Form might perhaps, for present purposes, be defined as the order, in time and importance, in which the incidents of the narrative are grouped.<sup>1</sup>

A definition as simple as this would apparently belie the emphasis given the term. Form, in Mrs. Wharton's sense of the word, is woven inextricably with subject, the central matter. Form will spring naturally out of the particular theme chosen for representation.

In 1905, writing of Howard Sturgis's novel Belchamber, Mrs. Wharton stated bluntly: "Form is much -- so much that to the plodder through the amorphous masses of Anglo-American fiction, it seems sometimes all in all."<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later she notices the same weakness in fiction and demands the same consideration for order:

The trend of the new fiction, in America and England and on the continent, is chiefly toward

- 
1. The Writing of Fiction, pp.23-24.
  2. Bookman, May, 1905, p. 308.

the amorphous and the agglutinative. The novelist<sup>1</sup> most in view reject form not only in the structure of their tales but in the drawing of characters.<sup>1</sup>

Writer and critic alike must have this sense of form.

Mrs. Wharton held the opinion that the fundamental difference between an amateur and an artist resided in the artist's possession of the sense of technique, "of the necessity of form."<sup>2</sup> Her testimony is continued in the same article.

Form can never be dispensed with, no more than wine can be drunk without something to drink it out of... Now when the stuff of life is in the novelist's hands, he needs to be taught how to model.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's repeated objections to the new novelists are based upon the opinion that they lack a sense of form. Especially does her condemnation fall upon English and American novelists, and even upon those who are not "new." In a review of Leslie Stephen's biography of George Eliot she attributes the one great weakness of her predecessor's fictions to the circumstances under which novels were written in Victorian England. Such narratives were then, as she says elsewhere, a "string of successive episodes, a sum in addition, as he [Henry James] called it."<sup>4</sup> George Eliot, however, did not see life as a succession of outward accidents, but rather as a drama of the

- 
1. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," op.cit., p. 40.
  2. "The Criticism of Fiction," Living Age, July 25, 1914, p.205.
  3. Ibid., p. 209.
  4. "Henry James in His Letters," Quarterly Review, July, 1920, p. 198.

soul.

The endeavor to reconcile this study of moral crisis with the popular demand for a plot, resulted as grotesquely as might the attempt of a portrait painter to reproduce the inner economy as well as the physical exterior of his sitters... her psychological insight surpassed her constructive talent.<sup>1</sup>

George Eliot's novels were weak in form. The excuse, that audiences demanded a plot of incident and action, does not, in Mrs. Wharton's mind, eliminate the fault.

Edith Wharton is speaking a firm conviction about her art. A writer must have complete control over the mechanics of novel structure, no matter how strong is his insight, or vigorous his subject. Structure, alone, she would seem to say, will not produce great art; but structure is necessary to give permanent greatness to the subject. One of her earliest experiments in fictional problems touches directly on this point. After her first volume of short stories, The Greater Inclination, had been published in 1899, a reviewer observed that she would have to learn that every short story must open with dialogue.

'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 could be a fixed formula for the design of every short story ever to written or to be written. Even I already knew

---

1. "George Eliot," Bookman, May, 1902, p. 248.

that this was ridiculous. I had never consciously formulated the principles of my craft, but during my years of experimenting I had pondered on them deeply, and this egregious commentary did me the immense service of giving my pondering an axiomatic form. Every short story, I now saw, like every other work of art, contains within itself the germ of its own particular form and dimensions, and ab ova is the artist's only rule.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the weakness of a novel will arise from an artist's acceptance of the demand of temporal reading taste, as we have found Mrs. Wharton explaining the cause of George Eliot's failures in defective structure. Sometimes, too, the fatal fault is imbedded in the subject itself. Mrs. Wharton admonishes every novelist to choose his subject carefully, to select one that is within the range of his experience and talent, and one that will lend itself to the demands of the form and structure he is capable of manipulating. Hence she demands that an artist "brood" upon his subject, so that the form will arise naturally and almost automatically from the theme. She is wise enough to see that every subject can not be confined to the conventions of a novel, that some subjects are inherently unsuitable to the form. As early as 1902, in a review of Stephen Phillips' Ulysses, she objects to the playwright's lack of unity. She describes the play as being a series of incidents rather than a dramatic whole, and concludes: "The temperament of Ulysses makes this [the episodic structure] inevitable. He is not a good dramatic subject."<sup>2</sup>

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 114.

2. Bookman, April, 1902, p.168.

Her reaction to Henry James's The Awkward Age also indicates her belief that form will arise from the subject chosen, and that the novel has its advantages and limitations, as much as the stage. The Awkward Age was written during the period in Henry James's career when he was seriously interested in the drama as a vehicle for artistic expression. In that novel he attempted to utilize only dialogue as a method of exposition and narration. She felt that the novel was a failure and records that she probably annoyed Henry James by asking him why he limited himself in that fashion.<sup>1</sup> Much as she admired form, and much as she admired Henry James's use of it, she was unwilling to subordinate it to the demands of the subject. If the material, or argument, to use her word, is suitable for a novel, it should be given the form of a novel and "ordered" with all the privileges and conventions of the novel. She disliked seeing a subject marred and prescribed by a deference to form or method for its own sake. "Obviously, every subject contains its own dimensions"<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, the mode of presentation to the reader, that central difficulty of the whole affair, must always be determined by the nature of the subject; and the subject which instantly calls for dialogue seems as instantly to range itself among those demanding for their full setting forth the special artifices of the stage.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 203.

2. The Writing of Fiction, p.51.

3. Ibid., p. 51.

The most that the aesthetic criticism of fiction can hope to do is to add to the understanding of form and its values to the basic excellence of a good subject. Form can be transmitted, form can be inculcated through the artist's serious attention to his business. Form, consequently, becomes paramount in her doctrine because it enables a writer to make a poor work good, a good work better, and a great work perfect.

Mrs. Wharton's interest in form led her directly to the French novelists. Her frequent allusions to the "masters" show a thorough interest in and familiarity with them. The sense of form, she says, is, in all the arts, specifically of the classic, the Latin tradition.<sup>1</sup>

A thousand years of form (in the widest disciplinary sense), of its observance, its application, its tacit acceptance as the first condition of artistic expression have cleared the ground, for the French writer of fiction, or many superfluous encumbrances.<sup>2</sup>

An interesting observation concerning this idea is made by Mrs. Wharton in a series of travel sketches called A Motor Flight Through France. She has been visiting cathedrals built in the middle ages and observing the meticulous details with which some of the Biblical stories are elaborated, in the interior adornments.

---

1. Ibid., p. 34.  
2. Ibid., p. 35.

She says:

And thus one is brought back to the perpetually recurring fact that all northern art is anecdotic and has always been so; and that, for instance, all the elaborate theories concerning Shakespeare's crowded stage are but an unprofitable evasion of the ancient ethnological fact that the Goth has always told his story in that way.<sup>1</sup>

The anecdotal form of narrative never interested Mrs. Wharton. She turned with joy to the organic system of French artists, finding in them the unity of design she demanded in all art, especially in fiction.

In France there was the tradition of form in art, as there could not be in America. America had not hampered her expression -- she had no tale to tell that New York or New England would find morally objectionable. Her dissatisfaction might be said to have resulted from America's too great freedom, its lack of restriction. Especially did America lack an interest in the form of fiction. Only in France could she find an audience that would give her guidance in the aesthetic paths she wished to follow.

As the soil of France is most weeded, so the field of art, wherever French culture extends, is the most worked-over and most prepared for whatever seed is to be sown in it.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. Atlantic Monthly, December, 1906, p.736.
  2. The Writing of Fiction, p. 35.

Form is triumphant in her catalogue of writing virtues, and her literary history is, in many ways, a study of form, a search for it and a continuous attempt to achieve it in her own fiction.

### 3. The Morally Significant Theme

A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context.<sup>1</sup>

The moral significance of a story, Mrs. Wharton says many times, is the only reason a writer can give for having chosen to tell that particular story rather than any other. To have moral significance, a story must tell something about life, it must reveal some phase of our common plight, standing forth dramatically and typically. Moral significance arises in subjects which are so treated that they become a "kind of summary or foreshortening of life's dispersed and inconclusive occurrences." Her objections to the novelists of the twentieth century, to the school labeled stream-of-consciousness and also the American realist-naturalist, are based on her passionate demand for some sort of an interpretation of life.

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p.34.

Because of her demand for moral significance in a subject, Mrs. Wharton has frequently defended the apparently inconsequential nature of her own themes. Her subject, as has been indicated, was already prescribed by her unusual environment and her possession of the good sense to know that she could not project herself into the experiences of a Dickens, or a Melville, for example. There was, however, still the pressure within her artistic soul which insisted that her theme have significance, that it be raised out of the category of the hopelessly trivial into which it seemed to fall.

In an early essay, "The Vice of Reading", she states the problem squarely, and her own solution by implication:<sup>1</sup>

Any serious portrayal of life must be judged not by the incidents it presents but by the author's sense of their significance. The harmful book is the trivial book: it depends on the writer, and not on the subject.

To keep her own selected subject from the weakness of inconsequence, Mrs. Wharton saw, would not be simple. She had an early demonstration of the difficulty in Howard Sturgis's Belchamber, which she reviewed in 1902. She was familiar with the general condemnation the book received from readers and critics. She wrote of it:

He [Sturgis] has shown us the tragedy of the trivial, has shown us how the susceptibilities of a tender and serious spirit, hampered by a

---

1. North American Review, October, 1903, p. 519.

physical infirmity, may be crushed and trampled under foot in the mad social race for luxury and amusement. A handful of vulgar people, bent only on spending and enjoying, may seem a negligent factor in the social development of the race; but they become an engine of destruction through the illusions they kill and the generous ardours they turn to despair.<sup>1</sup>

In her introduction to The House of Mirth written for its republication in 1933, Mrs. Wharton draws the same conclusion, but this time in relation to her own work:

Shallow and idle people always rest on an underpinning of wasted human possibilities; and it seemed to me that the fate of the persons embodying these possibilities ought to redeem my subject from insignificance. This is the key to The House of Mirth, and its meaning; and I believe the book has owed its success from the first, as much to my picture of the slow disintegration of Lily Bart as to the details of the "conversation piece" of which she forms the central figure.<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising to find, then, that one of the distinguishing qualities in the fiction of Mrs. Wharton is its preoccupation with problems of the soul. Life is not meaningless to her. She is interested, consequently, only in those characters who try to find some meaning in it. Her characters possess the moral responsibility that she has felt to be necessary in fiction. The meaning in life arises from the power of man

---

1. Bookman, July, 1902, p. 308.

2. Oxford University Press, London, p. vii.

to express his will, to choose between good and evil. The responsibility of the novelist is to depict men who are capable of making a choice and to attempt to reveal why they make the choice they do. When men are reasonable and engaged in making decisions, intelligently and knowingly, then they are morally responsible, and then their story has meaning and casts some light on the "endless woe of the world." It is the stories of those people who have a developed conscience that she chooses to tell.

Stuart Sherman has divided the world into three levels and his distinctions may well demonstrate Mrs. Wharton's position and her meaning of the "moral" idea. He says there is first the world of instinct, appetite, animality, and lust. On the second level there is the human world, regulated and created by the will and knowledge of man working upon the material world but governed by reason, the special human faculty, and illuminated more or less from the level above. The third is the supernatural world, which is the place of spiritual beings and the home of eternal ideas.<sup>1</sup> In that scheme of things Mrs. Wharton has chosen to occupy the second level. She lives in the middle plane, conceiving man as a personage of rare dignity, somewhere between the apes and the angels, neither

---

1. On Contemporary Literature, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1917, p. 294.

an animal nor a religious hermit. Ralph Sockman's apt description of humanistic belief, that "the joy of the game is in playing it within limits,"<sup>1</sup> is not an unfair description of Mrs. Wharton's attitude.

In her sketch of the history of the novel, given in the early pages of The Writing of Fiction, Mrs. Wharton epitomizes the whole development in the feeling that the old romance became a novel when it ceased to concern itself with the physical and began to reveal the conflicts of the soul. Man is possessed with a duality in which the forces of temperance and intemperance clash eternally. That clash is her abiding interest in fiction; it might almost be said to be her subject.

The humanist forces an order and meaning upon his picture... The basis of all fiction is a conflict or crisis. In the naturalistic novel this struggle is usually between men, or man and his surroundings. In the humanistic novel it is chiefly between man's impulses and his "inner check." One is an exterior drama, the other an interior. The naturalist is at war with everything that tries to restrain the free play or "self-expression" of his instincts; the humanist is at war with these instincts themselves, seeking to control and guide them. The humanistic novel deals with moral problems.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton has never engaged in the practice of establishing and defending a code of ethics. She is no dogmatist with a message, showing her characters failing because of their

- 
1. Morals of Tomorrow, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1931, p. 130.
  2. Hartwick, Harry, The Foreground of American Fiction, The American Book Co., New York, 1934, p. 307.

disregard for moral "laws". There are moral laws, it is true, but these do not control human action because they are too individual and too intangible. Moral laws are not codes designed by legislators or church fathers; they are a spirit within each character. Morality, then, is completely subjective.

An essay on George Eliot rather clearly shows Mrs. Wharton's attitude toward the "preaching" novelist. The weakness of Daniel Deronda she discovers to lie in Eliot's willingness to replace the humorous observer by "the preacher who feels called upon to draw a somewhat obvious moral from the spectacle which his collaborator would have left to speak for itself."<sup>1</sup> The observer of life is a better writer, she goes on, than the moralist. Although George Eliot went too far in her enthusiasm for showing the weaknesses of characters in transgression, it is none the less true that Mrs. Wharton's admiration for her work is based on the prevailing interest in moral problems in the Eliot novels.

Mrs. Wharton, describing George Eliot, might almost be describing herself. She praises her predecessor's "acute ethical sensibilities," her conservatism and traditionalism in moral practice, her power to "vibrate to the nuances of conduct as an artist vibrates to subtleties of line and color"

---

1. "Review of Leslie Stephen's George Eliot," in The Bookman, May, 1902, p. 248.

... "A deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired convictions and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books." The keynote of George Eliot's teaching lies in the idea of the necessity for faithfulness to inherited or accepted duty; all her characters shrink from acquiring any personal happiness at the cost of the social organism.

Because the idea of moral significance in fiction is so paramount in Mrs. Wharton's canon it is not unwise to eliminate possible confusion by reiterating what she did not mean by the term. A novel with "a purpose" is in her thinking "an unhappy hybrid."<sup>1</sup> Her admiration for Dickens is based upon his ability to create characters, never because he was a propagandist or reformer. Her function in relation to life is that of diagnosis, not correction. There can be no denying that Mrs. Wharton has much to tell the world and that there is much to learn from her. But her emphasis is never upon the "lesson" of the story. As a novelist of manners she must concern herself with the social scene, and must frequently condemn it. Fred Lewis Pattee says: "She lays bare social evils but has no vision of reform. Her function is the diagnosis of the diseases incident to the artificiality of modern

---

1. "Permanent Values in Fiction," op.cit., p. 603.

civilization. Not for her the surgery."<sup>1</sup>

Whether the particular fiction be long or short, situated in America or France, New York City or Starkfield, written in 1895 or 1935, Mrs. Wharton's concern with ethical validity in it will be apparent. Her first published story, "Mrs. Mansty's View" is, in that respect, like The Buccaneers, the last, unfinished work. Ethan Frome, with a background of New England snow, is like Madame de Tryemes, a story reflected against the inherited draperies of an old French family. The Old Maid, one of her shortest separate works, has the same ethical concern as The Valley of Decision, in which Count Odo is vacillating between love and duty through hundreds of pages. Even her ghost stories, of which there are many, are not without this central ingredient. "No mystery is related merely for its own sake. It is for the display of those obscure emotions that underlie all human life."<sup>2</sup>

It would be interesting simply to take Mrs. Wharton's books at random, making a blind selection from the shelf. Scanning a few pages would soon show the reader that he was being led quickly into an intellectual debate in which sensitive characters, in the presence of social forces, were faced with the necessity of making a decision. The decision is the crucial

- 
1. The New American Literature, New York, The Century Co., 1930, p. 252.
  2. Cross, Wilbur L., "Edith Wharton," The Bookman, August, 1926, p. 646.

moment she delights in depicting. What went before, or follows after, the details of the physical action, do not concern her. Her characters are usually in the midst of a moral crisis, facing an important decision. That they must decide and are capable of deciding is a fundamental premise of Mrs. Wharton's philosophy of life and fiction. Depicting the decision is her task. A symbolist might find a useful allegory in the fact that two of her early books, one a collection of short stories and the other her first long novel, were called Crucial Instances and The Valley of Decision.

All her characters must descend, at some time, to the valley of decision. Mrs. Manstey, an old woman living alone in a New York boarding house, nourishes in her soul the sight of beauty. A neighbor's garden, visible from her window, is her great joy. When she discovers that another neighbor is going to extend her house into the yard and cut off her view of the garden, she is in anguish. She has saved some money, and offers the prospective builder a thousand dollars to change his plan, so that the garden will remain in view from her window. The view of her garden is part of her soul and she is forced to act to protect it. When the builder continues with his plan, she rises one night and sets the new structure on fire. From the adventure she catches pneumonia and, in a few days, dies.

If this were the only story Mrs. Wharton ever were to produce it might be justifiable to interpret it as a pretty little narrative which taught the lesson that she who commits arson will not live to commit it another day, and that the fates are certain to punish the transgressor. The simple "moral" here might have led Mrs. Wharton to fear that the significance of the story would be overlooked by many readers and its meaning, therefore, lost. At any rate, she did not choose to reprint it.

The central significance lies elsewhere, however. It is completely in the ethical problem faced by the old woman, who must decide whether to submit to the material progress of civilization that is certain to destroy the one joy she has in life, or fight against it. She fights first with the means that her society recognizes: money. When that fails, she becomes desperate, overcomes her innate scruples against what, as a sensible person, she knows to be a crime. Through it all, the author's sympathy is with the forlorn woman in her struggle to maintain her one joy -- this "glimpse of beauty." We find no condemnation of her action; the woman's death is not punishment in compliance with a moral code, but rather an inevitable, and in some ways highly satisfactory, result of her decision to fight for the food of her soul.

By transposing terms, changing the idea of a view to that of love, the framework can be made to serve for many of the later stories. In Summer Charity Royall realizes her love in the young New York architect who visits North Dormer, a pinched, lifeless New England village. Charity can aspire to the love, and does, but the pressure of social distinctions is too great, and her love turns to tragedy. The young architect deserts her for a woman of his own social class, and the idyll is over. It lasts long enough, however, to pose a great question for Charity and force her to a noble decision. Young Harney, the architect, she knows to be scrupulous enough to have married her had he been aware that she was to bear his child. That fact Charity refuses to tell him, and faces the scorn of her society rather than impose upon Harney, and ultimately upon herself, an unnatural life that would grow unbearable.

She had no doubt that he intended to come back; her doubts were far deeper and less definable.

Since the fanciful vision of the future that had flitted through her imagination at their first meeting she had hardly ever thought of his marrying her. She had not had to put the thought from her mind; it had not been there. If she ever looked ahead she felt instinctively that the gulf between them was too deep, and that the bridge their passion had flung across it was as unsubstantial as a rainbow... Now her first feeling was that every-

thing would be different, and that she herself would be a different being to Harney. Instead of remaining separate and absolute, she would be compared with other people, and unknown things would be expected of her. She was too proud to be afraid, but the freedom of her spirit drooped...<sup>1</sup>

That Charity Royall is depicted as being too ingenuous, too impulsively selfish and spiritually immature to make her decision credible destroys much of the power of the book, but, on the other hand, serves to isolate the particular emphasis Mrs. Wharton gives to the existence of an innate ethical sense in her characters. She gives it even to those who should not rightfully have it. Happily the discrepancy between Mrs. Wharton's interest in ethical sensibility and her use of characters lacking it is rarely found. North Dormer is not her native habitat, any more than is Starkfield and the Frome cottage. In her glittering New York her moral sense plays safely in the minds of people within whose shell the reader might expect to find it.

In Ethan Frome the conflict between society and the inner freedom of the individual is more concise and more natural than that in Summer. Ethan can not deny the existence of his love for Mattie Silvers, nor can he willfully and serenely indulge himself in it. It is not society entirely that is deterring Frome from expressing his love by deserting Zeena. Nor is it

---

1. Summer, New York, Appleton, 1917, pp. 212-213.

Zeena who prevents his departure; she is not that strong. "Frome's own goodness is required to complete her parasitic power over him. Without his innate honesty and his sense of duty he could have escaped her demands and her decrees."<sup>1</sup> This unwillingness to find his own happiness at the expense of Zeena is proper to Frome, as it is strangely incongruous to the wood-nymph heroine of Summer. Frome had been to college and had developed a mind that might encompass such a problem; he had lived in a stringent environment of which the ideal of "duty" was an inseparable part. The conflict within his mind is well expressed:

Confused notions of rebellion stormed in him. He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontent than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain upon him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste...<sup>2</sup>

The conventional methods of solving the dilemma are considered by Frome; but all are denied by the presence of poverty and the ultimate helplessness of Zeena without him. The love is too strong to be denied, and the moral <sup>sense</sup> too strong to be over-

- 
1. "Ethan Frome", The Nation, October 26, 1911, p. 397.
  2. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911, p. 142.

come. The solution is to aim the sled for the elm tree.

Frome's story, like Charity Royall's, is a simple one because the conflict between passion and duty, between desire and ethical honesty, is displayed against a background that is not complicated by an elaborate social scheme. There are few people concerned, and the life in the community is a precise routine. The "social front" is unified because the New England natives who represent the objective existence of the ethical sense are few in number and rather elementary in their thinking processes. When the scene is changed to fashionable New York the problem becomes more involved and the exposition of it requires more room. The novels become longer, and the problems become more subtle. There is no change, however, in Mrs. Wharton's interest in a special kind of conflict. A world, to have meaning, must be peopled with souls that have a sense of moral responsibility.

If the fascinating picture of New York society that has made The Age of Innocence such a memorable book is disregarded, the substance of the plot hangs upon the existence of a conscience in Newland Archer. He is divided within himself: loving Madame Olenska and pledged to May Welland. The problem is complicated for him, as it was not for Frome, by the existence of traditions, family rituals and an unspoken obligation to support the convention of tribe solidarity. His temptation is greater

than Frome's, for, after all, he is not married to May Well- and when he first discovers his love for Olenska, and his will, his intellectual power to superimpose his reason upon his emotion, to drown enthusiasm in pedestrian conformance to the law of the herd, is equally greater. His tragedy, although less dramatic, is no less severe.

Lily Bart could have married Lawrence Selden at the beginning of their friendship had she not realized that the material resources of Selden would have been strained beyond bearing. The alternative, to play the game of the Trenors and Rosedale, would provide material comfort, but at the sacrifice of her self-respect and her love for Selden. She loses both in the course of time, and The House of Mirth becomes a tragedy for her.

The story of Lily Bart provides a nice contrast with that of Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country. Given approximately the same physical equipment: beauty, a moderate income, a satisfactory social position and ordinary intelligence, Lily is defeated and Undine is victorious. It is true that there are differences in the social and financial position of the two girls, and also that the society of New York had changed vastly between the 1870's of The House of Mirth and the 1910's of The Custom of the Country. The greater difference exists, however, in the fact that Undine Spragg lacks the essence of spiritual honesty that drives Lily Bart to suicide. Spragg is in no way

admirable; she is selfish, crude, heartless. But she succeeds in just the way that Lily Bart fails. She marries whom she chooses and lives in the sensuous luxury that her animal nature can appreciate. That she sacrifices her father and mother, her second and third husbands, and even her son, does not disturb her. She gets what she wants, and her habit of being soon tired of what she gets makes her no less victorious, especially in comparison with the fate of Lily Bart.

Even a superficial observation of the contrast between the fates of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg should convince any reader that Mrs. Wharton is uninterested in showing that good will ultimately prevail or that the meek shall inherit the earth. Obviously she has no sympathy for Undine Spragg or anything that the Spragg clan represents. She has sympathy for Lily Bart and an honest interest in her predicament.

Aside from the problem of justice, in the distribution of which Mrs. Wharton is not going to interfere, there remains her attitude toward her characters. The excellence of The House of Mirth as a novel, and the strength of Lily Bart as a character, are balanced by the insipidity of The Custom of the Country as a novel and the failure of Undine Spragg to come to life in the pages of the book. Spragg is hopelessly unbelievable and her story not worth the telling. Lily Bart has become a symbol in the mind of American readers and her story a classic of American fiction. The reason no doubt lies in the fact that

Bart possessed "moral responsibility" enough to qualify her as belonging to the category of important people that Mrs. Wharton visualizes as the ones proper to great fiction. She is no puppet in the "sluggish stream of fatality" nor an animal, like Spragg. She fights against the stream, and, if she succumbs to it eventually, she has, in the struggle, risen to new heights. She gets closer to the angels and farther from the apes. It is about people such as Lily Bart that Mrs. Wharton wants to tell her stories.

These tales follow the same tendency as their author's novels. Obviously, the problem can not be so complicated, nor so well developed. In "Souls Belated," one of her earliest, she uses the same situation that is found in her last finished novel, The Gods Arrive (1932). In the short story, a man and a woman have eloped to Europe, leaving in America a long, conventional past, including a wife and husband, respectively. The story is devoted to an analysis of their attempts to reorient themselves in a new society and under false pretenses. The attempt is not satisfactory because they both realize that they are internally dishonest and persist in punishing themselves, even though the company in which they move is not aware of their irregularities. The woman in the case reveals their predicament:

This vulgar fraud upon society -- and upon  
a society we despised and laughed at -- this  
sneaking back into a position that we've vol-  
untarily forfeited: don't you see what a cheap

compromise it is ? We neither of us believe in the abstract sacredness of marriage: we both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other; what object have we in marrying, except the secret fear of each that the other may escape, or the secret longing to work our way back gradually into the esteem of the people whose conventional morality we have always ridiculed and hated ?<sup>1</sup>

In the same volume appears the story called "A Coward", entirely a study of conscience which narrates the career of Carstyle's life-long attempt to reassert his confidence in himself after he had, as a young man, allowed a friend to die because of his own physical weakness.

But from that day to this I've hankered day and night for a chance to retrieve myself, to set myself right with the man I meant to be. I want to prove to that man that it was all an accident -- an unaccountable deviation from my normal instincts; that having been once a coward doesn't mean that a man's cowardly ... and I can't, I can't !<sup>2</sup>

"The Recovery", included in Crucial Instances, (1901) is a study of an American artist who has been successful enough to have a patron give him a trip abroad. Upon seeing the masters, in the foreign museums, he realizes that his painting is hopelessly bad, and that there is nothing to do but start all over. <sup>this</sup> ~~That~~ means that he can not complete the work he has been  
^

---

1. The Greater Inclination, p. 96.

2. Ibid., p. 154.

commissioned to do and for which he has already been paid, does not alter his decision. There is a higher integrity in his soul, higher than the simple honesty what would lead him to complete the work for which he had been paid.<sup>1</sup>

"The Debt" shows a young scientist who has been given a lucrative position by the family of his predecessor faced with the necessity of destroying his patron's cherished theories. The situation is typical in Mrs. Wharton's work. The scientist must either ignore his own recent discoveries, which refute those of his master, or seem to be an ingrate by using the opportunity that the family has provided, the equipment and money, to destroy all the scientific fame the older man possessed. He follows the higher duty and publishes his own findings.<sup>2</sup> In "The Blond Beast" a young secretary resigns his position when he discovers that his employer, in the midst of professions in the press and on the platform of his high business ethics, has been guilty of serious hypocrisy in stock manipulations.<sup>3</sup>

The novelettes show the same interest in moral significances as the novels and short stories. In her earliest separately published piece of fiction, The Touchstone, (1900), the interest is obvious. Ethical problems as a subject <sup>must</sup> have been strong in Mrs. Wharton's mind in her early career. Sanctuary (1903) and

- 
1. P. 65 ff.
  2. P. 127 ff.
  3. P. 277 ff.

Madame de Treymes (1907) are all similarly devoted to an intellectual debate. The action in all three novelettes is slight.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is placed upon moral decisions that the characters face.

In the first, Glennard, pressed for money, publishes secretly the letters written to him by a famous poetess, now dead. The book sells rapidly, and the needed money is produced, but Glennard becomes increasingly aware of his disloyalty to the poetess. Although his part in the publication is known to only one friend, his own consciousness drives him eventually to suspect that his wife knows and to become thoroughly miserable. Eventually he confesses to her the secret of the letters, and she reveals a loyalty and nobility of character that he had not suspected.

At length he looked up. "I don't know," he said, "what spirits have come to live in the house of evil that I built, but you're here and that's enough. It's strange... she wished the best for me so often, and now, at last, it through her that it's come to me... But for her I shouldn't have known you -- it's through her that I've found you. Sometimes ... that makes it hardest -- it makes me feel most intolerable to myself. Can't you see that it's the worst thing I've got to face? I sometimes think I could have borne it better if you hadn't understood! I took everything from her -- everything -- even to the poor shelter of loyalty she'd trusted in -- the only thing I could have left her! I deceived her, I despoiled her, I destroyed her -- and she's given me you in return."

- 
1. This term will be used in the paper to refer to narratives published separately and less than 100,000 words in length. The division between short story, novelette, and novel must be arbitrary because Mrs. Wharton has used all forms and all lengths.

The wife replies: "It isn't that she's given me to you -- it is that she's given you to yourself."<sup>1</sup>

The transgression of Glennard happened to have a happy ending; in other respects the novelette follows the tendency of all her best novels: to show the character in a situation demanding a choice, and to show a character who is developed enough to be responsible for the choice he makes.

In Sanctuary, (1903) a young architect has an opportunity to win a coveted competition if he uses the designs of his friend who died a few days before and bequeathed him his plans. He is encouraged to accept the help of his dead companion by his fiancée. His mother is anxiously hoping that he will not. The spirit of the mother prevails, and the architect refuses to present another's work as his own. Sanctuary also recounts another ethical problem, that of the architect's father, who has taken advantage of his legal power and social position to deny the claims of a dead brother's wife to her share of the estate.

Madame de Treymes is largely a contrast between American society and the French regard for family solidarity. John Durham finds his pursuit of happiness, marriage with a childhood sweetheart who is the widow of a French nobleman and the mother of a

---

1. The Touchstone, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900, pp. 155-156.

son bearing the family name, obstructed by Madame de Treymes, who insists upon the right of the French family to claim the son if the mother remarries. Durham must choose between his own happiness and that of the woman whom he hopes to marry. He knows that marriage would be impossible to her if she discovered that it would mean giving up her son. He chooses to sacrifice himself.

Of the four novelettes published under the general title Old New York only one, False Dawn, is not completely a study of the problem of moral obligation. The Old Maid revolves around Delia Ralston's decision to tell Charlotte Lovell's prospective husband of Charlotte's illegitimate child. The problem is complicated by the necessity of keeping the parentage of the child a secret from society for the next twenty years.

The Spark is the revelation of Hayley Delane's willingness to honor his wife and support his father-in-law in spite of their failure to provide any happiness for him. The spirit that leads him in that direction is the memory of Walt Whitman whom he had met in a hospital during the Civil War. Whitman the poet he knew not, but Whitman the "Spark" led him to assert his higher nature. "Almost any man can take a stand on a principle his fellow-citizens are already occupying; but Hayley Delane held out for things his friends could not comprehend, and did it for reasons he could not explain."<sup>1</sup>

---

1. The Spark, p. 99.

"She was bad... always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel."<sup>1</sup> Such was New York's condemnation of Mrs. Lizzie Hazeldean, the subject of New Year's Day. She prostituted herself in order to provide medicine and physical comfort for her dying husband. Upon her husband's death the lover proposes marriage and is amazed at her refusal.

She turned to him with a softened smile. Yes, he had really brought himself to think that he was proposing to marry her to save her reputation. At this glimpse of the old hackneyed axioms on which he actually believed that his conduct was based, she felt anew her remoteness from the life he would have drawn her back to.<sup>2</sup>

There can be no doubt that Mrs. Wharton admires Lizzie Hazeldean's creation of a moral standard of her own. Conventional morality, the standard of Mrs. Hazeldean's day, condemned her; but the author regards her as having gone beyond it. One needs to read only New Year's Day to realize that Mrs. Wharton is neither a namby-pamby preacher nor a pious defender of the necessity for a strong social organization. There can be no question of her interest in moral problems, but her interest is aesthetic rather than didactic. Only a moral person is capable of noble action.

The Reef (1912) is the longest work almost exclusively revolving about the problem of an ethical decision. The Mother's

---

1. New Year's Day, p. 1.  
2. Ibid., p. 127.

Recompense (1925) has a central theme of conscience versus happiness, but it is relieved by the description of social conduct which its New York setting requires.

Darrow had been right in saying that their sacrifice would benefit no one; yet she seemed dimly to discern that there were obligations not to be tested by that standard.<sup>1</sup>

So concludes The Reef, almost four hundred pages of intellectual duelling, subtle analysis of character and emotion and the drawing of distinctions so fine that they become almost imperceptible. The novel concerns the efforts of George Darrow and Anna Leath to ignore their discovery that Darrow has been the lover of Sophy Viner, fiancée of Anna Leath's stepson, Owen. When honesty prevails over convenience, as we expect from Mrs. Wharton's characters, should Darrow marry Anna Leath, and young Leath marry Sophy? All four go their separate ways.

In The Mother's Recompense the sacrifices reach almost to the depths of spiritual sadism. Kate Clephane leaves her husband and young daughter to go to Europe with another man. She loses herself on the continent in empty activities and at least one shallow love affair, with Chris Fenno. When her husband dies, she is summoned back to America by her daughter and discovers that the daughter is about to marry her former lover,

---

1. The Reef, p. 360.

Chris. Her decision is to keep her secret buried within her soul. She must leave the happiness she found with her daughter in America and also relinquish the offer of marriage from her old friend, Fred Landers.

Perhaps no one else would ever understand; assuredly he would never understand himself. But there it was. Nothing on earth would ever again help her -- help her to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness as much as the fact of being able to take her stand on that resolve, of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her.<sup>1</sup>

The fiction of Henry James and Paul Bourget demands comparison with Mrs. Wharton's in relation to the element of moral responsibility, as it will with every aspect of her art. James and Bourget were interested in sensitive people facing ethical decisions in the grip of a strong culture and society. In these details the pattern of their fiction is similar to hers. Statements in criticism of her work such as "the problem is similar to those used by James and Bourget" or "the moral idealism suggests James and Bourget" becomes almost a refrain. They were her first teachers, men with whom she conversed at length about

---

1. The Mother's Recompense, p. 342.

the art of fiction. Temperamentally they were akin to her, in a way that Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Marcel Proust, writers she greatly admired, could never have been.<sup>1</sup>

The subtlety of James' later novels has, no doubt, denied him much popularity; but the careless way in which later critics have mocked his obsession with trifles, should not blind us to the strength and directness of his early novels. It was his early work that most influenced Mrs. Wharton. In 1920 she was able to say of him that despite the popular feeling that he was a carver of cheery stones, "actually the vital matter for him was subject, and the criterion of subject was the extent of its moral register."<sup>2</sup> James was not, in the 1880's, concerned only with form. He thought he could see "all round Flaubert intellectually," implying a perception of Flaubert's narrowness of philosophy. "James demanded a novel based on a profound sense of moral values."<sup>3</sup>

Fleda Vetch, in James' The Spoils of Poynton, for example, is the direct counterpart of Anna Leath of The Reef, which the critics are unified in calling the most "Jamesian" of Mrs. Wharton's later novels. Fleda is genuinely fond of Owen Gareth and

- 
1. James was a constant visitor at the Wharton's apartment in Paris, travelled with them and spent several of his few months in America at their home in Lenox. Bourget translated some of her novels into French, and lived near her at Hyères.
  2. "Henry James in His Letters," op.cit., p. 199.
  3. Ibid., p. 199.

could, with the assistance of his mother, marry him, despite the presence of a fiancée, Mona Brigstock. She has many reasons to do so, among them the same that Lily Bart had for thinking of marrying Lawrence Selden, but she refuses. Her decision is based upon a desire to follow the dictates of higher moral demands:

You must settle that with her. [She says to Owen.] You mustn't break faith. Anything is better than that. You must at any rate be utterly sure... The great thing is to keep faith. Where is a man if he doesn't? If he doesn't he may be so cruel... I couldn't have a hand in that, you know; that's my position -- that's mine."<sup>1</sup>

Lambert Strether in James's The Ambassadors resembles John Durham of Madame de Treymes, sacrificing his happiness for the benefit of a social code he can not completely understand. The Baroness Munster in The Europeans abandons her love for young Wentworth for the same reason, and with the same quietness, that Madame Olenska leaves Newland Archer.

The influence of Paul Bourget, her early French master, is apparent in Mrs. Wharton's interest in the moral problem of adultery, not as a physical phenomenon but purely as a psychological one. It is the "suggestion" of adultery that interests both. It is probably Mrs. Wharton's treatment of

---

1. The Spoils of Poynton, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1896, p. 236.

that subject on a purely intellectual level, not as a sin to be punished but a condition that would react upon the "moral responsibility" of her characters, that shocked some of her readers in the 1890's. In such short stories as "The Long Run" and "Afterwards" she treats it calmly as an ethical problem of concern only to the particular characters involved, not to society. The Gods Arrive is a full-length analysis of illicit love and its effects on Vance Weston and Mrs. Warrant, but that came in 1932, long after the American reading public had ceased to be shocked by anything. Paul Bourget's selection of characters for fictional treatment throws some light on Mrs. Wharton's reasons. He was asked why he never wrote about an honest woman. He answered that honest women were not interesting to write about.<sup>1</sup> Bourget's women are not "honest" in the current meaning of the word, but like Mrs. Wharton's, neither are they sordid. They are the social rebels again, those with desires that transcend the pedestrian level of social routine. She has "studied American life with the same process of Paul Bourget in French fiction."<sup>2</sup>

In The Night Cometh Bourget depicts the struggle of Michel Ortegue, an irreligious scientist, to overcome his "feeling"

- 
1. Gilbertson, Catherine, "Winters in Paris," Atlantic Monthly, October, 1936, p. 474.
  2. Michaud, Regis, The American Novel Today, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1928, p. 57.

that his young wife loves her handsome, ingenuous cousin, Saint Cyrian. The novel also includes other ethical debates among the characters, such as the wife's right to ease her husband's pain by agreeing to commit suicide with him. A Tragic Idyll becomes a tragedy when Pierre discovers that one of the former lovers of his mistress is his most intimate friend. The friend destroys himself, but remorse prevents the lovers from ever again meeting. This last story is not unlike The Mother's Recompense.

"The influence of James and Bourget presided at the birth of her talent," writes Edmund Wilson of Mrs. Wharton, "and I remember those early stories as dealing with the artificial moral problems of Bourget and developed with the tenuity of analysis of James."<sup>1</sup> It was to both that she was indebted, not only in using their novels as models but also in studying their literary criticism. In praising the critical writing of William C. Brownell she does not neglect them. She found in his work, the range, quality, and discernment that "nothing has had since Bourget's Études de Psychologie Littéraire and James' French Poets and Novelists."<sup>2</sup>

Stuart Sherman describes the methods of both Mrs. Wharton and Henry James as beginning with "a nice little moral predicament," which attracts them as Puritan theology did Hawthorne.

- 
1. "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, June 29, 1938, p. 209.
  2. "William C. Brownell," Scribner's Magazine, November, 1928, p. 596.

The moral interest of their plots is obvious. Mrs. Wharton uses hers for what it is worth artistically, and for no more than that. She uses conventional society because she requires its pressures for the construction of the little hell in which she tortures her characters till they reveal the elemental nature beneath, which she, like Henry James, knows to be terrible, tragic, perverse and abysmal.<sup>1</sup>

It is unfair to attribute all of Mrs. Wharton's interest in ethical decisions to the influence of James and Bourget. Other novelists had discovered the same quality in life and the same power of that quality to <sup>give</sup> significance to fiction. William Dean Howells, a critical monarch of her early years, was one novelist whom she could not have helped knowing. There was also the tradition of Hawthorne inescapably behind her. George Eliot in England would surely, also, have had some formative influence in leading Mrs. Wharton toward the use of moral responsibility as a subject.

#### 4. The Sensitive Character

In order to utilize a subject possessing a moral problem, a novelist must select characters that understand a code of ethics based on a higher principle than mere animal necessity. Mrs. Wharton found the suitable characters in her own life. In the protected existence of an upper class people, long rooted in traditions, she could find the natural habitat of the moral conscience.

---

1. The Main Stream, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1927, p. 208.

She differentiates herself from the majority of recent American novelists by demanding a subject filled with moral significance. Unlike the others, she believes that American life does offer evidence of a social metier which lies above primitive indulgence. Her objection to American fiction of the last two decades revolves around this problem of the use of the sensitive characters. She condemns the "pornographic realists of the naturalistic school" for using primitive, animal characters, who can reveal themselves only through physical action. She holds the responses of such a character to external stimulation as too easy to depict, and not worth the trouble.<sup>1</sup>

The undeveloped primitive can not be shown engaged in "ethical choosing" because his plane of experience never reaches that level. He is satisfied to choose between food and hunger, comfort and pain, warmth and cold. A biological law of self-preservation determines his choice for him. That they chooses to eat rather than starve, and in general pursues the creature-comforts is to be expected. That choice is, in a sense, the sluggish stream of fatality they follow. No reader can imagine Clyde Griffiths or Studs Lonigan refusing to marry Anna Leath because he was aware that she was aware that he had been the lover of her step-son's fiancée. Anna Leath and Studs Lonigan

---

1. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," op.cit., p. 42.

could not communicate with each other, no less understand each other. They operate on different wave lengths of moral sensitivity.

It is to the aristocrat that Mrs. Wharton invariably turns, for the characters of her fiction. The choice is, to some extent, motivated by the fact that the members of the "older families" are her familiars. Her statements that a novelist must confine himself to the things he knows best are, in this respect, illustrated in her work. The Newland Archers, Delia Lovells, and Ralph Marvells were her intimate associates all her life. Since they were the only people she knew well, it is only natural that she should use them in her novels. But it is not convenience alone that makes their selection imperative. They also typify the kind of person who can best display the moral responsibility that so much interests her.

Mrs. Wharton's characters, the George Darrows, Paul Marvells and the rest, are ethically responsible because they have behind them generations of people who have been able to disregard the demands of physical security. They inherit wealth, social position, ease, and they live in a world immune to physical pressures. So long have they worn clothes, and so well provisioned is their wardrobe, that they even, in Stuart Sherman's phrase, costume their passions. So long have their souls been protected from exposure that, like a hand too long encased in a glove, their ethical consciousness becomes supersensitive.

A Backward Glance is full of descriptions of people who personify sensitivity. Discounting what we will from the book because of its prevailing nostalgia, we find Mrs. Wharton's acquaintance with leisured, cultured sophisticates everywhere evident. Describing her father in his library, she writes:

The new Tennysonian rhythms also moved him greatly; and I imagine there was a time when his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy; and in later years I remember his reading only Macaulay, Prescott, Washington Irving, and every book of travel he could find. Arctic exploration especially absorbed him, and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure.<sup>1</sup>

This description, especially the last sentence of it, could be applied, without change, to almost all of her male characters. They all seem lonely, haunted by something unexpressed and unattained. Young Raycie of False Dawn is exactly such a man. He discovers, through the aid of John Ruskin, the painters who are to be hailed as masters a generation after he dies. He is convinced that his taste is right, but refuses to assert his beliefs beyond a quiet whisper of a private exhibition. When his art treasures go unnoticed he retreats into a shell of silence.

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 39.

Her men are never vigorous and those who do have physical vitality, such as the western "Goths" Elmer Moffett and Jim Driscoll (Custom of the Country), she heartily despises. The male characters in her fiction are sensitive and too well-behaved to engage in violent activity.

Of factual evidence concerning Mrs. Wharton's admiration for the cultured man, none is more significant than her tribute to George Cabot Lodge. She appreciated him for his "sense of beauty," his "intellectual power and reflecting intelligence."

I must speak of the accomplishments that made his society so refreshing and animating; for he was an admirable linguist, a good "Grecian", a sensitive lover of the arts and possessed of the fullest general "culture" I have ever known in a youth of his age.

He had, she concludes, "an unusual gift of sympathy, and the range of his response to the imaginative call" was remarkable.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere she observes of him that "he might have turned in the end to history or archaeology; unless indeed he was simply intended to be the most sensitive of contemplators, as he was the most varied and dazzling of talkers."<sup>2</sup>

It was in a world of men and women such as these that she lived and it is little to be wondered at that it is about such

---

1. "George Cabot Lodge," Scribner's Magazine, February, 1910, pp. 236-239.

2. A Backward Glance, p. 150.

people that she wrote. Mrs. Wharton's characters necessarily arise from a long established society, a civilization with confidence in itself, with no need to assert its superiority. It is probable that the most serious objection she has to the growth of American middle-class materialism which destroyed her New York lies in the fact that it also destroyed her sensitive people. The man of culture, responsive to ideas and beauty, was exterminated, or driven to Europe. Near the end of her life she observed:

The European order has nuances, all interwoven with intensities and reticences, with passions and privacies, inconceivable to those in a safe, shallow and shadowless world... We are meager material to the imagination, not because we are middle class, but because we are middling, that our story is soon told.<sup>1</sup>

In her fiction she has told the stories of the people who are not "middling," those who are aware of nuances of conduct and thinking. She ignores the part of America that is Main Street "socially and intellectually as well as geographically."<sup>2</sup> Only a few of her major characters are outside the "Class and Culture" that "feels with their minds."<sup>3</sup> In "The Bunner Sisters" the moral responsibility is abandoned as a theme; with Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive the result is dis-

---

1. "The Great American Novel," op.cit., p. 651.

2. Ibid., p. 648.

3. The first phrase is Lovett's stigma; the second is Charles K. Trueblood's admiring epithet. (Dial, Jan., 1920, p. 82)

tinctly confusing; with Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country she loses reality in her desire for satirical strength; and with Charity Royall in Summer the characterization is a serious mistake. All the other people in her gallery could very properly be hung with her father and George Cabot Lodge in a room labeled "Sensitized Humanity."

A simple test of the kind of people that interest Mrs. Wharton can be based on an observation of their occupations. The women do not work. They either inherit wealth or marry it; and their time is passed, consequently, in joining clubs, in travel, or arranging dinner lists. Their greatest problem seems to be that of avoiding a juxtaposition of dinner companions with clashing temperaments. It is true that Lily Bart plays ineffectually at being a milliner and Justine Brent in The Fruit of the Tree is nominally a practical nurse, but these are conspicuous exceptions. May Welland is much nearer the normal Wharton woman. It was only natural that Mrs. Wharton should choose as characters women whose function in life is to supervise servants. During the years of which she writes it was uncommon for an educated woman even to think of exerting herself for monetary gain.

Although for the men, the excuse of "custom" can not be offered, the absence of labor is equally apparent. They never soil their hands. Money comes from someplace, and most of them are engaged in earning it; but it seems that they never need exert

themselves in its pursuit. A "living" is never earned in Mrs. Wharton's novels; an "income" always exists.

All her men belong to the group loosely known as professional. They are bankers, brokers, lawyers, diplomats, artists, writers, archaeologists, and infrequently college professors. Whatever may be their profession, it seems never to occupy much of their time. They are always able to travel and stay away from their offices for months at a time. The lawyers and brokers disappear quietly each morning, at about ten o'clock, to a nebulous downtown and engage in some equally nebulous business. They return early enough for tea, or an art exhibit, or if they stay in their offices very late they have difficulty in finding time to rest before they dress for dinner.

Newland Archer finds no difficulty in running down to Washington for a few days, or to Boston, or even to Florida. He goes on "business". Just what the business is the reader never discovers, and Mrs. Wharton probably does not care. All that concerns us is that the business "downtown" shall not interfere with the more important business she has for Newland Archer & to leave unimpaired his ability to perceive the subtleties of behavior.

A college professor, whose wife has committed suicide because of his relations with another woman, is able, on the day he buries her, to perceive these mental processes when he talks

to the other woman:

Ah, there was the sting -- the devil's claw ! What was it ? Was she being superhumanly magnanimous -- or proud, over-sensitive, afraid that he might be making the proposal out of pity ? Poor girl -- poor child ! That must be it. He loved her all the more for it, bless her ! Or was it (ah, now again the claw tightened), was it that she really didn't want to commit herself, wanted to reserve her freedom for this crazy expedition, to see whether she couldn't do better by looking about out there -- she, so young, so fresh and radiant -- than by binding herself in advance to an elderly professor at Kingsborough ? Hawaii -- Samoa -- swarming with rich idle yachtsmen and young naval officers (he had an excruciating vision of a throng of "Madame Butterfly" tenors in immaculate white duck and gold braid) -- cocktails, fox-trot, moonlight in the tropics... he felt suddenly middle-aged, round shouldered, shabby with thinning graying hair... Of course what she wanted was to look around and see what her chances were ! He retrieved the fallen stool, set it up again, and sat down on it.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation is given at length because it reveals how much Mrs. Wharton's characters can "feel with their minds." All the girl had said was that she was planning to go with some friends to Hawaii and Samoa. Mrs. Wharton's characters are intuitive people who see all at a glance or never see. The soliloquy quoted above could easily have come from any one of her creations.

This intellectual capacity compensates her folk for their loss of experience. Nothing much ever "happens" to them, but

---

1. "The Day of the Funeral," Human Nature, New York, Appleton, 1933, pp. 125-126.

they can stretch that little to its full length and with their minds eke from it the last drop of significance. Kate Clephane is recalling her exile in Europe:

...the tedious drive with the prosy patronizing old woman; the long discussion at the Rectory as to whether it would "do" to ask Mrs. Schlachter to take a stall at the Fair in spite of her unfortunate name... the dull noisy friends who wanted to "see life" and didn't know that you can't see it unless you've first had the brains to imagine it...<sup>1</sup>

In "The Other Two" Waythorne was sure that his wife would not have seen Haskett, her first husband, "if she had divined that Waythorne would object, and the fact that she did not divine it was almost as disagreeable to the latter as the discovery that she had lied to him."<sup>2</sup> The use of characters with that kind of reflecting intelligence is a conspicuous quality in all of Mrs. Wharton's work. Examples of it are so easy to find that further quotation is hardly needed. More evidence can easily be obtained by reading any page of her fiction.

Among her characters the habit of thinking deliberately and coherently is so strong that it is easy to understand the predicament of one of them who confesses: "I can't always separate what we've talked of from what I've imagined."<sup>3</sup> The author's respect for sensitivity once led her into a ridiculous situation.

---

1. The Mother's Recompense, p. 15.

2. The Descent of Man, p. 94.

3. The Gods Arrive, New York, Appleton, 1932, p. 428.

In "A Bottle of Perrier" the butler of an archaeologist living in a desert kills his master by throwing him into a well. The story is convincing enough until the reader realizes that the motive for the murder lies in the fact that the master has prevented the butler from going back to England to see the art exhibit at Wembley.<sup>1</sup>

Edmund Wilson describes all the men created by Mrs. Wharton's fiction between The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence as "set apart from their neighbors by education, sensibility and intelligence, but lacking that force either to impose themselves or get away."<sup>2</sup> The same might be said of the women, although they, at least, make some effort toward getting away. The effort is strangely impeded by their unwillingness to gain their own happiness at the sacrifice of somebody else. Mr. Wilson's description aptly applies to all her men, and most of her women, from Lawrence Selden to Newland Archer, including Ethan Frome, Lawyer Royall (who makes a pitiful effort to escape through drinking), John Amherst, in The Fruit of the Tree, Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles in The Custom of the Country, Lewis Tarrant in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, Jim Manford in Twilight Sleep, and Martin Boyne in The Children.

- 
1. Certain People, New York, Appleton, 1930, p.21 ff.
  2. "Justice to Edith Wharton," op.cit., p. 212.

The need to develop a class of intellectual aristocracy which she could not find in her own country and among the residents of the New York City she knew so well, led Mrs. Wharton to create this learned, cultivated, artistic group. Most of them are professional artists; at least they are so interested in art and its theories that their every discussion is leavened with technical allusions. Mrs. Wharton went so far as to build up a mythology of great names which appear from time to time in her books as almost a part of the setting. The roll of stories in which art and artists form a guiding interest is a long one. The Valley of Decision (1902) is heavy with allusions to and pictures of the Italian artists. The book is an artistic travelogue rather than a novel, with the central narrative of Count Odo being subordinated to liberal ideas and descriptions of works of art. Count Odo is aware of beauty, much of the painting, music and sculpture of which the book is an exposition being seen through his eyes. Mrs. Wharton's concern with things aesthetic was an early one. This use of artists and their works continues as a central subject throughout her career. The great poet Rendle is the central figure in "The Muse's Tragedy"<sup>1</sup>; Irene Astarte Pratt, Mrs. Amyot's mother in "The Pelican"<sup>2</sup> is the author of several books; George Lillo is the important

---

1. In The Greater Inclination.

2. Ibid.

painter in "The Portrait"<sup>1</sup>; Mrs. Aubyn is the immortal poetess in The Touchstone; in "Expiation"<sup>2</sup> there are two authors; in "The Duchess at Prayer"<sup>3</sup> the statue is the work of Cavaliere Bernini; "The Recovery" is that of the American painter Keniston;<sup>4</sup> "The Daunt Diana"<sup>5</sup> and "The Rembrandt"<sup>6</sup> are stories of connoisseurs rather than artists, but the interest is the same; the amazing novelist and philosopher Pellerin is "The Legend"<sup>7</sup>; in "Copy"<sup>8</sup> the intellectual duel is demonstrated by Mrs. Dale, a novelist, and Ventnor, a famous poet.

In the longer works the same prevalence of artists is observable. Nick Lansing in Glimpses of the Moon is an archaeologist; young Harney in Summer is an architect; John Campton in A Son at the Front<sup>9</sup> is a portrait painter; Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed<sup>10</sup> is a novelist, and Lewis Tarrant an editor; even Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country has aspirations toward being a writer.

When Mrs. Wharton's characters are not artists of the brush or chisel, they are artists of living who have been economically

- 
1. Ibid.
  2. In The Descent of Man and Other Stories.
  3. In Crucial Instances.
  4. Ibid.
  5. In Tales of Men and Ghosts.
  6. In Crucial Instances.
  7. In Tales of Men and Ghosts.
  8. In Crucial Instances.
  9. New York, Appleton, 1923.
  10. New York, Appleton, 1929.

secure long enough to make it a fine art. They try to arrange their actions into beautiful patterns, to follow the rules of their social order, and to draw from existence the greatest possible aesthetic pleasure. According to Charles Trueblood:

Her characters' minds are a maze of sophistication... like actors who have many times rehearsed a piece together and know each other's roles; as in fact they have repeated together and know the code of amenity until it has become a fine instrument in the hand of their cleverness.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton has tersely provided her own reason for selecting these characters: "Leisure transmutes wealth into beauty. Only in the atmosphere thus engendered floats that impalpable dust of ideas which is the real culture."<sup>2</sup> This culture-civilization she further defends, in different language, in a review of Hewlett's The Fool Errant. In that novel, she says, he has made his characters a bundle of sensations. "Civilization has produced differentiation; human nature is still a bundle of sensations, but of a more complex order."<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's objections to the "primitives" that modern American novelists have used is more compelling when we realize how consistent has been her own practise and how deep-rooted are her convictions on the matter. Shortly after the World War she

- 
1. "Edith Wharton," The Dial, January, 1920, p. 80.
  2. "The Great American Novel," op.cit., p. 652.
  3. The Bookman, September, 1905, p. 66.

travelled through the Mediterranean countries. While she was in Morocco she visited a house with "an excellent view" and looked at the residents to observe:

I was never more vividly reminded of the fact that human nature, from one pole to the other, falls naturally into certain categories, and that respectability wears the same face in an oriental harem as in England and America.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's people belong in the category of respectability, and more than that. They are people who have succeeded in the world, in some fashion, and have been so long the cynosure of those about them that they have become conscious of their responsibility. They are respectable to the point of being guardedly jealous of their position and anxious to defend it. All their actions are guided, consequently, by an awareness of the result upon other people. As she was in actuality, so they become in the pages of her fiction, the sensitive instruments who, given leisure, are able to turn living into a fine art. Mrs. Wharton's characters are a refutation of the critical condemnation of American life of the last fifty years as being without lights and shadows of conscious action.<sup>2</sup>

It has been necessary to describe Mrs. Wharton's characters at length, and to show the reason why she chose to use them, in

---

1. "Harems and Ceremonials," Yale Review, October, 1919, p.60.

2. Even Sherwood Anderson could write, in 1916, "How is one to escape the obvious fact that there is as yet no native subtlety of thought or living among us?"

order to nullify the growing condemnation of her work as "thin." Because she remained outside the main stream of interest in the subject matter of American fiction she has been condemned widely, as insipid, fragile, inconsequential. If she has ceased to interest the modern reader it is because he has ceased to interest himself in a fiction that details a spiritual conflict in a soul, or perhaps because the modern reader has ceased to believe in the existence of either spirit or soul.

When she strayed from her proper demesne Mrs. Wharton encountered difficulties. When her characters cease to be sensitive, in other words, when her characters differ in temperament from her, she loses them. It may be that she loses interest in them; but, in any case, they do not come alive. They dissipate themselves before the greater strength of melodrama, satire, social criticism or the author's sheer fatigue.

Seven times Mrs. Wharton went outside the pale for her characters. Once, in the Bunner Sisters, she saved her work from complete failure by abandoning her primary idea of moral responsibility. In a second, Ethan Frome, her success in characterization is a subject of debate. In the other five, Charity Royall, in Summer; Undine Spragg, in The Custom of the Country; John Amherst, in The Fruit of the Tree, Nona Manford in Twilight Sleep; and Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive; her failure is too obvious to be denied.

Mrs. Wharton tries her best to be sympathetic toward Charity Royall, but the illegitimate child of a murdering father and a prostitute mother has too much of the Mountain in her to be happy in civilized hands. She is seen first as a sensuous materialist getting what she can from the people around her. With frequent reminders of her impossible parentage, Mrs. Wharton allows the reader to admire Charity. At least he can comprehend her motivation. When young Harney enters North Dormer, Mrs. Wharton turns Charity into a Lily Bart, and the mixture is impossible.

Ever since their meeting [Mrs. Wharton writes of Harney] at the Creston pool he had been subject to those brooding silences, which were as different as possible from the pauses when they ceased to speak because words were needless. At such times his face wore the expression she had seen on it when she had looked in at him from the darkness and again there came over her a sense of the mysterious distance between them; but usually his fits of abstraction were followed by bursts of gaiety that chased away the shadow before it chilled her.<sup>1</sup>

These are the thoughts of Charity, who can say, several pages later, "I don't never want to go back there," and who can be transported into a trance by a cheap moving picture or fireworks. And it is the same girl, too, who can relinquish her moral hold on Harney because she "realizes" that he would be happier married to one of his own social level. The two

---

1. Op.cit., p. 142.

qualities are so contradictory, the naive animalism and sophisticated sensitivity are so mutually exclusive, that the author had to introduce an even more unbelievable solution to end the story.

With Undine Spragg, Mrs. Wharton is more consistent. Her failure arose from a complete lack of sympathy with her central characters. Undine Spragg is a symbol of the forces that were destroying everything she admired. The portrait became a satire, and Spragg becomes a monstrosity. The subject of the novel is Undine Spragg of Apex City, Indiana, and Mrs. Wharton knows practically nothing of Apex City, Indiana. The background is real enough, making Spragg all the more a caricature. To carry the satire for five hundred pages is a very difficult task and requires a compelling central character. Undine Spragg remains a shadow because Mrs. Wharton did not know her well enough to sneer at her for more than five pages; and she did not like her well enough to be interested in her problems.

John Amherst is well educated and has "good connections" on his mother's side, but he works in a factory. It is true that he is a manager in a vague way but, nevertheless, the income from his job is essential. During the first portion of the book he is real enough, and although the factory background is the merest apology, Mrs. Wharton is successful in her portrait.

Once the interest in the factory is exhausted, her concern with John Amherst is also diminished beyond recall. Bessy Westmore, owner of the factory, marries him, and he is swept into the House of Mirth. His efforts to get out again are decidedly anaemic. The novel dwindles away into investigations of mercy killings and the ethical use of inherited wealth; Amherst dwindles with it.

Vance Weston is a writer and should, by our definition, be included in the larger category of Mrs. Wharton's people. But he belongs with Undine Spragg and the twilight sleepers because he is not an artist, only a genius. He comes out of the west an uneducated college graduate who is born anew under the influence of New York and Halo Tarrant. He is crude, impetuous, selfish, without a conscience. What would make him attractive to the intelligent and adult Halo Tarrant is beyond knowing and why Mrs. Wharton should follow him through two long novels is also beyond knowing. A man who has been able to go through college without hearing of Coleridge and Marlowe<sup>1</sup> is no subject for her, and the two novels prove it.

In A Backward Glance Mrs. Wharton expresses her displeasure at the repeated statements that Ethan Frome is her best work.

---

1. Hudson River Bracketed, pp. 93-135.

She clearly does not think so. In The Colophon<sup>1</sup> she defends the form of the work, in spite of the opinion of friends who thought a twenty-five years' lapse of time would be awkward in so short a piece. In A Backward Glance, and elsewhere she defends the accuracy of her interpretation of New England life. Henry James found the "weak point" in Ethan Frome to be the result of Mrs. Wharton's use of such "simple creatures as hardly to be worth the pains the gifted writer has spent on them." What has happened, as James suggests, is that she has put one of her sensitive characters in a situation in which he can not reveal his true stature. She has achieved a masterpiece of technical workmanship and brilliant prose style, but the protagonist has been unsatisfactory to most readers. Ethan Frome possesses this mixture of rugged strength and inner fragility that is more obvious and more unbelievable in Charity Royall. As DeVoto says, the people remain a formal design, "Why are they so helpless? Why the tragedy? Why no will to live?"<sup>2</sup> The answer is that Ethan Frome is Newland Archer, George Darrow and Ralph Marvell all over again, living on a place of aesthetic indulgence in moral discipline that is as out of place on a woodlot as it is proper in a paneled library.

---

1. Vol. III, September, 1932.

2. Introduction to Ethan Frome, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938, p. xiii.

Archer and Darrow submit to disappoint<sup>ment,</sup> have no will to live because generations of civilization prevail in their temperaments and they are inherently opposed to "fighting" because they regard that as the proper functions of the barbarians. Ethan Frome is cut to the same pattern, and the pattern does not suit the gaunt frame that strides through the fields of New England.

Had Mrs. Wharton elaborated the tale she might have discovered this central difficulty. She uses the observant engineer from the city as part of the framework, and then lets Frome tell his own story with a perceptiveness that would have seemed natural had we been seeing the story through the mind of the narrator. But necessity demands that Frome tell it, because Frome is the only one who knows it. In the telling, Frome destroys himself, or at least he destroys the conception of him that the engineer had previously given the reader. We could call this a mistake in form, but it is more essentially the result of the author's almost unconscious habit of creating hypersensitive characters. To answer DeVoto's question: the reason why Frome has no will to live is that he is really Newland Archer and Lily Bart, but the story is told so briefly that the reader has not been convinced that such a temperament would have been produced on a New England farm.

Among American novelists Mrs. Wharton could find few models to encourage her to select these artistic temperaments as central characters. Those who used the American scene found, for the most part, that its peculiar appeal lay in realms that Mrs. Wharton avoided. Although she says that the "man with the dinner pail" is not the only subject for an American novel, her statement indicates that this concentration on the laboring classes prevailed among her contemporaries.

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James would have been among the few American predecessors who could have demonstrated the possibilities of using a reflecting character for story telling purposes. The Pyncheons, especially Hepzibah and Clifford, in The House of Seven Gables, Miriam and Hilda in The Marble Faun, and Arthur Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter suggest a resemblance in the type of character used by Hawthorne. The appearance of Ethan Frome prompted the critics to recognize parallels in the works of the two. Both Hawthorne and Mrs. Wharton are interested in the effects of sin. That interest would presume the use of characters with developed consciences. Wilbur Cross sees Mrs. Wharton, in certain of her short stories, as "a twentieth century Hawthorne, amused perhaps more than impressed by the new psychology."<sup>1</sup> Austin Warren's description of Hawthorne could easily include Mrs. Wharton: "His traffic was not with the streets but with souls; the conscience, not the camera, his mode of vision."<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. "Edith Wharton," op.cit., p.646. (Cross is referring to Here and Beyond.)
  2. Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne, New York, American Book Co., 1934, p. xv.

His personal morality, Warren believes, belonged to the Victorian or the New England School, and no reader can miss his moral earnestness, since, he is preoccupied with "problems of character and conscience."<sup>1</sup>

The moral didacticism in Hawthorne's work alienated Mrs. Wharton from<sup>him</sup> in much the same way that it lessened her admiration for George Eliot. There is no doubt, however, that she learned from Hawthorne some of the virtues of telling a tale about people who are mature enough intellectually to analyze its incidents to their fullest extent. She turned then to Henry James, who had used similar characters but freed them of the necessity of making them conform to a particular code of ethics. Ethical they were, and finely balanced in conduct, but their significant action was of their own choosing, not ordained by a theology.

The importance of the problem of selecting sensitive people in the novel lies rather in the difference between Henry James and Edith Wharton. There is a fair agreement among the critics that after her apprenticeship had been served Mrs. Wharton parted company from her American master. James, as time went on, became more and more interested in the mental processes of his characters, to the extent that the background for their action became oblit-

---

1. Ibid., p. lxiv.

erated. Mrs. Wharton carried her fondness for "probing into the soul" as far as it would go and still, as she saw it, not destroy the essential liveliness of the tale itself. Her testimony on this point is needed in full:

I was naturally much interested in James's technical theories and experiments, though I thought, and still think, that he tended to sacrifice to them that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction. Therefore, though I greatly admired some of the principles he had formulated... I thought it was paying too dear even for such a principle to subordinate to it the irregular and irrelevant movements of life. And one result of the application of his theories puzzled and troubled me. His latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move. The characters in The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl seem isolated in a Crookes tube for our inspection... I one day said to him: "What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in The Golden Bowl 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 through life?"<sup>1</sup>

The Touchstone (1900), Sanctuary (1903), Madame de Treymes (1907) and The Reef (1912) are the most conspicuous of Mrs. Wharton's Jamesian novels. After 1912 she seems to have found other

---

1. A Backward Glance, op.cit., pp. 190-191.

masters to follow and returned to writing the novel of manners that depended for its force upon the interplay of character upon society. The Age of Innocence (1920) resembles The House of Mirth (1905) much more than it does The Reef, and all the more memorable of Mrs. Wharton's novels have a vivid background of social manners that she felt James was ignoring. That background of manners was the "human fringe" that trails after her characters through life. To put the problem more succinctly, Mrs. Wharton differs from Henry James in refusing to believe that the effect of character upon character (in a void) will ever give the life to fiction that can be found in a study of the effect of incident on character, especially if the incident arises from the nature of the social milieu in which the character exists.

She turned elsewhere for her lesson in the usefulness of social panorama as a reflector of character. Balzac in the cosmopolitan Paris of Old Goriot and the stark provincialism of Eugenie Grandet could show her that the nature of the background was of less importance than its use. Thackeray gave her a similar example in another country, as did Dostoevsky and Tolstoi. The use of "society" as a character she learned from them, not from James. He taught her much, but she soon discovered that the investigation of sensitivity on a purely aesthetic level did not provide substantial fiction. It is possible that Mrs. Wharton learned the dangers of the Jamesian dependence upon

character-consciousness alone by noticing the result in Willa Cather's Alexander's Bridge and Anne Douglas Sedgwick's The Third Window. These books, both of which appeared before 1915, are Jamesian in their departure from the pressure of physical existence around the characters, and both are books that their authors shortly repudiated by writing novels of much greater earthiness.

If we remember Mrs. Wharton's critical theory that a novelist must select a subject that is temperamentally suited to him we can understand her preference for the sensitive conscience as a character in her novels. Her major creations, the successful ones, it would appear, all are possessed with an intuitive power of perception that makes it possible for them to react to the slightest nuance of emotional stimulation. Characters of that type she turned to naturally because they were most like herself. She saw life through their eyes most clearly because their eyes were most nearly her own. She differs from her realistic contemporaries in having, like Hawthorne, a conscience rather than a camera for a mode of vision.

##### 5. The Selective Process

Mrs. Wharton, in one of her earliest attempts at an evaluation of her work-to-be, reveals a definite conviction concerning selection: "All forms of art are based on the principle of

selection, and where that principle is held of no account in the sum total of any intellectual production, there can be no genuine criticism."<sup>1</sup> The best art would be that in which the design produced by the selection of parts is the most organic, most inherent in the soul of the subject.<sup>2</sup> She has no sympathy with either the slice-of-life school of the French novelists or the stream-of-consciousness of more recent writers. To her they are the same, the new being the old under another name, and given a new name because the recent writers were not familiar enough with the great traditions of the past to recognize their indebtedness. The stream-of-consciousness method has been achieved by adding the record of mental processes to the French naturalist's account of physical activities. To Mrs. Wharton both are bad because they lack selection. The new writers, she thinks, would never have embarked upon their program had they been aware of the history of the slice-of-life school. The late nineteenth century novelists who made the experiment discovered that their only lasting works were successful in spite of their non-selective technique, and not because of it. She called "a singularly happy summary of a central principle of creative art" the statement by Brownell concerning Hawthorne's weakness: "The artistic synthesis of nature should be more rather than less definite than

---

1. "The Vice of Reading," op.cit., p. 520.

2. "The Criticism of Fiction," op.cit., p. 209.

than its material."<sup>1</sup>

On the threshold of any theory of art its exponent is sure to be asked: on what first assumption does your theory rest? And in fiction, as in every other art, the only answer seems to be that any theory must begin by assuming the need for selection. It seems curious that one should have to explain and defend what is not more than the rule underlying the most artless verbal statement. No matter how restricted an incident one is trying to give an account of, it can not but be fringed with details more and more remotely relevant, and beyond that with an outer mass of irrelevant facts which may crowd on the narrator simply because of some accidental propinquity in time or space. To choose between all this material is the first step toward coherent expression.<sup>2</sup>

It would appear that this statement alone would make it imperative to list Mrs. Wharton on the side of the traditionalists in art, the group that insists upon a need for arranging incidents to form an organic whole, those who see in their work, before they begin, a central design, those who collect and admit only those actions and impressions that conform to the central scheme. She is particularly conscious of a growing abandonment, among her younger contemporaries, of the principle of selection, to which she held so firmly. Later in the essay she uses "sticking to the point" as a colloquial synonym for selection, and adds, petulantly:

But the novelist who applies -- or owns to apply this rule to his art, is nowadays accused of being absorbed in technique to the exclusion of the supposedly contrary element of human interest.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. "William C. Brownell," op. cit., p. 597.
  2. The Writing of Fiction, p. 13.
  3. Ibid., p. 9.

Mrs. Wharton does not write it so, but her conception of literature and her own practices in fiction would imply that the words "supposedly contrary" should be italicized. Interest in humanity and interest in technique went hand in hand in her work. The technique merely clarified the vision of humanity; it did nothing to eradicate the power of subject.

It is in the application of the principle of selection to the novel of manners and to the short story that she is primarily interested. In the short story, selection leads to the vital economy that makes this form vivid, that gives it the unity it must have not to be a novel in synopsis. In the novel of manners, selection is the principle which will save the novelist from running into the danger of overcrowding his stage.

For Mrs. Wharton to say that there is danger in overcrowding a novel would seem to imply that she advocated short novels. Her admiration for War and Peace and for Vanity Fair refutes such an implication. Her demand in a novel of manners is that the writer should select characters and incidents which will reveal whole classes of people and complete social systems in operation.<sup>1</sup>

It is the unnecessary characters who do the crowding, who confuse the reader by uselessly dispersing his attention; but even the number of subordinate yet necessary characters may be greatly reduced by making the principal figures so typical that they adumbrate most of the others.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Ibid., p. 83.

2. Ibid., p. 84.

The selection of character, incident, and even scenic detail are determined by their relevance, which will depend upon the writer's acceptance of a principle of design, an organized progression from beginning to end, and a clear vision of what the whole book is supposed to accomplish.

Even such a novelist as Marcel Proust, who included, most readers would think, everything in his record of a revery, Mrs. Wharton praises for his use of this principle. All the new effects he achieved, she says, were attained through selection and design. "In the construction of these vast, leisurely and purposeful compositions," she says, "nothing is really wasted or brought in at random."<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Crucial Moments

Selection as an artistic principle leads directly to Mrs. Wharton's theory of crucial moments, for the careful selection of incidents to be narrated is as important to the success of the work as choice of the narrator. Both give unity and form. The incidents selected should be those which would most accelerate the narrative tempo. Of the great novelists Mrs. Wharton says:

Their observation showed them that in the world of normal men life is conducted, at least in its decisive moments, on fairly coherent and select-

---

1. "The Vice of Reading," op.cit., p. 520.

tive lines, and that only thus can the great fundamental affairs of breadgetting and home-and-tribe organizing be carried on. Drama, situation, is made out of the conflicts thus produced between social order and the individual appetites, and the art of rendering life in fiction can never be anything but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence.<sup>1</sup>

In describing these moments Mrs. Wharton denies that the action, the external movement, need be elaborate or involved. For the moment to be crucial, it must bear some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard and reveal some facet in the external struggle between man's contending impulses. Otherwise, the tales embodying these incidents will fail to fix the reader's attention.

The selection of crucial moments or illuminating incidents, and Mrs. Wharton uses the terms almost interchangeably, is clearly the great requirement of the successful short story. The briefer the narrative the more it depends for its effect on the choice of what has been kept when the superfluous has been jettisoned. A novel, if we follow this reasoning to its conclusion, will have the same essential selective pressure made upon it, except that, since it is a longer form, the compression into only crucial moments will not be so strict. The novel can afford to "carry more sail."

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 13.

Even the novelist, however, must rely on the illuminating incident to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation.

Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity. They are also the most personal element in any narrative, the author's most direct contribution; and nothing gives such immediate proof of the quality of his imagination -- and therefore of the richness of his temperament -- as his choice of such episodes.<sup>1</sup>

The power to choose the significance moment in the narrative and to develop it, the power to utilize the illuminating incident, is not only proof of the novelist's imagination but is also a capital method of giving immediacy to the tale. In Mrs. Wharton's opinion the sense of immediacy depends on the selection of crucial moments far more than on the use of dialogue, which most writers apparently favor. In each selected incident there should be amassed all the possible threads of significance. In this way, pages of explanatory narrative are spared.

When the central interest of fiction moved from the street to the soul, from action to character, it follows that in time the traditional emphasis on climax, especially that of action, would be minimized. That something must be substituted in order to maintain vitality in the story Mrs. Wharton realized, and the idea of crucial moments is the result. In some respects her method is not greatly different from the straightforward use of

---

1. Ibid., p. 109.

climax: the same selection of incidents of dramatic intensity is necessary. These incidents are simply used differently; they are revealed in retrospect rather than directly.

This method is a natural result of the novelist's desire to reveal character. She is more interested in the effect of the action upon the character than in the action itself. Emotion is present in her fiction, but it is an emotion "recollected in tranquility." The moment selected is not chosen because it illuminates the development of the action; rather, it is a crucial moment in the development of the character. The character is faced by an incident, a situation, or sometimes only the awareness of an idea, upon which he must make an intellectual decision which will throw him in one direction or another.

The story of Ethan Frome, excluding the framework, is a series of crucial moments in the hero's life which lead him to decide to attempt suicide with Mattie Silvers. There are but few of these incidents in which we see him participate. He recalls them for us. The first scene shows Ethan outside the dance hall, looking at Mattie Silver. A synopsis of the next twenty pages of the story will show that much of the action is being given the reader through the mind of Ethan:

Frome was in the habit of walking into Starkfield to fetch home his wife's cousin... It was his wife who had suggested that such opportunities should be put in her way... Mattie Silver had lived under his roof for a year, and from early morning till

they met at supper he had frequent chances of seeing her; but no moments in her company were comparable to those when, her arm in his, and her light step flying to keep time with his long stride, they walked back through the night to the farm... It was during their night walks back to the farm that he felt most intensely the sweetness of this communion...

As he stood in the darkness outside the church these memories came back with the poignancy of vanished things... Watching Mattie whirl down the floor... the sight made him unhappy, and his unhappiness roused his latent fears. His wife had never shown any jealousy of Mattie, but of late she had grumbled increasingly over the house-work and found oblique ways of attracting attention to the girl's inefficiency... He did his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire... He even crept down on Saturday nights to scrub the kitchen floor after the women had gone to bed; and Zeena, one day, had surprised him at the churn and had turned away silently, with one of her queer looks.

Of later there had been other signs of her disfavour, as intangible but more disquieting... 'The doctor don't want I should be left without anybody to do for me,' she said in her flat whine... 'He wanted I should speak to you about a girl he's heard about, that might come --'... 'Well, I'd like to talk to you about it.'

He was getting into his clothes with fumbling haste. 'All right. But I haven't got the time now; I'm late as it is' ... but as he went toward the door she said, suddenly and incisively, 'I guess you're always late, now you shave every morning.' ...

That thrust frightened him... Once or twice in the past he had been faintly disquieted by Zenobia's way of letting things happen without seeming to remark them, and then, weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences... But now, as he stood outside the church, and saw Mattie spinning down the floor with Denis Eady, a throng of disregarded hints and menaces wove their cloud about his brain.

The crucial moment in the life of Ethan Frome is his discovery, as he stands in the snow outside the church, that Mattie Silver is his reason for living. His mind selects for the reader his impressions of the past that led him to that discovery. To show them all in detail would have extended the idea beyond the reader's patience. This retrospective method is a brilliant economy. There are given in the remainder of the story a few more crucial moments -- the incidents of the pickle dish, and Frome's refusal to take advantage of Hale's sympathy -- leading the action headlong into the tragic crash against the elm.

In The Old Maid, Tina is a young woman of marriageable age when her foster mother is described as lying awake till morning and recalling "every detail of the fateful day when she had assumed the charge of Charlotte's child."<sup>1</sup> Later, as Tina is about to be married, there is another crucial moment in the soul of the foster mother:

As the truth stole upon Delia her heart melted with the old compassion for Charlotte. She saw it was a terrible, a sacrilegious thing to interfere with another's destiny, to lay the tenderest touch upon any human being's right to love and suffer after his own fashion... The adopted mother's thoughts reverted painfully to the little white room upstairs.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. The Old Maid, p. 1414

2. Ibid., p. 186.

In Mrs. Wharton's short stories the retrospective climax frequently appears. In "Autre Temps" we read of Miss Lidcote that "When she was alone, it was always the past that occupied her."<sup>1</sup> This is an introduction to her story and a preparation for its being duplicated in her daughter. Although "The Long Run" is not a good instance, being a story within a story, there is in it an interesting example of the narrator's passing over the normally expected climax:

I had her promise that she would see me, two days later, at her house in town, and that we should then have what I called 'a decisive talk'; but I don't think that even at the moment I was the dupe of my phrase. I knew, and she knew, that the end had come...<sup>2</sup>

It would not be <sup>un</sup>fair to conclude, using the expression of the narrator above, that Mrs. Wharton's characters never need these "decisive talks." They know what will result from a particular situation. There is no need to carry any event to its ultimate physical conclusion; just a hint of the action here and there is enough to suggest the character development that will result. The narrator in "The Long Run" decides to conform to the strictures of the society around him and to relinquish the woman who happens to be married.

The situation in "The Reckoning" is that of a wife who has agreed with her husband that their marriage shall be based on

---

1. "Autres Temps", Xingu, p.101.  
2. Ibid., p. 231.

the law of the new dispensation: 'Thou shalt not be unfaithful -- to thyself', and discovers that he wants to leave her. The announcement of his decision is given not in retrospect, but directly. Here we may note how Mrs. Wharton tends, even in dramatised action, to subordinate movement to character:

He waited a moment, shifting his position nervously; then he said, with a touch of irritability: 'You acknowledge the agreement?'

The question went through her like a shock. She lifted her head to it proudly. 'I acknowledge the agreement,' she said.

'And you don't mean to repudiate it?'

A log on the hearth fell forward, and mechanically he advanced and pushed it back.

'No,' she answered slowly, 'I don't mean to repudiate it.'

There was a pause. He remained near the hearth, his elbow resting on the mantel-shelf. Close to his hand stood a little cup of jade that he had given her on one of their wedding anniversaries. She wondered vaguely if he noticed it.

'You intend to leave me, then?' she said at length.

His gesture seemed to deprecate the crudeness of the allusion.

'To marry some one else?'

Again his eye and hand protested. She rose and stood before him.

'Why should you be afraid to tell me? Is it Una Van Sideren?'

He was silent.

'I wish you good luck,' she said.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. The Descent of Man, pp. 182-3.

That is the end of the scene, its culminating force in Mrs. Wharton's mind being indicated by its use as the conclusion of the second of the three sections into which the story is divided. For the next five pages the reader watches the woman react to the scene:

She looked up, finding herself alone. She did not remember when or how he had left the room, or how long afterward she had sat there... Her first conscious thought was that she had not broken her word... There had been no crying out, no vain appeal to the past, no attempt at temporizing or evasion... Now that it was over, she sickened to find herself alive... She stood up, weariness in every bone... Gradually her vision cleared... There must be help somewhere if she could only master the inner tumult... She was the victim of the theories she renounced. It was as though some giant machine of her own making had caught her up in its wheels and was grinding her to atoms.<sup>1</sup>

Other examples can be given more briefly and will only show how frequently a paragraph or a section of a short story begins with a suggestion of the character's being engaged, or having been engaged, in recollection:

"She did not understand this until afterwards."<sup>2</sup>

"It was certainly curious to reflect, as he leaned against the doorway of Mrs. Goldermere's ball-room..."<sup>3</sup>

"The discovery came to Paulina suddenly. She looked up one evening from her reading and it stood before her like a ghost."<sup>4</sup> (The discovery required fifteen preceding pages to

---

1. Ibid., pp. 183-187.

2. "Souls Belated," The Greater Inclination, p. 89.

3. "A Cup of Cold Water," The Greater Inclination, p. 184.

4. "The Angel at the Grave," Crucial Instances, p. 51.

elaborate )

I began to think over the years of our intermittent acquaintance...<sup>1</sup>

The thought of his wife rushed into Trenham's mind.<sup>2</sup>

Now, as she stood on the hearth, the subject of their earlier curiosity revived in her with a new sense of its meaning...<sup>3</sup>

It was not till the following spring that I plucked up courage to tell Mrs. Bridgeworth what had happened to me that night at Morgat.<sup>4</sup>

It was odd how, as he paced up and down the Embankment late that evening, musing over the vision vouchsafed him, one detail continued to detach itself with discordant sharpness from the harmonious blur.<sup>5</sup>

At Euphoria, after a ball-game, a dozen people would have been ready to give him a lift home... Suddenly a motor stood there: Vance remembered piling into it with Upton... Presently some other girls turned up, and there were more drinks and jokes...

As his vision readjusted itself, and he found that he was in a narrow iron bedstead... he began to wonder... but the effort of wondering was too much for him; his aching head dropped back.<sup>6</sup>

Many critics have noticed that there is in Mrs. Wharton's method a subjugation of the action. Percy H. Boynton puts it simply: "She is absorbed in the lights and shades of analysis that precede and follow a climax more than she is in the climax itself."<sup>7</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, whose opinion of Mrs. Wharton

- 
1. "Her Son," Human Nature, p. 4.
  2. "The Day of the Funeral," Ibid., p. 117.
  3. "Afterwards," Ghosts, p. 75.
  4. "Miss Mary Pask", Ibid., p. 223.
  5. "The Temperate Zone", Here and Beyond, p. 204.
  6. Pp. 139-145.
  7. Some Contemporary Americans, op.cit., p. 101.

is more flattering than penetrating, believes that this skill "in making her characters dominate the situations, which yet in their turn illuminate both the past and the future of her characters" is one of the reasons why she is superior to her contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Lewis Hackett, in a review of the Xingu collection of short stories, described her narrative quality in an apt figure: "In some respects she is a pharmacist in her handling of vital forces. She deals in essences and double distillations."<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1908 Henry Dwight Sedgwick made some observations on Mrs. Wharton's work that have been substantiated by her later fiction. He felt that her proper vehicle was the short story, because in a novel the characters must act for themselves. "The business of Mrs. Wharton's dramatis personae is to portray an effective episode; and it is a business which requires cleverness, as distinguished from originality, poetic feeling, humor, insight, romance, energy or power."<sup>3</sup> With this description of her creative limitations not many later critics would disagree, except with the implication that she lacked insight. Sedgwick retracts that idea in a later statement, equally full of sound opinion: "The reader did not expect from Mrs. Wharton pathos, nor humor, nor tragedy, nor a wide range

---

1. Op.cit., p. 578.

2. New Republic, February 10, 1917, p. 50.

3. The New American Type and Other Essays, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1908, pp. 57-8/

of experience, nor broad sympathies, nor raids upon the heart; one did expect wit, satire, flashes of insight, comprehension, analysis, vividness."<sup>1</sup> Her condemns The House of Mirth as being composed of disconnected episodes and concludes that the plot is uninteresting because of the monotony "due to the iteration of motive. Mrs. Wharton is not a storyteller... not a raconteur... she looked down on life from a tower and does not get close to people."<sup>2</sup>

Sedgwick has probably hit upon the weakness in The House of Mirth that Mrs. Wharton feared. She recalls the state of her artistic development as she wrote it:

My idea of a novel was something far more compact and centripetal [than The Valley of Decision] and I doubted whether I should ever acquire enough constructive power to achieve anything beyond isolated character studies, or the stringing together of picturesque episodes.<sup>3</sup>

Wilbur Cross says of her people that, "She tries <sup>to</sup> tell us what was going on in their minds beneath a calm exterior."<sup>4</sup>

St. John Ervine praises the adaptation of The Age of Innocence for the stage because it avoided the author's use of "expired events."<sup>5</sup> It is likely that Osbert Burdett had the same idea in mind when he said that her work contained more form than

---

2. Ibid., p. 72.

2. Ibid., p. 94.

3. "Confessions of a Novelist," op.cit., p. 389.

4. "Edith Wharton," op.cit., p. 645.

5. Quoted in The Literary Digest, December 15, 1928, p. 27.

feeling and that Hawthorne "evokes where Mrs. Wharton describes."<sup>1</sup>

To find the source of Mrs. Wharton's tutelage in the use of expired events to tell her story we must turn, as usual, to Henry James. "The great scenes in James are always mental conflicts. They are, even in words, but rarely scenes of passion. Too often in his books the scene-a-faire, if violent, is told retrospectively or at second-hand."<sup>2</sup>

In attaining effects James sacrifices intimacy and emotional power. We share Strether's thoughts but never, deeply, his feeling. This restraint is inevitable in James' method, which springs instinctively from his reticence, from his constitutional avoidance of, his fear of, passion.<sup>3</sup>

We must remember that Mrs. Wharton never went as far as James, and the condemnations of James based on his lack of vitality can be only partially applied to her. She struck a medium in fiction somewhere between the artificiality of James and the looseness of Thackeray. The selection of "crucial moments" can also be seen as a quality in the work of the other woman novelist that Mrs. Wharton admired, George Eliot. Cross describes Eliot as seeking after revealing moments in the behavior of her characters and then studying the consequences of their acts for weal or woe. Cross's analysis of Mrs. Wharton's

- 
1. "Contemporary American Authors," London Mercury, November, 1925, p. 59.
  2. Grabo, Carl H., op.cit., p. 31.
  3. Ibid., p. 89.

similarity and indebtedness to her masters is significant enough to be quoted in full:

In her art one may sometimes see Henry James. But for him she would never have gone so far into psychological refinements, though she has never subordinated her characters and story to his obscure complexities of style and manner. When she passes through the minds of the people she is creating, she takes a lantern with her and eventually brings the reader out into the light of day. As time went on, James sacrificed his characters to the exigencies of elaborate designs, giving us, as it were, perfect houses with only the phantoms of men and women to inhabit them... In Mrs. Wharton's best work characters, situation, scene and incident unite in a single beautiful pattern as if they had come into her imagination that way. Her novels belong to the realm of art as much as do the Italian paintings she admires.<sup>1</sup>

The use of the narrative formula, which shows a character being molded under the pressure of the effect of expired events, although by no means Mrs. Wharton's only method, is evidently the one that distinguishes her work from that of most other novelists. It has gained for her the brilliant economies of effect, and provided her novels with a solidarity and roundness that is unmistakable. It is one of the essential methods in a craftsmanship designed to achieve form. It is through form that she maintains the reader's interest in narratives that are frequently neither universally interesting nor dramatic.

---

1. "Edith Wharton," op.cit., p. 642.

Stuart Sherman hits upon this point in his discussion of The Mother's Recompense:

'Where,' as Henry James was so fond of inquiring, 'does the interest lie?' With reference to the ordinary novel of commerce one specifies a newly exploited trade or town or race, or one picks out a chapter or a character or a bit of social satire, and says, 'This is what interests me.' In The Mother's Recompense interest pervades the novel as the tension pervades a spider's web of which every strand is taut and indispensable. That is what Mrs. Wharton's French critics mean when they say that she has 'form' and that is why she has been able to publish her novels simultaneously in the revues and the American magazines.<sup>1</sup>

The French influence on Mrs. Wharton in arranging action into patterns, which American critics delight in calling artificiality, is inescapable. She learned many lessons from such masters as Flaubert, Bourget, and the Goncourts. The parallels in structure between Ethan Frome and Flaubert's Madame Bovary have not gone unnoticed by the critics.<sup>2</sup> There were other masters to be consulted, who showed her possibilities in a different direction: Tolstoi, with his tremendous inclusiveness of canvas; Stendhal, whose The Red and the Black, at least, would have been no model for a convert to the theories of James; Balzac; even Dostoievsky.

Mrs. Wharton's experience was restricted, and her power to dramatize was undeveloped. No better example of this weakness can be found than in a notable attempt she makes in Twilight

---

1. The Main Stream, op.cit., p. 208.

2. DeVoto, in the Introduction to the Modern Students Library edition of Ethan Frome; and Van Meter Ames, in The Aesthetics of the Novel, University of Chicago Press, 1928, p.192.

light Sleep is describe one man's attempt to shoot another.<sup>1</sup>

The scene is covered with a veil of uncertainty, as if the idea were unpleasant to the author. The reader concludes with the hazy notion that somebody has shot somebody, but just who did it and how or when, he can not know until the events are reflected, later, through the mind of Nona Manford as she lies on a hospital bed. Mrs. Wharton, as Sedgwick pointed out, is no story teller, no raconteur. To the extent that she saw life as action, as incident, ~~she is~~ not a great artist, being only a pale imitation of writers who could, like Dumas and Stevenson, make an action live. Her interest conformed with her ability in this respect. "The story with the plot is a perfectly legitimate branch of fiction... intrinsically less interesting than the drama of characters and circumstances -- brilliantly used, however, by Dumas, Defoe and Stevenson."<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's power lies, rather, in the selection of those moments in the lives of her characters when the accumulated pressure of circumstances becomes so strong that a particular incident, not in itself important, will change that character, force it to a decision or deflect it in a different direction. Waythorn notices that his wife is pouring brandy into his coffee, and becomes aware, as his meeting with two men

---

1. Chapter XXX, pp. 351-356.

2. "Review of Leslie Stephen's George Eliot," op.cit., p. 43.

downtown had only partially suggested to him, that he was, after all, one of three husbands in the life of his wife.<sup>1</sup>

The world of incidents and the world of emotions do, indeed, overlap and react on each other, but only to some myriad minded seer is it given to behold and report life 'in the round' as it were: the greatest among the less great can seize but one angle of the complex vision.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's world, by her own definition, was one of emotions precisely distilled and measured. When she attempted to combine that analysis of emotion with the vividness of incident she seems to have gone beyond her ability. The power to combine both, to behold and to report life in the round, as she says, is the power given to a genius. All that she did was learn everything possible about the proper selection and organization of the incidents that would reveal the elements in human life in which she was most interested.

All the principles of her work are linked solidly together. Out of one grows another: out of the demand for moral problems grows the use of sensitive characters than can appreciate a moral problem. Out of the subject thence engendered, a sensitive person engaged in soul-strife, there would arise the technique of structure that would demand the use of crucial moments which would reveal that character being shaped. The incident is less important than the character, consequently; and Mrs. Wharton's

---

1. "The Other Two," The Descent of Man and Other Stories,  
2. "Review of Leslie Stephen's George Eliot," op.cit., p.44.

power to dramatize the incident never reached nearly the level of her power to show that incident's effect upon her character. Her formula developed from this desire: she starts with the character and goes back to the incidents more often than not.

Sometimes Mrs. Wharton's narrative is straightforward, although her events are rather limited: quiet scenes, the unspoken word, the subtle gesture, the flash of an eye. The dramatized incident, especially the most effective ones, are never violent; they are rather the exhibition of a decision. The sensitive characters need not have the decision demonstrated to them; they are made aware of it through these subtle movements that to a casual observer would have so little significance. Waythorn takes the third cup from his wife with a quiet laugh. That is an indication of his decision to accept the conditions that have been forced upon him: a third of his wife is better than none. Anna Leath drops her eyes and leaves the room. Darrow knows that they can never marry. The "big scene" is absent from Mrs. Wharton's work because her characters are quick to perceive the consequences of an incident. No one ever needs to raise his voice to tell them anything. It can all be done with a bow, a smile, or the lady asking the gentleman to call a cab.

There is somewhere a point, of course, at which the subtlety of the motivation for a particular character's change

becomes so fine that the reader is bewildered. The crucial moment can be made so quiet, so inconspicuous, that the reader, not being as delicately tuned to the significances of a misplaced glove or an untimely blush, is unable to associate result with cause. The result is clear, usually, but the cause may go unperceived. Henry James once hoped that Mrs. Wharton would never concern herself with the "Obvious." Her answer and the key to her difference from James, may be found in a statement made by one of her characters in "The Liar": "In fighting shy of the obvious, one may miss the significant."<sup>1</sup>

For the most part Mrs. Wharton did not miss the significant. She may sometimes have struck upon the obvious, as Henry James felt that she had in Ethan Frome, as others have felt that she did in The Custom of the Country, and as Mrs. Wharton herself must have known she did in Twilight Sleep and Hudson River Bracketed. At the other extreme, she has been accused of missing the significant, as some critics think she did in The Reef, The Mother's Recompense, and Madame de Treymes. It is in those novels demanding the selection of moments least obvious that she comes closest to Henry James in technique. An example from one of her short stories can best show what is meant by the use of fictions so subtle in implication that the reader can not be sure he knows what is happening. In "The

---

1. Quoted in Quinn, Arthur Hobson, Edith Wharton, New York, D. Appleton-Century Company, 1938, p. 4.

Dilettante" Thursdale has announced, by letter, to his old and close friend, Mrs. Vervain, that he has become engaged to Ruth Gaynor. Mrs. Wharton takes us into his mind as he walks toward the home of Mrs. Vervain:

He thus incidentally learned that the privilege of loving her is one of the least favours that a charming woman can accord; and in seeking to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment he had developed a science of evasion in which the woman of the moment became a mere implement of the game. He owed a great deal of delicate enjoyment to the cultivation of this art. The perils from which it had been his refuge became naïvely harmless: was it possible that he who now took his easy way along the levels had once preferred to gasp on the raw heights of emotion? Youth is a high-coloured season; but he had the satisfaction of feeling that he had entered earlier than most into that chiaro-oscuro of sensation where every half-tone has its value.

As a promoter of this pleasure no one he had known was comparable to Mrs. Vervain. He had taught a good many women not to betray their feelings, but he had never before had such fine material to work in. She had been surprisingly crude when he first knew her; capable of making the most awkward inferences, of plunging through thin ice, of recklessly undressing her emotions; but she had acquired, under the discipline of his reticences and evasions, a skill almost equal to his own, and perhaps more remarkable in that it involved keeping time with any tune he played and reading at sight some uncommonly difficult passages.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the story is devoted to a conversation between  
T  
Thursdale and Mrs. Vervain. Just what the conversation means

---

1. The Descent of Man, pp. 142-3.

can be easily lost upon one who has not been taught to keep "in time with the tune" or unable to read at sight some of these "uncommonly difficult passages."

At just what point the crucial moment selected becomes so tenuous that its significance grows imperceptible will depend, of course, upon the reader. To the American audience, Mrs. Wharton has seemed to be too subtle, too much averse to the obvious. The novels popular in this country have been so for reasons outside her method, possibly in spite of it. It is important to notice, however, that in her selection of these crucial moments she found a level somewhere between that of the James-Bourget school, in which all action seems to be clouded with gray shapes of subtle analysis, and that of superficial animal conflict of the Defoe-Dreiser school. Obviously she is much closer to James and Bourget than to Defoe, but not so close to James as to become completely divorced from life.

Mrs. Wharton had no objection to action in a novel; she thought it inferior only to character. The reason why she was uninterested in action, and weak in handling it, can be found in the limitations of her temperament. Her theoretic essays on the writing of fiction are consistent in their iteration of the belief that a writer must conform to his temperament in his selection of subject and in his "style." Mrs. Wharton was alien to physical action, as were the characters she created.

She and they came from the same roots, a civilized hothouse. "The lives led behind the brownstone fronts was as monotonous as the architecture."<sup>1</sup> A monotonous life will not provide many crucial moments. The recorder of that life must use what there is.

### 7. Point of View

An artistic sense of selection will provide an important technical tool in writing fiction. On its use depends the writer's ability to control the point of view. Mrs. Wharton's lasting interest in the problem was obtained from conversations with Henry James during the formative period of her artistic development. She has achieved admirable unity through the consistent application of her theories. It is axiomatic in her thinking that a writer must know how he is going to tell a story long before he starts. One of the first decisions is to determine through whose eyes the story is to be seen and told.

In a short story, Mrs. Wharton goes so far as to say, the effect of compactness and immediacy is attained mainly through two unities: the old traditional one of time, and another, more complex and modern, which requires that any rapidly enacted epi-

---

1. "A Little Girl's New York," op.cit., p. 359.

sode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes.<sup>1</sup> She regards Henry James as being the only novelist who has formulated his ideas about his art, and the first to explain the principles of unified vision.

It seems as though such a question must precede any study of the subject chosen, since the subject is conditioned by the answer; but no critic seems to have pronounced it.<sup>2</sup>

Unity of effect can be secured through the novelist's careful selection, among his characters, of a reflecting consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The mind chosen must be so situated and constituted that it can take the widest possible view of the action. As she says in A Backward Glance, the character chosen to see the story should be the one with the mind most capable of reaching its periphery.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's early experiences in writing The House of Mirth involved her in problems that forced a consolidation of her thinking. After she had written The Valley of Decision, which she considers no true novel, the central idea for a story about New York began to take shape in her mind.

I already had definite ideas [she says] as to how any given subject should be viewed, and from what angle approached; my trouble was that the story kept drawing into its web so many subordinate theme that to show their organic connection with the main issue, yet keep them from crowding to the front, was a heavy task for a beginner.<sup>5</sup>

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 43.

2. Ibid., p. 45

3. "Henry James in His Letters," Quarterly Review, July, 1920, p. 189.

4. A Backward Glance, p. 190.

5. Ibid., p. 207.

Mrs. Wharton knew that to include all possible themes would extend the novel unduly and involve a lack of completeness. It would sacrifice conciseness of form and unity secured through the application of a strict point of view. That this was the salutary remedy for one difficulty can be shown by a comparison of the previous novel, The Valley of Decision, with its shifting point of view, and The House of Mirth. The latter is told almost completely through the minds of Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden. What they can not see, hear, or think is not recorded.

Mrs. Wharton's general rules for the use of the reflecting consciousness are explained in The Writing of Fiction.

It was remarked in the chapter on the short story [she says] that the same experience never happens to any two people, and that the story-teller's first care, after the choice of a subject, is to decide to which of his characters the episode in question happened, since it could not have happened in that particular way to more than one. Applied to the novel this may seem a hard saying, since the longer passage of time and more crowded field of action presuppose, on the part of the visualizing character, a state of omniscience and omnipresence likely to shake the reader's sense of probability. The difficulty is most often met by shifting the point of view from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet preserve the unity of impression. In the interest of this 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 consciousness 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.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 86-7.

Mrs. Wharton's objection to the single narrator, already stated, has the same basis as her objection to the author omniscient. Both tend to destroy verisimilitude. She does not object to conventions in the novel; she objects only to their misuse. Any convention that hinders verisimilitude is "obviously in the wrong place."<sup>1</sup> She accuses the omniscient author of developing the careless habit of tumbling in and out of his characters' minds, and then suddenly drawing back to scrutinize them from the outside as the avowed showman holding his puppets' strings. To use only one reflecting consciousness weakens the readers' faith in the power of the selected character to function so extensively. Her own decision is that the story must be told through the mind of two, or at most three, characters. Her advice concerning the change from one point of view to another is based on the simple rule that a new reflector is to be turned on the scene when the first can not "be aware of, or is incapable of reacting to, even if aware of" the incident about to be related.

Mrs. Wharton is more fortunate than most novelists in finding that her proper sphere of investigation lies among characters who are able to reflect the shades of conduct which interest her most, and are most revealing. Her characters are sensitive; consequently, her point of view is that of a sensitive observer.

---

1. Ibid., p. 89.

Her concern for the careful selection of the revealing consciousness has given strength to her work. A recent student of the art, Carl Grabo, considers that choice as the basis of all the problems of the novelist.

The point of view [he says] is the fundamental principle of technique in novel structure. By the adoption of one or another point of view, plot, characterization, tone, description are all to some degree determined. The choice of his point of view is to an author contemplating a story the most vital question of method, the one most fraught with possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

The House of Mirth is an excellent example of Mrs. Wharton's wise selection of a point of view. The central character sees the story. It is natural that she should, because Lily Bart is the author's main concern, and the elimination of the many diverse strains of action that could have crept into the crowded scene is accomplished by the recording of only those incidents that Lily is herself a part of, or aware of. The unity so essential to Mrs. Wharton's idea of form is almost automatically achieved.

This limitation also invests the central character with an interest for the reader than he can not ignore. This engagement of the reader's sympathy is one of the triumphs of the art of fiction. The limited point of view, by its removal of the 'interfering author' is a happy means of getting the reader

---

1. The Technique of the Novel, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928, p. 81.

to identify himself with Lily Bart. That sympathy is enhances the tragic implications of The House of Mirth.

Although Lily Bart carries the burden of the narrative exposition here, her vision alone could not tell the whole story. A severely limited point of view has the danger of destroying the author's power to show the effect of the same incident upon another character, or to show the central character's objective reality. The solution Mrs. Wharton offers is to introduce a second point of view. When that is done we really know the protagonist, having been given her own revelation of herself and also that of another keen observer. Lawrence Selden performs that function in The House of Mirth.

Mrs. Wharton sacrifices this artistic principle, however, when she finds it more convenient to present some passages from the point of view of even insignificant characters, such as Mrs. Peniston, Mrs. Stepney, Gerty Farish, and Trenor. After The House of Mirth, her tendency increases, even in long novels, to use only one or two characters to relate the story. Her early practice in this respect is so uniform that it is difficult to agree with Joseph Warren Beach who says that she was following the traditional method of objective narrative.<sup>1</sup> In general, Mrs. Wharton confines the point of view to two characters, letting each take the narrative in turn. Practically the whole of Hudson

---

1. Op.cit., p. 436.

River Bracketed and its sequel, The Gods Arrive, is told by Vance Weston and Halo Tarrant. The reflections of minor characters and the objective description by the author are inserted briefly and almost imperceptibly.

The number of points of view used in a piece of fiction by Mrs. Wharton is largely determined by the length of the work. In the short story and novelette there is only one. In these briefer pieces there is sometimes a framework in which a narrator, frequently in the first person, provides a prologue and an epilogue for the main action. Only in The Spark does the narrator reveal the central substance of the story. The usual method, then, is to let a central character visualize the whole story and also to reflect the significance of the action. In Madame de Treymes John Durham is the point of view; in The Old Maid, Delia Ralston; in False Dawn, Lewis Raycie, the young purchaser of the masterpieces of art; in Sanctuary it is Kate Peyton, the mother of the young architect; in Ethan Frome, it is Frome himself; in New Year's Day, Lizzie Hazeldean; in The Touchstone, Glennard. The strictly limited point of view gives a story an almost automatic unity. As a method of providing 'form', of shearing off the irrelevant details with which any story is replete, the discipline of selected vision is a good one. In these shorter forms Mrs. Wharton

has happily followed her own injunction to select the character who is most capable of seeing the 'periphery.'

John Durham is able to appreciate the French attitude concerning family solidarity in a way that Madame de Treymes herself could not, lacking perspective from which to view the problem. Delia Ralston is best able to tell the story of her old maid cousin, Charlotte, because Charlotte is too much a rebel to understand the reasoning processes of the New York society that frustrates her, and all the male Ralstons are too smug to sympathize. Only Lewis Raycie could know the satisfaction he got from owning masterpieces that went unappreciated, so he must tell of "false dawn." Kate Peyton could best reveal the temptation facing her son because she was most keenly aware of its force. We can not imagine Zeena Frome or Mattie Silver being able to see deeply enough into the soul of Ethan to be able to tell his story; Frome must tell it himself, as must Lizzie Hazeldean in New Year's Day. Glennard's wife might have told of his battle with his conscience, but she could not have done it so well as Glennard.

The first-person narrator, used occasionally in the shorter works, has the useful function of putting the reader in the proper mood and of introducing the central characters, who will be more real for having been already evoked externally. The visiting engineer in Ethan Frome describes the New England countryside and reveals its barren loneliness. Frome could not

perceive the depressing elements in the climate, topography, and routine existence of the neighborhood. By allowing the engineer to discover the circumstances of the tragedy of Frome only bit by bit, Mrs. Wharton maintains suspense, yet only one fifth of the space is absorbed by the engineer's narrative; four fifths are devoted to Frome.

The same formula for point of view is used for three of the four novelettes in the Old New York series. The narrator sets the stage for Raycie's discovery of the new art, for Lizzie Hazeldean's defiance of the moral code, and for Delane's attempt to live more nobly than his associates. Delane in The Spark differs from the others in never revealing his true character. Indeed, he is the least sharp of Mrs. Wharton's briefer characterizations, seen only through the narrator, vaguely. In The Old Maid the stage is set by the author, in objective manner that she will occasionally use in her later novels.

Mrs. Wharton employs the same method, or rather two variations of it, in the short stories. The character immediately concerned in an experience tells it, or a narrator in the first persons hears it told. In either case the emotional value of the story is given through the consciousness of a participating character. Among the eighty short stories collected into eleven books, not more than five vary from this formula. The point of view is most often limited to a central character. The story of

the "Bunner Sisters" is told by Ann Eliza Bunner;<sup>1</sup> Waythorn, the third husband, tells of "The Other Two";<sup>2</sup> the lady's maid tells the story in "The Lady's Maid's Bell";<sup>3</sup> Nora Frenway is the point of view in "Atrophy";<sup>4</sup> Paul Dorrance in "Diagnosis".<sup>5</sup>

The tale told by a first-person narrator not himself involved in the action is a device used by Mrs. Wharton occasionally. In "The Duchess at Prayer"<sup>6</sup> the narrator establishes a gloomy, ominous background against which the caretaker of the Italian ruin can reveal the tragedy. "Kerfol"<sup>7</sup> follows the same procedure, except that a manuscript is reproduced to tell the story. "Coming Home",<sup>8</sup> "A Coward",<sup>9</sup> "The Recovery",<sup>10</sup> "The Confessional",<sup>11</sup> and "The Eyes"<sup>12</sup> have a similar point of view, with the narrator merely setting the stage. In a few stories the first-person narrator is himself the chief character. Examples of this method can be found in "Miss Mary Pask",<sup>13</sup> "Confession",<sup>14</sup> and "Her Son".<sup>15</sup> In these the author returns to the oldest and simplest method of all fiction.

- 
1. Xingu and Other Stories, 1916, pp. 309-436.
  2. The Descent of Man and Other Stories, 1904, pp.71-109.
  3. Ibid., pp. 243-281.
  4. Certain People, 1930, pp.1-20.
  5. Human Nature, 1933, pp.214-249.
  6. Crucial Instances, 1901, pp. 1-32.
  7. Xingu and Other Stories, pp. 151-189.
  8. Ibid., pp.43-99.
  9. The Greater Inclination, 1899, pp. 131-159.
  10. Crucial Instances, pp. 65-99.
  11. Ibid., pp. 181-242.
  12. Tales of Men and Ghosts, 1910, pp.241-275.
  13. Here and Beyond, 1926, pp. 1-32.
  14. The World Over, 1936, pp. 141-215.
  15. Human Nature, pp. 1-105.

"Xingu"<sup>1</sup> marks an important variation from Mrs. Wharton's normal method. No character in it is singled out as the interpreter of the action; three or four women are equally portrayed, and the sketches are drawn by an omniscient author. It is her only experiment with this traditional method, although it is by no means objective. What makes "Xingu" important is that it has been widely reprinted and is regarded as typical of her kind of short story.

Mrs. Wharton's novels, with the exception of The Valley of Decision and The Buccaneers,<sup>2</sup> are examples of her practice of limiting a point of view to one or two characters. In The House of Mirth, 1905, the story is seen through the eyes of Lily and Selden. With the next novel, The Fruit of the Tree, 1907, the use of minor characters has been replaced by an objective description of those actions which John Amherst and Justine Brent, the two principal narrators, could not have seen. Only the slightest hints of Mrs. Wharton's presence can be found in The Reef, 1912, the story being seen through the eyes of George Darrow and Anna Leath. Undine Spragg sees most of the action in The Custom of the Country, 1913, although Ralph Marvell, Comte Raymond de Chelles, and at least one minor character,

- 
1. In Xingu and Other Stories, 1916, pp. 1-41.
  2. The first is not a true novel and the second is unfinished. To consider them along with the others would unnecessarily complicate any judgment.

Charles Bowen, observe portions of it. The unity here would have been spoiled had Marvell not been used, since he must reveal the action in American while Spragg is in Paris.

Summer, 1917, is the first full-length novel with a single point of view, and after that date the tendency toward confining the mode of vision to one character is more noticeable. The Age of Innocence, 1920, is told through Newland Archer, a choice as successful as that of Charity Royall in its predecessor was dangerous. Beach selects The Age of Innocence as the best example of the well-made novel. There can be no question that the limitation of the point of view to Newland Archer makes the story more unified and convincing than was, for example, The Custom of the Country. The Glimpses of the Moon, 1922, uses a dual point of view, with the story moving rapidly between Nick and Susie Lansing. In the next two novels, A Son at the Front, 1923, and The Mother's Recompense, 1925, the single point of view is retained, but in Twilight Sleep, 1927, three reflectors are employed, Pauline, Dexter, and Nona Manford, interchangeably. The Children, 1928, is seen through Martin Boyne's eyes and the last two novels are similarly confined to the central characters, Vance Weston and Halo Spear.

- 
1. Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive.

There is an unmistakable relationship between Mrs. Wharton's failure to maintain point of view and the weakness of certain of her novels. Some, which are unified but weak, fail because of inconsequential subject matter. The Children is devoted to a group of maladjusted products of the international hotel set, and there are so many characters introduced that the material wears thin. A Son at the Front is much too long, and the reader wearies of trying to sympathize with John Campton, the protagonist. The characters in The Glimpses of the Moon are such hopelessly shallow parasites that no amount of technical brilliance could have made them important, or their story worth telling.

Mrs. Wharton's other distinct failures have partially resulted from errors in selecting point of view. In Summer, The Custom of the Country, and Twilight Sleep she tried to tell her story through the minds of characters with whom she was not sympathetic, whose manner of looking at life was completely different from hers. Charity Royall possesses such a mixture of naivete and insight that, when Mrs. Wharton tells the story through her, the ideas are confused because of Charity's personality. The author sympathizes with her, but the intellectual separation between them is so great that the writer can never quite lose herself in the character. More startling is Mrs. Wharton's weakness in selecting a point of view to which she can not wholly resign herself in The Custom of the Country. Here the reader is always aware, while

the story is being told by Undine Spragg, that the author is present, and unable to control her desire to interfere and reveal just how despicable Undine is. The heroine can not analyze her own cruelty and shallowness; and Mrs. Wharton has eliminated herself as a recording instrument. Consequently, Undine is drawn in garish strokes with a large brush, through action, rather than in Mrs. Wharton's accustomed fashion, through psychological insight, with the fine lines of an etching. To continue the figure, if Lily Bart resembles a portrait done by an impeccable artist who catches the significance of every quality in her face, so Undine is a portrait done in yellow on the side of a red barn. Mrs. Wharton was artistically unable to get close to her subject. With Ralph Marvell, Mrs. Wharton has a spiritual kinship, and he becomes more real, if less vivid, than Undine. Percy Lubbock believes the book fails because the "characters have light and space all around them."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's use of similarly shallow characters in Twilight Sleep is another example of her failure to select a sensitive reflector. Pauline Manford and her husband Dexter, who are the points of view for more than half the novel, are members of the crude society which had replaced, in the 1920's, the remnants of aristocracy destroyed by Undine Spragg and her kind. Mrs. Wharton hates the Manfords as much as she hates Undine, but has resigned herself to laughter. The rules of her

---

1. Lubbock, Percy. "Novels of Edith Wharton," op.cit., p.641.

craft prevent her from having too much fun at the expense of her points of view. The reticence is fatal; the characters die, and the book ends in pointless melodrama, even as The Custom of the Country dwindles into insipid irony.

Percy Lubbock has indirectly stated the case against Mrs. Wharton in her weaker books:

The central and distinguishing gift of the novelist is to completely identify himself with the characters through whose eyes he is seeing; that his field of vision, both in extent and particularity, is exactly no more and no less than that of the man or woman he has imagined.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Mrs. Wharton's novels are told from a specialized point of view, as are most of her short stories. Now and then she allows herself, however, the privilege of looking at the scene and characters objectively. Such objective passages are subtly inserted, and the point of view of one of the participants in the scene is gradually introduced. The reader is hardly aware that he has not been seeing the whole thing through the eyes of the interpreter of the action. Beach says that she does this "frequently",<sup>2</sup> but a close analysis would show the method to be exceptional.

There is a clear example of the objective manner merging into the limited point of view in The Old Maid. The opening sentence states: "In the old New York of the 'fifties a few families ruled, in simplicity and affluence. Of these were the Ralstons."

---

1. Ibid.

2. Op.cit., p. 439.

The second paragraph shows that the sturdy English and rubicund Dutch had mingled to produce a prosperous, prudent and yet lavish society and lived "in a genteel monotony of which the surface was never stirred by the dumb dramas now and then enacted underground. Sensitive souls in those days were like muted key-boards, on which Fate played without a sound." The third paragraph shows that the Ralstons filled a large area in this compact society.

They had not come to the cononies to die for a creed but to live for a bank-account. The result had been beyond their hopes, and their religion was tinged by their success. Anedulcorated Church of England which... left out the coarser allusions in the Marriage Service... was exactly suited to the spirit of compromise whereon the Ralstons had built themselves up. There was in all the tribe the same instinctive recoil from new religions as from un-accounted-for people.

The description of New York continues in this tone for eight pages. The reader learns that, at the age of twenty, Delia Lovell had married James Ralston. On page eleven the limited point of view begins to operate:

She [Delia] was thinking placidly and gratefully of these things as she sat one afternoon in her handsome bedroom in Gramercy Park. She was too near to the primitive Ralstons to have as clear a view of them, as, for instance, the son in question might one day command: she lived under them as unthinkingly as one lives under the laws of one's country.

A reader would have to be credulous to believe that Delia Ralston would interpret her civilization with the insight displayed in the introductory pages of her story. She might have

been sitting in her bedroom thinking, but a "placid and grateful" thinker would not see that the

fourth generation of Ralstons had nothing left in the way of convictions save an acute sense of honour in private and business matters; on the life of the community and the state they took their daily views from the newspapers, and the newspapers they already despised.

It is really Mrs. Wharton who has that opinion; she is the possessor of the "clear view" that "the son in question might one day command."

A similar subterfuge can be found in The Age of Innocence. Newland Archer is the point of view selected. In the opening chapter he is attending Christine Nilsson's performance of Faust.

She sang, of course, "M'ama !" and not "he loves me," since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded; such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole.<sup>1</sup>

Newland Archer would accept the convention of the Swedish artist singing in Italian; he would not have noticed it. He is so much a part of his society that he is incapable of evaluating it with the aloofness that characterizes Mrs. Wharton's mind. She must, therefore, sneak into his, make little darting comments

---

1. The Age of Innocence, pp.2-3.

and then sneak out again, with the hope that the reader may not have noticed. In that particular habit, the use of a dishonest objectivity, lies a confusion and weakness in her work. Her demand for form led her to use a single reflecting consciousness, and to select a sensitive character who could "command the periphery"; but the satirical bent of her temperament interfered with the complete subjugation of her mind into that of the sensitized point of view. Her own intelligence is too keen to overlook the stupidities and ironies in which Newland Archer, Lily Bart, and the rest are so involved that they could not record them. She is caught between the desire to be a honest craftsman and a satirist. Her integrity as craftsman denied her the use of objectivity; her penchant for satire destroys the unity of impression her characters would otherwise provide.

Mrs. Wharton's tendency to use a reflecting consciousness as narrator has led her into a habit of describing in full something that did not happen. She does the describing through the mind of her selected point of view. This artifice probably rises from the unwillingness of her characters to engage in an action. They more readily imagine it. An example from The Old Maid will illustrate better than further explanation.

Delia Ralston, the point of view, is upstairs, awaiting the arrival of Tina, her ward, while Charlotte, the child's mother, waits below.

And Delia could imagine how quietly and decently the scene below stairs would presently be enacted: no astonishment, no reproaches, no insinuations, but a smiling and resolute ignoring of excuses.

"What, Tina ? You walked home with Lanning ? You imprudent child -- in this wet snow ! Ah, I see: Delia was worried about the baby and ran off early, promising to send back the carriage -- and it never came ? Well, my dear, I congratulate you on finding Lanning to see you home... Yes -- I saw up because I couldn't for the life of me remember whether you'd taken the latch-key -- was there ever such a flighty old aunt ? But don't tell your Mamma, dear, or she'd scold me for being so forgetful, and for staying downstairs in the cold... You're quite sure you have the key ? Ah, Lanning has it ? Thank you, Lanning; so kind ! Goodnight -- or one really ought to say good morning."

As Delia reached this point in her mute representation of Charlotte's monologue the front door slammed below, and young Lanning Halsey walked slowly away across the square... His dismissal had taken exactly as long as Delia had calculated it would.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of this passage shows that Delia's information includes only the facts that Tina and Lanning had come and Lanning had gone. The main portion, the "mute representation of Charlotte's monologue," is imagined. The reader does not know what happened when Charlotte met Tina at the door; nor does Delia. Yet what she feels might have happened is presented in much more detail, occupying three times as much space as what the author tells us did happen. The rules Mrs. Wharton has agreed to follow make it impossible for her to tell the reader what did happen when

---

1. The Old Maid, pp. 138-140.

Tina entered. But the moment is too crucial to be omitted. The meeting arouses Delia to the realization that she can not let Tina face the world without her support. The author dramatizes the meeting, consequently, so that it becomes memorable. It is safe to assume that few readers will notice that the significant speech Charlotte makes to her daughter took place only in Delia's mind.

A similar method is used in A Mother's Recompense. Kate Clephane's problem is used in A Mother's Recompense daughter, Anne, that Chris Fenno, Anne's fiancé, had been previously her lover. Kate is leaving the rectory in which she has just been told by Dr. Arklow, the clergyman, that she should tell her daughter.

She tried to think the situation out; but, as always, her trembling thoughts recoiled, just as she had seen Dr. Arklow's recoil.

Every one to whom she had tried to communicate her secret without betraying it had the same instantaneous revulsion. 'Not that -- don't tell me that !' their averted eyes, their shrinking voices seemed to say. It was too horrible for any ears.

How then was she to obey Dr. Arklow's bidding and impart the secret to Anne ? He had said it as positively as if he were handing down a commandment from Sinai: 'The daughter must be told.'

How easy to lay down abstract rules for other people's guidance: 'The daughter' was just an imaginary person -- a convenient conventional pawn. But Kate Clephane's daughter -- her own Anne ! She closed her eyes and tried to face the look in Anne's as the truth dawned on her.

'You -- you, mother ? The mother I've come to adore -- the mother I can't live without, even with all my other happiness ? You ?'

Yes, perhaps that would be the worst of it, the way Anne would look at her and say 'You ?' For, once the girl knew the truth, her healthy youth might so revolt from Chris's baseness, Chris's duplicity, that the shock of the discovery would be its own cure. But when the blow had fallen, when Anne's life had crashed about her, and the ruins had cleared away -- what then of her mother ? Why her mother would be buried under those ruins; her life would be over; but a hideous, indestructible image of her would remain, overshadowing, darkening the daughter's future.

'This man you are going to marry has... '

No; Kate Clephane could go no farther than that. Such a confessions were not be made; were not for a daughter's ears. She began the phrase to herself again and again, but she could not end it...<sup>1</sup>

All this happens, it must be remembered, in Kate Clephane's mind. Like Delia Ralston, she is dramatizing an imaginary scene. It could be said that these scenes are examples of the continuation<sup>of</sup> point of view beyond its proper limits, and that Mrs. Wharton is not being fair with her readers. Those who read A Mother's Recompense carelessly might feel that Mrs. Celphane did tell her daughter. These scenes are evidence of the author's interest in the effect of incident on character. The crucial moment that evokes the decision is delineated in full; the reader can understand why the decision is made. Mrs. Wharton lives so completely in the minds of her characters that their thought-proceeses are just as real to her as were the actions of Moll Flanders to Defoe.

The source of Mrs. Wharton's ideas and practices in point of view is Henry James. Proust, master of<sup>the</sup> method, came into her

---

1. The Mother's Recompense, pp. 268-270.

literary experience too late to have exerted much influence. Meredith's examples must have helped, and Jane Austen provided some. With Austen, the point of view is omniscient, but the omniscience is hardly necessary, her characters being able to reveal themselves in word and deed. Hawthorne and Howells she would have called crude in their handling of this device. Balzac and Tolstoi could offer no help in teaching the lesson because, as she says, their "point of view is based on their trying after 'quantity' of material".<sup>1</sup>

#### 8. Lapse of Time

To give the illusion of passing time is one of the most difficult of the novelist's tasks. It is not the nature of the action but rather the amount of time required to complete it which should determine the use of a long or a short narrative. An emphasis on character such as Mrs. Wharton desires often necessitates extended narration; for character, to be fully revealed, must be allowed to develop, a process which requires time. Whenever she chooses to reveal a moral drama at its culmination, she selects an incident which can be set down in the single retrospective flash of a short story. When she seeks to depict a more

---

1. "Henry James in His Letters," op.cit., p. 200.

complex action involving a greater length of time she is inclined to employ the novel.

Mrs. Wharton admits that she has great difficulty in securing the illusion of the lapse of time. It is true that she secures it, but she does not know how. Tolstoy is the master, she says, but the process is a great mystery.<sup>1</sup> If the writer fails to indicate the time-lapse he risks showing the "modifying and maturing of the characters as an arbitrary sleight-of-hand" rather than the result of natural growth in age and experience.<sup>2</sup> The power to show passing time will exist only when the author knows his characters so well that he has a deep belief in what he is telling about them.

Mrs. Wharton makes one significant comment about the problem; namely, that the great writers have always allowed time to expire between the high moments of the narrative. The novelist must not fear to go slowly.

Mrs. Wharton has two methods of indicating the lapse of time. The first is the arbitrary use of blank pages and "parts." The second, and more important, is to show that the character has been developing. A good example of the first method is The Reef, which is divided into five parts, called books. Between the first

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p.43.

2. Ibid., p. 96.

and second, a period of three months intervenes; none between the second and third; one day between the third and fourth; three days between the fourth and fifth. The House of Mirth is divided into two parts, with three months intervening. The Custom of the Country covers the events of a ten year period in five months. The marriage of Undine and Ralph Marvell occurs between books one and two; book three opens with an action in New York which occurred several months before the event in Paris with which book two ends. Book four begins in typical fashion: "Nearly two years had passed since Ralph Marvell... had found that the fact of life was changed for him."<sup>1</sup> The same book ends with his suicide; the fifth opens with Undine married to the Marquis de Chelles. Her son is only three years old then, but a hundred pages later he is nine. At the end of book five, Undine is married to Elmer Moffett. The first three books, then, cover a limited period of time; the last two an extensive one.

Summer is the most unified of the longer works. There are no divisions within it, and, although a period of three or four months expires in the course of the action, the narrative is more or less continuous. The Fruit of the Tree encompasses as much time as The Custom of the Country, and the division of lapses is handled in about the same way: rapidly at the end. Three years elapse between books one and two, several months between two and

---

1. The Custom of the Country, p. 423.

three, one year between three and four, three or four years during book four. The Children is in four books, and covers about three years. The Age of Innocence is divided into two parts, with the greatest lapse coming at the very end, where the scene in which Newland Archer sends his son to visit Madame Olenska serves as a kind of epilogue. Hudson River Bracketed is divided into seven books, a number greater than can be found in any other of Mrs. Wharton's novels.

No particular conclusion can be drawn about the use of arbitrary divisions in the novels. They vary in number, they vary in length, and there seems to be no consistent relationship between the beginning of a new book, or part, and the lapse of time. Just as much time is likely to expire within the book, and be there indicated by a few blank lines, or the beginning of a new chapter. It is obvious, however, that each of the main divisions ends in a crucial moment, almost as if Mrs. Wharton were afraid to continue the stream of development to its indicated climax. She breaks off suddenly and begins, in a new section, to show the results of the action which was suggested at the end of the one preceding. Mrs. Wharton's The Fruit of the Tree illustrates this habit of abruptly breaking the action. Bessy Westmore has asked John Amherst to stay at

**The mill:**

He stood still before her and bent his head to hers.

She did not speak or move, but in the quickened state of his perceptions he became aware that she was silently weeping. The gathering darkness under the trees enveloped them. It absorbed her outline into the shadowy background of the wood, from which her face emerged in a faint spot of pallor; and the same obscurity seemed to envelop his faculties, merging the hard facts of life in a blur of feeling in which the distinctest impression was the sweet sense of her tears.

"Bessy !" he exclaimed again; and as he drew a step nearer he felt her yield to him, and bury her sobs against his arm.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after this incident the second book opens, and the action is seen through Justine Brent. Her conversations with various people reveal that the marriage of Amherst and Bessy Westmore, never directly narrated, has been unsuccessful. After fifty pages of exposition through Justine Brent, the author returns to John Amherst, who gives his opinions of the marriage. He is allowed to recall various incidents in his relationship with Bessy Westmore which indicate that he is in the midst of another crucial moment: the discovery that he and his wife are at opposite extremes in temperament, too far apart to continue in even outward harmony.

There is a similar variation in the amount of time covered by Mrs. Wharton's novelettes. Madame de Treymes and The Touchstone are the most compact, the first being confined to three or four days, and the second to two incidents, each unified within

---

1. The Fruit of the Three, p. 139.

itself, separated by about a year. The Old Maid and Sanctuary are alike in that both skip a whole generation between the opening action and the closing. As in The Touchstone, the two separated actions are more or less unified. The Spark, New Year's Day, False Dawn, and Ethan Frome, are not nearly so concise as the others. Ethan Frome and New Year's Day are framework stories, the latter obscure in showing just how the time sequence is arranged. In Ethan Frome, although the arrangement is unnatural, the movement is clear. The engineer-narrator's background material is given first, followed by the story of Ethan Frome, which had ended twenty years before, and then the narrator resumes the tale for a few pages. The same time sequence and use of narrator is found in New Year's Day, but the central story, that of Lizzie Hazeldean, is complicated by her narration, in detail, of the important events during the past ten years. False Dawn is only less confusing than The Spark. In the former, the young man who goes abroad to collect paintings for his father tells most of the story, covering a period of about eight years, including his courtship of a young lady across Long Island Sound, his trip to Europe of several year's duration, his marriage and the failure of the pictures when they are exhibited. Then, suddenly, the first person is used to move the events forward fifty years. The narrator is present, on the other hand, at almost every vital

scene in The Spark. This technique leads the author into her worst confusion of time sequence. The narrative moves backward and forward indecisively. Near the end of the tale the narrator records:

Sometimes, walking up town from the bank where in my turn I have become an institution, I glance through the rails of Trinity churchyard and wonder. He has lain there ten years or more now; his wife has married the President of a rising Western University, and grown intellectual and censorious; his children are scattered and established. Does the old Delane vault hold his secret, or did I surprise it one day; did he and I surprise it together ?

It was one Sunday afternoon, I remember...<sup>1</sup>

And from there the story goes into the final scene, in which the narrator reads the poetry of Walt Whitman to the hero.

The Spark is the least satisfactory of Mrs. Wharton's stories in use of time lapse. The reason lies in the author's awareness that she was not telling a story, but sketching a character. She says:

This is not a story-teller's story; it is not even the kind of episode capable of being shaped into one. Had it been, I should have reached my climax, or at any rate its first stage, in the incident at the Polo Club, [the incident had already been narrated] and what I have left to tell would be the effect of that incident on the lives of the three people concerned.

It was not a story, or anything in the semblance of a story...<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. The Spark, pp.99-100.
  2. Ibid., p. 41.

To make out a case against Mrs. Wharton based on The Spark, or even False Dawn, would be misleading. Most of her novelettes are compact and the time sequence is perfectly apparent. It must be noticed that three of them, The Old Maid, Sanctuary, and Ethan Frome endeavor to span rather long periods. The jump in Ethan Frome is made by the narrator; in the others it is indicated by dividing each into two parts.<sup>1</sup>

In the short story Mrs. Wharton's use of time-lapse is similar to her method in the novel. As might be expected, the lapse is shorter. Like the novelettes, some of the short stories are compact, consisting of a single brief incident; others are in two distinct parts, with a break between; and others follow the design of The Custom of the Country, The Fruit of the Tree and The Spark by including a series of events spread over a rather long period.

It is easy to find examples among Mrs. Wharton's narratives of the single incident. In "Xingu"<sup>2</sup>, for instance, the action occupies only two hours but it sufficiently reveals a novelist's visit to a female culture club and the confusion into which the delightful Mrs. Roby throws it. "The Dilettante"<sup>3</sup> is similarly confined to a single afternoon, and ten minutes of conversation cover the whole action. It is one of the most analytic of Mrs.

- 
1. The Old Maid on page 81; Sanctuary on page 67.
  2. Xingu and Other Stories, 1916.
  3. The Descent of Man, 1904.

Wharton's stories, and very little action reveals the character. "The Expiation"<sup>1</sup> includes only one afternoon, although the action is divided into two rather complete parts, between which there is a lapse of several hours. "A Journey"<sup>2</sup> is the record of a woman's thoughts as she rides for ten hours in a train with her dying husband. "A Cup of Cold Water",<sup>3</sup> one of the most crowded of the stories, covers only one night, with an early morning scene as a culmination. "The Triumph of Night"<sup>4</sup> is confined to about five hours.

In her later collections of short stories Mrs. Wharton has not been much concerned with confining the action. Here and Beyond, 1926, contains no story unified in time. Certain People, 1930, has only two, "Atrophy" and "After Holbein." The World Over, 1936, contains only one, "Roman Fever", and so much of it is a recollection of what had happened twenty years before, that the time interest seems divided. "A Day at the Funeral" is the only one compactly arranged in Human Nature, 1933. The stories included in Ghosts, 1937, require a lapse because their effectiveness depends upon the specter's "continuity and silence."<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of Mrs. Wharton's willingness to use divided action and action set in a framework which breaks the unity of

- 
1. Ibid.
  2. The Greater Inclination, 1899.
  3. Ibid.
  4. Xingu and Other Stories, 1916.
  5. Preface to Ghosts, p. x.

time, is discoverable in any collection of her short stories. It will suffice to select one example from each of the eleven volumes. "A Coward" relates his past to a young friend twenty years after he has been guilty of a certain piece of cowardice.<sup>1</sup> "The Recovery" describes a painter's life in Hillbridge, and then his revealing experiences abroad.<sup>2</sup> "The Quicksand" distinguishes itself from the other stories in The Descent of Man, 1904, by its split action. "The Pot Boiler"<sup>3</sup> would take its place in this category; as would "Autres Temps",<sup>4</sup> "Bewitched",<sup>5</sup> "The Refugee",<sup>6</sup> "Joy in the House",<sup>7</sup> and "Confession".<sup>8</sup> Only one of the volumes, Tales of Men and Ghosts, 1910, has no story consisting of two distinct episodes.

Since a large number of Mrs. Wharton's short stories are either not confined in time or are held together only by the single point of view, it is evident that her mind tends to create first the character and then the incident. Many of her short stories carry the character through enough time, at least, if through no large number of incidents, to make the reader wonder why she did not use a longer vehicle.

- 
1. The Greater Inclination, 1899.
  2. Crucial Instances, 1901.
  3. The Hermit and the Wild Woman, 1908.
  4. Xingu and Other Stories, 1916.
  5. Here and Beyond, 1926.
  6. Certain People, 1930.
  7. Human Nature, 1933.
  8. The World Over, 1936.

Since time is not the unifying factor in Mrs. Wharton's work, and since its passage is necessary to make credible the development of her characters, it follows that she would have to be expert in impressing the reader with the idea of time-lapse. One of her technical excellences is that power. She is skillful in using chronological guideposts that indicate time lapse without actually stating it. The conventions of the novel form do not grant the author the privilege of dropping the curtain and inserting a note in the program to inform the spectator that the next scene occurs "ten years later."

The five particular methods for indicating the passage of time in Mrs. Wharton's work are the introspective recollection of past action, physical change in characters, change in seasons, change of scene, and the simple statement that time has passed. The one most frequently used is introspective recollection by the character chosen as the point of view. An example has already been given from Hudson River Bracketed which shows Vance Weston awakening in his room and trying to recollect the events of the past three days. In the same novel a period of three years is covered by an extension of the method. The fourth division opens with the thoughts of Halo Spear, a character who has been used only slightly in the previous pages.

Looking back now, after three years, she remembered old Tom Lorburn's perturbed face as she left the Willows with him, the day the loss of the books was

discovered... It was a pity, of course -- for cousin Tom did die within a few months, and did change his will, leaving the Willows to a distant relative.

Yet she had been his wife for nearly three years now ... and they had arrived at some kind of a mutual understanding, so that, had she suddenly been called on to leave her husband's roof... Habit had wound its benumbing web about her.

... Prosperity had affected Mrs. Spear [her mother] differently... It had made her more indignant...

The recollection of the little scene flashed through Halo's mind... The extent of their borrowings had in fact been the direct cause of Halo's marriage. Tarrant had stepped into the breach more often than she had guessed...

The years that followed had represented the interest on her husband's advances... 'If my boy had lived --' she said to herself, cowering under that elliptical sweep of regret all the things she might have judged differently, all the things she might have forborne to judge, if between her and her husband there had been a presence, warm and troublesome and absorbing, to draw them closer, yet screen them a little from each other.<sup>1</sup>

In this fashion Mrs. Wharton covers the three years between the departure of Vance Weston from New York and his return at the invitation of Halo Spear's husband who has decided, so the reader has been informed by the ten-page 'backward glance,' to become the editor of a new literary review. The next chapter opens with the receipt by Vance of the invitation. The reader must be informed of what happened to Vance, and he is told in much the

---

1. Hudson River Bracketed, pp. 183-195.

same way:

Grandpa and grandma Scrimser had moved in to Mapledale Avenue after grandpa's first stroke. The house out at Crampton was too cold... Grandpa's stroke had come within the year after Vance's return to Euphoria. ... Correspondence between Paul's Landing (New York) and Mapledale Avenue (Mid-west) had ceased after a somewhat acrimonious exchange of letters at the time of Vance's departure... since then he had heard nothing...<sup>1</sup>

In the next sentence Vance is shown on the train to New York.

In less than twenty pages the author has covered the three year period; the reader realizes that both Vance Weston and Halo Spear have changed: Vance under the boring routine of his family and job, Halo through her acceptance of her husband. Mrs. Wharton's story really concerns Vance and Halo as they affect each other. Since she does not wish to write of them separately, she condenses the period in which they have no mutual influence.

Yet the reader must be told that Vance is no longer an impetuous boor, drinking life with joyous gulps; that Halo is a disillusioned, experienced woman, who has sacrificed the careless raptures of life for the security offered by a colorless husband. Then the reader is ready for the next crucial moment in the relationship.

The final chapter of The Age of Innocence reveals the same method. Newland Archer is sitting in his library, having just returned from the inauguration of the new galleries at the Metro-

---

1. Ibid., p. 196-199.

politan Museum. Mrs. Wharton writes:

The vision had roused a host of other associations, and he sat looking with new eyes at the library which, for over thirty years, had been the scene of his solitary musings and of all the family confabulations.

It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened. There his wife, nearly twenty six years ago, had broken to him with a blushing circumlocution that would have caused the young women of the new generation to smile, the news that she was to have a child; and there their eldest boy, Dallas, had been christened... There Dallas had first staggered across the floor... and there their second child, Mary, had announced her engagement to the dullest and most reliable... and there Archer had kissed her through her wedding veil before they went down to the motor which was to carry them to Grace Church -- for in a world where all else had reeled on its foundations the 'Grace Church wedding' remained an unchanged institution.

He had been, in short, what people were beginning to call 'a good citizen.' In New York, for many years past, every new movement... had taken account of his opinion and wanted his name... His days were full, and they were filled decently. He supposed it was all a man ought to ask.

Somehow he knew he had missed: the flower of life.<sup>1</sup>

All this background is necessary to show the significance of the final scene in the book, the one in which Newland Archer refuses to go to see Madame Olenska, but sends his son Dallas. If the reader did not know how Archer had spent the intervening quarter of a century, this refusal would not be nearly so striking. Dramatically it was a dangerous jump to make in the time sequence, and only a practiced hand could have carried it off as well as

---

1. The Age of Innocence, pp. 347-350.

does Mrs. Wharton.

In The Custom of the Country the difficulty in handling time sequence is much greater because there are more periods to be explained. More frequent, consequently, are the passages which begin in this fashion:

Not much more than a year had elapsed since Undine Marvell, sitting in the drawing-room of another Parisian hotel, had heard the immense orchestral murmur of Paris rise through the open windows like the ascending movement of her own hopes.<sup>1</sup>

and:

She had not seen Chelles since her return to Paris. It had seemed preferable to leave their meeting to chance...

All this passed through Undine's mind in the very moment of her noting...<sup>2</sup>

and:

Nearly two years had passed since Ralph Marvell, waking from his long sleep in the hot summer light of Washington Square, had found that the face of life was changed for him.

In the interval he had gradually adapted himself to the new order of things; but the months of a adaptation had been a time of much darkness...<sup>3</sup>

In these passages it is apparent that the author is about to review the events of an expired past, to show how the character has changed and what has changed him. The cause of the

---

1. The Custom of the Country, p. 345.

2. Ibid., p. 355.

3. Ibid., p. 423.

change will have been implicit in the climax immediately preceding the opening of the new section.

Physical changes in the characters are symbols of passing time that no novelist would neglect. Dallas Archer, Newland's son, is about to be married when the novel closes; he is about to be born when the main action ends, years before. Undine Spragg's son, Paul,<sup>1</sup> is mentioned from time to time as becoming older: he needs a nurse, he needs a tutor, he is able to greet his 'new' father; at the end he is nine, able to be impressed by the books in the 'new' library. A child, the daughter of Bessy Westmore, is used in much the same way in The Fruit of the Tree. The Children grow larger and more selfish as the novel progresses. Halo Tarrant, in Hudson River Bracketed, has a son by her husband and is about to bear Vance Weston's child as the sequel, The Gods Arrive, ends. These are the only novels in which there is enough time lapse to use a change in physical appearance as an indication. The growth of a child is not the only physical change recorded, but it is the most conspicuous.<sup>2</sup>

Description of the seasons in which action takes place can indicate the passage of months within the year. A memorable demonstration of this method occurs in The Reef, where the sea-

---

1. The Custom of the Country,

2. Mrs. Wharton's frequent use of children in her novels and the allusions made to their power to give happiness would make an interesting starting point for any psychoanalyst who wanted to continue the line of reasoning suggested by Edmund Wilson; namely, that her marriage was a very unhappy one and that some of her work is a sublimation resulting from the dissatisfaction she found in it.

sons not only indicate the time of the action, but also suggest its nature. The book opens in May, in a fog and rain over the English channel, but the story is shortly carried to the bright spring of Paris. There the heedless affair between Darrow and Sophy Viner is in its proper seasonal setting. The second book of the novel begins as "The light of the October afternoon lay on an old high-roofed house," and the action is involved in debate, melancholy, and judgment.

Changing the scene of the action will almost always indicate that time has intervened. The Custom of the Country carries Undine Spragg from Apex City to New York, thence to Paris and through several subsequent trips. The novel never gives any details of actual travel. The first book of The House of Mirth ends with a telegram inviting Lily Bart to cruise in the Mediterranean. The second book opens with Selden in Monte Carlo, soon to be joined by Lily, who has been travelling, Selden tells us, for several months. The fourth part of the second book opens with Lily Bart back in New York, facing her family for the first time since 'her return from Europe, two weeks earlier.'<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton uses the bare statement of time-lapse only in the short stories. Because so many of them cover extensive periods, this method is found frequently. "Six or seven months

---

1. The House of Mirth, p. 356.

had passed since our meeting on the Scythian, and I had forgotten her very existence."<sup>1</sup> "After my departure from Les Calanques I had no news of Mrs. Glenn till she returned to Paris in October."<sup>2</sup> "It was not until over two years later that I returned to Europe."<sup>3</sup> "On the morrow, I left too early to redeem my promise; and for several years afterwards I saw no more of Mrs. Amyot."<sup>4</sup> "I went abroad for a year or two and when I came back she had disappeared."<sup>5</sup> "In the West she achieved a success which for a year or more embittered my perusal of the morning papers."<sup>6</sup>

The handling of lapse of time is one of the technical details of fiction that Mrs. Wharton admits she does not know how to achieve. She credits Tolstoi with being the master of it, but his scene was so much more extensive than hers that she could have learned little from him. War and Peace is helpfully guided, in point of time, by the Napoleonic campaign. She might have gleaned from Tolstoi the trick of using children, as he uses the two children in Anna Karenina. But she could have learned as well from Tom Jones or David Copperfield or even Tristram Shandy. It is more likely that she acquired most of her methods

- 
1. "Her Son," Human Nature, p. 10.
  2. Ibid., p. 36.
  3. Ibid., p. 85.
  4. "The Pelican," The Greater Inclination, p. 53.
  5. Ibid., p. 66.
  6. Ibid., p. 61.

from Bourget, whose The Night Cometh is full of introspective recapitulations. James, in moving from character to character for point of view, also omits sections of time that are needed to fit into a perfect chronological arrangement.

Jane Austen, another of Mrs. Wharton's mentors, holds a scene longer than most novelists for the same reason as Mrs. Wharton does: very little happens to her characters, and she must make the most of what does. They have a trick of looking back upon an incident, keeping it in their minds, through the long dull periods. Mrs. Wharton's characters differ from Miss Austen's in that they are usually analyzing the incident rather than simply enjoying it. She uses their retrospective glances merely to fill in the time gaps.

Mrs. Wharton read all the great novelists and took what she wanted from each. Her methods for showing the passing of time are so varied that it is difficult to assign them to definite sources.<sup>1</sup> All the reader can do is be thankful that she learned her lesson so well.

---

1. In "Bunner Sisters," for example, one of the most definite impressions of passing time is given by the infrequent calls at the sisters' shop of a lady of fashion, who announces that she is going to Florida, or has just come back. Browning was one of Mrs. Wharton's favorite poets. Should this method be assigned to the influence of "Pippa Passes" ?

## 9. Diction, Imagery

Mrs. Wharton's desire for perfection in method extended beyond a concern for the structural excellence of the whole piece of fiction. She was just as much interested in the perfection of the particular details of writings, the mechanics of sentence structure and the careful choice of the exact word to convey the desired meaning and tone. The whole had to be perfect in form. Since the whole is no more than the sum of its parts, it would follow that each part must be perfect.

Early in life Mrs. Wharton was impressed with the majesty of the English language. Her home could not have been surpassed, in that respect at least, as a training ground for the incipient writer. She says that she was taught only two things in her childhood: modern languages and good manners. The modern languages included English.

Usage, in my childhood, was as authoritative an element in speaking English as tradition was in social conduct. And it was because our little society still lived in the reflected light of a long-established culture that my parents, who were far from intellectual... spoke their mother tongue with scrupulous perfection, and insisted that their children should do the same.<sup>1</sup>

The language her father and mother spoke and encouraged her to speak was an easy, idiomatic English, neither pedantic

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 49.

nor literary. Slang was not allowed, unless the speaker used it in such a manner as to indicate that he knew it was not standard. There was, strangely, a decided preference in the family for speech that was flexible and idiomatic, including even the "enjoyment of racy innovations."<sup>1</sup>

Mastery of the mechanics of language was part of Mrs. Wharton's inheritance. Sentence construction, now a part of the school and college curriculum, was taught her in the nursery. It is no wonder that she discusses "language" but slightly, giving less attention to it than we might expect from an obvious stylist. Only in speaking of Proust does she mention the power of language specifically. He had "the ability to reveal -- in a word, an image, an allusion -- those depths of soul beyond the soul's own guessing."<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton was never pleased with the level of speech and usage in America. In 1919, after she had lived in France for many years, and visited frequently in England, she handed down the verdict that the use of language in America was "horrible." In England she found implicit standards. Demanding a stability of usage for America she went as far as to suggest the establishment of an academy.<sup>3</sup> This does not imply that she favored a language that would be stabilized into lifelessness. She dis-

---

1. Ibid., p. 50.

2. Ibid., p. 153.

3. French Ways and Their Meaning, New York, Appleton, 1919, p. 53.

tinguishes carefully between an innovation in the language made to give it a picturesque liveliness and that made through ignorance. Her reverence for good usage amounts to snobbery:

But above all abhorrent to ears piously attuned to all the inflections and shades of meaning of our rich speech were such substitutes as "back of" for behind, "dirt" for earth (i.e. a "dirt road"), "any place" for anywhere, or slovenly phrases like "a great ways", soon, alas to be followed by the still more inexcusable "a barracks", "a woods" and even "a strata", "a phenomena", which, as I grew up, a new class of the uneducated rich were rapidly introducing.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton always wrote with great care. The routine of writing and rewriting, "the discipline of the desk," was habitual with her.<sup>2</sup> The exact word in the exact place to give the fullest and clearest meaning to the sentence and paragraph was her ideal. From Flaubert she could have learned the power that can be achieved through the meticulous seeking after the precise word to convey a desired meaning. From Henry James she could have learned a different lesson, being aware that a specialized vocabulary and an involved sentence structure served only to divert the reader's attention from the central impression desired.

There are no tricks in Mrs. Wharton's diction beyond an occasional Gallicism and the use of an English expression in place of an American. Her language is natural, easy, and imper-

- 
1. A Backward Glance, pp. 50-51.
  2. The only exceptions that could be made would be A Son at the Front, written hastily while her mind may have been occupied with war work, Twilight Sleep, Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, which came at the end of her career and appear to have been the result of a resolve to "sell out", even in language, to the taste of the American magazine-reading public.

sonal. Her forceful and traditional usage is one of her great economies. She can say exactly what she means, leave the reader with the desired impression without imposing an intervening presence, by a trick or mannerism, between the reader and the printed page.<sup>1</sup> In ease and finish of prose she resembles Hawthorne and Irving, an early inspiration. Among English writers she may have learned most from Jane Austen; she found George Eliot's constructions cumbersome. Her familiarity with modern foreign languages was notable, and unquestionably helpful. She could not have written The Valley of Decision without constant, and understanding, reference to Italian source material; the first draft of Ethan Frome was written in French; and the ease and clarity with which she translated Hermann Sudermann's Es Lebe Das Leben<sup>2</sup> is an indication of her mastery of that language. The translations of her novels into French, many of which were made by her friends, especially Madame Paul Bourget, must have been the source of many problems, suggestions and solutions which would all, in time, give Mrs. Wharton greater control over her implements.

Mrs. Wharton's sentences are neither long nor short; her vocabulary is neither erudite nor commonplace. Her prose is happily even in quality. It is all of a uniform excellence, with no purple

- 
1. As one can not, for example, read a page from Hemingway or Wolfe without being aware of their presence, no matter what the subject may be.
  2. Called The Joy of Living, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.

passages.

It was in fact that the Bishop of Ossining, who impressively announced by Mrs. Fetherel's butler, now made an entry that may best be described as not inadequate to the expectations the announcement raised. The Bishop always entered a room well; but, when unannounced, or preceded by a Low Church butler who gave him his surname, his appearance lacked the impressiveness conferred in it by the due specification of his diocesan dignity. The Bishop was very fond of his niece Mrs. Fetherel, and one of the traits he most valued in her was the possession of a butler who knew how to announce a bishop.<sup>1</sup>

The level of clarity, of which this excerpt from her work is not an unfair example, she never abandoned. Even when she relaxed, late in her career, in the careless colloquialisms that she had so long despised, the change seems to be a conscious one. For the most part, however, her last novels are written with the same formality and grace in prose style as her first.

He'd never looked at a girl since Floss -- never meant to. Taken it out in writing poetry instead. Sometimes, for a few moments, doing that almost replaced her caresses, seemed to bring her as close as if words were warm and palpable like flesh. Then that illusion passed, and he was out again in the desert. Once in a while, by way of experiment, he would give himself a kind of mental pinch where the ache had been, just to be sure he felt nothing -- literally nothing.<sup>2</sup>

To say that this is, as a piece of prose, mediocre, would be a kindness that Mrs. Wharton would be the first to decline. It is presented as an example of her prose construction that went perhaps too far in the direction of courting the popular taste.

- 
1. "Expiation," The Descent of Man, p. 208.
  2. Hudson River Bracketed, 1929, p. 20.

At the other extreme in the scale, an example may be given of her prose when it was too highly intricate, probably too close to the influence of Henry James to be her own:

He had seen, on the previous day, no trace of jealousy or resentment in his betrothed: he could still hear the candid ring of the girl's praise of Mrs. Vervain. If she were such an abyss of insincerity as to dissemble distrust under such frankness, she must at least be more subtle than to bring her doubts to her rival for solution. The situation seemed one through which one could no longer move in a penumbra, and he let in a burst of light with the direct query: "Won't you explain what you mean?"<sup>1</sup>

This last quotation might well have come from Henry James, of whom she said, long after she wrote this passage that "His style was not lax, but it was always ample; he took a great deal of space to turn round in."<sup>2</sup> In her decision not to follow James in the development of a prose structure requiring the writer to take "a great deal of space to turn round in" Mrs. Wharton distinctly separated herself from her master. If she touched upon the obvious rather than avoiding the significant, she also used a prose language that made her meaning always clear.

In one other respect her prose is notable, and different from James's: in figures of speech. Figurative language has a place in her work because it makes for economy. It is the method of achieving the greatest effect with the least effort, or rather in the least space. Her prose, especially in the early books, is

- 
1. "The Dilettante," The Descent of Man, p. 151.
  2. "Henry James in His Letters," op.cit., p. 190.

laden with pertinent similes and colorful analogies. She sees in images, as a poet. Quinn believes that she is "the coiner of more magnificent phrases than any other living American or British novelist."<sup>1</sup> Many of her most memorable figures take the form of epigrams, and it is in those epigrams, and figures of speech in general, that the reader will find most of her satirical thrusts.

"Xingu", which was written in 1911, presents itself immediately as a source of figures. It starts with one, and from only the dialogue passages are they missing for more than a sentence or two in the whole of it. "Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone." She has formed a club with "several other indomitable huntresses of erudition." The prospect of entertaining Osrick Dane, a distinguished novelist, threw them, not so much into fear as "into the agreeable uncertainty of the lady who weighs the alternatives of a well-stocked wardrobe." Poor Mrs. Roby did not "keep up" with things, and "the non-conductiveness of one member was a serious obstacle to the exchange of ideas, and some wonder had already been expressed that Mrs. Roby should care to live... on the intellectual bounty of the others." There was Mrs. Leveret, "whose manner of putting forth

---

1. American Fiction, op.cit., p. 551.

an opinion was like that of an obliging salesman with a variety of other styles to submit if his first selection does not suit." Mrs. Plinth's mind was like her house, "furnished with monumental 'pieces' that were not meant to be disarranged." And another whose "mind was an hotel where facts came and went like transient lodgers, without leaving their address behind, and frequently without paying for their board" and who had "a disheartening glimpse of new fields of knowledge to be traversed in Mrs. Ballinger's wake"<sup>1</sup> and as a result "felt like a ~~passenger~~ on an ocean steamer who is told that there is no immediate danger, but that she had better put on her life-belt." When the famous writer appears we learn that she looked "as though she were about to be photographed for a new edition of her books" and that she had a way of looking at you "that made you feel as if there was something wrong with your hat." In the presence of the enemy they present a united front:

"We have a standard," said Mrs. Plinth, feeling herself suddenly secure on the vast expanse of a generalisation; and Mrs. Leveret, thinking there must be room for more than one on so broad a statement, took courage to murmur: "Oh, certainly; we have a standard."<sup>2</sup>

The figures of speech reveal many things about Mrs. Wharton, as the nature of selected imagery will tell much about any writer. Hers are full of furniture, draperies, bric-a-brac. Thus

- 
1. The figures are poured forth so rapidly that the reader hardly notices an occasional mixed one.
  2. The quotations are taken from the first thirteen pages of the 1916 republication.

she says that Mrs. Amyot's dimple comes out with the punctuality of the cuckoo in the Swiss clock. Her interest in travel is apparent in Mrs. Ballinger's "wake", and the life preserver on the ocean steamer, mentioned above, and in her statement that Lily Bart is "caught into a crowd as carelessly as a passenger is gathered in by an express train." Or she relies on military operations, as in The Reef, saying that the train hammers the syllables of a disconcerting telegram like the discharge of musketry, and in Ethan Frome notices that the storms of February pitch their tents, and the March winds are wild cavalry. Her similes are never taken from nature, but are all of a cultivated domestic variety.

#### 10. Irony

The satirical tone of many of Mrs. Wharton's figures of speech is clue enough to her penchant for irony. Carl Van Doren goes so far as to allocate to her a "tower of irony", from which she looks down and comments upon her characters.<sup>1</sup> Her critical mind refuses to accept the trivial for the important. She despises shoddiness in everything -- in building, in furniture, and in people. In the culture club of "Xingu", where some degree of intelligence might be expected, Mrs. Wharton sees stupidity and

---

1. Contemporary American Novelists, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1923, p. 104. (In the 1940 revision of the book the author expressed the same conclusion about her temperament.)

affectation. The "learned ladies" of American society suffer just as much beneath her pen as their French parallels did under Molière's. Her vision was too keen and her intelligence too highly developed to allow her to be happy and submissive in a world full of people who were either dull, indifferent, or stupid.

Two things kept Mrs. Wharton from being a great satirist: her technical method and her instinctive "good manners." She was aware enough of the stupidity of people, collectively and individually, to have found sufficient material; and the "flashes of satire" that no reader can miss in her work are evidence that she had the ability to ridicule with deftness. But when she accepted the technical ideal of the limited point of view her satirical predilections had to be subjugated. A true satirist must be cruel, almost brutal, animated with hatred. In Mrs. Wharton's world the cruelty, brutality and all the vigorous passions a satirist needs, were outlawed. Her satirical flashes were brief because her social training prevented her from "making fun" of inferior people.

In a sense, The House of Mirth is written by Newland Archer, not by Mrs. Wharton. Archer is so much a part of his social environment that it would be completely out of character for him to discover the superficialities, foibles, and smug limitations of that compact New York plutocracy in which he lived. He could not satirize it because he was in the midst of it. He had no per-

spective. Mrs. Wharton therefore, becomes, without admitting it, an objective narrator and slyly inserts revealing and condemnatory passages. Then, as if remembering that the stage really belonged to Newland Archer, she slips into the wings as Archer steps forward.

A more conspicuous example of a divided loyalty between satire and technique is that of The Custom of the Country where, although the satire is more savage because the heroine is more coarse, many of the possibilities have to be abandoned because much of it is told from Undine Spragg's point of view. The satire must be revealed through action, but Mrs. Wharton's forte is the mind. Ralph Marvell, Undine's husband, might have legitimately revealed Undine's huge stupidities; but he was one of Mrs. Wharton's gentlemen, suffering in accepting silence. Martin Boyne in The Children could have shown the vicious qualities in hotel life among the idle rich, but he was sentimentally interested only in the young results of it. Nick and Susie Lanning,<sup>1</sup> admitted parasites, would have been delectable subjects for a satirist, but Mrs. Wharton has them tell their own story and the human race is notoriously opposed to having fun at one's own expense. Vance Weston<sup>2</sup> is a proper subject for Sinclair Lewis. Mrs. Wharton's method, however, requires her to tell her story from Weston's point of view. She must, consequently, be sympa-

---

1. The Glimpses of the Moon.

2. Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive.

thetic with him, at least to some degree. The result is a confusing indecision. She not only takes the bull into the china shop, she tries to make the reader think that he belongs there. It is interesting and important to notice, that her most consistently satirical story, "Xingu", is the only one written from a completely objective point of view.

The other reason why Mrs. Wharton could not be a great satirist, her good manners, needs little explanation. "Bringing up in those days," she says of her training in childhood, "was based on 'good breeding'. One was polite, considerate of others... because such were the principles of the well-bred."<sup>1</sup> Although no interpretation of Mrs. Wharton's personality gives the impression that she was either kind or genial, there can be no doubt that her training and environment opposed her, instinctively, to any breach of good manners. It was simply not good form, as she saw it, to make fun of people.

Mrs. Wharton's ability to be cuttingly satirical is shown in a sketch she contributed to The Bookman in 1901. An anonymous volume, An Englishwoman's Love Letters, prompted her sketch, called "More Letters". Here she is brutal. She caricatures the writer, the young man to whom the letters are addressed, and the young man's mother, with a merciless harshness. In comparison

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 52.

with the vain, gushing young woman whom Mrs. Wharton depicts as the author of the added letters, Franklin P. Adams' Dulcy is an intellectual giant. Such people as Anita Loos and Margaret Halsey would discover, in the slight sketch, that their sweeping and bitter condemnation of the modern woman is exactly the kind of thing Mrs. Wharton did once and decided to abandon. The cruelty and vigor of the satire in "More Letters" is obvious and startling. It is easy to imagine that after its publication her friends went out of their way to inform "Dear Edith" that "nice people" did not write such things. Dorothy Parker spoke more than she may have known when she captioned a review of one of Mrs. Wharton's posthumous books with the terse comment "Eadie was a Lady."

As a compensation for the elimination from her work of any stinging satire, Mrs. Wharton turned to irony. Irony can not be crude. It requires deftness, subtlety, and imagination. Mrs. Wharton has those qualities in abundance. She makes practically no use of irony in its limited sense, where it is a figure of speech and is used to imply the opposite of what is said. Her method is rather the revealing that life resolves a dilemma in a fashion exactly opposite from the one to be expected. Irony, in her work, results from the perverseness of fate, or the stupidity of society. It reveals itself in the thread of an action,

coming as an unexpected and piercing climax to the normal flow of events. A mere text-book description of the term shows how properly the tone of irony fits into her general temperament:

... it is usually lighter than sarcasm, less harsh in its wording. Its presence is marked by a sort of grim humor, an "unemotional detachment" on the part of the writer, a coolness in expression at a time when the writer's emotions are really heated. The great effectiveness of irony as a literary device is the impression it gives of great restraint.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton might, for example, have expended her energy in condemning satirically the shallow society that destroyed Lily Bart and Madame Olenska. The condemnation is really more effective, however, when the direct satire is only casually introduced and the meaning of the society is conveyed in the realization of the great irony that the society destroyed the very things it should produce. What greater purpose has a social order than the creation of cultured, beautiful and noble souls such as Bart and Olenska? And what is more ironical in life than the tragic unhappiness provided these people by the leisured ethical society that should have encouraged them.

Vance Weston and Halo Spear ignore the restrictions of convention and live together in Europe after her husband refuses to grant her a divorce. Society does not punish them; they live in immunity from public scandal. The nobility within their own

---

1. Thrall, William Flint, and Hibbard, Addison, A Handbook to Literature, Doubleday, Doran and Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1936, p. 219.

souls, however, rises against them, and they fall irretrievably into unhappiness because of their own scruples.

The ironical conclusion to the career of Ethan Frome results from pressures of his neighbors and his own conscience. Ultimately, it is a trick of fate that sends him to a long life as a helpless cripple, more than ever at the mercy of his nagging wife. As if the failure at suicide were not enough of an irony for Frome to suffer, Mrs. Wharton adds the final touch of making the previously gay and loving Mattie Silver, after the accident, a querulous, droning invalid.

Mrs. Wharton's fondness for the paradoxes of life is probably best illustrated in the short story, "Autres Temps". Mrs. Linyard returns to New York to comfort and support her daughter, who has divorced her husband. She discovers that her daughter neither wants nor needs her comfort, and is embarrassed by her presence. Mrs. Linyard, twenty-five years before, had divorced her husband, and been ostracised. She is still, she comes to understand, one of the scandals that her daughter's friends are trying "to forget." Her daughter's divorce is accepted, even admired; her own is nevertheless condemned.

Mrs. Wharton is imaginative enough to realize how satisfactorily life might arrange itself, and she is realistic enough to know how disappointing the actuality often is. She so frequently shocks the reader with a solution directly contrary to the one expected from the circumstances that it is easy to place her, as Mr. Van Doren has, in a "tower of irony."

## 11. The Creative Process

Mrs. Wharton has made a serious effort in her critical writings to explain how her fiction takes shape in her mind. As might be expected, her explanation is no simple key to the writing of good fiction. It is, rather, a statement of her belief that the work of the brain is quite as involved and arduous as that of the pen.

The peculiar characteristic of the creative process is the indefinable reshaping of the material of the imagination under the pressure of thought. First, the writer's mind gets "full of the new subject"; then he must "look into it." His failure to follow this process will result in a shallow novel, leading "to the indolent habit of decorating its surface."<sup>1</sup> The unwillingness of many of the younger novelists to perform the mental labor involved, to concentrate on the subject until it ripens in the mind, is in Mrs. Wharton's thinking, their greatest weakness.

There need not be much to turn over in the mind, but whatever is there must go through the process. A mind full of experiences, passions, and sensations is not preeminently the productive mind. It is the mind that thinks continuously and long on a few incidents or situations that produces the lasting fiction. "The creative mind thrives best on a reduced diet."<sup>2</sup> sums up her

---

1. *The Writing of Fiction*, p. 56.

2. "A Little Girl's New York," *op.cit.*, p. 357.

observations about writers and her conclusions concerning her own creative processes. Although this statement was made near the end of her life she had implied it in all her critical observations. Thinking through a subject is at once her answer to the problem of originality, of experience, of imagination. To take them in order:

True originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision. That new, that personal vision, is attained only by looking long enough at the object represented to make it the writer's own; and the mind which would bring this secret germ to fruition must be able to nourish it with an accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience.<sup>1</sup>

The need for experience, however, does not presume that the author must lead an active life of sensation-seeking. It, too, will be supplied by steeping the mind in the subject.

As to experience, intellectual and moral, the creative imagination can make a little go a long way, provided it remains long enough in the mind and is sufficiently brooded upon.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis Mrs. Wharton gives to the personal element of a writer's imagination, the deference she pays to creating out of one's head, would indicate that she favored subjective writing exclusively. Experience, in the Dumas and Melville manner, is subordinated by her in favor of the writer's spinning out his own mental substance. From a casual observation of these theories, one would presume that she was not in sympathy

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 18.

2. Ibid., p. 20.

with detachment and objectivity and that those qualities would have no place in her fiction. Her novels immediately refute this conclusion, and the several qualifications she places on the use of the imagination make her theory consistent with her practice. Creative imagination is two-sided, combining with the power to penetrate into other minds that of standing "far enough aloof from them to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge."<sup>1</sup> That aloofness can be obtained only by mounting to a height "proportioned to the artist's power of detaching one part of his imagination from the particular problem in which the rest is steeped."<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's belief in the value of imaginative objectivity is further substantiated by her objection to autobiographical novels. To her the difference between a born novelist and a writer of self-confessions is simply that the latter lacks the necessary objectivity. The subjective writer can not get far enough away from his story to view it as a whole and relate it to its setting; his minor characters remain mere satellites and disappear when they are not reflected in the glow of the only one the autobiographical novelist creates: Himself.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in the Colophon about Ethan Frome, Mrs. Wharton says she read a thoughtful article which insisted that a per-

- 
1. Ibid., p. 16.
  2. Ibid., p. 15.
  3. Ibid., p. 78.

spective was necessary for a subject; that Main Street could be better described by one living in Paris or Palermo, in proof of which Ethan Frome was cited as an instance of a successful New England story written by one who knew nothing of New England. She makes the significant response: "I have no desire to contest the theory;... in a certain measure I agree."<sup>1</sup>

Because the writer must always control his inventions, the character and incidents created by a novelist can not be real. The element of control, detachment, aloofness is constantly invoked by Mrs. Wharton. A character to be "real" must be a creation of the imagination, not of actuality. After she had written Ethan Frome she was satisfied that she had her material "well in hand, though so often, alas, I am conscious that the strange beings who have commissioned me to tell their story are not satisfied with the portraits I drawn of them."<sup>2</sup>

Although Mrs. Wharton favors the use of the imagination, the peculiar kind she associates with fiction eliminates the idea that writing will be subjective or artificial. Imagination is the result of allowing the experiences of life to grow in the mind. The process of creation is all of these: "Experience, observation, the looks and ways and words of 'real people', all melted and fused in the white heat of the creative fire."<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Reprinted in Breaking into Print, Adler, Elmer, ed., Simon and Schuster, New York, 1937, p. 305.
  2. "Confessions of a Novelist," op.cit., p. 396.
  3. A Backward Glance, p. 137.

Mrs. Wharton admires George Cabot Lodge, William Brownell, and George Eliot, as persons and as writers, because they possess this power of projecting the imagination. She saw in Lodge the ability to disassociate, "the very mainspring of the dramatic faculty; for to draw one's neighbour is a much easier business than to draw one's self as seen by one's neighbour."<sup>1</sup>

George Eliot is an example of Mrs. Wharton's ideal of objectivity. She can give only praise to George Eliot as an observer of life. Turned moralist, however, the Victorian predecessor is reduced in stature. To observe life and to show its significance is acceptable as the novelist's function; but the novelist should not introduce himself into the scene. "The novelist of manners needs a clear eye and a normal range of vision to keep his picture in perspective."<sup>2</sup>

When the author introduces his presence into his book there will develop the weakness that Mrs. Wharton finds specifically in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. The characters in his fiction "are often no more differentiated than a set of megaphones, through all of which the same voice interminably reiterates the same ideals."<sup>3</sup>

Brownell she praised as a memorable critic because he had "the sense of perspective, the power to comprehend and relate to

- 
1. "George Cabot Lodge," Scribner's Magazine, February, 1910, p. 238.
  2. "George Eliot," Bookman, May, 1902, p. 250.
  3. "Permanent Values in Fiction," Saturday Review of Literature, April 7, 1934, p. 603.

one another the different traditions and ideals of various ages and peoples. "And no great critic has been able to do with less."<sup>1</sup> This demand for detachment and perspective is of additional importance when we remember that in Mrs. Wharton's mind all novelists are critics of life, and that their duty is to show the relation between their narrative and "the rest of the world." American fiction is generally weak in this respect.

America produces numerous critics of life who have found out that there is something wrong with Main Street, but do not know the remedy because they have never really studied the alternatives. Such intellectual uneasiness is the first step to good criticism, but it doesn't lead far unless supplemented by the intellectual range and detachment needful for the survey of culture from the centre all round.<sup>2</sup>

Although she demands living characters in a novel, Mrs. Wharton decries the use of characters who control the novelist. She is making an important distinction between the character that is alive and the one with a will of its own. She has little respect, on the one hand, for the "lifeless puppets in the sluggish stream of fatality," as she does, on the other, for the evoking of those characters who control the creator.

---

1. "William C. Brownell," op.cit., p. 602.

2. Ibid., p. 603.

Once created by his fancy they [the characters] are living beings who live their own lives; but their world is one consciously imposed on them by their creator. Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art. I have never been much moved by the story of the tears Dickens is supposed to have shed over the death of Little Nell... The business of the artist is to make weep, and ~~not~~ to weep, to make laugh and not to laugh.<sup>1</sup>

Her testimony about her own creative methods shows her objectivity. She says of her characters: "From the first I know what is going to happen to them; their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record."<sup>2</sup> The creative process, "though it takes place in some secret region on the sheer edge of consciousness, is always illuminated by the full light of my critical attention."<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Wharton is no advocate of the plot novel. "The novel, in the hands of English-speaking writers, has always tended, as it rose in value, to turn to pictures of characters and manners."<sup>4</sup> Over and over she expresses a distaste for the plot framework, even for "the novel of situation." Happily, she is liberal enough to see a place for every kind of novel: "because so long as there are various creative temperaments there must be varied artistic methods." The brief history of the novel given in the early pages of The Writing of Fiction mainly shows change in emphasis from

- 
1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 120-1.
  2. "Confessions of a Novelist", op.cit., p. 388.
  3. A Backward Glance, p. 205.
  4. The Writing of Fiction, p. 131.

action to character, from incident to people. The great advance came when the protagonists in the soul drama were transformed from conventionalized puppets into breathing and recognizable human beings.<sup>1</sup>

The great novelists, beginning with Balzac, have created each character "as though he or she had been a living human being."<sup>2</sup> It is this power that Mrs. Wharton specifies as one of the two qualities that give permanence to literature. Permanence is the ultimate test of the worth of fiction. Of the two qualities, the lesser is that of relating the characters to "a law of human experience," this moral significance previously discussed. The principal one "is the creating of characters which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of *Karenina*, *Becky Sharp*, old *Goriot* and *Tess* as real people whom we have known and lived with."<sup>3</sup>

In the novels of Jane Austen Mrs. Wharton has found the best example of character drawing. Her testimony concerning *Emma* reveals her own methods. Referring to Jane Austen, she says:

Her sense of her limitations, as certain as her sense of her power, must have kept her, unconscious or not, from trying to thrust these little people into great actions, and made her choose

---

1. Ibid., p. 41.

2. "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," op.cit., p. 39.

3. "Permanent Values in Fiction," op.cit., p. 604.

the quiet setting which enabled her to round out her portraits as imperceptibly as the sun models a fruit. Emma is perhaps the most perfect example in English fiction of a novel in which character shapes events quietly but irresistibly.<sup>1</sup>

The characters comes first. The action, the event, is to be controlled by the character. These would be fair statements of Mrs. Wharton's preferences and practices in fiction.

The writer must bear in mind at each step that his business is not to ask what the situation would be likely to make of his character, but what his characters, being what they are, would make of the situation.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's concepts of character and situation involve her insistence upon imagination and brooding. The subject of fiction will present itself to the writer's mind in one of two ways; either the character or the situation is born first. In either event the original vision, whether it be character or situation, must be allowed to lie in the mind until its matching counterpart is created. In her own work, an idea that comes first as a situation she has usually finished as a short story. When the character appears first, the result is a novel. The length of the two forms chosen is an indication of her opinion of the relative worth of the two elements.

Mrs. Wharton is convinced of the superiority of the novel of character and manners. "The greatest novels have undoubtedly dealt with character and manners rather than with mere situation."<sup>3</sup>

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, pp. 128-9.      3. Ibid., p. 138.  
2. Ibid., p. 140.

Characters and manners are interrelated because the novelist must present his people against a proper background if they are to be real. She is interested, as we can easily understand, in the usefulness of backgrounds as an integral part of character; with the background exerting just as much effect on its development as do the other characters, or the incidents. To Balzac she gives credit for first having used background in the correct way. He knew how to depict character as deriving vitality from the soil it grew in.

This background dates a novel, but the supreme "preservative" will be the unchanging human nature the novelist has contrived to reveal the

passing fripperies of clothes and custom. The essential soul is always there, under whatever disguise, and the story teller's most necessary gift is that of making its presence felt, and of discerning just how far it is modified and distorted by the shifting fashions of the hour.<sup>1</sup>

## 12. Discipline, Integrity

Great fiction, it is Mrs. Wharton's opinion, can result only when the writer designs his structure out of the judicious use of character, setting, crucial moments, dialogue, lapse of time, moral sensibility, and good English. The most vivid imagination, the deepest insight into the springs of human actions are

---

1. Introduction to The House of Mirth, op.cit., p. viii.

useless unless they are made to function as the artist desires. He must be controlled by discipline and integrity.

The discipline of form is an essential part of Mrs. Wharton's doctrine. There is another kind, however, a more mechanical sort, that might be labeled the discipline of energy. Although she nowhere says pointedly that writing is hard work, it is an obvious conclusion that we must draw from her attitude. It is hard work to write, and it should be, if the work is to be good. She has no interest in the "acceptable" fiction that has not been submitted to the artist's fullest attention and greatest energy. Whatever is done must be done as well as the artist can do it. Perfection of this sort requires intense labor, but nothing short of perfection should be allowed.

Mrs. Wharton quotes from the work of Proust to show that style may be the result of this discipline and application of energy. Proust is describing a writer.

The severity of his taste, his unwillingness to write anything of which he could not say 'c'est doux' (harmonious, delicious) this determination was in reality the secret of his strength; for habit makes the style of the man, and the author who has several times contented himself with expressing his thought in an approximately pleasing way has once and for all set a boundary to his talent, and will never pass beyond.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Ibid., p. 24. The italics are Mrs. Wharton's.

Patience, attention, and time as parts of Mrs. Wharton's formula for successful writing are revealed in her account of the composition of The House of Mirth. In 1903, the date of that novel, she was still trying her wings. The story had been promised to Scribner's Magazine, but no date had been set for its publication. Because another that was supposed to precede this could not be ready, the editors had to ask for hers at once. "I had expected to devote another year or eighteen months to the task," she says, "instead of which I was asked to be ready within six months." The demand of the editors forced her to accelerate her normal speed, but she testifies that the effort was most helpful. "Not only did it give me what I most lacked -- self-confidence -- but it bent me to the discipline of the daily task, that inscrutable 'inspiration of the writing table.'"<sup>1</sup>

In addition to discipline, physical energy, there must be artistic integrity. The integrity of the artist takes precedence ~~over~~ editor and public alike. Mrs. Wharton's advice to her friend Geoffrey Scott reveals her feeling in this respect. Scott was preparing a biography of Boswell and was reluctant to begin the book because he knew of the existence of a quantity of unexamined Boswell material in private hands. Her answer to his problem is indicative of many things about Mrs. Wharton, but her emphasis on

---

1. A Backward Glance, pp. 207-8.

integrity is clear:

'Never mind what people say. Don't do the book till you can consult all the material available. Never do anything against your better judgment simply to prove that you're not lazy.' As far as his [Scott's] own welfare was concerned, it might have been better for him to tie himself down to any definite task but since the question was one of literary probity it seemed impossible to hesitate.<sup>1</sup>

The writer's need to satisfy first his own soul eliminates much consideration of audience. Although Mrs. Wharton admits that even the great writers have sometimes made their work conform to the demands of an era, she is heartily in sympathy with one who has the courage to write for "the happy few."<sup>2</sup> The desire for the few as an audience is expressed after several passages are given to condemning "mechanical" readers who have succeeded in destroying much that is good in modern fiction. She seems to believe that the general reader and critic, especially in America, is unable to perceive the finer qualities in fiction and that the weakness of the audience has been a primary cause of the decline of modern fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Wharton favors the practice of changing a writing style from time to time despite a possible public aversion to any innovations. The variation in manner should be made to conform to the requirements of the subject, and not grow out of pure

---

1. Ibid., pp. 376-7.

2. "The Vice of Reading", op.cit., p. 519.

3. Ibid., p. 520.

perversity on the author's part. The idea that a style, and a change in style, should be provoked only by the exigencies of the subject is indicative of her ideas about originality in general. Her denial of the virtue of originality in itself is a complement to her opinion concerning spiritual integrity.

Mrs. Wharton was fortunate in being relieved of the economic pressure that most novelists continually face. She never depended upon her books alone for her livelihood, and her emphasis on independence, from publisher and audience alike, can be attributed, to some extent at least, to her financial security. Her attitude toward her readers is the ideal that almost any author would favor. But indifference to popular approval is not entirely a matter of wealth. Strength of purpose is also required. Even Henry James, who had a financial advantage similar to Mrs. Wharton's, was unable to overcome the human desire for acceptance. The few people whose approbation he valued gave it unstintedly to his books.

But the deep central loneliness [she says] persisted. He always felt that even the best among them did not understand what he was trying for. It was well enough to tell himself that the immediate success of a work of art is always in inverse ratio to its originality... but he could never wholly overcome the longing, not to be bought by the many, but at least to be understood by the few.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton's own audience, the one to which she wrote directly, was a group of friends. A Backward Glance is full of

---

1. "Henry James in His Letters," op.cit., p. 195.

gratitude to those who have served as her critics. There were always such people as Walter Berry, Roger Burlingame, William Brownell, Charles Eliot Norton, and the Bourgets to reconcile her for the absence of either critical ability or literary interest on the part of her family and her earlier New York friends.

In 1904, in the course of composing Italian Villas and Their Gardens, came Mrs. Wharton's first assertion of her independence from editors. Maxwell Parrish had been selected to do the illustrations for the articles as they were appearing in The Century. His "fairy-tale" pictures were widely admired, but her accompanying text was, in comparison, dry and technical. Richard Watson Gilder, the editor, asked her to introduce in the subsequent numbers a few anecdotes, and a touch of human interest. But she was convinced of the seriousness and utility of her study of the gardens and declined to popularize it unduly. She offered to annul her contract. The offer was refused; she had gained her point. She was convinced that what she was doing needed to be done, and in the only way that she could conscientiously present the material. Such honesty and directness pervades all of her relations with editors and readers. She will satisfy first her own artistic and ethical instincts and principles.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is an easy matter for a successful novelist, at the end of a long career, to erect a critical code to substantiate his practice and to show that it is artistically sound. Mrs. Wharton's theories are not, however, that kind of ex-post facto justification. She developed her principles and practices simultaneously. The two aspects of her contribution to American letters are complementary and must be considered as parts of the whole artist. She varied from time to time in her emphasis upon certain of her criteria, but it is easy to discover, underneath the surface variations, that the same Edith Wharton is writing the same fiction, and following the same doctrines.

That her way is the only or the best way is never Mrs. Wharton's opinion. Her method is, rather, the one that she discovered as best for herself. We must remember that she was always aware of the artist's limitations, and insisted that he must create with proper regard for them. She wrote what she wrote because she was what she was. Given Edith Wharton with her temperament and experience, the technique she has evolved was the one most suited to her peculiar talent.

Although Mrs. Wharton's essays in the criticism of fiction are full of suggestions, arising from her study and experience, there is never in her opinions the least dogmatism. She makes no generalizations that are not qualified in one way or another. Most of her "rules" are presented with the reservation that they can

not be observed too strictly, lest the writer go to the extreme of making a fetish, so to speak, of a particular practice.

General rules in art are useful chiefly as a lamp in the mine, or a handrail down a black stairway; they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Wharton is much more interested in the soul of the artist than in any mechanical regulation of his habits of writing. He will formulate, given powers of vision and imagination, rules for his own guidance. All that she has said concerning writing can be taken as her definite, studied, and sincere opinion. "My own experience has taught me that nothing is more difficult than to talk indifferently or insincerely on the subject of one's own craft."<sup>2</sup>

The diversity of critical opinion concerning Mrs. Wharton's work results from the varying admiration for form. It is easy to understand that a critic who evaluates fiction according to its relevance to economics, or politics, or democracy, will have no patience with the artistry of her patterns. On the other hand, a critic who regards fiction as an art form, a problem in proportion, design, and method, will be thoroughly delighted. The ultimate judgment of the world will be determined by its particular predi-

---

1. The Writing of Fiction, p. 42.  
2. A Backward Glance, p. 184.

lection for one element or the other.

It is true that an interest in form does not exclude a concern for content, or that for content exclude that for form. Nevertheless, a writer's intentions and preferences will lead him into one channel or the other. With the work of Mrs. Wharton, this division between form and content is particularly important. She is primarily concerned with form, and her fiction must be judged to determine whether her form has been successful, and has been the most satisfactory for the revelation of American life and character. Certain conclusions can be made, however, about Mrs. Wharton's methods without regard for her subject. In her artistry lay her power. It would be convenient, but misleading, to say that form was her strength and content her weakness. The misleading idea in such a statement would be the implication that her form was perfect and her subject-matter without value. Her form and her methods provided great advantages in her practice of fiction writing. No one can fail to perceive that the story is being told by a writer secure in the mastery of her implements. The novels are planned, arranged, revised, and controlled. The selection of crucial incidents, the arrangement of time sequence, the interplay of character upon character, all fall into an unmistakable design. Her novels resemble the eighteenth-century gardens she so much admired; they possess a unity, balance, and symmetry that indicate the presence of a controlling intellect striving

ing for ordered beauty. Like the gardens, her novels are carefully weeded and pruned.

To achieve regularity of pattern and cohesion of design, Mrs. Wharton uses all her technical training. The unity of action and time depends upon her decision to confine the point of view, and the result is an intensification of effect and the achievement of greater verisimilitude. The limited point of view restricts the author's privileges, particularly those of including extraneous scenes which may, in themselves, be vivid. The gain, in concentrating on the core of action and increasing probability, is much greater than the loss.

Limiting the point of view also assists Mrs. Wharton in creating a well-rounded character. The natural tendency of the reader to lose himself in the character revealed is increased because he sees and feels as does the character. It is easy for him to identify himself with her characters because he is made aware of only one at a time, and rarely more than two in a novel.

To continue interest in the character, Mrs. Wharton minimizes action. The selection of only crucial moments, and the use of introspective narration, stresses character rather than action. The selection of crucial moments prevents the novel from sprawling over too much space and time, leaving, again, the impression of singleness of effect and unity of design.

Mrs. Wharton's careful, efficient prose style was another great economy in her writing. As the whole is unified through a

pattern, so in each sentence. She selects her words and phrases with the same regard for ultimate effect and relevance to the whole, that she shows in choosing the crucial incident and the reflecting character. The smoothness of her prose rhythms, the facility of her own patterns, and the concise meaningfulness of her language are elements in her writing worthy to be copied by any novelist.

All Mrs. Wharton's technical methods, then, lead to valuable economies. She wastes no words, no incidents; all are fitted into the pattern. A few characters, moving within a narrow range of slight actions, all seen from a fairly fixed intellectual position, serve to isolate the reader from any irrelevant impressions. Everything moves from the center outward. The circumference of interest is never too extensive to pass beyond the reader's radius of attention.

Confining time, action, and point of view also serve to emphasize background. When the disturbing elements of vivid action and multiple characters are eliminated from the story, the background against which it is set becomes proportionately more conspicuous. Since of Mrs. Wharton's ultimate claims to fame will be as a social historian, it is fortunate that her methods isolate her setting.

With all the excellencies of pattern and design, of economies in prose diction and incident, there remain serious weak-

nesses in Mrs. Wharton's form that can not be ignored. Certain failures in her fiction grow out of her methods as much as out of her subject-matter.

Her greatest failure is as a dramatist. Her depiction of action lacks animation, and her method eliminates vitality. The seriousness of this weakness will be computed according to the taste of the critic, but no amount of indulgence can make Mrs. Wharton into a great teller of tales. Dramatic action even when the even-tempered lives of her characters admit of it, disappears under the use of a method that is essentially reflective, or, at best, narrative. The action is always once removed from the reader; it is seen through the screen of the reflecting consciousness chosen to tell the story; and frequently it is seen in retrospect even then. As with the Greek playwrights, her murders take place off-stage. Her implicit excuse, that the non-dramatic quality of her fiction is a realistic reflection of the passive lives of her characters, does not prevent the ordinary reader from feeling that nothing happens.

Because the analysis of action, and effect of incident upon character, is sometimes so tenuous and subtle, the interest of many readers is alienated. The shades of actions, the nuances of decision, and undercurrents of emotions which Mrs. Wharton delights to reveal, are sometimes imperceptible. Her insight, the power to interpret hidden motivations, is not given to all people. Her

method may concentrate the attention, but the lines in the etching are too fine to be traced. It is true that she chooses to present only the crucial moments in the lives of her characters, but even a crucial moment loses its force if the crisis which it purports to display can not be understood.

Mrs. Wharton's refusal to utilize her satirical powers to their fullest extent may be charged to an intellectual decision, or to the limitations of her chosen technical devices. Even a cursory reading of her novels, if her incisive style is at all noticed, should convince the critic that she could have been a satirist. She had the necessary scene and subject in New York society; she had the temperamental aloofness that gave her a clear, keen, critical gaze; she had the vitriolic pen and the terse prose style; and she had, in some moods, a feline cast of mind. Her method prevented any great success in the direction of satire. When she chose to tell her stories through the eyes of a participant, and to force the reader to identify himself with the character, the possibility of sweeping satire was eradicated. When she allowed herself to use an objective method, she wrote satire. The introductory expositions, which come before the scene is focused through the eyes of a character, are frequently her most memorable pages. Then she seems to remember the rules, and the satirist disappears. Her critical intelligence can not properly comment on the scene and action. She can, however, still arrange the pattern of incident, and her satirical bent finds release in

the shape of ironical juxtapositions of events -- a poor substitute.

Subject and method are so compounded in Mrs. Wharton's work that it is necessary to keep one in mind while discussing the other. It is convenient to say that some of her subjects came into her fiction because of the nature of her methods, although it is equally possible to believe that the method resulted from the subject. It matters little which is given priority. One depends upon the other.

Her interest in the reflecting consciousness as a point of view demanded moral responsibility in her fiction, and also the use of sensitive, cultivated characters. Her actual experience may have so limited her that she had the power to interpret only those characters who had the necessary sensitivity. To make their quiet lives meaningful, she had to show them in moral crises; and her method was admirably suited to that purpose. The question must remain whether the moral problems of cultivated people will ever make great fiction.

Mrs. Wharton sees man as having will and purpose, capable of choosing his actions, and to some extent of making his own world. Most of her American contemporaries came to an opposite conclusion and omnisciently have written a different sort of fiction. Judgment need here be passed only on the artistic result of her philosophy, not on its validity. Mrs. Wharton's

decision to see life as something other than chaos, and her characters as different from the "helpless puppets" of other novelists, is the hypothesis which must be accepted in order to make important her preoccupation with "moral responsibility." From that position the advance can be made to the acceptance as proper characters of men and women who "feel with their minds."

The results in fiction has limitations which will probably prevent Mrs. Wharton from ever gain being a popular writer. Excellent as her subject was, it could not withwtand continuous use through forty volumes in as many years. It is always the same; invariably unbending people engage in the convolutions of an intricate ethical dance. Ethan Frome, Summer, and "The Bunner Sisters" are not large enough in bulk to nullify the contention that her fiction has no range. There are only shades of difference, in a broad view of dramatic conflicts, among the various kinds of moral dilemmas she presents. The subordination of action, demanded by her form, leaves only characterization and moral responsibility for the reader's nourishment. To the appetite of the average reader, both character and subject are too much alike in novel after novel.

The evaluation of a writer must fall back upon a conclusion about his personality. Mrs. Wharton had definite temperamental qualities which, although only reflected in her fiction, are inescapable. In her autobiography especially, and in the tone of her work, there can be found indications of her seriousness and

aloofness. To say that she was, in her attitude toward people, "reserved" only describes most of the members of her class. With her, however, the reserve borders on frigidity. She is cold. Her developed and cultivated analytical mind, almost scientific in its objectivity, divorced her from an encompassing kinship with the hearty and solid mass of mankind. The evidence presented by her humanitarian efforts in war work to the contrary, there is no escaping the feeling that she did not like people.

Mrs. Wharton had an innate feeling for form, and a love of beauty. She had a powerful intellectual energy and a serious concern for the work she was doing. She could discipline her mind, concentrate her attention upon involved technical principles, and work slavishly to accomplish her ends. She refused to give to the public anything, except in her last years, which was not the best she could do. Combine all these qualities with an intelligence that can safely be called brilliant, and we understand why her novels are models of form.

Mrs. Wharton lacked fervor, enthusiasm for life and people; in sum -- heartiness. Her inability to dramatize an action may be only the result of her intellectual unwillingness to participate in one, or to understand those people who are passionate, and who become involved in physical conflicts.

The crux of any evaluation of Mrs. Wharton's work must lie, then, in the acceptance or denial of moral responsibility as a suitable theme for fiction. Her extreme popularity, from about

1915 to 1925, and her equally rapid decline in appeal since the latter date, are the result of different evaluations of the importance of ethical decisions. If the taste of the readers changed, her practices did not. Her vision of moral responsibility never wavered. It is always somewhere present in her work. In A Backward Glance, she reviews the problem:

The poor novelists [who were my contemporaries] in English-speaking countries had to fight hard for the right to turn the wooden dolls about which they were expected to make believe into struggling, suffering human beings; but we have been avenged, and more than avenged, not only by life but by the novelists, and I hope the latter will see before long that it is as hard to get dramatic interest out of a mob of irresponsible criminals as out of the Puritan marionettes who formed our stock-in-trade. Authentic human nature lies somewhere in between the two, and is always there for the new great novelist to rediscover.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to understand the willingness of readers to believe that because many of her characters meet tragedy when they defy regimentation, Mrs. Wharton must be advocating conformity. Just the opposite is true. She regarded the preempted authority of social groups with some indignation. The failure of her characters in revolt is not a defence of the victorious society, but rather a revelation of her strong strain of pessimism. Edmund Wilson, one of her most sympathetic critics, says that she is as pessimistic as Hardy or Maupassant, and that she has a general sense of the inexorable doom of humanity.

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 127.

Haunted by the myth of the Eumenides, she had developed her own deadly version of the working of the Aeschylean necessity -- a version as automatic and rapid, as decisive and unsentimental, as the mechanical and financial processes which, during her lifetime, were transforming her New York.<sup>1</sup>

To Mrs. Wharton the only genuine human defeat was not compliance with social decorum, but disintegration of the spirit. As long ago as 1915 the discerning Percy Lubbock realized that her aim was not to support society, but to show individuals who are changed by the pressure of social forces. Writing of The House of Mirth, Lubbock says:

It is difficult to see what they members of New York society mean or created, but what they are devouring or supplanting is less obscure. Mrs. Wharton accordingly pictures not the Trenors themselves but their disturbing impact upon others and more impressionable societies.<sup>2</sup>

That the author herself is in agreement with Lubbock's idea is indicated by her introduction to a new edition of the novel in 1936. Her interest is in the disintegration of Lily Bart, who embodies "wasted human possibilities", and upon whom the "shallow and idle people" lean for support. The fate of Lily Bart redeems the subject from insignificance.

Because Mrs. Wharton has depicted the defeated social rebels, she has been regarded by some critics as an ordinary moralist preaching the necessity for social conventions. A

- 
1. "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, June 29, 1938, p. 210.
  2. "Novels of Edith Wharton," Quarterly Review (London), January, 1915; in The Living Age for March 6, 1915.

recent student of American fiction, Harry Hartwick, falls into the delusion, and captions a discussion of her work "Crime and Punishment." He says she looks upon every break with convention as a crime that must be punished, and that "Social rules, even when they are cruel and superficial, are essential to social order and cannot be violated with impunity."<sup>1</sup>

Almost the opposite is true, if we accept Mrs. Wharton's own testimony. She depicts the rebels of society because they are the only ones who interest her. She needs a character who possesses the moral stamina to strive after something higher in life than that which fate, chance, and society have decreed. "Least is he," she said in a sonnet in 1894, "who through indecision makes nothing of his life."<sup>2</sup> The truly indecisive person is one who lets society in the guise of time decide for him. When the characters who possesses a will fights against society and loses, it is not because she believes that society is in the right of it, or that it should be supported against all assaults, but rather because defeat is the inexorable law of life. If social traditionalism is often victorious over the rebel in her books it is only because she so often uses society as one of the forces in the conflict. Her repeated statements concerning the need, especially in America, for a social tra-

---

1. The Foreground of American Fiction, New York, The American Book Company, 1934, p. 385.

2. "Life", Scribner's Magazine, June, 1894, p. 839.

dition is outside this argument. Social tradition as a cultural stimulus is one thing, and as a binding force on the human spirit it is something else again. When that distinction is borne in mind there is no danger of regarding her as advocating a social morality that metes out justice upon its nonconformists.

More often than not her characters lose in the conflict with society because Mrs. Wharton sees life that way. Her temperament has an inescapably pessimistic bent. The American public's wanting a tragedy with a happy ending, she said once, is an epitome of the whole American attitude toward life. "Happy endings are for children... Things are not always and everywhere well with the world, and each man has to find that out as he grows up."<sup>1</sup>

R.M. Lovett, in his study of Mrs. Wharton, gives the opinion that her weakness lies in her "aesthetic morality". This was, he felt, impatiently received in a world of barbarism which recognizes the battle for survival as a cardinal fact in human biology. The response of Stuart Sherman is an adult and meaningful interpretation of her work and her theme.

I suspect that Mrs. Wharton he says has been playing with her public and with her critics for some years and wondering how long it would be before anyone discovered that The Age of Innocence tells just the same story as Ethan

---

1. A Backward Glance, p. 241.

Frome -- a story, in each case, of that battle for survival which Mr. Lovett grimly says is "the cardinal fact in human biology."

But in one case the combatants are so much better dressed. It is diverting to costume the passions.<sup>1</sup>

The conflicts in Mrs. Wharton's novels are as passionate as those revealed by the physical realists and naturalists she despises. They are usually between a man's duty and his desire, the duty sometimes being embodied in the established codes of society and sometimes in his inherited awareness of those codes. In any event, the conflict is raised to the plane of soul, conscience, ethics, morality, integrity -- call it what you will. The greater the sensitivity of the soul or conscience, the more dramatic will be the conflict, and the more worth describing. Only in people who possess moral responsibility does she find a story worth the telling, a story that has typical human significance" and reflects some part of "the old woe of the world."

---

1. The Main Stream, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927, p. 212.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. The Works of Edith Wharton

#### A. Fiction

"Mrs. Manstey's View," Scribner's Magazine, July, 1891.

"The Fulness of Life," Scribner's Magazine, Dec., 1893.

"That Good May Come," Scribner's Magazine, May, 1894.

"The Lamp of Psyche," Scribner's Magazine, Oct., 1895.

"The Valley of Childish Things and Other Emblems,"  
Century Magazine, July, 1896.

"The Line of Least Resistance," Lippincott's Magazine,  
October, 1900.

"More Love Letters of an Englishman," Bookman, February,  
1901.

"The Letter," Harper's Magazine, April, 1904.

"The House of the Dead Hand," Atlantic Monthly, August,  
1904.

The Greater Inclination, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1899. ("The Muse's Tragedy," "A Journey," "The Pelican,"  
"Souls Belated," "A Coward," "The Twilight of the God,"  
"A Cup of Cold Water," and "The Portrait.")

The Touchstone, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900.

Crucial Instances, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.  
("The Duchess at Prayer," "The Angel at the Grave,"  
"The Recovery," "Copy," "The Rembrandt," "The Moving  
Finger," "The Confessional.")

The Valley of Decision, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1902.

Sanctuary, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.

The Descent of Man and Other Stories, New York, Charles  
Scribner's Sons, 1904. ("The Descent of Man," "The  
Dilettante," "The Reckoning," "The Expiation," "The  
Lady's Maid's Bell," "A Venetian Night's Entertainment.")

The House of Mirth, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1905.

Madame de Treymes, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1907.

The Fruit of the Tree, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1907.

The Hermit and the Wild Woman and Other Stories, New York,  
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908. ("The Hermit and the  
Wild Woman," "The Lost Asset," "In Trust," "The Pre-  
text," "The Verdict," "The Pot Boiler," "The Best Man.")

Tales of Men and Ghosts, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1910. ("The Bolted Door," "His Father's Son," "The  
Daunt Diana," "The Debt," "Full Circle," "The Legend,"  
"The Eyes," "The Blond Beast," "Afterwards" "The Letters.")

Ethan Frome, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911.

The Reef, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912.

The Custom of the Country, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1913.

Xingu and Other Stories, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons,  
1916. ("Xingu," "Coming Home," "Autres Temps," "Kerfol,"  
"The Long Run," "The Triumph of Night," "The Choice,"  
"The Bunner Sisters.")

Summer, New York, Appleton, 1917.

The Marne, New York, Appleton, 1918.

The Age of Innocence, New York, Appleton, 1920.

The Glimpses of the Moon, New York, Appleton, 1922.

A Son at the Front, New York, Appleton, 1923.

False Dawn, New York, Appleton, 1924.

The Old Maid, New York, Appleton, 1924.

The Spark, New York, Appleton, 1924.

New Year's Day, New York, Appleton, 1924.

The Mother's Recompense, New York, Appleton, 1925.

Here and Beyond, New York, Appleton, 1926. ("Miss Mary Pask," "The Young Gentlemen," "Bewitched," "The Seed of the Faith," "The Temperate Zone," "Velvet Ear Pads.")

Twilight Sleep, New York, Appleton, 1927.

The Children, New York, Appleton, 1927.

Hudson River Bracketed, New York, Appleton, 1929.

Certain People, New York, Appleton, 1930. ("Atrophy," "A Bottle of Perrier," "After Holbein," "Dieu d'Amour," "The Refugees," "Mr. Jones.")

The Gods Arrive, New York, Appleton, 1932.

Human Nature, New York, Appleton, 1933. ("Her Son," "The Day of the Funeral," "A Glimpse," "Joy in the House," "Diagnosis.")

The World Over, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1936. ("Charm, Inc.," "Pomegranate Seed," "Permanent Wave," "Confession," "Roman Fever," "The Looking Glass," "Duration.")

Ghosts, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1937.

The Buccaneers, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1938.

B. Critical and Expository

The Decoration of Houses, (with Ogden Codman, Jr.), New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897.

The Joy of Living (translated from the German of Hermann Sudermann) New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.

"Review of Stephen Phillips' Ulysses," Bookman, April, 1902.

"Review of Leslie Stephen's George Eliot," Bookman, May, 1902.

"The Three Francescas," North American Review, July, 1902.

"The Vice of Reading," North American Review, Oct., 1903.

Italian Villas and Their Gardens, New York, Century, 1904.

- Italian Backgrounds, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
- "Review of Howard Sturgis's Belchamber," Bookman, May, 1905.
- "Review of Maurice Hewlett's The Fool Errant," Bookman, Nov., 1905.
- "Sonnets of Eugene Lee-Hamilton," Bookman, Nov., 1907.
- A Motor-Flight Through France, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.
- "George Cabot Lodge," Scribner's Magazine, Feb., 1910.
- "The Criticism of Fiction," Living Age, July, 1914.
- "Introduction" to Gottfried Keller's A Village Romeo and Juliet, London, Constable, 1915.
- Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915.
- The Book of the Homeless, (ed.), New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915.
- French Ways and Their Meaning, New York, Appleton, 1919.
- In Morocco, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- "Henry James in His Letters," Quarterly Review, July, 1920.
- "Introduction" to William Gerhardt's Futility, New York, Duffield and Co., 1922.
- "Introduction" to Ethan Frome, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- "Christmas Tinsel," The Delineator, December, 1923.
- The Writing of Fiction, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- "The Great American Novel," Yale Review, July, 1927.
- "William C. Brownell," Scribner's Magazine, Nov., 1928.
- "A Cycle of Reviewing," London Spectator, Nov., 1928.

"Visibility in Fiction," Yales Review, March, 1929.

"The Writing of Ethan Frome," Colophon, Sept., 1932.

"Introduction" to The House of Mirth, new edition,  
World Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press,  
1933.

"Confessions of a Novelist," Atlantic Monthly, April,  
1933.

"Tendencies in Modern Fiction," Saturday Review of  
Literature, January 29, 1934.

"Permanent Values in Fiction," Saturday Review of  
Literature, April 7, 1934.

A Backward Glance, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1934.

"Little Girl's New York," Harper's Magazine, March, 1938.

### C. Poetry

Artemis to Actaeon and other Verse, New York, Charles  
Scribner's Sons, 1909.

Twelve Poems, London, The Medici Society, 1926.

"Garden Valedictory," Scribner's Magazine, January, 1928.

"Had I Been Only," Scribner's Magazine, August, 1928.

## II. Concerning Edith Wharton (Selected)

Ames, Van Meter. Aesthetics of the Novel, Chicago, University  
of Chicago Press, 1928.

Boynton, W.H. "Review of The Valley of Decision," Atlantic  
Monthly, May, 1902.

Boynton, H.W. "Mrs. Wharton's Manner," Nation, Oct., 1913.

Boynton, P.H. "Edith Wharton," English Journal, January, 1923.

Brown, E.K. "Review of Lavinia Davis' Bibliography of Edith  
Wharton," American Literature, November, 1933.

- Brown, E.K. Edith Wharton, Paris, Librarie E. Droz, 1935.
- Brown, E.K. "Review of A Backward Glance," American Literature, January, 1935.
- Burdett, Osbert. "Contemporary American Authors," London Mercury, November, 1935.
- Burke, Thomas. "Review of The World Over," American Mercury, September, 1936.
- Canby, H.S. "Review of The Mother's Recompense," Saturday Review of Literature, May 25, 1925.
- Canby, H.S. "Edith Wharton," Saturday Review of Literature, May 23 21, 1937.
- Colby, F.M. "Review of The Custom of the Country," North American Review, Feb., 1914.
- Cooper, Frederick Taber. "Review of The Valley of Decision," Bookman, April, 1902.
- Cross, Wilbur L. "Edith Wharton," Bookman, August, 1926.
- Cross, Wilbur L. "Review of The Writing of Fiction," Yale Review, Spring, 1926.
- Chanler, M.W. "Winters in Paris," Atlantic Monthly, October, 1936.
- Davis, Lavinia, A Bibliography of the Writings of Edith Wharton, Portland, Maine, The Southworth Press, 1933.
- DeVoto, Bermard. "Introduction" to Ethan Frome, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.
- Follett, Wilson. "What Edith Wharton Did and Might Have Done," New York Times Book Review, September 5, 1937.
- Franklin, C.L. "Women and Business," Bookman, November, 1906.
- Gilbertson, Catherine. "Mrs. Wharton," Century, October, 1929.
- Hackett, Francis, "Mrs. Wharton's Art," New Republic, February, 1917.

- Hartwick, Harry. The Foreground of American Fiction, Cincinnati, The American Book Company, 1934.
- Herrick, Robert. "Mrs. Wharton's World," New Republic, February 1, 1915.
- James, Henry. Notes on Novelists, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood, "Ethan Frome," Nation, Feb. 5, 1936.
- Loveman, Amy. "Review of A Backward Glance," Saturday Review of Literature, April 28, 1934.
- Lovett, Robert Morss. Edith Wharton, New York, Robert M. McBride and Co., 1925.
- Lubbock, Percy. "Novels of Edith Wharton," The Living Age, March, 1915.
- Lubbock, Percy, ed. The Letters of Henry James, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- MacDougall, Allan Ross. "The Literary Coast of France," Bookman, October, 1932.
- Mable, Wamilton Wright. "Books and Writers," Outlook, May, 1902.
- Matthews, Brander. "Review of The Writing of Fiction," Literary Digest International Book Review, October, 1925.
- Melish, Lawson McClung, A Bibliography of the Collected Writings of Edith Wharton, New York, Brick Row Book Shop, 1927.
- Michaud, Regis. American Novel Today, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1928.
- Morley, Christopher. "Review of The Buccaneers," Saturday Review of Literature, June 2, 1934.
- Nelson, J.H. "Review of Brown's Edith Wharton," American Literature, May, 1936.
- Overton, Grant. American Nights Entertainment, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, George H. Doran Co., etc., 1923.

- Pattee, Frederic Lewis. The New American Literature, 1890-1930, New York, The Century Co., 1935.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. American Fiction, New York, D. Appleton-Century, 1936.
- Rascoe, Burton. "The Writing of Fiction," Arts and Decoration, February, 1926.
- Repplier, Agnes. "Edith Wharton," Commonweal, Nov. 25, 1938.
- Roberts, R. Ellis. "Edith Wharton," Bookman, Sept., 1923.
- Russell, Frances Theresa. "Edith Wharton's Use of Imagery," English Journal, June, 1932.
- Russell, Frances Theresa, "Melodramatic Mrs. Wharton," Sewanee Review, October-December, 1932.
- Sedgwick, Anne Douglas. A Portrait in Letters, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936.
- Sedgwick, Henry Dwight. "Novels of Mrs. Wharton," Atlantic Monthly, August, 1906.
- Sedgwick, Henry Dwight. New American Type and Other Essays, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1908.
- Sencourt, Robert. "Poetry of Mrs. Wharton," Bookman, July, 1931.
- Stalnaker, John, et. al. "American Novelists Ranked," English Journal, April, 1929.
- Sherman, Stuart, Main Stream, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.
- Troy, William. "Flower of Manhattan," Nation, May 23, 1934.
- Trueblood, Charles. "Edith Wharton," Dial, January, 1920.
- Van Doren, Carl, and Mark. American and British Fiction Since 1890, New York, The Century Co., 1925.
- Van Doren, Carl. The American Novel, New York, Macmillan, 1921; revised edition, 1940.

Webb, Mary. "Irony of Mrs. Wharton," Bookman, September, 1927.

Wilson, Edmund. "Review of Old New York," New Republic, June 11, 1924.

Wilson, Edmund. "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, June 29, 1938.

### III. Background (Selected)

Beard, Charles and Mary. The Rise of American Civilization, New York, Macmillan, 1927.

Blankenship, Russell. American Literature, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1931.

Brewster, Dorothy, and Burrell, Angus. Modern Fiction, New York, Columbia University Press, 1934.

Brooks, Van Wyck. Three Essays on America, New York, E.P. Dutton and Co., 1934.

Cowley, Malcolm, ed. After the Genteel Tradition, W.W. Norton, 1937.

Edgar, Pelham. The Art of the Novel, New York, Macmillan, 1933.

Forster, E.M. Aspects of the Novel, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927.

Grabo, Carl H. The Technique of the Novel, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928.

Josephson, Matthew. Portrait of the Artist as American, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930.

Lathrop, Henry Burrowes. The Art of the Novelist, New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1919.

Lubbock, Percy. The Craft of Fiction, New York, Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931.

Muir, Edwin. The Structure of the Novel, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929.

Parrington, Vernon Louis. Main Currents of American Thought,  
Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927.

Perry, Bliss. A Study of Prose Fiction, New York, Houghton  
Mifflin Co., Boston, 1902.

Smith, Bernard. Forces in American Criticism, New York,  
Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939.

Whipple, T.K. Spokesmen, New York, D. Appleton and Co.,  
1928.

Winters, Yvor. Maule's Curse, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions,  
1938.

-----