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EDITH WHARTON'S TREATMENT OF LOVE: A STUDY OF
CONVENTIONALITY AND UNCONVENTIONALITY
IN HER FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Jo Agnew McManis
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1965
August, 1967
"Quotations from the following works by Edith Wharton are reprinted by special permission of Charles Scribner's Sons: THE HOUSE OF MIRTH, ETHAN FROME (Copyright 1911 Charles Scribner's Sons; renewal copyright 1939 Wm. R. Tyler) and THE REEF (Copyright 1912 Wm. R. Tyler; renewal copyright 1940)."
I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Donald E. Stanford for his continuing advice and direction in the writing of this dissertation as well as for his guidance throughout my graduate work. Also I want to thank Dr. James T. Nardin and Dr. Louis P. Simpson for their constructive criticism.
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ABSTRACT

The popular opinion of Edith Wharton is that she was a strictly conventional, Victorian writer of sentimental novels with soap-opera plots. One reason for this view is based upon the long accepted belief that her life was, for the most part, one of complete conformity. Known facts substantiated an opinion of her as the "grand dame," growing up in New York society, traveling in the best circles, sojourning in Europe, and, with the exception of her divorce from Edward Wharton, never defying the conventions of society. However, this established conception of Edith Wharton has been modified by the discovery of her love for and close relationship with Walter Berry before, during, and after her marriage. Nevertheless, foundation for the charge of conventionality is readily found in Mrs. Wharton's style of writing and in her subject matter. Her formalized, conservative technique is perfectly in keeping with her classical, traditional theory of fiction. Her subject matter is the quiet, internal, moral struggle of well-bred ladies and gentlemen. Her setting is most often aristocratic New York society, and her characters are made to conform to established social standards.

Yet, there are unconventional aspects of Edith
Wharton's fiction. She is outside the mainstream of American literature in her concern with man's relationship to society. Unlike the typical American novel in which emphasis is placed upon man's lonely role as an alienated individual who will not or cannot communicate with others, Edith Wharton's novels are concerned with the individual's responsibility to society. Her major fiction is also distinguished from that of her contemporaries by the skillful way in which she handles love scenes and her attitude toward love as a destructive force.

In *The House of Mirth* the love between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden leads only to suffering for both. Lily's love for Selden plus the pressures of imminent poverty, social ostracism, and Selden's seeming indifference result in Lily's death. *Ethan Frome* also presents a doomed love which yields no happiness. The story employs a triangular situation in which one lover is trapped in a hateful marriage. Ethan's moral responsibility to his sickly, complaining wife prevents his one chance for happiness with Mattie Silver. In *The Reef* Anna Leath rebels against her love for George Darrow. She cannot trust him after she learns of his affair with Sophy Viner; she realizes that marriage to Darrow must necessarily result in her moral shrinkage. Yet, because of her love for Darrow, she lacks the strength to resist. In *The Age of Innocence* the consequences of the familiar triangular love situation are tragic because of the wasted potential for happiness. These consequences are all the more poignant
because of the effective dramatization of the beautifully
done love scenes. Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska are very
much in love, but Archer is hopelessly trapped by his mar-
riage to Ellen's cousin. The frustrating substitution of
dreams for reality is all that is possible for the two.
This same attitude toward love can be found not only in the
major novels but also throughout Mrs. Wharton's other
fiction. The style and plot of the minor novels, especially
those written after 1920, are vastly inferior; however, even
in the most conventional and sentimental novels her unconven-
tional attitude toward love can still be found. Thus,
despite her traditional style, the unconventional aspects of
Edith Wharton's life contribute to her treatment of and
attitude toward love in her fiction, separating her from the
writers for ladies' magazines with whom she is too often
erroneously identified.
INTRODUCTION

The popular opinion of Edith Wharton is that she was a strictly conventional, old-fashioned, stuffy, Victorian writer of sentimental novels with soap-opera plots. She has been dismissed as a snob, and it has been said that her writing was limited and concerned with trivialities as the result of her emphasis upon the socially elect. Critics speak of her moral conservatism, her melodramatic quality, and her traditional design and style. Her later novels have been described as the "slick" fiction of ladies' magazines, "a series of cheap novels," "a succession of intelligent regrets," and "a concession to the readers of serialized fiction." They have also been described as sentimental and melodramatic. Mrs. Wharton is considered too Victorian and is described as one "among the voices whispering the last enchantments of the Victorian age."

Edith Wharton realized that she must be considered old-fashioned and dated even during her own lifetime. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, thanking him for sending her a copy of The Great Gatsby, she wrote, "I am touched at your sending me a copy for I feel that to your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and
What is the basis for this view of Edith Wharton, and just how much truth is there behind this opinion? One reason for this view is based upon her life which will be discussed more fully in Chapter I. Here, it will suffice to say that, until recent information was brought out, it was accepted that she had led a quiet, refined, conventional life. Now it seems that this placid surface was hiding a turbulent undercurrent. It is true that her divorce was known and speculated upon, but there was no scandal attached to the "grand dame," who grew up in New York society, traveled always in the best circles, and frequently sojourned in Europe. The recent information has not yet adequately dispelled the established myth that her life was utterly within the bounds of the conventions set by society. Therefore, Chapter I is devoted to the task of presenting Edith Wharton's life with emphasis upon its unconventional aspects.

A second reason for describing Edith Wharton as conventional is her formalized, conservative style of writing. Her style exemplifies her classical, traditional theory of fiction which she stated explicitly in her book, *The Writing of Fiction*. Her technique is very conventional; for example, she opposed experimentalism and the stream-of-consciousness method of James Joyce and his followers, and she explained the reasons for her opposition as well as for her own conservative beliefs. Chapter II examines Mrs. Wharton's theory of fiction and her technique of writing prose, both of which
were admittedly quite conventional.

The third reason for classifying Mrs. Wharton as conventional is the fact that her writing is often thought of as being too imitative of established authors, especially of the early Henry James. While it is true that she was a literary disciple of James, to dismiss her as simply a "female James" is to distort the truth. A brief comparison of the two will serve not only to show her debt to his influence, but also to show her independence of him.

In general we may say that we find an echo of James in certain of her themes, situations, names, and methods, particularly in her early work. Her fictional structure, however, has much more freedom than does that of James. Her work is clearer and more concrete. She avoided his complexities and the symmetrical architectural design of his novels. She usually did not perceive the sharp impression of details as did James, although at times she becomes too detailed in her description of dress or décor. Her view is larger, more comprehensive and therefore less exact. Lacking James's subtlety, she achieved her point more directly. Following James's lead, she assigned her point of view to the character with the largest view, the most intelligent, and in the best position to observe.

She echoes James's metaphors, for example, the protecting, hovering wings and the emotional or moral abyss which threatens the characters.

Her early style shows a great amount of indebtedness
to James's early style. Her dialogue contains his nuances, his hesitations, his unfinished sentences and implications. Ordinarily, however, her dialogue is more emphatic and more brisk than is James's.

She is more of a realist than is James but, although her prose does possess a certain poetic quality, she is not the poet that James is. Environment is a more controlling factor in the lives of Wharton's characters than it is in the lives of James's characters.

Although influenced more by James than perhaps by any other writer, she did learn much from other writers whom she admired. She did not imitate these writers, but she assimilated what she read and appreciated. She admired Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert, but she resembles them in no specific way. She does treat social scenes skillfully and realistically as they do, however. Also she admired certain English authors, for example, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and William Makepeace Thackeray, but again there is no specific modeling her style after them. Hers is not the conventional morality of George Eliot. She is not so limited as was Jane Austen. She is infinitely more interesting than Trollope, and never so subjective in her treatment of her characters as was Thackeray. Yet, it is true that she clung steadfastly to traditional methods for the creation of her fiction.

A fourth reason for Mrs. Wharton's reputation as conventional is her subject matter. The subjects of her
later novels do reflect the fact that she was writing for ladies' magazines, and often she is erroneously judged simply on the basis of these later novels. However, even her best novels, those of the middle period (with which this dissertation is primarily concerned) are conventional in their repeated reliance upon the established social standards. Even when society is satirized, the observance of its standards is held up as admirable. Edith Wharton is concerned primarily with the upper ranks of society. In his book, *The Protestant Establishment*, E. Digby Baltzell tells us that "at the top of the pyramid of wealth and social prestige in the city [New York City], there is a White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant establishment which . . . has been gradually losing its power and authority in the course of the twentieth century." It is this top of the pyramid with which Edith Wharton is usually concerned. "While the major American writers were composing sociological novels and making heroes out of Clyde Griffiths, Wharton was coolly praising the manners and tradition of Lawrence Seldens. While James T. Farrell was bitterly acquainting us with the viciousness of the city gang, Wharton was wondering whether to place the duke or the ambassador at the hostess's left at dinner. While Hemingway was showing us the brutality of men at war, Wharton was deciding whether the Wellands and the van der Luydens should leave calling cards." In the light of the modern emphasis upon violence, Edith Wharton does seem quite old-fashioned with her emphasis upon the quiet,
internal, moral struggle.

These then are the four obvious reasons why Edith Wharton has been dismissed as the conventional novelist who was too Victorian for the modern twentieth century in which she lived and wrote. Only the conventional aspects of her life were known until quite recently. Her theory and technique of writing fiction are traditional and conservative. She relied upon the established forms of previous authors, notably Henry James, and her subjects were quite traditional.

Edith Wharton differed from many of her contemporaries and immediate followers in three outstanding ways. First, she is outside the mainstream of American literature in her concern with man's relationship to society. Certainly the social novel does exist in American literature, but novels which deal with man's relationship to society are in the minority. In The Modern Novel, Walter Allen writes that "the classic American novels have dealt not so much with the lives of men in society as with the life of the solitary man, man alone and wrestling with himself. . . . The emphasis is on the individual. . . . One might say that society and the characteristic American hero are irreconcilably opposed."9

Although not writers of fiction, Emerson and Thoreau, with their emphasis upon self-reliance and individuality, come immediately to mind. Examples are abundant in the world of fiction. Cooper's Natty Bumpo is the rugged frontiersman separated from society by his retreat into the
forest. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne is isolated from society by her scarlet letter which represents her sin. Melville's Ishmael lacks kinship with society, and Ahab is separated from man because of an overweening pride. Emily Dickinson is an isolated poet who produced extremely individualistic poetry. In Whitman's *Song of Myself*, he is the composite of humanity, not a man with a relationship to society, but he is society as a whole. The same thing is true of Thomas Wolfe's heroes. The hero of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* must stand alone and test life for himself. Twain's Huck Finn and Salinger's Holden Caulfield are classic examples of teen-age boys who are alienated from society. Other examples of isolated protagonists include Wolfe's Eugene Gant, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, and Faulkner's Joe Christmas, Sutpen, and Quentin Compson. Perhaps the supreme example of the isolated, lonely individual in twentieth century fiction is Hemingway's Nick Adams.

Edith Wharton writes about men and women who belong to society. Her constant theme is man's responsibility to society. She writes about the conflict between society and the individual. An individual's desires may not conform to what is socially acceptable, but Mrs. Wharton does not condone the animalistic route of blindly following one's appetite. The individual must sacrifice to society's standards which, although at times unreasonable, are better than having no standards at all. Her characters are not unthinking conformists; they struggle, but the ultimate
conclusion is that happiness cannot be purchased at the expense of others. Others cannot be sacrificed for the good of one individual.

The second factor distinguishing Edith Wharton from her contemporaries is that, in my opinion, she treated romantic love with more power and literary skill than most of her contemporaries. In American literature, which tends at one extreme to suppress love and sex altogether and at the other extreme to expose sex as cheap, filthy, and sordid, Edith Wharton indeed stands alone in her creation and portrayal of beautiful, yet realistic love scenes, for example in *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*. Conversely, in my opinion, some of the greatest American writers have either ignored love almost completely, for example, Melville, or else have failed in their attempts to portray romantic love, for example: Edgar Allan Poe, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway.

In his book, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie A. Fiedler substantiates the accusation that the American writer of fiction either avoids the treatment of adult heterosexual love or else fails miserably if he does attempt to portray it. Fiedler says, "Our great novelists . . . tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel." Fiedler goes on to cite the failure of love in American fiction as the reason for the tremendous success which the tale of terror has enjoyed in America. "The death of love
left a vacuum at the affective heart of the American novel into which there rushed the love of death."¹²

Fictional women prove incapable of inciting love. In an article dealing with the history of love in America, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. summarizes the appearances of women in American literature of the nineteenth century.

When women appeared, they generally represented a contrast between symbolic abstractions; the ethereal fair girl and the passionate, and therefore dangerous, dark girl. The women in Cooper were waxworks; there were no women in *Moby Dick*; in Poe they were generally symbols of death; Whitman's invocation of women was of men in disguise; Mark Twain fled from adult love like the plague. Unable to deal with the fact of heterosexual love, American literature of the Nineteenth Century suppressed it.¹³

In the twentieth century, we can look for successful portrayals of love and find the emphasis not upon love but upon sex, for example, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Frank Norris. It is true that there are love scenes in Hemingway, but most of them consist of harshly worded, clipped dialogue which sounds more like demands or threats than words of love. We find not love, but examples of sexual play, promiscuity, prostitution, rape, and incest in the work of Faulkner. The sordid details which surround these sex scenes with frequent overtones of sadism hardly allow them to be called love scenes. Sex scenes are frequent in twentieth century fiction, but the love scenes are rare and poorly done when attempted. Man escapes the responsibilities of love by settling for a sexual relationship as a substitute which carries with it no responsibilities.
Another means of escape is to run away. Fiedler maintains that the male protagonist who is typical in American fiction is always on the run to escape civilization. He goes either into the woods, out upon the ocean, down the river, or to war, anywhere away from the polite, civilized society where he must confront woman and face the issue of love and marriage. The primary object is to escape a society where reciprocal love is impossible and therefore "a society in which passion leads only to thralldom and suffering."  

While it is true that essentially the same conception of love as a passion which can lead only to thralldom and suffering is held by Edith Wharton, she does not try to avoid the subject nor to play up the sensationalism of sex. She presents adult heterosexual love as she sees it with all its driving power and dire consequences, and she is effective in her portrayal of love scenes.

Finally, Edith Wharton departed from convention in her presentation of love as a destructive force. This fact alone sets her apart from the writers for ladies' magazines with whom she is often confused. Even though set within the conventional framework of the romantic love novel, her attack on romantic love is unconventional and opposed to the popular view of love as presented in the ladies' magazines.

An examination of Edith Wharton's unconventional attack on romantic love is primarily the subject of this dissertation. Chapter I reveals Edith Wharton's life and her unhappy experiences with love. These experiences had
considerable effect upon her attitude toward love, an attitude which is reflected in and is influential upon her writing. We learn that her life was not nearly so conventional as has been supposed. A triangular love situation developed, and she frequently employs just such a situation in her writings. Another frequent situation in her works is that of ensnarement; it takes various forms, but usually one person is bound by marriage to another person whom he or she does not love. Edith Wharton's attitude toward marriage is explained somewhat by her personal experience. She felt trapped by her own marriage to Edward Wharton.

Chapter II, as stated previously, provides foundation for classifying Edith Wharton as conventional in its examination of her conservative, classical approach to the writing of fiction.

Chapter III examines Edith Wharton's specific works which reveal her unconventional attitude toward love. At this point, an explanation showing how these specific works were selected is in order. Edith Wharton's fiction can be divided into three groups: the early writings from her first publication in 1878 until 1905, the middle period from the publication of The House of Mirth in 1905 until the publication of The Age of Innocence in 1920, and the later works from 1920 until the posthumous publication of The Buccaneers in 1938. The quality of the works is one distinguishing feature. The novels of the middle period are, as a whole, vastly superior to the mediocrity of the earlier and later
novels. Also dialogue, which in the best novels is used quite economically, being reserved primarily for scenes of emotional stress, is increased considerably in the later fiction. Style is another factor which distinguishes the periods into which Mrs. Wharton's fiction falls. Her early style was often done at the top of her voice (to paraphrase Walter Berry). Her later style is often too tense and distractingly artificial. At its best, her language is crisp, witty, and epigrammatic, but after *The Age of Innocence*, there is a distinct falling off in both style and subject matter. Her later style is too soft; it lacks its former power, and her subjects are too sentimentalized.

Therefore, only novels from the middle period have been chosen as subjects for a full discussion. Other novels and short stories which shed light on Edith Wharton's attitude toward love are summarized, but only the better ones of those in which the main concern is love are treated at length.
FOOTNOTES TO INTRODUCTION


8Plante, p. 85.

10 Allen, pp. xi-xxii.


12 Fiedler, p. 126.


14 Fiedler, p. xx.

15 Fiedler, p. 453.
CHAPTER I

EDITH WHARTON'S LIFE

We turn now to a discussion which brings out the unconventional aspects of an otherwise quite conventional life. The revelation of what is known about Edith Wharton's experiences with love helps to explain her attitude toward love as shown in her fiction. Finally the relationship of her biography to her creative fiction is discussed.

Edith Newbold Jones was born into a wealthy and influential New York family of culture and breeding. Her mother had come from a good family which had fallen into economic stress, but Lucretia Rhinelander had married well when she married George Frederic Jones, the son of an affluent New York family of position and prestige. Therefore, it is strange that a certain amount of mystery surrounds the birth of Edith Newbold Jones. There exists neither birth certificate nor baptismal record for her. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1862 is the year of her birth, and 1862 agrees with the age she gave on her marriage certificate. However, her niece Mrs. Ferrand stated that Edith was born on January 24, 1861.¹

In addition to the uncertainty concerning the date of her birth, there was also question, at least in Edith
Wharton's mind, about the identity of her father. Her mother's husband, George Frederic Jones, is generally accepted as Edith Wharton's father. However, there is a story that Edith Wharton searched (unsuccessfully) for the English tutor to her two older brothers in the belief that he was actually her father. Edmund Wilson states, "It has been asserted by persons who should be in a position to know that Edith Wharton had some reason for believing herself to have been an illegitimate child." Whether or not she had anything substantial upon which to base her belief is unknown, but whether it is true or not, the very fact that she believed it or even suspected it must have had an effect upon her.

Another important influence upon Edith, as indeed it is influential upon any child, is the relationship which the child has with his parents. It seems that Edith was never really close to her parents. Like Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country, Edith's mother, the dynamic Lucretia Jones, seems to have been too involved with her own affairs and social life to have any time to give to her child. The mild George Frederic Jones was necessary to Lucretia as an escort; therefore, she could not spare him long enough to allow him to build a close relationship with Edith. However, Edith, nicknamed Pussy, did find a certain amount of human warmth and understanding among the domestic servants, especially her nurse, Doyley. Also, although her brother Fred seems to have ignored her, her brother Harry did seem to
take at least a small interest in his little sister. Thus, the servants and perhaps her brother Harry were the only friends of the child. She did not play with other children her own age; she did not get along well with her peers. Something about her set her apart from them and inhibited her joining their games. She spent much of her time alone, play-acting, making up stories which she pretended to be reading out of a book. The fact that she could not read proved no deterrent; her imagination was sufficient. Perhaps this habit of "making-up," as she called it, was one thing which separated her from her peers. Or perhaps she developed it as a result of her loneliness. Whatever the case, "making-up" was a diversion which she began before she was four years old.

Then, when Edith was four or five years old, her parents decided to go abroad. For the next six years Edith and her parents traveled all over Europe, and Edith received her impressions of the old world at a very early age. During this time she learned to read. Who taught her no one knows. Her mother, who was as thrifty concerning her daughter as she was extravagant concerning herself, had not provided a governess, nor did she do so for a number of years. Edith's father had taught her the alphabet, but she had had absolutely no formal instruction. Therefore, it must have been quite a surprise when Edith demonstrated her mysteriously acquired ability.

When Edith was ten or eleven years old, the family
returned to New York. Her "making-up" progressed beyond the verbal stage, and she began writing her stories. At the age of eleven or twelve she began a novel which she proudly and expectantly showed to her mother. Instead of encouraging her daughter, Lucretia was scornful. There still existed a hint of the risqué surrounding novel writing. Novels lacked the genteel respectability of poetry; therefore, Edith turned to the more acceptable mode of expression.

Edith's first publication, a slender volume of poetry entitled Verses, appeared in 1878, when she was sixteen or seventeen years old. However, the publication of even such a respectable thing as poetry was embarrassing to her family. One story has it that Edith Jones's mother diligently bought and destroyed every copy that she could find.

After this experience, Edith Jones gave up the idea of publication. She continued to write, but not for the public. Her first novel, Fast and Loose, written when Edith Jones was fourteen or fifteen years old, was not published. However, M. L. Pitlick was allowed to read what material of Fast and Loose that was preserved, and he reports that:

"This novelette evidences not only the rudiments of stylistic sophistication, but also a modicum of thematic sophistication in its treatment of love and renunciation."³

Edith Jones continued to spend her time alone—writing. She was not developing socially as a normal adolescent. She was not preparing herself for the social demands which would be expected of the daughter of such a prominent family as
hers. She was not preparing herself in the social graces which were considered important in her society. She did not know how to attract a man and make herself interesting to him. The time when she would be called upon to demonstrate her social accomplishments was approaching, and Edith Jones was doing nothing to insure that she would not be found wanting; instead, she was spending her time reading and writing. It seems her mother gave her no warning as to what would be expected of her. When Edith was seventeen or eighteen she made her debut and discovered just how inadequately prepared she was.

Edith's mother favored sparing expense where her daughter was concerned. Instead of giving a party for Edith, Mrs. Jones arranged for Edith to be introduced to society via a public social affair which was to be given by a Mrs. Morton, owner of a ballroom. Mrs. Jones chose to omit the preliminary functions of lunches and smaller parties which led up to the climactic debutante ball. Instead of an expensive dress from Paris or Fifth Avenue such as the other debutantes would be wearing, Edith wore a low-cut, pale green, brocade bodice and ruffled white muslin skirt. Grace Kellogg suspects that the bodice was a hand-me-down from Lucretia. Even Edith's hair had not received proper attention. To complete the dismal picture, Edith could not dance! It is true that she had been taught a few solo dances in her youth, but to ballroom dance with a partner is quite another thing. The fact that she had brains and a quick, sharp tongue did
not help. It is small wonder that Edith failed in the prime objective of the debutante, whose success is judged by the speed with which she is able to ensnare a socially distinguished husband. The normal rate of progress was engagement by the end of one's own season and marriage by the end of the next. When the other debutantes of Edith's season were caught up in the excitement of planning weddings, she was still without prospects, just as much of a wallflower sitting at home as she had been a wallflower at her debut and at the other balls.

Edith knew that she was expected to get married, and certainly she, herself, longed for the companionship and love which she had never really had. However, she seemed forced to accept the fact that the "happiness" of love was not for her, and stoically determined to hide her hurt and her need. She seemed resigned to her status as a wallflower.

Then, quite surprisingly, Edith became engaged. She had apparently fallen in love and had all her dreams fulfilled. However, the young man's father was a hotel proprietor and therefore beneath the Joneses' standards. Immediately her parents took Edith with them on a prolonged trip to Europe. The stated excuse was that the trip was for George Frederic's health, but the real reason was to extinguish Edith's romance, a matter which was accomplished successfully.

When it was considered safe to do so, the travelers returned to New York. Edith was nineteen or twenty, and the
prospect of being an old maid loomed ahead. Most of the girls her age were already married; some were even mothers or soon to be. No doubt the pressure from her mother exceeded that exerted by society, but of course the man must be one out of her parents' world; he must be someone who would meet with the Joneses' approval.

Then Edith's father died, and at least for a time the social pressures were removed from Edith. However, after the period of mourning was over, the pressure returned with renewed intensity because Edith was now a year older. Edith's brother Harry was by this time a middle-aged bachelor who had many friends among the young married couples. Through his intercession and influence he secured Edith's passport into this group. It is possible that it was at one of these functions that she met a young man studying law because Walter van Rensselaer Berry was a member of this set. By Edith Wharton's own account, she met Mr. Berry at her own home, where she said he often visited as a friend of her brothers. However, Grace Kellogg doubts Mrs. Wharton's statement and provides logical reasons for her doubt. Harry Jones was six or seven years older than Walter Berry, and Fred Jones was even older than Harry. Thus, Walter's age of twenty-four was much closer to Edith's than to that of her brothers. Mrs. Kellogg attributes Edith's statement to "her effort to draw a mantle of respectability over her long friendship with Walter Berry," a frequent practice throughout her autobiography.
Whatever the circumstances of their meeting, their involvement with each other was soon evident. They were suited to each other; both had wealth and social position. Walter was intelligent enough not to resent intelligence in a woman, and he was quick-witted enough to be a match for Edith's clever tongue. His slightly tainted reputation must have made him all the more exciting to a young girl with a daring spirit. Edith had never had attention from such an attractive, alluring man, a man with imagination, a man who appreciated her wit and intelligence, a man with whom she could relax and be herself. She had longed for a true companion, for someone to love and to return her love. Love-starved and lonely, she was in a very vulnerable position. It is any wonder that she fell completely and irrevocably in love with Walter Berry? Whether or not he actually possessed all the qualities with which Edith's imagination endowed him is irrelevant; the fact that she believed him to be ideal in every way is the important thing.

In Walter Berry, Edith was to believe for a time—till the course of events mercilessly disillusioned her—that she had found the true father of her soul and mind not less than the husband of her person who would companion, guide, protect and fulfill her. In him she was to believe she had found everything for which she had yearned all her childhood and girlhood, that in his love loneliness was to cease forever. Their hearts would feed each the other. Their minds would run side by side through the bright fields of thought.6

Unfortunately, Edith Jones was mistaken. In the words of Grace Kellogg, Walter Berry "was fitted to enjoy whatever kind of satisfaction he extracted from a woman who,
on any level, offered it. He was not fitted to love any woman. He could not give himself whole to any. He had no wish to cherish or husband any woman. He was, in the apt phrase of Edith's generation, 'not a marrying man.'

Meanwhile Miss Jones was becoming a subject for gossip. She had slightly cracked the door of suspicion by her engagement to the son of a hotel proprietor; the door was opening even wider with her continued association with Walter Berry. Grace Kellogg dramatizes a scene depicting Edith visiting Walter's apartment unchaperoned and at night. Mrs. Kellogg allows Edith to retain her virtue, largely because it took so long to remove cumbersome clothes in those days; however, Edith is placed in a very compromising position. Mrs. Kellogg offers no proof that the scene ever actually occurred; her basis is that she believes the episode of Lily Bart's visiting Laurence Selden's rooms in The House of Mirth to have an autobiographical ring to it. In addition to portraying the full scene from her imagination, Mrs. Kellogg goes so far as to suppose that the news of this visit leaked out and greatly damaged Edith's reputation.

Whether or not Edith's reputation was hurt by Walter Berry, it is evident that she herself was hurt deeply by Walter's abruptly leaving town. His excuse was that he had been suddenly called away to another city. Edith saw no more of him until several years after she had become the wife of another man.

On April 30, 1885, when Edith Jones was twenty-three
or twenty-four years old and had been considered an old maid for several years, she married Edward ("Teddy") Wharton, a man twelve years her senior. It seems apparent that Mr. Wharton was very much in love with Edith when he married her. It is equally evident that she was marrying him on the rebound. She had been cruelly jilted by Walter Berry and naturally sought consolation for her disappointment wherever she could find it. According to Mrs. Kellogg, Edith Jones's experience "was nothing so gentle as heartbreak. It was wild shame and despair. Walter's defection climaxed the cold rejection of her whole childhood and youth." Marriage for her meant escape from the stigma of being an old maid and moving into the honorable and enviable position of being a wife. To Edward Wharton she was young and in distress; he was an affectionate, although apparently not a very passionate, man, and it must have been easy for him to love her. Here at last Edith Wharton had found someone to love her, but if it brought her any happiness, it was only temporary. The one thing that she had always wanted at last was hers, but one thing was wrong. One blot spoiled the whole picture and, after the novelty had worn off, made marriage a misery for both husband and wife: Edith Wharton did not love her husband. She was apparently still in love with Walter Berry, and in that love there was no happiness.

Edith Wharton returned to her writing with more vigor than ever before. Was this intensity the result of what had been building up during the time when she had left off
writing? Or was she writing frantically, trying to fill a void in her life which marriage to Edward Wharton could not fill? She sent poems to *Scribner's, Harper's* and the *Century Magazine*. Mrs. Wharton was ecstatic when all three accepted.

The Whartons enjoyed traveling, and they indulged this inclination quite extensively. However, Edith Wharton always carried her notebook and pencil with her. She faithfully continued her writing. Two of her stories were accepted by *Scribner's*, but as yet she had published no book.

Edith Wharton was very much interested in interior decoration and held some revolutionary ideas concerning it. She discovered that a young architect from Boston who was altering and redecorating her house shared many of her views. They decided to write a book about their ideas. However, according to Mrs. Wharton, neither of them had any idea about how to organize their mass of raw materials into acceptable book form. Therefore, she found it necessary to call in a third person, a person who appreciated literature and had not become a writer himself only because he realized that he lacked creative ability. Perhaps a bit of rationalization on Edith Wharton's part helped to persuade her that this man whom she had not seen for twelve years was the very one to aid in her project. This man, whose services Mrs. Wharton thought essential, was none other than Walter Berry, who by this time had established himself successfully as a lawyer.
Mr. Berry had not married, but it is extremely doubtful that it was any feeling for Edith Wharton which had caused him to remain a bachelor. However, during all this time, her feeling for him had not been extinguished. She must have welcomed the excuse, any excuse, to see him again. Berry's only interest, however, apparently was in the task of organizing the book.

The only result of this renewed acquaintance was the publication of the book, The Decoration of Houses, in 1897. No doubt Mrs. Wharton was disappointed that nothing had developed from the intimacy of collaboration between herself and Walter Berry. However, The Decoration of Houses proved to be immensely popular. Its tremendous success was encouraging, and Edith Wharton decided to collect some of her unpublished short stories into one volume for publication. Once again she found it essential to have the help of Walter Berry in the compilation of her book. Once again the only thing accomplished was what had been the excuse for the association. The book of short stories entitled The Greater Inclination was published in 1899, and, at the age of thirty-seven, Edith Wharton finally began her career as a writer of fiction.

Much speculation has been aroused by the occurrence in Mrs. Wharton's life which has borne the label of a "nervous breakdown"; however, few exact facts have been established. Even the exact date is not known. Clearly this psychic crisis occurred after her first collaboration with Walter
Berry on *The Decoration of Houses*, but whether or not it was before the second collaboration on *The Greater Inclination* is not clear. One of the favorite interpretations of Edith Wharton's trouble is that she was frigid and could not adjust herself to the role of a wife. It seems quite plausible that her association with Walter Berry could have been at least partially responsible. Her contact with him made her aware of all that she was missing and would never be able to have. Perhaps it was a combined frigidity or repulsion or indifference toward her husband and a frustrated love for Walter Berry. Perhaps a hitherto unsuspected reason will be discovered in 1968 when her private papers are at last revealed. Perhaps the real reason will never be known for sure. Whatever the cause, the therapy prescribed by a distinguished nerve specialist was that Mrs. Wharton should devote her energies to writing. Grace Kellogg tells us that "she entered definitely upon a professional writing career. And she called Walter Berry back into her life as platonic friend and literary mentor."11

The following years were busy ones for Mrs. Wharton. She wrote of course, but she also displayed her talent as a charming hostess. She entertained frequently at "The Mount," her palatial home with more than twenty servants. Her guests included famous statesmen such as President Theodore Roosevelt, ambassadors, and their wives. There were men of letters including Charles Eliot Norton. Distinguished editors, dramatists, and architects were there, as well as visitors
who were completely unknown. Edith Wharton's hospitality stretched itself to considerable lengths and even included some free-loaders. More often her guests were men than women. It seems that she got along better with men and frequently made women the objects for her satire and ridicule, although she also had some very good friends who were women.

One of Mrs. Wharton's dearest friends, however, was a man. Her friendship with Henry James began in 1902 or 1903. She had met him twice previously, but, relying solely upon her appearance, had failed to make an impression upon him. By the third meeting, she had learned her lesson. This time she demonstrated that she had brains and wit. This time she was successful in beginning a long and fruitful friendship.

At this time, Edith Wharton was establishing herself as a novelist. The Touchstone had been published in 1900 and Sanctuary in 1903. In 1905 appeared The House of Mirth, a novel which created quite a stir in the literary world and was also immensely popular among the reading public. Also at this time Mrs. Wharton's marriage was beginning to deteriorate. The years from 1905 until 1907 were indeed crucial in Edith Wharton's personal life. They were also years during which her writing was quite prolific, a fact which substantiates the theory that her writing had a therapeutic value. In addition to the previously mentioned The House of Mirth, Italian Backgrounds was also published in 1905 and in 1907 Madame de Treymes and The Fruit of the Tree. During this period Edward Wharton, who had never been very stable
emotionally, was becoming more and more mentally disturbed. Although one theory is that Edward used narcotics, his symptoms sound suspiciously like those of a psychotic manic-depressive. The aura of disgrace surrounding insanity plus the fact that his family was inclined to blame Mrs. Wharton for Edward Wharton's trouble made the situation even more unbearable. Edith Wharton tried to keep up a stoical outward appearance and conceal her husband's mental illness. However, she did confide in Henry James; he was apparently her only confidant concerning the matters of Wharton's illness as well as her marriage problems and love for Walter Berry. James, although sympathetic, had no practical suggestions to offer.

The result of Mrs. Wharton's reticence about her husband's illness was that her friends, like her husband's family, felt that Edith was to blame for Mr. Wharton's extreme unhappiness and agitation. Perhaps in part at least, she was. There was a definite rift in the marriage. Although they tried to maintain outward appearances (divorce was considered a disgrace), in actuality, the marriage had disintegrated. Mr. and Mrs. Wharton were seldom together; she enjoyed the company of Walter Berry whenever she could. Mr. Wharton might be on a fishing trip in Florida or trying a new "cure" in Virginia or else at home while Edith Wharton traveled. In Paris, she and Walter Berry were often together. He helped her with her books, although Percy Lubbock maintains that Mr. Berry's disastrous influence upon her was
harmful, not helpful. Nevertheless, Walter Berry and Edith Wharton were frequently alone together. She experienced brief moments of radiant happiness, but disillusionment followed. Walter Berry's feeling for her was not at all comparable to hers for him. She was completely absorbed in him even when she could not be with him. Finally she had to leave Paris. From the boat on the way back to America and her husband, in 1908, Mrs. Wharton wrote to Walter Berry: "I hold the book in my hand and see your name all over the page." Once the ship had docked, she felt that she was returning to her "prison cell" with Edward Wharton as the jailer.

On May 31, 1908, Edith Wharton wrote in her diary: "At sea I could not bear it. Ici j'étouffe. . . . Oh, Gods of derision! And you've given me twenty years of it! Je n'en peux plus." Made desperate by the distance separating her from Walter Berry, she wrote him: "Let me face the fact that it is over. Without a date to look to, I can't bear to go on. It will be easier to make the break now, voluntarily, than to see it slowly, agonizingly made by time and circumstance." She was miserable at home with her husband, and she was beginning to realize that Berry had no intention of giving her a date to which she could look forward. "More and more she suspected that the little piecemeal snatches of happiness had meant nothing important or permanent to him; they certainly had not meant to him any part of what they had meant to her."
Edith Wharton tried to force Walter Berry into making some sort of commitment or at least a declaration of his intentions. She contrived a meeting with him at the home of Henry James, where she was sure of having James's support; her intention was to bring the whole matter out into the open for a frank discussion. However, Berry was quite adept at remaining noncommittal. He would not be pinned down. For a while following this meeting, the relationship between Edith Wharton and Walter Berry was strained. She discontinued her abundant correspondence to Walter Berry. He became worried about losing the friendship of these two illustrious persons, both Edith Wharton and Henry James. Mr. Berry wrote to James and, although receiving a gentle reproach in James's reply, Berry was reassured that there would be no breach, at least with James. However, for the next few years, it seems that he and Mrs. Wharton were no longer in contact. She and Edward Wharton were still presenting the front of an unruffled marriage. Edith Wharton made no move toward divorce. Perhaps Edward Wharton flatly refused to consider divorce, or perhaps she was afraid to test Berry's feelings toward her. Nevertheless, in 1911, she was seeing Walter Berry again, as evidenced by Henry James's letter refusing to accompany Mrs. Wharton and Walter Berry on their motor trip through Italy. Edward Wharton was not included on the trip. This was the year of the publication of Ethan Frome, a novel presenting the tragedy of being trapped by a hateful marriage, a marriage made more detestable by the fact that it prevents
the union of two people who really love each other.

In the following year, 1912, the year of the publication of *The Reef*, as Henry James's correspondence reveals, the relationship between Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Berry continued. James had not heard from Edith Wharton for quite some time, and he was naturally concerned about his friend. Therefore, he wrote to Walter Berry hinting for information about Mrs. Wharton. Berry's reply ignored the hinted question. James wrote again, making his question plainer, but still he learned nothing from Walter Berry. Finally James overcame his reluctance to be blunt and asked straightforwardly concerning Edith Wharton. There could be no ignoring the question this time. Mr. Berry "breaks the news to Henry that he and Edith have after a fashion set up a joint establishment—their two apartments are under the same roof, Edith's above his; they are invited about together; Edith is his official hostess."\(^{17}\)

Even with this open confession, Berry did not tell all, according to Caresse Crosby, the wife of Walter Berry's cousin Harry Crosby. Mrs. Crosby claims that in Berry's library, there was a hidden stairway which led to the above apartment occupied by Edith Wharton.\(^{18}\)

Berry's revelation in itself, however, was sufficient to cause Henry James to worry about the welfare of his friend. Edith Wharton stood to lose so much, whereas, with the double standard what it is, Berry took absolutely no risk whatsoever upon himself. James had doubts about Berry's sincerity; he
questioned the depth of Mr. Berry's feeling. Had Walter Berry really cared for Mrs. Wharton, he would not have allowed her to jeopardize herself for his sake. There could be no doubt about her separation from her husband, but would her divorce from Edward Wharton and her marriage to Walter Berry follow? It was in this year, 1912, that Edith Wharton made a statement concerning love without marriage, one which Percy Lubbock quotes: "Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty of any love outside marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all:"

Edmund Wilson tells us that in her writing, she is preoccupied "... with the miseries of extramarital love affairs and the problems of young women who have to think about marrying for money and position." Wilson goes on to state his belief that Walter Berry provided the model for many of Edith Wharton's fictional heroes; however, they are not the idealized portraits one might expect her to draw of the man she worshipped.

On the contrary, the male type which most conspicuously recurs in her novels is the cultivated intelligent man who cannot bear to offend social convention, the reformer who gets bribed without knowing into marrying a rich wife, the family man who falls in love with someone more exciting than his wife but doesn't have the courage of his passion; and the treatment of these characters by the author, though outwardly sympathetic, is always well chilled with an irony that has an undercurrent of scorn. ... In every one of these roles, he is made helpless by a commercial civilization. But Edith Wharton knew him well, and she never ceased to resent him because he had failed to stand up to the temptations and threats of that civilization and because he had not been strong enough to save from that moneyed world, in which it was even easier for a woman than a man to be caught, a
woman, courageous herself, whom he might have, whom he should have, loved.21

A few months later, in 1913, when Mrs. Wharton was fifty-one or fifty-two and Edward Wharton in his sixties, they were divorced, leaving no external obstacle to Edith Wharton's marriage to Walter Berry. His lack of desire is the only possible explanation for the fact that no marriage followed. She continued her writing. Not only was writing a means of escape, something to keep her mind occupied, but also it was a link between her and Walter Berry. It was an excuse for continued contact with him, and that fact, in itself, made writing of the utmost value to her.

1913 was the year of the publication of The Custom of the Country, a novel which centers upon divorce. The once-widowed, twice-divorced heroine, a most unsympathetic character, is criticized for her frequent exchange of partners. Her "punishment" at the end is that she cannot become an Ambassadress, the one thing she thinks she really wants, because of a rule forbidding divorced Ambassadresses. In the spring of the year of the publication of this book, Edith Wharton had obtained her divorce. She sold her home, "The Mount." For that summer, she rented "Stocks," the English country place of Mrs. Humphrey Ward. She had her apartment in Paris closed and planned to travel with Walter Berry before going on to "Stocks." They spent some time in the Pyrenees and then Catalonia. From Barcelona, they went to Poitiers, where the "war scare" cut their trip short.
War was declared two days after their hasty return to Paris. During the war Mrs. Wharton devoted her energies to relief service. For some months she headed the American Committee. She wrote letters back to the United States soliciting funds for her work at the Accueil Franco-Belge which later was called the Accueil Franco-Américain. Edith Wharton's contribution to Belgium and to France, for which she was decorated, is a fact of history. "By 1918 she had five thousand refugees permanently cared for in Paris, four colonies for old people and children, four large sanatoria for tuberculous patients." In addition, Mrs. Wharton personally cared for six children during the war and found homes for them after the war. There is no record that Walter Berry aided her efforts in any way or even that he was in sympathy with the cause. Their relationship changed. A distance, a reserve developed. Perhaps Edith Wharton's pride was the reason, or perhaps she had simply given up and accepted her lot.

Mrs. Wharton's writing continued. During and after the war, she wrote books and stories which, as war propaganda, were overdone, but at least they showed her intense feeling. Other novels followed, and in 1920 appeared The Age of Innocence, another story of two people who love each other but are separated because of a loveless marriage. In my opinion, her writing reached its climax in The Age of Innocence. I feel that this is her best work. Afterward her writing, although quite prolific, made a definite decline.
In 1922 Edith Wharton was awarded a Doctorate of Letters by Yale, but she was not inspired to any subsequent performance which equaled or even approached her past accomplishments. In *The Writing of Fiction*, which was published in 1925, Mrs. Wharton states that she considered stopping her writing after *The Age of Innocence*. Many regret that she did not. Certainly, her writing after 1920 was not of the same fine caliber as her previous writing had been; yet, it would be erroneous to claim that it is totally lacking in merit.

One of Edith Wharton's close friends was the great scholar and humanist, Bernard Berenson. In her book, *Forty Years with Berenson*, Nicky Mariano affords us many personal glimpses of Edith Wharton. She describes Edith Wharton's appearance after their initial meeting in 1923. We are told that she was dressed rather conventionally; she moved jerkily and seemed to be ill at ease. The ugliness of Edith Wharton's mouth is also commented upon; Miss Mariano finds it comparable to a savings box. She does say, however, that Mrs. Wharton had fine eyes. The description of her personality is even less complimentary than the one of her appearance. Miss Mariano admits that her opinion might have been somewhat prejudiced by the fact that Edith Wharton had treated her coldly and made her feel like an outsider (a frequent accusation leveled at Mrs. Wharton, especially as a first impression). However, like others who had at first been repelled by Edith Wharton's shyness, which took the form of austerity
with strangers, Nicky Mariano later changed her opinion of Mrs. Wharton. After getting to know her and breaking down her barrier of reserved shyness, Miss Mariano found Edith Wharton to be warm, friendly, and thoroughly likable, although somewhat capricious in her whims and demands. 23

It is from Miss Mariano that we learn that in the autumn of 1926, Edith Wharton and Walter Berry were traveling together again. She tells us that she and Berenson met the travelers in Aosta. While there, Nicky Mariano went to Mrs. Wharton's rooms with a message from Berenson concerning their plans. She reports the following scene: "I found her in her bed in an elegant wrapper with a coquettish lace-cap on her head, books and writing things spread all around her, her pekingese doggies asleep at her feet and Walter Berry seated near her, in excellent spirits and she as happy as a young girl to have him all to herself and to let herself be teased by him." 24

This trip, however, was their last, for in the following spring Edith Wharton was called to Paris to the bedside of Walter Berry. He had suffered what was apparently a cerebral attack which had left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. From then on until his death a few weeks later, Mrs. Wharton was always nearby.

When Mr. Berry died, Edith Wharton bought a casket for him. She arranged to have a Mass said for him and had him buried in the Cimetière des Couards at Versailles. Beside his grave was a space designated for her own remains.
Mrs. Wharton had not been mentioned in Walter Berry's will; however, he had given his library to Harry Crosby with the stipulation that Mrs. Wharton be allowed to choose the items that she wanted. The Crosbys protested when she chose practically every book in the whole library, and eventually she capitulated and allowed the Crosbys to have the bulk of the library.

Edith Wharton's letters prove that Walter Berry's death affected her deeply. He died on October 12, 1927. On November 3, 1927, she wrote to a mutual friend that "Being with him, to me, was always like being on a mountain top, or rather, like ranging the free air above the mountain. No one will ever know what I owe to having lived in that climate for so many years--but it's hard drawing breath now." Three years later on February 24, 1930, she wrote to this same friend, "... he was all the meaning of life to me."

With the death of Walter Berry, a significant part of Edith Wharton's life ended. She outlived her love by one decade, during which time she wrote, traveled, entertained her old friends as guests, and cultivated new friendships. She was extremely possessive of her friends, the majority of whom were men. Mrs. Wharton was extremely disappointed if one of her "male wives" decided to marry. She never forgave Percy Lubbock for marrying Lady Sybil. She was extremely fond of her neighbor at Saint Bernard, Charles de Noailles, but she detested his wife, Marie-Laure.

Mrs. Wharton's late sixties and early seventies were
full, active years. Determined not to slow down, she forced herself to be energetic. "Her misfortune is that she will not let herself grow older comfortably, will hold out against it and rushes about, gets tired and then again will not give in and becomes peevish and fussy and deprives her friends of the real treasures that her friendship can produce for them. It is very sad but too deeply rooted in her to be changed."28

Edith Wharton died on August 11, 1937, at the age of seventy-five or seventy-six. She had lived approximately three quarters of a century, a large portion of which had been devoted to writing fiction and loving Walter Berry.

According to Percy Lubbock, Walter Berry's narrow, dogmatic, supercilious influence had a stifling effect upon Mrs. Wharton's creativity.29 Yet, Edith Wharton believed his influence to be of utmost value to her. Just how much good or damage Walter Berry did to Edith Wharton's creative talent is a matter of conjecture. However, that he influenced her fiction in other ways is apparent. "Those who have discerned the lineaments of Walter Berry's personality in a succession of Edith Wharton's heroes would probably agree that his relationship with the novelist is also reflected in the nature and treatment of the moral problems in her stories. In the antiromantic tradition, none of the love affairs in Edith Wharton's novels acquires interest or significance until one or both of the partners is married."30

The interference of marriage with love outside of
marriage certainly has its parallel in Mrs. Wharton's life. She must have seen herself as the trapped sensibility kept from her "soul-mate" by an unimaginative, uncomprehending husband. In her novels she tries to define the limits of an individual's responsibility to his society. She argues the pros and cons of divorce, making divorce seem desirable in *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*, but refusing to permit it. Usually she presents divorce as deplorable, for example, in *The Custom of the Country* and *The Children*. Like George Eliot, she felt obliged to "defend conventional morality" in her fiction because she departed from it in her life. She seems to have felt compelled to preach what she found impossible to practice, and perhaps she was striving for a cathartic effect by expressing her personal feelings in her fiction.

Concerning the autobiographical content in her writing, Blake Nevius states that there are "certain difficult episodes in her life which seem to be shadowed forth in her fiction--episodes arising from the incompatibility of tastes between herself and her husband, the latter's failing health, their separation and divorce, and her friendship with Walter Berry. It is impossible to note the reappearance in her novels of certain problems, situations, and character types without speculating on their common significance." Some critics insist that Edith Wharton is too autobiographical in her fiction. She has been accused of writing
about real people, with only their names changed. Her defense is that "all social authors are accused of using real people." Some critics claim that all of her heroes are merely portraits of Walter Berry. Winifred Lynskey goes so far as to claim that Edith Wharton's heroes are not Walter Berry, but sentimentalized self-portraits. Certainly this claim that Mrs. Wharton based her heroes upon herself is far-fetched; however, the claims that she used Mr. Berry and others as bases for her characters are, to a certain extent, true. It is noticeable that her heroes and heroines age as she does. She probably had what she thought was her own situation in mind, at least subconsciously, when she trapped so many of her characters in hateful marriages which prevented their marrying those whom they loved. Yet, to insinuate that she was only a reporter rather than a creator is not fair to her. If she used her own situation as a foundation, the superstructure was built with her imagination. If her characters are based upon real people, her creativity gave depth to their outlines. After all, it is impossible to really know other human beings as intimately as she knows her own characters to whom she gave life.

Lionel Trilling has accused Mrs. Wharton of being "a woman in whom we cannot fail to see a limitation of heart, and this limitation makes itself manifest as a literary and moral deficiency in her work. . . . It appears in the deadness of her prose, and more flagrantly in the suffering of her characters." If Mr. Trilling really believes what
he said, then the only possible explanation is that he is guilty of misreading. Also, the biographical information which is now available was unavailable at the time of his writing the above. In the first place, Edith Wharton comes closer to having an over abundance of heart (if by heart he means compassion and human warmth) rather than a limitation. Grace Kellogg's book, *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton*, published in 1965, offers ample evidence of the largeness of Mrs. Wharton's compassion as does the book on Berenson by Nicky Mariano, published in 1966. In this chapter we have seen Mrs. Wharton as a warm and compassionate woman whose haughty, austere manner was only a façade in order to hide her shyness and vulnerability. Her tenderness and love for Walter Berry is no longer a speculation, but is now a proven fact. If these facts were not enough, the historical fact of her effort during the war should be conclusive proof. Mrs. Wharton says that in order to write about heart-break, a novelist must have a heart that is capable of being broken, and her own life provides a good example.

Furthermore, Trilling's claim that Edith Wharton's (nonexistent) limitation manifests itself as a "literary and moral deficiency" is erroneous. We will examine her literary deficiencies and, whatever their various causes: immaturity, limited knowledge of all classes of people, stifling influence of Walter Berry, failure to devote herself wholeheartedly because of many other time consuming interests, and writing for women's magazines; certainly one cannot blame her
literary faults upon a lack of compassion. As for Trilling's claim of her "moral deficiency," it is my contention that she had no moral deficiency. On the contrary, she unswervingly followed her precept that a good subject must contain a moral. She is one of the most moral writers ever to escape didacticism. Trilling's accusation grows out of his failure to find a moral issue in Ethan Frome, but the fault lies in himself not in the novel, for the moral issue is there, apparently too inherent in the character of Ethan for Trilling to notice. Trilling evidently sees Ethan as a victim of circumstances without freedom of choice. Trilling does not realize that Ethan does make a moral decision when he refuses to dupe his neighbor who trusts him in order to get the money to run away with Mattie and abandon Zeena. Trilling can see no escape and therefore no decision for Ethan, but the choice is there. Ethan's standard of morality, his own strength of character, not fate, is what prevents escape.

Trilling's comment on the deadness of Mrs. Wharton's prose makes one wonder if he has read her work at all; certainly her prose with its beautiful poetic quality could not be classified as dead by any discerning reader. Of course some passages are not as well written as others, but there are enough beautifully written examples of her dynamic, epigrammatic prose to remove all question of its vitality.

Trilling's final criticism of the suffering of her characters as a manifestation of her "limitation of heart"
is also invalid. Edith Wharton's characters grow morally through suffering, for example, Lily Bart. Her characters suffer because they are alive, living beings must suffer, and Mrs. Wharton draws life realistically. It is true that in her world love is not a source for happiness as it is in the works of other writers, but Edith Wharton's picture is actually more realistic than is the picture of love as the producer of unmitigated joy. Perhaps Mrs. Wharton's conception of love as the cause of pain and suffering is a bit too pessimistic for the average case, but she is not writing the average story about the average person. She is forever selective. She chooses dramatic situations in which there is conflict, most often conflict between an individual and society. Love is a motive strong enough to cause a person to rebel against his society. Certainly her conception of love was colored by her own painful experience with love, but if anything, the fact that she had a heart capable of being broken makes her fiction that much more interesting and significant. Certainly, it does not detract.

Other comments pertaining to the autobiographical quality of her work are made by Alfred Kazin who states:

Since she could do no other, she chose to write, in various forms and with unequal success, the one story she knew best, the story that constituted her basic experience—her own. Her great theme . . . became the plight of the young and innocent in a world of greater intricacy than they were accustomed to. . . . [She] specialized in tales of victimization. . . . The novel became an involved expression of self. . . . [She] escaped that excessive refinement and almost abstract mathematical passion for art that encumbered James. She could speak out plainly with a force he could
never muster; her own alienation and loneliness gave her a sympathy for erratic spirits and "illicit" emotion that was unique in its time. . . . [She] was among the few in her generation to attain the sense of tragedy, even the sense of the world as pure evil, and it found expression in the biting edge of her novels and the superficially genial fatalism of their drama. 36

Kazin's claim that Edith Wharton wrote only her own story is obviously exaggerated. Certainly her own experience colored her fiction, but the fact that she wrote so many different stories, including tales of horror, disproves the claim. Even if all of her love stories were somehow partially echoes of her own, they could not have been totally so. The fact that she used her own experience should not be considered a flaw. Rather her experience provides a basis for her upon which to build creatively from her imagination. The artist who does not express himself in his art should beware of the fact that his art is lacking. After all, it is the self-expression of the writer which lifts his story above a mere photographic representation of life. The artist must study the situation at length and make it his own by adding his own knowledge, experience, and personal reaction in order to give his art an individual flavor.

Edith Wharton's unconventional experience with love, her unconventional love for Walter Berry enabled her to sympathize with "illicit" passion and to voice the tragic aspects of life. The fact that she put something of herself into her work does not cause her work to suffer, but on the contrary, makes her writing that much more interesting and rewarding to the reader.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER I


4 Kellogg, p. 49.

5 Kellogg, p. 56.

6 Kellogg, p. 12.

7 Kellogg, p. 55.

8 Kellogg, pp. 58-60.

9 Kellogg, p. 70.

10 Bernhard Knollenberg (Librarian at Yale University), "Edith Wharton's Papers," Times Literary Supplement (May 20, 1939), 298.

11 Kellogg, p. 85.


13 Kellogg, p. 138.

14 Pitlick, p. 11.

15 Kellogg, p. 139.

16 Kellogg, p. 141.

17 Kellogg, p. 156.

19 Charles Du Bos, quoted by Lubbock, p. 100.
20 Wilson, p. 173.
21 Wilson, pp. 175-176.
24 Mariano, p. 173.
25 Pitlick, p. 12.
26 Pitlick, p. 12.
27 Mariano, pp. 174-176.
28 Mariano, p. 188.
29 See Lubbock, Portrait, passim.
32 Nevius, pp. 7-8.
CHAPTER II

EDITH WHARTON'S CONVENTIONAL THEORY AND
TECHNIQUE OF FICTION

This chapter provides a very real basis for speaking of Edith Wharton's conventionality. She was truly conventional in her theory of fiction and technique of writing. In her book *The Writing of Fiction* she states her ideas concerning good and bad techniques for constructing novels and short stories. From the standards she sets forth and from the expression of her views about other writers of fiction and their accomplishments, we learn that she is fundamentally conservative in her beliefs and theories concerning fiction writing. In her fiction we will see that her theory carries over into actual practice.

Our first indication of Mrs. Wharton's conservatism is the motto from Thomas Traherne with which she introduces her book. "Order the beauty even of Beauty is." "In its implicit emphasis on selection as the means to an aesthetic end, this seventeenth-century motto allies Mrs. Wharton with a traditional concept of beauty that can be traced back through Thomas Aquinas and his triumvirate of integrity, proportion, and clarity to the Greeks and their love of symmetry, pattern, and balance in every form of artistic expression from prose to architecture."
Edith Wharton credits Balzac and Stendhal with being the first to view characters as the products of their environments. The characters are produced by particular material and social conditions which go into the make-up of a human personality. According to Mrs. Wharton, preceding fictional characterization, which ignored the formative influence of environment, seems incomplete when compared to the method of presenting characters as products of their past. Thus, we can expect to find that Mrs. Wharton's characters do not exist in a vacuum. She has given her characters a history which has influenced the total picture of the character. Particularly important in her fiction is the influence of material possessions and social status. Given social position and a cultural background, but lacking wealth, we find two comparable characters such as Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Lizzie Hazeldain in *New Year's Day*. Given money, but without any inherited social status, the product is a social climber such as Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* or Sam Rosedale, the Jew in *The House of Mirth*. The simple, down-to-earth New Englanders in *Ethan Frome*, as well as the Bunner sisters, have neither material wealth nor social position, whereas, the genteel characters, Anna Leath in *The Reef* and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*, have both. It is plain to see how similar environments, materially and socially, produce similar character traits. Of course, this is not to say that Edith Wharton allows her characters to be blameless products of their society. Quite
the opposite is true. Similar influences and pressures, although producing similar attitudes and traits, do not always necessarily form similar characters. The individual is still responsible for his own actions. Although we see the influence of environment, there is something within the individual's personality which reacts uniquely to these pressures; for example, note the different characters of Anna Leath in *The Reef* and Bertha Dorset in *The House of Mirth*, both of whom have wealth and social position. Likewise, observe the differences in Sophy Viner in *The Reef* and Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth*, both of whom have neither material nor social advantages. Yet, the surroundings are a part of the total characters in Edith Wharton's fiction.

Also, in the actions of her characters, we find something of the past and of the future. We are prepared for a character's actions by his past actions, and present actions prepare us for the future. Lily Bart's first refusal to use Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden in order to blackmail Mrs. Dorset prepares us for the scene in which Lily burns the letters, making any future usage of them impossible. Lily cuts herself off from the temptation of ever using the letters. Newland Archer's inability to break off his engagement to May Welland when he falls in love with Ellen Olenska prepares us for his future inability to leave May and go away with Ellen.

For the successful creation of characters, Mrs. Wharton says that the artist must be able to pass without any sense
of effort into a world of creatures of the imagination, more real to him than living human beings, but whom he must always think of as imaginary characters. He must see his characters dually: as "visionary" to him and real to his readers. His characters must talk as they would in reality in order to keep the reader under the illusion of reality. Yet, the author must not let himself get carried away. He must allow them to say nothing irrelevant to the story, as they would in real life. So much in life is irrelevant, but in fiction everything superfluous must be eliminated and at the same time still keep the appearance of reality.

Another aspect of Mrs. Wharton's theory of the technique for creating fiction is her belief in the importance of being selective rather than recording events without discrimination. She believed that the selection of material is the first step toward writing coherent fiction. She is naturally assuming the undesirability of writing incoherent fiction. She was most critical in her condemnation of those authors who were not selective. She shows her conservatism in her statements concerning the stream-of-consciousness technique which, according to Mrs. Wharton, is only the reappearance of the old slice-of-life technique with a new label. In a comparison of the two, she states that both set down reactions as they come without regard to their relevance; the only difference is that the stream-of-consciousness method notes mental reactions as well as visual. Edith Wharton continues with the statement that this automatic
recording of sensations and thoughts is not really new and original. Most of the greater novelists have used it as a tool whenever they wanted to portray intense mental anxiety or stress, but it had been used only as a means and not as an end in itself. In her autobiography, A Backward Glance, she states that the stream-of-consciousness technique "contains its own condemnation, since every attempt to employ it of necessity involves selection, and selection in the long run must eventually lead to the transposition, the 'stylization,' of the subject." 

Edith Wharton also criticizes the stream-of-consciousness method for deliberately disregarding the relevance of the reactions which it records. She attacks their practice of taking an "unsorted abundance" of reactions as a subject. According to Edith Wharton, reactions themselves are unsuitable as subject matter, since a dramatic situation arises out of the conflicts between the order imposed by society and the individual whose appetite is checked by society. It is this dramatic conflict which should be the subject for fiction, not just mental reactions. She maintains that fiction is created by "the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence." She thinks that the writers who attempt to use the subconscious as their source of material are deluding themselves. She continues by stating that fictional anarchy will be the result of the growing "distrust of technique and the fear of being unoriginal," two symptoms marking a lack of creativity. Prophetically,
Edith Wharton states that she is "almost tempted to say that in certain schools formlessness is now regarded as the first condition of form."\(^9\) Ironically enough, the early nineteenth century English novelists were enslaved to the artificial practice of using the double plot. Now, as the pendulum swings too far in the opposite direction, even the single plot has vanished.\(^{10}\)

Also to come under attack is the group which Mrs. Wharton calls the school of dirt for dirt's sake, another excess which has come into vogue now that former prudish restraints have been removed. Edith Wharton claims that from this group "no real work of art has ever sprung. . . . Laborious monuments of schoolboy pornography are now mistaken for works of genius by a public ignorant of Rabelais and unaware of Apuleius."\(^{11}\) However, she predicts optimistically that "the balance will right itself with the habit of freedom. The new novelists will learn that it is even more necessary to see life steadily than to recount it whole; and by that time a more thoughtful public may be ripe for the enjoyment of a riper art."\(^{12}\)

Edith Wharton criticizes American novelists for limiting their subject to "the man with the dinner pail" and for being "tethered to the village pump."\(^{13}\) She also criticizes the immaturity in "modern art" which rebels fiercely against doing anything which has been done previously. This immaturity also results in the production of unfinished products, that is, works of fiction which have not been thought
through sufficiently because of the mistaken belief that brooding over a subject too long will impair its originality. She fears that the result will be a vicious circle which will keep the novelist immature and undeveloped. According to Edith Wharton, "true novelty consists not in a new manner but in a new vision." The new personal vision comes from looking at an object long enough to make it one's own. Long brooding over the subject, therefore, is not a deterrent but rather a necessary prerequisite to originality. The mind must add its own knowledge and experience to the subject in order to achieve a new personal vision. In order to penetrate beyond a casual acquaintance with one's subject, in order to possess a really thorough knowledge of it, one must also study and understand not only other related subjects, but also "a great deal more of one's immediate subject than any partial presentation of it visibly includes."

Edith Wharton believes that creators must be inspired, but in her estimation, inspiration alone is not sufficient; inspiration must be controlled and channeled properly. Teaching and guidance must accompany inspiration in order to turn that inspiration into an artistic accomplishment. The result of this theory is evident in her work. There are times when a distinct lack of spontaneity and warmth is felt. At these times the exuberance and vitality are stifled by a cold, harsh, austere tone. Edith Wharton had trained herself to strive for this detachment in which the author keeps an objective distance and aloofness between himself and his
characters. The result is that the author gives the impression of feeling superior to and scornful of his characters and their manners. It is at these times that Edith Wharton's satire becomes a bit too malicious and overdone. Examples can be found in The Custom of the Country, Ethan Frome, and The House of Mirth.

However, Edith Wharton also realized the importance of a creative imagination. Without this imagination it would be impossible for a woman to ever create a realistic male character, and vice versa. An author must create characters and situations in his imagination. It is not necessary for an author to first experience something before he can write about it. A creative imagination can make a little experience go a long way. "One good heart-break will furnish the poet with many songs, and the novelist with a considerable number of novels. But they must have hearts that can break."¹⁶ The imagination alone is not sufficient. An author must not withdraw from life and attempt to live imaginatively nor vicariously. A certain amount of experience and participation in life is necessary. An author must be willing to get involved; he must have a heart capable of being broken. Edith Wharton's own case provides a good illustration of this point. Her creative imagination enabled her to get the full value from her experiences. She used her own experience as a basis upon which to build with her creative imagination. She wrote about what she knew about as any good author must. Her creativity and imagination
supplied the rest.

Mrs. Wharton points out certain difficulties which may arise for the author. One is the danger of an author's attempting to write either for his readers or for himself. She tells us that the creative artist corresponds with his other self, and it is this other self, alone, not for his readers nor himself, for whom he must write. He must be true to his other self. In her best work, Mrs. Wharton wrote according to her own standards; she did not try to please the public nor appeal to the popular taste. One irate reader asked her if she had ever known a respectable woman. It is unfortunate that she did not stick to her theory in her later novels at the time when her style reflects the fact that she was writing for women's magazines.

Another difficulty for the creative artist arises when there is a discrepancy between the way that he sees life and his technical ability to portray life. For example, he may see things in large masses; but may perceive in terms of the total, over-all picture, but his talent may be exclusively for the portrayal of things minutely, meticulously, and individually. He does not possess the talent to skillfully represent things on a large scale. The only remedy is to "narrow one's vision" rather than doing things superficially.17

After speaking about the writing of fiction in general, Edith Wharton then devotes a section of her book to her theories about form, style, and subject matter. Once again
her conservatism and conventionality are obvious. By form, 
she means "the order, in time and importance, in which the 
incidents of the narrative are grouped." Style she 
defines as a discipline, that is, the method for the presen-
tation of these incidents in the narrative. Also included 
in the explanation of style is the way in which these inci-
dents are absorbed and colored by the mind of the narrator 
and by his verbal expression of them.  

Mrs. Wharton tells us that the subject is what the 
story is about. She goes on to explain that no matter what 
the central episode might be, the author's subject is 
limited to whatever portion of the central episode which 
produces in him a reaction. Therefore, the subject is what 
has produced a reaction in the author. Make no mistake; it 
is not his reaction which is the subject, but the cause 
producing the reaction. The author must first view this 
cause as a total entity; then he must consider it in relation 
to his ability to extract its essence. He must contemplate 
its contents. The novelist must distinguish between signifi-
cant and insignificant subjects. Some subjects appear 
insignificant on the surface, but in actuality, they are not. 
Other subjects are trivial through and through. A novelist 
has to be able to determine which subjects are truly trivial 
and which only appear to be so. For this reason, he must 
carefully probe, examine, and study his story before he can 
begin to write. Once he has a significant subject, the 
author must also be sure that there is a moral. Edith
Wharton says, "A good subject . . . must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience."\textsuperscript{20}

Edith Wharton adhered to this rule that a good subject must have a moral, although her morality is not without qualification. Yet, she is never didactic. She never preaches to the reader, but the Puritan in her demands that each individual face up to his moral responsibility. This moral responsibility may be direct such as Ethan Frome's moral responsibility to his wife, or it may be subtle, such as whether or not Lily Bart use letters to the man she loves in order to gain her way back into society. Nevertheless, the moral is there, in the background, never to the point of usurping the character's personality. The characters never become mere abstractions to preach or point out a moral, but they are mature enough to realize right from wrong. They are often faced with an inner moral struggle, and because this is true, because there is a division within the character between his personal desires and his knowledge of right and wrong, he becomes a much more interesting character.

Mrs. Wharton also specifies that good subjects must dramatize and typify common experiences. Good subjects contain the essence of daily occurrences; they summarize the inconclusive events of day-to-day living.\textsuperscript{21} With this final qualification, Edith Wharton has described what she considers to be an appropriate subject for an author. It must be significant, and it must have a moral. It must be typical of common experiences. It must be one with which the author
has a deep familiarity. She advises the writer to spend time, patience, study, and thought, letting experience accumulate. An artist's mind is a mirror, according to Mrs. Wharton, but the work of art should be projected, not reflected.²²

Edith Wharton ostensibly devotes one section of her book specifically to the short story; however, in her comparisons between the short story and the novel, she provides considerable insight into her theories of the novel before she reaches her section devoted to the novel. She maintains that both the modern novel and the modern short story actually began in France. Then Russian writers added depth to the French short story. "The result has been to give the short story, as French and Russian art have combined to shape it, great closeness of texture with profundity of form. Instead of a loose web spread over the surface of life they have made it, at its best, a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experience."²³

Because of its brevity, the short story must produce a sense of trust and security in the reader immediately. Each phrase should lend to the general intention of the story. Unless it contributes to the purpose of the story, no phrase should ever be misleading. There is not enough time nor space to start the reader on a wrong road and then lead him back to the right one; he must be kept on the right track throughout. Probability is not so important as is the appearance of probability. Once the reader's confidence is
gained and things are made to appear probable, all sorts of incredible adventures may follow. The reader enters into the spirit of things and does not stop to ask himself if this event could really occur; for him it does occur vicariously. However, if the slightest hint of irrelevance is sounded, the spell is immediately broken. The bubble of illusion bursts, Alice goes back through her looking glass, and the whole story seems unreal and improbable. One method for insuring probability is to make sure that the narrator does not record anything which is outside the limits of his register. The author must carefully choose his narrator as his foundation and then live inside his mind and react as he would. This procedure is necessary in order to avoid incongruities.24

Mrs. Wharton makes a very good point concerning the horror story. Suspense is not nearly as effective for building terror in the reader as is the use of the expected. Once the note of horror is sounded, it can be repeated over and over again until the nerves are stretched taut. Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" is a good example of Edith Wharton's theory that "the expected is more frightful than the unforeseen."25

Edith Wharton argues against the claim that a good short story is always capable of expansion into the length of a novel. She maintains that some subjects are especially suited to one medium or the other, and the author must be able to distinguish between the two. She relates certain
criteria which mark a subject as being unsuited to development in a short story. One is the necessity for the characters' inner lives to unfold. Another is that some subjects require the reader to sense a certain "lapse of time." 26

Conversely, there should be no feeling of time lapsing in the short story because it seeks to achieve an effect of instantaneity and compactness. In order to achieve this effect, Edith Wharton stresses the importance of observing the old traditional unity of time and the unity of vision. By the unity of vision, she means that the episode should be seen "through only one pair of eyes," 27 a principle formulated by Henry James. These eyes should belong to the person capable of having the largest possible view. He must be in a position to see more and know more than anyone else. Also he must possess a mind and intellect capable of expressing what the author wants expressed because probability limits him to reporting only what it would be possible for him to see or reasonably surmise and to expressing only what would be natural for him to express. 28

In comparing the novel and the short story, Edith Wharton states that whereas "the test of the novel is that its people should be alive," 29 the same thing cannot be said about the short story. No matter how fruitful the subject of a novel, only the characters can make it live; a novel cannot depend entirely on a dramatic situation as a short story often does so successfully. The most important technical difference between the two forms, therefore, is
that the novelist is mainly concerned with character, and
the short story writer is mainly concerned with the situa-
tion. Consequently, the presentation or form of the short
story is what produces the effect. The short story writer,
moreso than the novelist, has to be sure that he achieves a
vivid sense of the present in the narration. He also must
know his angle of presentation and why only that angle is
suitable. Therefore, he must have brooded at length upon
his subject and applied laws of perspective. Instead of
forcing his story to develop as though it were a hot house
plant, he must let it develop gradually and naturally as if
it were ripening in the sun.30

Because of its compactness, a good beginning and con-
cclusive ending are more important in a short story than in a
novel. "The rule that the first page of a novel ought to
contain the germ of the whole is even more applicable to the
short story."31 Also the conclusion must be latent within
the first page. In order to capture the reader's attention,
the first stroke must be vivid and startling, for example,
"'Hell,' said the Duchess as she lit her cigar."32 However,
it is useless to capture the reader's attention unless his
attention can be held by what follows. The vivid opening
must be more than just a trick; it should present all the
essentials and therefore "a clue to all the detail
eliminated."33 The author must follow up on his clue; his
adventure must be a real one despite the fact that limitation
of space prohibits the elaboration necessary to produce real
characters. In a short story, the situation must be real whether the characters are or not.

There are certain dangers for the short story writer. One is the use of unnecessary repetition, or anything unnecessary for that matter. Edith Wharton emphasizes the fact that the short story has no room for anything which does not contribute to the whole. Its effectiveness depends upon selection of detail, elimination of the superfluous, and the order of presenting the essentials. Another danger is the tendency of the short story writer to summarize a long episode. Only deep familiarity with the subject will protect the author from merely sketching the selected episode which should be given in detail. It is just as important to include all essential details as it is to avoid all superfluous ones. A third danger arises when too many accidental happenings and minor episodes are crowded into the story. Excessive usage of coincidence is a false economy. "True economy consists in the drawing out of one's subject of every drop of significance it can give."^34

Edith Wharton criticizes the use of too many accidental happenings. Yet, she uses coincidence freely; for example, in The House of Mirth it just so happens that Mr. Rosedale sees Lily leaving Selden's rooms at the beginning of the novel. Coincidentally, Selden sees Lily leaving Gus Trenor's house on the occasion of her one visit there when Mrs. Trenor is not at home, a fact which Selden happens to know. Lily does not discover that Selden has sailed for
Europe until just after her rejection of Rosedale's proposal of marriage. If she had read her newspaper prior to Rosedale's visit instead of afterward, she probably would have accepted his proposal. Although Lily and Selden happen to be in Europe at the same time, it is a coincidence that they should happen to meet, and Lily just happens to be on the train which Selden takes in order to escape her. These coincidences occur in other novels as well; for example, in *The Age of Innocence*, it is coincidental that May agrees suddenly to set up the wedding date just as Archer had been ready to break the engagement and also that she should get pregnant at just such a vital time. In *The Reef*, it is coincidental that George Darrow should find Sophy Viner, of all people, as governess to Anna's daughter and engaged to Anna's stepson. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Vance's wife dies exactly eight days before Halo comes to tell him that she is free of her husband. Examples of coincidences can be found throughout Mrs. Wharton's works.

Section III of *The Writing of Fiction* has as its subject the modern novel. Edith Wharton states that France must be given credit for the origin of the psychological novel. England was the birthplace for the novel of manners. These two then were united in Balzac's brain, the result of this union being the modern novel. Comparable to a chameleon, the modern novel adapts its color and shape to the subject upon which it is resting.35

In her discussion of the novel, Edith Wharton arrives
at three main classifications. *Vanity Fair* is an example of
the novel of manners. *Madame Bovary* exemplifies the psycho-
logical novel or novel of character. *Rob Roy* represents the
class called novels of adventure. Subdivisions include the
farcical novel of manners (*The Pickwick Papers*), the romance
(*Lorna Doone*), and the philosophical romance (*Marius the
Epicurean*). Finally there is the zone of unclassifiable
hybrids (*John Inglesant*). Another type of hybrid novel might
characterize manner instead of matter; for example, the novel
might consist almost entirely of dialogue. Henry James
thought that a particular class of subjects called for that
treatment, for example, *The Awkward Age*. He also felt that
it needed to be "chattered" instead of being narrated. The
novelist must first decide which type of novel he needs to
use. Of course the subject should help to determine the
form of presentation.36

Concerning narration, Edith Wharton feels that it
should provide the novel's substance, whereas dialogue,
because it is too indirect and wasteful, should be used
sparingly, skillfully, and only as an adjunct. Since dialogue
is best for the expression of passion and emotion, it should
be held in reserve for the moments of crisis. It would sound
ridiculous for the author to describe a character's passionate
feelings in the same terms which the character himself might
use quite seriously and effectively. The purpose of dialogue
is to emphasize the climax and to lend an air of continuing
development to the whole.37
Although in the later novels, the use of dialogue is considerable, in her major phase Edith Wharton reserved dialogue for moments of crisis, for example, in the farewell scene between Lily and Selden in *The House of Mirth*. Another example is the love scene between Ellen and Archer which takes place during Archer's business trip to Boston in *The Age of Innocence*.

Edith Wharton believes in an economy of characters. When introducing characters, as well as when describing a scene, relevance must be borne in mind; anything irrelevant or superfluous must be omitted. The unnecessary characters should be eliminated, and even the number of subordinate necessary characters can be reduced by having the major characters fulfill the functions of many of the minor ones. It is better to portray fully and carefully a few characters than it is to attempt the portrayal of many figures which are only half-drawn. Edith Wharton tells us that one of the two chief problems in a novel is choosing the point of view. If a character is chosen, he must have sufficient intelligence and facility with language and expression to be able to tell the story. Nothing should be depicted which the narrator could not or would not have noticed. His impressions must be within the scope of his mentality. In order to cover the action fully, the point of view may need to be shifted, but shifting should be minimized in order to preserve unity. The maximum number of angles of vision should be three.
Mixture of point of view between characters and omniscient author hinders the illusion; therefore, one or the other should be chosen and adhered to throughout. 39

Edith Wharton uses the omniscient author more often than a narrator, and there are times when the reader is too much aware of the author's presence in telling the story. She intrudes with generalizations and authorial comment occasionally in a rather disconcerting manner. Also she says that to alternate between author and narrator endangers the illusion or reality; however, she fails to follow her own prescription in Ethan Frome and New Year's Day. In both of these, the whole story is supposedly told by the narrator, but it simply is not true. The omniscient author takes over in the middle of both and allows us to observe the characters' thoughts and feelings which a narrator could never perceive simply by observation.

The other chief problem in constructing a novel is producing the effect of the passage of time. The secret of communicating passage of time and characters' natural age and experience is incommunicable, says Mrs. Wharton. Over a long period of time characters must naturally be modified; yet, they must remain recognizably themselves, for example, as in War and Peace. This achievement comes from the author's belief in the reality of his characters and the reality of their story. However, one method is to go slowly and keep the tone of the narrative as "quiet as life often is in the intervals between its high moments." 40
Other matters of importance to the fiction writer include choosing the right moment at which to begin his story. It is not necessary to introduce all the characters at the beginning as in *War and Peace*. It is perfectly permissible to introduce them gradually as it is done in *Vanity Fair*. Another matter of importance is length, which must be determined by the subject. By length, Mrs. Wharton is speaking in terms of quality moreso than the quantity of pages. Henry James showed perfect proportion in the length of "The Turn of the Screw," according to Mrs. Wharton. Finally then, the length must be in proportion to the profundity of the subject. Space is required for a great argument; it is required for the achievement of the "eternal effort of art [which is] to complete what in life seems incoherent and fragmentary."41

Also important in the creation of fiction is the manner in which the story is told. Just as each tale determines its own length, so too does each scene call for a particular way in which it should be told. Some scenes must be reported plainly and straightforwardly, while others call for innuendoes and meaningful glances. The author must select the manner most appropriate for his subject and one that conveys the fullest possible meaning.42

The importance of what are referred to as "illuminating incidents" is particularly emphasized. These incidents contain the inner meaning which is the essence of a situation. Since these incidents are the author's direct, personal
contribution, his choice of them reveals the quality of his imagination. The author's style is his sense for selecting these incidents. There is no better method for giving immediacy to a story than by using "illuminating incidents." Edith Wharton is most definite in her opinion concerning a novel's conclusion which, as stated previously, should be latent within the first page. All of the loose threads should be gathered together into a neat and tidy knot. The end should have a "sense of inevitability," and when the story is finished, it is imperative that the author must stop and avoid dragging things on and on without purpose. At times, however, Edith Wharton's conclusions are so neatly rounded off that they seem unreal. There is no sense that life continues for the characters. Although they are alive at the end, it seems that their lives must stop with Mrs. Wharton's final word. Instead of the story's seeming to be lifted out of life which existed prior to and which goes on after its conclusion, it seems that, although her characters do have a history, they have no future. The ending is too conclusive, too rounded, and therefore unrealistic.

Definitely not a pioneer herself, Edith Wharton tells us that the true pioneers in the world of fiction are never rewarded by seeing the fulfillment of their work. They experiment; they search for untried forms and new effects. They establish rules for their methods and experiments for the future generations to follow or to take and modify. Future writers perfect the raw material discovered by the
true pioneers. It is in this latter role that Edith Wharton would place herself. She does not experiment with new forms; rather she follows the traditional, established forms in an attempt to perfect the raw material.

In the fourth section, Mrs. Wharton discusses novels of character and novels of situation. Although she has told us previously that the main concern of the novel is character and the main concern of the short story is situation, she does admit the existence and success of some novels of situation. She tells us that in the novel of situation, for example *The Scarlet Letter*, the characters arise out of the situation and are governed by it. In the novel of character and/or manners, the characters originate first, and they cause the events to take place. Jane Austen's novels provide good illustrations of the novel of character in which the situation is minimized. English novelists are interested in personality, and the English novel has tended toward an emphasis of character and manners; however, dramatic episodes are blended in with the characters. Traditionally a plot was composed of a conflict of events or of characters, but the plots were loose enough to allow the characters to freely be themselves. They were never controlled by the plot except perhaps in rare moments of crisis. For the most part then, the characters were real, although unreal characters did exist. Probably the unreal characters derive from old heroes and heroines who were sublime, not human. Another reason for a lack of reality applies to leading characters
in a story in which the plot was not loose enough. These tight, constricting plots allowed no room for the development of idiosyncrasies. They forced the main characters to become puppets to the events, whereas, the subordinate characters who had no such demands placed upon them were allowed to remain free and therefore real. According to Mrs. Wharton, real and unreal characters differentiate between novels of character and novels of situation.46

In Edith Wharton's novels, the characters are not puppets of the situation; rather they seem always to be in control of the situation. Ann-Eliza Bunner renounces her one and only chance for love. Ethan Frome decides that he cannot deceive his neighbor who trusts him and that he cannot desert Zeena. Ralph Marvell decides to commit suicide. Ellen Olenska renounces her chance for a life with Archer because of her refusal to gain love by inflicting pain upon others. May holds on to Archer, knowing what it is costing him, by telling him that she is pregnant. Archer decides not to visit Ellen with his son Dallas. Lily Bart burns the letters which could bribe her way back into society and a life of luxury. Sophy Viner gives up Owen Leath and her chance for a good life materially and socially. All of these are instances of characters, like living people, controlling their own destinies. They make things happen or prevent things from happening. They are not just pushed along blindly by fate as victims of circumstances. They make decisions, decisions which change the courses of their lives.
They are in control of the situation, especially the women characters.

The male characters are not manipulated by the situation either, but they are more often weak. They are usually intelligent men of feeling who are lacking in courage. Therefore, they depend upon the women to make their decisions for them. Thus, the heroines seem to dominate the critical moments. In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen must convince Archer that they could have no real life together based on having to inflict pain upon others; they cannot have love without honor. In *Ethan Frome* it is Mattie who pleads with Ethan to escape their miserable lives. She is the one who suggests that they coast into the big elm and die together. Ethan follows her suggestion and even bungles suicide. Anna Leath calls the plays and makes the decisions in *The Reef*; she seems always to be in charge. In *New Year's Day*, Lizzie Hazeldean decides and acts independently of her husband and of Henry Prest. They are not even aware of her manipulations of them. Of course there is never any doubt about who has the power in *The Custom of the Country*. Her men do not dare to question the authority of Undine Spragg.

The subject of the final section of the book is Marcel Proust. Mrs. Wharton makes some very enlightening comments on the French author. She also re-emphasizes her conventional theory by pointing out traditional aspects in his writing which she finds praiseworthy. She compliments his selectivity and the fact that he uses only what is relevant. We see her
reliance upon tradition in her attempt to explain that it is only his personal values which erroneously make Proust appear to be revolutionary. She states that his "strength is the strength of tradition." She argues that he is traditional in his use of psychology, anecdote, and illustration by discourse. She compares him to Shakespeare in his ability to bring characters to life. She praises Proust for brooding long over his subject until he becomes thoroughly saturated in it.

Her criticism of Proust likewise serves to re-emphasize earlier points. She criticizes him for intermittent blind spots when his moral sense seems to fail him. She also criticizes him for allowing the veil of reality to drop occasionally; for example, it is quite unrealistic for the narrator to describe how he has hidden himself in order to spy on a scene. Another flaw in Proust is that he completely ignored the existence of bravery; his world was ruled by fear, including the fear of love. Her final comment is a generous one, and although concerning Proust specifically, it is universally applicable. She says that the critic must concern himself with a man's genius and draw back from his "physical disabilities" or at most admire what he accomplished in spite of his hindrances.

Thus, we have seen Edith Wharton's criticism of the experimentalistic "stream-of-consciousness" and "dirt for dirt's sake." In the positive presentation of her ideas, we have seen the formalized, classical, basically conservative
approach which she takes. She holds with tradition and the traditional method for constructing a piece of fiction whether it be short story or novel. In her short stories and novels, we are able to see Edith Wharton's traditional theories at work.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II


3 Wharton, p. 120.

4 Wharton, pp. 141-142.

5 Wharton, pp. 9-12.


10 Wharton, p. 81.


12 Wharton, p. 66.


15 Wharton, p. 19.

16 Wharton, p. 21.

17 Wharton, pp. 20-23.


20 Wharton, p. 28.
21 Wharton, p. 29.
22 Wharton, p. 58.
23 Wharton, pp. 35-36.
24 Wharton, pp. 37-46.
25 Wharton, p. 40.
26 Wharton, pp. 41-42.
27 Wharton, p. 43.
28 Wharton, pp. 43-46.
29 Wharton, p. 47.
30 Wharton, pp. 47-49.
31 Wharton, p. 51.
32 Wharton, p. 52.
33 Wharton, p. 61.
34 Wharton, p. 57.
35 Wharton, p. 61.
36 Wharton, pp. 66-72.
37 Wharton, pp. 72-74.
38 Wharton, p. 83.
39 Wharton, pp. 86-89.
40 Wharton, p. 96.
41 Wharton, p. 107.
42 Wharton, pp. 113-114.
43 Wharton, p. 112.
44 Wharton, p. 108.
45 Wharton, p. 117.
46 Wharton, pp. 125-134.
47 Wharton, p. 154.
48 Wharton, pp. 155-166.

49 Wharton, pp. 171-178.
CHAPTER III

SPECIFIC WORKS OF EDITH WHARTON ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY
ACCORDING TO PUBLICATION

Part A

Having examined the conventional and unconventional aspects of Edith Wharton's life and her conventional theory of fiction with its carry over into her technique, let us turn to the body of her fiction where we are concerned primarily with the novels and novelettes of her major phase, those which most vividly express her unconventional attitude toward love. There is little to hold our attention in her early short stories. Although some are surprisingly well written and do foreshadow important themes of the future, many are marked by an amateurish excessiveness and a self-conscious attempt at cleverness. Her dialogue is too obviously a poor attempt at imitation of Henry James. There are too many hesitations, implications, and unfinished sentences done rather unskillfully. Artifice is much more in evidence than is art. She seems to be too absorbed with the ancedote which has an ironic or unusual turn of events giving it a surprise ending. She relies upon this trick (by which O. Henry is known) to hold the reader's attention

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instead of making her stories genuinely interesting. The situations of her early works are often conventionally trite and melodramatic with sentimental endings in which everything turns out for the best. Edith Wharton views her early subjects as from a distance, refusing to come to close grips with them, a fact which is just as well since the subjects really could not support a profound treatment.

The early short stories have situations which are unrealistic in that they are too enclosed, too artificially rounded. They are not episodes detached from life; in fact, the characters seem to have had no life before nor after the story. They come into existence with their introduction into the story and cease to exist when the story concludes. The characters are mere instruments of the plot. Edith Wharton believed that situation was the primary concern of the short story, but in her early short stories, situation is the only concern.

Valley of Decision (1902)

The characters are also blurred and lifeless in her first published novel, *The Valley of Decision*. The situation also lacks vitality. The blame for her abstracted, lifeless characters and plot probably should be placed upon the fact that she became too absorbed in her scholarly research of the period. She became carried away with presenting an authentic and vivid background, with her creativity and originality suffering as a result. Although her impressions
of the historical background contain a vitality akin to Carlyle's, her talent as a creator of fiction is definitely lacking. She sacrifices a dramatic situation to a panoramic presentation of accurate details of eighteenth century Italy. She was too completely absorbed in her setting to the neglect of her characters and situation.

**The House of Mirth (1905)**

Edith Wharton's genius developed gradually—from the publication of her volume *Verses* in 1878, through books on interior decoration and gardening, short stories, and a novel until the publication of one of her finest novels in 1905. In *The House of Mirth*, her method is almost perfected. The style is characteristic of the best of her work in its epigrammatic quality. It is also polished, crisply ironic, and at times a bit austere. There are a few rare instances of sentimentality. However, when reading these passages, one is so caught up in the reality of the plot and the characters, that the sentimentality goes unnoticed. It is discovered only by a retrospective examination.

Under adverse, rushed working conditions, Edith Wharton produced a novel skillfully written about the theme which was to absorb her in her major fiction. Her pessimistic attitude toward love has blossomed into full flower. *The House of Mirth* is concerned with the painful consequences of love. We see an individual, Lily Bart, whose desires are in direct conflict with society, a materialistic, frivolous
society which eventually destroys her. It destroys her because she will not give in to it; she will not compromise and play by its rules. She could have triumphed over her society had she been willing to abandon her principles. There is a moral issue, but it is not her moral integrity which prevents Lily's compromise to society so much as it is her love. Several times she is morally ready to forsake her standard of ethics, but in each case, it is her love for Lawrence Selden which prevents her attainment of her goal. Thus, it is a love story more than it is a social satire.

It is also an example of vivid character portrayal. Lily Bart is one of Edith Wharton's most realistic living characters. Lily is always human, never a type. She never acts falsely in order to further the plot. The plot rather is an extension of her character and of her inward struggle. She is impulsive. She alternates between moments of generous sacrifice and moments of complete selfishness with utter disregard for the feelings of anyone else. Her vacillation is so convincing because it is so human, so feminine. Women are noted for frequent changes of mind, and few women, or men either for that matter, know exactly what they want all of the time. Those who do are certainly less interesting. Often there exist conflicting desires between two goals which are mutually exclusive, as in Lily's case. Quite often there is a conflict between emotional desires and rational desires, as it is with Lily, and no real decision can be reached without a great deal of vacillation. Few women have
a steadfast purpose and unswerving strength of mind to drive them straight toward one purpose with never a falter or hesitation. The fact that Lily wavers makes her the more human.

Her dual outlook is also emphasized by the fact that she is a product of her society; yet she is capable of standing apart and seeing it with all of its shallowness, artificiality, and cruelty. She can view it critically while still trying desperately to become a part of it. She possesses the weaknesses and strengths of a human being. She is torn between two conflicting desires—each too deep and powerful to conquer the other without a fierce and bitter struggle. Her desire for wealth and the luxuries which wealth can buy has been deeply ingrained into her from childhood. Her love and her desire for love are equally strong motivations, perhaps stronger than normal in Edith Wharton's world. This desire for love seems to be instinctual; whereas her desire for luxury is environmental. Mrs. Wharton has been accused of writing a naturalistic, deterministic novel in *The House of Mirth*, but it is precisely the fact that Lily refuses to succumb to the urgings of environmental pressures which distinguishes her above such weak characters as Clyde Griffiths or Carrie Meeber to whom she has been compared. It is her struggle, the fact that there is a struggle throughout, and that her final renunciation scene is rehearsed many times, which lift her above the weak characters who give in to environmental pressures without a struggle.
Let us turn to the first of her renunciation scenes. She is all set to spring her trap upon a wealthy husband who will provide her with the luxury which she so passionately wants and the security which she so desperately needs. However, her plans are thwarted because of her feelings for Lawrence Selden, who is not wealthy. Everything is running smoothly at a week-long house party until the dinner which affords Lily an opportunity for comparing Selden and Percy Gryce. This comparison leads her to renounce the opportunity of marrying Mr. Gryce for his money. She sacrifices her afternoon with Percy in order to spend it with Selden.

Selden is genuinely in love with Lily Bart. He tries to show her the falseness of the set of values which have been erected for her. He would like her to realize the shallowness of what she is trying to attain. Selden does not believe that she will enjoy the fruits of her goal once it has been reached.

Lily is torn between her desire for wealth and her love for Selden. Like Kate Croy in James's *Wings of the Dove*, she is unwilling to accept the man she loves without wealth. Lily chastises Selden for making the things for which she strives seem hateful to her when he has nothing to offer as a substitute. He has no choice but to admit that she is correct; he does have nothing to offer her, but he adds that if he did, it should be hers. Lily's response to such a direct revelation of love is not at all the typical conventional romantic response expected of a girl who had just
received such a statement from a man she loves. Instead, she is unhappy because she realizes that to give in to her feeling for Selden will deprive her of the luxury which could so easily be within her grasp. Edith Wharton is presenting love, not as the sentimental, traditional cure-all, but as the source of conflict in Lily's struggle for happiness.

Very soon following Lily's open demonstration of preferring Selden's company to Percy's, Mr. Gryce leaves the party and returns home. Lily is rebuked for having let her chance with Percy Gryce slip through her fingers. No one is more reproachful though of Lily than is she of herself. "No one could hurt her as much as she was hurting herself, for no one else . . . knew the full magnitude of her folly." Only Lily realizes the extent of her sacrifice of a chance for attainment of what she has been taught is the only worthwhile goal--and for what?--for a few moments of happiness, for a "sense of lightness" which is always under the cloud of her realization that her course of action must necessarily lead to pain for those involved. Thus ends one scene in this novel in which it must be admitted that the structure is indeed episodic. The story is presented in a series of scenes, some of which remain vividly in the memory. These scenes are unified by Lily's presence.

Lily's next encounter with Selden is at the Van Osburgh wedding. She regrets that she had missed her chance to be the bride. Then she sees Selden, and her complacency is disturbed. "He was a living reminder of the worst mistake
in her career, and the fact that he had been its cause did not soften her feelings toward him. She could still imagine an ideal state of existence in which, all else being super-added, intercourse with Selden might be the last touch of luxury; but in the world as it was, such a privilege was likely to cost more than it was worth."^2 In Edith Wharton's world, romantic love always costs more than it is worth. The hurt and disadvantages never outweigh nor even balance the joy and advantages. The price exacted by romantic love is out of proportion to the returns.

Following this scene of the meeting at the wedding, the next memorable scene occurs at a party in which the presentation of tableau scenes is part of the amusement. Lily portrays Reynold's "Mrs. Lloyd." In her simple, white gown which reveals her beauty quite expressively, Lily is the subject of male admiration, female envy, and prudish censure. Selden has a sense of complete surrender as he approaches her and gives her his arm. They go outside where they can talk undisturbed. Lily chides him for his lack of attention to her. She accuses him of thinking harsh things of her. Selden replies, "I think of you at any rate, God knows!"^3 Not satisfied, Lily persists in questioning why they never see each other. She reminds him of the promise he made to help her. Then Selden reveals his total commitment to her:

"The only way I can help you is by loving you," Selden said in a low voice.
She made no reply, but her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched.
She drew back and rose from her seat. Selden rose too, and they stood facing each other. Suddenly she caught his hand and pressed it a moment against her cheek.

"Ah, love me, love me--but don't tell me so!" she sighed with her eyes in his; and before he could speak she had turned and slipped through the arch of boughs, disappearing in the brightness of the room beyond.

Selden stood where she had left him. He knew too well the transiency of exquisite moments to attempt to follow her.  

Lily's reaction is hardly the conventional one expected of a young woman in love.

Edith Wharton has been criticized for her handling of love scenes in The House of Mirth. Irving Howe says that her love scenes contain forced sentences and that her tone is harsh, unrelentless, and grinding. The preceding example serves as a refutation of Howe's criticism, although it is admittedly a weak love scene. Its weakness lies in the fact that it is too sentimental and overdone. For example, to Selden's low voiced declaration of love, Lily replies by lifting her face for a kiss. The metaphor of the flower in the words of the omniscient author sounds excessive. However, Edith Wharton does manage to portray the repressed emotion in this love scene and at the same time convey the struggle within Lily. Lily's plea to Selden that he love her is also overdone, but it is her natural inclination crying out to him. Her added plea that he not tell her so is the voice of her rational powers which tell her that her love for Selden and the knowledge of his for her will only serve to thwart her plans and play havoc with her designs for marrying a man with money. The author cannot be criticized for Lily's
slipping away melodramatically after her passionate outburst. Rather it is an ingenious stroke of characterization. Lily knows when she has made a vivid impression, and she knows that the best way to leave that impression indelibly stamped upon Selden's memory is by an immediate disappearance. She must not do nor say anything to spoil her climactic outburst. Lily knows her art well. She had made a career of knowing how to attract and hold a man's attention. She knew the impression that her tableau of "Mrs. Lloyd" would create. She knows exactly when to make her entrances and her exits. The fact that she has acquired this somewhat artificial ability does not mean that her feelings are any less sincere than if her actions were completely spontaneous. It provides a deeper insight into her character and into her one supreme talent by which she could achieve monetary and social success if she only did not have to struggle with the rebellious voice of her heart.

Mrs. Wharton tells us that Lily had read a great deal in Selden's eyes. This ability is an enviable accomplishment of Wharton's characters, especially her heroines, and the omniscient author is there to tell us that it happened. Mrs. Wharton allows us to enter Lily's mind at times. We know her thoughts and feelings, but somehow we never forget that Edith Wharton is present telling us what happened, interpreting the characters' feelings or reporting their dialogue. There is an intermediary voice which always separates the reader from the characters. Edith Wharton tells us that Lily longs
to feel a power over Selden.

Lily's love is a selfish love. She is primarily concerned with her own happiness, not with that of her beloved. She considers only what will make herself happy. The conflict is that she cannot be happy with her love because of money; yet, she cannot be happy in a world of wealth without love. Her tragedy is that she cannot have both. She wants neither badly enough to make the sacrifice of the other worthwhile. Two strong urges pull against each other within her. Her love for Selden is not strong enough to overcome her love for money, at least not yet.

Basically Lily is a decent human being with moral values, although no real moral issue has yet arisen. Her love for Selden is a support to her sense of self-respect, which her love for wealth requires that she sacrifice. Had Lily abandoned her code of decency she could have gotten the wealth and power that she craved. Had she abandoned her social ambition and aspiration for wealth, she could have married Selden. However, she remains standing in the middle and holding the reins of two strong and powerful horses that are pulling in opposite directions. In her world of society she is still conscious of Selden; she considers what he would think of her actions and if he would disapprove. Selden's opinion carries more weight than her own conscience or sense of ethical values.

Lily is upset by the climax of her dealings with Gus Trenor. Having just learned that the money which Gus had
given her, supposedly as earned from her invested money, was really a gift for which he expects full payment by her being "nice" to him, Lily is horrified not only because of her sense of dishonor, but also concerning what Selden would think. Gus had lured Lily into his home on the pretext that his wife was there. In the scene with Gus, Lily discovers what he expects of her. Extremely frightened, she manages to escape him, but once safely in her carriage, she is overcome by what has happened. She remembers the story of Orestes snatching one hour of sleep in a cave when he had found the Furies, who haunted him, sleeping. Although they sometimes slept, they were always present, hiding in the dark corners and waiting. They were wide awake now in Lily's brain, and she was tortured by the iron clanging of their wings.

Edith Wharton is effective in her use of the metaphor of the Furies. It is particularly appropriate and descriptive of Lily's situation. She is alone in the world, with no family to turn to for guidance or protection. The prospects of her future appear dark and unpromising. She is not getting any younger. She shrinks from the bright light which might show up tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes in the mirror. Her chances for a wealthy marriage are decreasing every day. Her debt to Gus Trenor is a new pressure. On top of all, she fears Selden's censure and condemnation. The Furies are closing in upon her, retreating at times, but then jumping out unexpectedly. Even now they are preparing a
fresh assault for the next day. Lily, craving compassion, decides to go to Selden's cousin Gerty to find out if Selden would condemn her.

Earlier that same evening Selden had been at his cousin's where he had unknowingly inflicted pain upon her. He had abandoned his reasoning ability to his emotions. He "was in the state of impassioned self-absorption that the first surrender to love produces." So completely self-absorbed is Selden that he fails to realize that his cousin is in love with him. Instead, he is thinking only of his own situation and of the rumor concerning Lily and Gus Trenor. Selden thought of Gus Trenor as a beast; to hear Gus's name linked with Lily's was unbearable. Selden longed to take her away beyond her ugly, petty, corroding society. Feeling a mutual sympathy with his cousin Gerty because of the affection that both felt for Lily, he had gone to see her.

At first Gerty thought that Selden's visit had a personal significance for her. Like a small child afraid of frightening away a beautiful butterfly which has settled itself close enough for inspection, Gerty held her breath hopefully, unquestioningly, not daring to move or break the spell for fear that the gorgeous butterfly might fly away.

Selden was so full of his feeling for Lily, however, that he could not prevent its bubbling over. His love for Lily becomes apparent to Gerty, and "a joy just trying its wings in Gerty's heart dropped to earth and lay still."
The words beat on Gerty's brain like the sound of a language which has seemed familiar at a distance, but on approaching is found to be unintelligible. He had come to talk to her of Lily—that was all: There had been a third at the feast she had spread for him, and that third had taken her own place. She tried to follow what he was saying, to cling to her own part in the talk—but it was all as meaningless as the boom of waves in a drowning head, and she felt, as the drowning may feel, that to sink would be nothing beside the pain of struggling to keep up.®

Having released the cork which held back his feelings, and let himself speak freely of Lily to Gerty, Selden was overpowered with the desire to see his beloved. He left Gerty and went to Mrs. Fisher's where Lily had been dining, but she has already left to keep her engagement with Gus and Judy Trenor; only, unknown to Lily, Judy was not at home. Selden detests the thought of Lily's being with Gus. Selden sees himself as Perseus; he hears Andromeda's cry for rescue. He feels a pang at his discovery of her absence, but her note in his pocket reassures him that he will see her the following day. However, when Selden leaves Mrs. Fisher's, his route takes him by the Trenor's and, knowing that Mrs. Trenor is not at home, Selden is shocked and hurt to see Gus handing Lily into a carriage.

Edith Wharton does not describe Selden's agony, but she effectively reveals its depth by having him set sail the following day without keeping his appointment with Lily. Mrs. Wharton artfully avoids a description which would lend itself so easily to melodrama. Instead of portraying the actual
feeling, she allows us to see its effect upon Selden. This method is all the more effective because of its employment of the reader's powers of imagination.

Meanwhile Gerty had experienced intense pain because of her love for Selden. In the narrative describing Gerty's reaction, the imagery of drowning is repeated. Edith Wharton's portrayal of Gerty's thoughts is well done. There is no self pity in a situation which could conceivably call for it. The strength and unselfishness of Gerty's character is stressed quite skillfully.

Alone with her cousin's kiss, Gerty stared upon her thoughts. He had kissed her before—but not with another woman on his lips. If he had spared her that she could have drowned quietly, welcoming the dark flood as it submerged her. But now the flood was shot through with glory, and it was harder to drown at sunrise than in darkness. Gerty hid her face from the light, but it pierced to the crannies of her soul. She had been so contented, life had seemed so simple and sufficient—why had he come to trouble her with new hopes? And Lily—Lily, her best friend! Woman-like, she accused the woman. Perhaps, had it not been for Lily, her fond imagining might have become truth. Selden had always liked her—had understood and sympathized with the modest independence of her life. He, who had the reputation of weighing all things in the nice balance of fastidious perceptions, had been uncritical and simple in his view of her: his cleverness had never overawed her because she had felt at home in his heart. And now she was thrust out, and the door was barred against her by Lily's hand! Lily, for whose admission there she herself had pleaded! . . . On Selden's part, no doubt, the wound inflicted was inconscient; he had never guessed her foolish secret; but Lily—Lily must have known! When, in such matters, are a woman's perceptions at fault? And if she knew, then she had deliberately despoiled her friend, and in mere wantonness of power, since, even to Gerty's suddenly flaming jealousy, it seemed incredible that Lily should wish to be Selden's wife. Lily might be incapable of marrying for money, but she was equally incapable of living without it, and Selden's eager
investigations into the small economies of housekeeping made him appear to Gerty as tragically duped as herself.9

Gerty is one of Mrs. Wharton's vivid minor characters. She is more than just a symbol of the impoverished life Lily seeks to avoid; she is more than a foil to Lily and an instrument of the plot. She is a character with life, although her unselfishness approaches the supra-human. Her love for Selden brings her back into the realm of humanity. Her love is what causes her to remove all blame for her unhappiness from Selden and accredit it to Lily. Her very real resentment of Lily is partially a result of her unhappiness at her own sense of loss and partially her belief that Selden is being wronged.

Mrs. Wharton is at her ironic best by choosing just this precise moment to have Lily arrive at Gerty's, driven there by her tormenting Furies. Lily has nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Desperately longing for and needing compassion, she turns to the closest thing she has to a real friend. It is not one of her social acquaintances, but rather a girl whose meager way of life is hateful to her. Wharton's wealthy women tend to be cold and cruel. It is the poor, but more loyal friend to whom Lily turns for warmth and understanding. Ironically, it is at the very time that Gerty is least disposed toward Lily. At first Gerty inwardly shrinks from her, but then Lily speaks of the Furies who hound her at night when she is alone. The dark has become a place of fear and dread. At no little cost to herself,
Gerty informs Lily that Selden had gone in search of her.

At the word, Lily's face melted from locked anguish to the open misery of a child. Her lips trembled and her gaze widened with tears.

"He went to find me? And I missed him! Oh, Gerty, he tried to help me. He told me--he warned me long ago--he foresaw that I should grow hateful to myself!"

The name, as Gerty saw with a clutch at the heart, had loosened the springs of self-pity in her friend's dry breast, and tear by tear Lily poured out the measure of her anguish. She had dropped sideways in Gerty's big arm-chair, her head buried where lately Selden's had leaned, in a beauty of abandonment that drove home to Gerty's aching senses the inevitableness of her own defeat. Ah, it needed no deliberate purpose on Lily's part to rob her of her dream!

. . . But if Selden's infatuation seemed a fatal necessity, the effect that his name produced shook Gerty's steadfastness with a last pang. Men pass through such superhuman loves and outlive them: they are the probation subduing the heart to human joys. How gladly Gerty would have welcomed the ministry of healing: how willingly have soothed the sufferer back to tolerance of life! But Lily's self-betrayal took this last hope from her. The mortal maid on the shore is helpless against the siren who loves her prey: such victims are floated back dead from their adventure.10

Once again we must admire Edith Wharton for her effective use of metaphor. She knows what she is about when it comes to depicting a woman's most intimate thoughts and feelings, and she describes Gerty's vividly and realistically.

Because of her love for Selden, Lily is concerned with his opinion of her actions. She is so afraid that he will reject her. Lily appeals to Gerty because as his cousin and friend, she knows and understands him. Lily asks Gerty her opinion of the outcome if she goes to Selden, confesses everything to him, how she wants admiration, excitement, and money. Lily feels that she has sunk to the depths, but it
will be sufficient if only Selden will understand.

"I've sunk lower than the lowest, for I've taken what they take, and not paid as they pay—oh, Gerty, you know him: if I told him everything would he loathe me? Or would he pity me, and understand me, and save me from myself?"

Gerty stood cold and passive. She knew the hour of her probation had come, and her poor heart beat wildly against its destiny. As a dark river sweeps by under a lightning flash, she saw her chance of happiness surge past under a flash of temptation. What prevented her from saying: "He is like other men"? She was not so sure of him, after all! But to do so would have been like blaspheming her love. She could not put him before herself in any light but the noblest: she must trust him to the height of her own passion.

"Yes: I know him; he will help you," she said. 11

The above scene is admirable for its characterization of Gerty. We have seen foreshadowings of her climactic renunciation scene in the previous portraits of her unselfishness. Her acceptance of the tormented Lily at a time of bitter resentment prepares us for the supreme sacrifice of one who loves: the sacrifice of any chance of happiness with the beloved. Edith Wharton made it clear how strongly the temptation presented itself to Gerty. Its force is strengthened by her hesitation. Instead of having her answer honestly without pausing to consider the results, Edith Wharton makes it plain that Gerty is fully aware of the consequences. Gerty realizes the power that is in her hands and how easily she could rationalize by telling herself that after all she was not really so sure of him. It is a suspenseful moment of inner debate. It is a moral decision, and Gerty, like Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence, realizes that she cannot hope to build anything good for herself if
it costs others. This renunciation scene is a foreshadowing of the future renunciation scenes which are so much a part of Edith Wharton's effective writing.

The following day Lily anxiously waits Selden's arrival. She does not know he saw her with Gus the night before and that he has consequently taken flight. She is secure in her expectation. No longer a victim of inner conflict, she has at last made up her mind; it is Selden she wants, and not wealth. Her sense of values has shifted. Ironically, now at the time when love has made her so dependent upon another, so needful of another's sanction, Selden fails her. He does not keep his appointment. While she is waiting, the wealthy Mr. Rosedale arrives and, in a striking scene, proposes marriage. Had Lily not loved Selden she no doubt would have taken this opportunity to share Rosedale's millions and to cancel out her overwhelming debt to Gus Trenor. Mrs. Wharton leaves no doubt that it is her love for Selden, not a moral decision, which compels Lily to refuse to legally prostitute herself by marrying a man whom she really does not even like but who can offer her the wealth and security for which she has worked and fought so long. After her dismissal of Rosedale, Lily realizes that Selden is definitely not coming, but still remains hopeful until she reads in the evening's newspaper that he has sailed for Havana and the West Indies. Then she realizes that he has deserted her.

Had Rosedale waited until after Lily had read the
newspaper, he probably would have been successful in his proposal. Mrs. Wharton seems to be leaning heavily on coincidence at this point. Lily did not reject love; instead love rejected her. Selden had not been strong enough. At the time when Lily had needed his love most of all, he had failed her.

This failure is typical of Edith Wharton's male characters, who are often too weak to allow the heroines to depend upon them in a time of need. Selden was not strong enough to stay and ask Lily for an explanation. He jumped to false conclusions and ran, cowardly seeking escape, too weak to defy the censure of a society which condemns not evil, but indiscretion or the appearance of evil whether it is really innocent or not. In fact he was too weak to even try to find out if he had correctly interpreted what he had seen. Instead he immediately condemned Lily, or at least appears to have done so by abandoning her. His love for Lily suffers by contrast to Gerty's for him. It even suffers from a comparison with Lily's love for him because she was ready to sacrifice the way of life that meant so much to her.

Edith Wharton's women are stronger and more prone to self-sacrifice than are her men. Her men are more interested in their own welfare. Selden hoped to forget Lily and to escape the pain of his love for her by sailing away.

Lily accepts the Dorsets' invitation to cruise on their yacht. However, she is unaware of the function which Bertha Dorset expects her to fulfill. Edith Wharton
saturizes the aimlessness of this society with its pursuits of shallow amusements and casual flirtations. Lily's experience with an Italian Prince, whom she had met on the cruise, had been on the brink of marriage, but at the critical moment she had ruined her chances by flirting with his stepson. Mrs. Fisher's comment on this situation serves to explain Lily's recurrent problem by an effective analogy: "She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic." She had allowed the same thing to happen with Percy Gryce, with others before him, and it will happen again in her future. She works for what she thinks she wants until it seems certain. Then she finds that she cannot go through with it. Her sense of decency and her love for Selden are barriers to her attainment of her material goals. In her relationship with the Dorsets, Lily lets her moral values interfere with her ambition, and she comes out the loser.

At first it appears that George Dorset is the only one who will be hurt. He is miserable when he discovers the nature of his wife's relationship with young Ned Silverton. Mrs. Wharton's satire grows more bitter concerning the casual value placed upon fidelity in marriage; she champions the conventional social values.

Lily's sympathy for the three participants in the love triangle is wasted, for she is the one who is hurt as a result of it. In order to keep her marriage intact, Bertha
pretends that her actions were in consequence of her jealousy of George and Lily. George and Bertha are reconciled, but Lily is ostracized from society and left practically destitute.

At this point Edith Wharton's satire is indeed sharp, almost malicious. The cruelty of women is emphasized not only by the actions of Bertha Dorset for whom Lily had felt a genuine sympathy, but also by the disloyal action of Lily's only relative. Her Aunt Julia, whom she had counted on for support, dies and, having heard of the scandal involving Lily, disinherits her with only ten thousand dollars, nine thousand of which she owes to Gus Trenor. Lily's situation is even more desperate because it will take a while for her to receive the money. She rejects the opportunities which do present themselves, again for the same reasons of her basic decency and her love for Selden. Even though she feels that she has lost all chance with Selden, she still cannot extinguish her love which has proved such a thorn in her side.

Lily realizes the great illusion which has built up concerning love and its magical qualities. Lily is very much aware of the inadequacy of love as a "cure-all." However, she realizes its value as a weapon, a weapon which she decides to use in order to make Mr. Rosedale marry her. Love is the only weapon she has, now that his original motivation of seeking to advance his social status through her is no longer feasible.

Mrs. Wharton reveals Rosedale's character precisely
in the way in which he declares his love. He says, "'I'm all broken up on you: there's nothing new in that. I'm more in love with you now than I was this time last year.'"\(^\text{13}\) But he goes on to add that love is not enough. The situation has changed; Lily has lost her social position. Even though Mr. Rosedale says that he loves Lily, he will not marry her until she regains that position. He is afraid of losing all that he has been working for so long. Romantic love is supposed to be all-powerful; according to the conventional view, it is able to conquer all obstacles. Yet, Rosedale's love for Lily is not powerful enough to overcome his desire for social position. Thus love has produced an inner conflict between desires within Rosedale. Under these circumstances contentment, peace, and happiness are surely impossible, and once again we see Mrs. Wharton's unconventional attitude toward romantic love at work.

Rosedale urges Lily to use Mrs. Dorset's letters to Selden in order to blackmail her into recognizing Lily in society. When Lily refuses, Mr. Rosedale surmises the reason. His retort seems the product of both pain and its consequent anger. "'I suppose it's because the letters are to him, then? Well, I'll be damned if I see what thanks you've got from him!'"\(^\text{14}\) Sam Rosedale is correct in his guess of Lily's reason. It is precisely because of her love for Selden that she is incapable of the action which would bring her what she has been striving for for so long.

Lily's apparently unreturned love for Selden plus her
fear of poverty has destroyed any semblance of peace or happiness. She cannot even sleep without artificial inducement. She is driven to desperation. The only escape she sees is to follow Mr. Rosedale's suggestion and use Mrs. Dorset's letters in order to force her way back into society, but again her love stops her from attaining what she wants and deprives her of her last method of escape short of suicide. She is on her errand to Mrs. Dorset's when she suddenly realizes that she is on the street where Selden lives, and his apartment is only a short distance ahead of her. "It was strange to find herself passing his house on such an errand. She seemed suddenly to see her action as he would see it—and the fact of his own connection with it, the fact that, to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame."15 Overcome by a longing to see him, she gathers her courage and enters his house.

In her conversation with Selden, Lily passionately wants to be understood, but she seems incapable of making herself clear. She cannot hold back her tears, although she usually does not cry easily because of her long practiced habit of self-control. Selden seems anxious about her health, but Lily discerns that any intense feeling on his part is lacking. Once again he is failing her in a time of desperate need. There is no obstacle now except the one which he has erected and which he is too weak to overcome. "The sense of loneliness returned with redoubled force as she saw herself
forever shut out from Selden's inmost self. She had come to him with no definite purpose; the mere longing to see him had directed her; but the secret hope she had carried with her suddenly revealed itself in its death-pang." Lily confesses her mistake to Selden: "'Once--twice--you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake--I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late for happiness--but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed.'" Lily believes that she had had a chance for happiness in her love for Selden, but she lost it. However, she is mistaken because in Edith Wharton's world, love does not bring any chance for happiness anyway. Love is a brass ring promising happiness, but giving only pain, but it uses its illusory promise to lure people into sacrificing other things that they want in a vain attempt to achieve happiness through love. Numerous times Lily gave up her chances for security, wealth, and social position for the love which brings her misery. Troubled, Selden asks her if he can help her. "She looked at him gently, 'Do you remember what you said to me once? That you could help me only by loving me? Well--you did love me for a moment; and it helped me. It has always helped me. But the moment is gone--it was I who let it go. And one must go on living. Goodbye.'"

This scene is the most effective love scene in the novel. Even though it seems one-sided with Selden's refusing
to admit his love, Lily's words are sufficient. She is not mawkish. She does not humiliate herself nor embarrass Selden by begging and pleading. She seems quite calm and collected except for a few tears. She reveals her love for Selden by telling how his having loved her in the past had helped her. She takes the blame for destroying his love. Edith Wharton has let her speak sincerely enough to show the depths of her feelings, but yet controlled enough to be able to retain her dignity. Her dignified restraint does not detract from the sincerity of her words; rather it serves to lend more believability to her emotion.

Edith Wharton usually makes very little authorial comment on a character's strong emotion. She usually allows the character to voice his own feeling in his own words because the character can portray his own emotion more effectively than can authorial comment, which would be more likely to sound overdone. However, in this scene is an exception. Edith Wharton describes the moment following Lily's farewell and describes it in her own words much better than the characters themselves could express it. She describes Lily's love for Selden and at the same time foreshadows an approaching death. She tells us that Lily "laid [sic] her other hand on his, and they looked at each other with a kind of solemnity, as though they stood in the presence of death. Something in truth lay dead between them--the love she had killed in him and could no longer call to life. But something lived between them also, and leaped up in her like an
imperishable flame: it was the love his love had kindled, the passion of her soul for his."^{19}

Lily's love has come a long way since its selfish beginning. Edith Wharton offers us concrete evidence of the unselfishness of Lily's love. Lily burns Mrs. Dorset's letters, her last means of gaining security and wealth, in Selden's fire without his knowing. Her suffering has added stature to her moral character. In her decision to burn the letters she has finally achieved a moral significance which had been lacking in her earlier actions. Of course her love for Selden was probably an equally strong motivation, but it is also significant that she could renounce security and wealth at a time after realizing the hopelessness of her love. She is not exchanging wealth for Selden's love, because it is no longer available to her. She is casting away wealth in exchange for nothing tangible. She has faced the moral issue and has triumphed. Her earlier refusal to use the letters prepared us for this scene in which she burned the letters thus making any future use impossible. And this scene prepares us for a more important future scene.

It is also worthy of comment that Edith Wharton has not allowed the situation to gain control of the character. Lily does not act against her nature simply in order to further the plot. On the contrary, her actions are completely in character. Her past actions, her moral growth through suffering has prepared us to accept the credibility of her actions. We see an added dimension to her character, but
she is still Lily Bart, a more moral, but quite depressed, Lily Bart. "She saw that nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation."20

Lily goes home and, afraid that she will be unable to sleep, takes her sleeping medicine. Although she has been warned that an increase in dosage could be deadly, she increases the dose in order to insure a deep sleep. Although Edith Wharton does not make Lily's suicide explicit as her actual intention, it has been plainly suggested that Lily no longer wishes to live. She even remembers the warning of increasing the amount and does so despite her recollection. Lily feels that she has lost all chance for happiness in life. Most depressing is her sorrow in the loss of Selden's love. Her love for Selden has placed her in her situation and then makes the suffering even more unbearable. Therefore, she takes the only escape that she sees available. She wants to sleep and forget about life and its pain. She experiences a sort of joy as she sinks into the sleep from which she will never awake. "She did not quite remember what it was that she had been afraid to meet, but the uncertainty no longer troubled her. She had been unhappy, and now she was happy—she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness vanished."21

Edith Wharton is particularly effective in her description of Lily's death. There is no melodrama, only a matter-of-fact tone which makes the picture of consciousness slipping away permanently all the more moving. "As she lay
there she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought—she was afraid of not remembering it when she woke; and if she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well.  

Then Lily sleeps. Her suffering is over, but Selden's is not. Despite his struggle to suppress his love for Lily and the fact that he succeeds in forcing it to lie dormant, ironically it rises again when it is too late. The following morning Selden goes to Lily's, unaware that anything has happened, but unable to resist his tremendous need to see her at once. He could not wait another moment to say to her what he wanted to say. But Lily's need of him is now over. The times she needed him most he let her down as is typical of Edith Wharton's male characters. Now when he is ready to be strong, Lily has no need of his strength.

Selden is deeply grieved at Lily's death. He thinks, "There had never been more than a little impalpable barrier between them—and yet he had suffered it to keep them apart! And now, though it seemed slighter and frailer than ever, it had suddenly hardened to adamant, and he might beat his life out against it in vain." Going over Lily's belongings, he finds her letter to Gus Trenor in which she absolves herself of her debt; however, Selden's integrity prevents his opening the letter. Then he comes across something which is even
more painful to him because he sees the needlessness of the barrier which he had set up between Lily and himself. Although finding the check stub showing Lily's repayment of her debt to Gus Trenor helped in clearing her character in Selden's eyes, no doubt the sense of his loss was doubled. His only consolation is his acceptance of the fact that he had loved her.

Love brought neither Lily nor Selden happiness. By dying, Lily escapes the pain caused by her love. She has in a sense triumphed because she died paying her debt to Gus Trenor. She salvaged her self-respect. She was not beaten nor conquered by society. She did not die because of society; rather it was her depression because of the loss of Selden's love which caused her to accidentally or deliberately take the overdose of pills. Selden, however, has no escape. His life and suffering must continue. Edith Wharton is having her revenge upon the man because he was too weak. He failed the heroine when she needed him most, and for him there is no mercy.

Thus, love is not presented as the conventional "cure-all," but rather unconventionally, as the source for misery for which there is no cure. We shall see this same attitude toward love repeated throughout Mrs. Wharton's fiction as we examine it in the chapters to come.
FOOTNOTES TO PART A—CHAPTER III


2Wharton, p. 88.

3Wharton, p. 137.

4Wharton, p. 138.


6Wharton, p. 153.

7Wharton, p. 156.

8Wharton, p. 156.

9Wharton, pp. 161-162.

10Wharton, pp. 165-166.


12Wharton, p. 189.

13Wharton, p. 255.

14Wharton, p. 260.

15Wharton, p. 304.

16Wharton, p. 307.

17Wharton, pp. 307-308.

18Wharton, p. 309.

19Wharton, p. 309.

20Wharton, p. 320.
21 Wharton, p. 323.
22 Wharton, p. 323.
23 Wharton, p. 326.
Part B

Let us continue to examine the unconventional picture of love which we saw in *The House of Mirth*. After *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton wrote *Madame de Treymes*, a short novel which is quite Jamesian in that its theme is a comparison of American and French traits. It is a "study in cultural comparison, an exploitation of that same 'Franco-American' subject which had once so powerfully attracted James" and to which Edith Wharton returned in *The Reef*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Mother's Recompense.*

*Madame de Treymes (1907)*

*Madame de Treymes* is the story of the ill-fated love between Madame de Malrive (the former Fanny Frisbee) and John Durham. John is faced with a moral decision. He will lose Fanny if he tells her that by divorcing her husband she will lose her little boy. As the story ends, he is on his way to tell her the truth.

*The Fruit of the Tree (1907)*

*The Fruit of the Tree*, which followed *Madame de Treymes*, is a dull, unsuccessful attempt to contribute to the reform movement. One reason for its inferior quality is that it is concerned with industrial problems which are not Mrs. Wharton's forte. She is much better in her own, more familiar world. Another significant flaw in the novel is a lack of unity. There is no one specific center of interest
to unify the action, which consequently splits into a plea for reform of factory conditions and into a love-story.

"The story is diverted from its muckraking pretensions by the complicated moral problem which arises out of the relations of the four principal characters; and as this interest usurps the center of attention, Justine Brent takes over from John Amherst as protagonist. As a result, The Fruit of the Tree is successful neither as a novel nor as a tract."^2 Thus, the novel is an unsuccessful combination of two unsuccessful parts.

The second part, the love-story, is one which comes close to ending happily, but is perhaps the more disappointing because the insurmountable distance is so short. The obstacle lies in the character of John Amherst (Edith Wharton's attempt to portray a strong hero); he is incapable of perceiving a morality that is above the rules of society. That is, he can approve the avoidance of needless, hopeless suffering as an abstract theory, but he cannot understand Justine's practical application of the theory.

Briefly summarized, the story concerns John Amherst, a factory foreman who works for humanitarian reforms at the factory. John marries the factory owner, Bessy Westmore, who is "a composite picture of everything that Edith Wharton disliked in her own sex."^3 John is a much finer person than his wife, and her petty, spoiled, selfish nature threatens to wreck the marriage. However, just before the marriage dissolves completely, Bessy is thrown from her horse and
Suffers a serious injury to her spine. She suffers terribly, with very little hope for recovery. Her nurse, a former schoolmate, Justine Brent, mercifully puts Bessy out of her misery with a lethal dose of morphine. After a time, Justine and Amherst marry and live very happily, until Amherst discovers the circumstances of Bessy's death from Bessy's doctor, whose motive is revenge because Justine had rejected his amatory advances. As is typical of Edith Wharton's heroes, Amherst fails to come through when the heroine needs him. He lacks Justine's strength of character. After a long period of separation, Justine and Amherst are eventually reconciled, but the former beauty of their marriage has been lost. Amherst fails to appreciate Justine, and, to Justine's mortification, he glorifies the memory of Bessy. Ironically, Justine could tell Amherst the truth about Bessy, but she refuses to lower herself by doing so. The novel ends on a note of waste and frustration.

Ethan Frome (1911)

Edith Wharton's next novel after The Fruit of the Tree was Ethan Frome, published in 1911. It has frequently been stated that Ethan Frome is a departure from the characteristic Edith Wharton, and, in a sense, this statement is true. The story is not set in New York City, but rather in and around a small New England village called Starkfield. The characters are poor and culturally deprived; they are a far cry from the wealthy, opera-attending members of the leisure
class. Yet, the difference is not as great as it seems. Ethan is a man, like Lawrence Selden or Newland Archer, "set apart from his neighbors by education, intellect, and feeling, but lacking the force or the courage either to impose himself or to get away." The familiar triangular love situation is there. Ethan is the superior personality trapped in marriage to an inferior personality. In this respect he is comparable to Ralph Marvell, Newland Archer, Amherst in his marriage to Bessy, and Justine in her marriage to Amherst.

As in Edith Wharton's other work, there is the overwhelming moral issue which Ethan must face. His Puritanical sense of duty and integrity is basic to the moral standard throughout Edith Wharton's fiction. Ethan's self-sacrifice and renunciation bring to mind many of Mrs. Wharton's characters, for example, Lily Bart, Ann-Eliza Bunner, Newland Archer, and Ellen Olenska.

Finally, Ethan Frome is linked to the body of Edith Wharton's fiction through the unconventional attitude toward love which is expressed. Love is the source of suffering which in this tale is even more tragic than the death of Lily Bart or the wasted life of Newland Archer. The tragedy in Ethan Frome is worse than physical death; in the final chapter we see the results of the death of the spirit. The lives of the characters are not only wasted, but also they are not even allowed the consolation of a memory; they are forced to witness the results of mutual disintegration.
It is not the pain and waste which make Ethan Frome a successful novel. It is the magnitude and generosity of the soul of Ethan. He faced a terrible moral decision and, although he failed to save Mattie, he did not fail his responsibility to his wife. He sacrificed himself and Mattie for his standard of morality and accepted the consequences of that sacrifice. Actually, he accepts more than he had bargained for because an accident makes the consequences all the more horrible.

The style of Ethan Frome is a part of its triumph as a work of fiction. The perfect adaption of style to subject matter is notable. There is a marked starkness and restraint; one noticeable example is in the amount of detail. Usually Mrs. Wharton uses a great amount of detail, especially concerning dress and décor, as a key to an individual's personality. However, in Ethan Frome there is an economy of detail, but it is straightforward and pertinent so as to be most effective. The dialogue is all the more impressive because of its rarity. The total effect is one of strict control and sparseness, a strict avoidance of the superfluous. The language itself is without embellishment. It is lean and stark in keeping with the theme. For example, concerning Ethan's marriage to Zeena, we are told that: "After the funeral, when he saw her preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him. He had often thought since that it would not
have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter. . . ."

The character of Ethan, the wintry New England landscape, and the theme blend harmoniously into one total picture of gaunt strength pitted against a merciless, frozen miserable waste. Ethan could be a character straight out of Hawthorne with his "lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was . . . stiffened and grizzled. . . . I saw his face as it probably looked when he thought himself alone. 'That man touch a hundred? He looks as if he was dead and in hell now!'" The narrator compares Ethan to the setting. "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface. . . . I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it . . . the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters." The barren setting is evoked vividly by comments such as, "'That Frome farm was always 'bout as bare's a milkpan when the cat's been around,'" and the following picture of "an orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate."

The novel is set within a framework in which, at the beginning and end, the narrator, a civil engineer, speaks directly to the reader. He introduces Ethan in the first
chapter. The body of the novel consists of the narrator's retelling of Ethan's story as it was told to him by Ethan. The final chapter jerks us back into the present reality in what Blake Nevius has appropriately termed as the final "turn of the screw."  

There are two chief advantages to this narrator-frame device. One is that it provides for a sense of time-lapse needed to show the disastrous results of a story which is incapable of sustaining a full-length novel. Thus, the time-lapse of a full novel is conveyed without any padding of length which would destroy the stark simplicity of the tale. The other chief advantage of the narrator-frame is that a narrator is needed to tell the story objectively and interpret the calamitous effect upon Ethan, something which Ethan, himself, could not do. Ethan would not reveal his story to the reader; the fact that he tells it to the narrator, who is practically a stranger to him, is a sufficient stretch of credulity. Actually, it seems that the narrator surmised more than Ethan told him, for he says, "It was that night that I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story," another incredible fact. Yet, the narrator is essential; he is an intelligent man of sensibility with a large consciousness and in an advantageous position for observation. It must be added that he is also quite visionary. It is true that there is a tinge of implausibility because the narrator is inadequately connected to the story and because the reason for his intense interest
is not sufficiently motivated.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet, this touch of artificiality does not really detract from this cold, austere novel about the suffering which love produces and the misery of being trapped by a hateful marriage. The physical pain although excruciating, is not as intense as the emotional and mental suffering which is so aptly symbolized by the physical pain.

The first thing that the narrator notices about Ethan Frome is that he looks like an old man, even though he is only fifty-two years old. Then the torment which is mirrored in the look on Ethan's face when he thinks he is alone causes the narrator to exclaim that Ethan looks as though he were "dead and in hell."\textsuperscript{13} After this initial reaction to Ethan, the narrator speculates as to what possible "combination of obstacles [could] have hindered the flight of a man like Ethan Frome?"\textsuperscript{14} When Ethan's story is revealed, the obstacles entrapping him are made known. However, before Ethan's history is discovered, Edith Wharton whets the reader's appetite even more by allowing glimpses of the man, which awaken a curiosity demanding the full picture.

Ethan is raised over and above his peers by his share of troubles, but a question is left unanswered. The narrator says, "Though all conceded that Ethan Frome's [troubles] had been beyond the common measure, no one gave me an explanation of the look in his face which, as I persisted in thinking, neither poverty nor physical suffering could have put there."\textsuperscript{15} Thus, even before the story of Ethan Frome's life
is known, his suffering is emphasized, especially that it is more than merely physical and more than just a result of his "smash-up," the event by which the townspeople marked a change in Ethan.

After Ethan has been sufficiently shrouded in mystery so that the reader is curious to know more about him, his suffering, and the reason for it, his background is revealed. The frame has been set for the narrator to tell Ethan's story. When the story opens on the young Ethan of twenty-eight, he is approaching the village where a dance is in progress. However, Ethan is not going for frolic, for the dance is almost over. He is going in order to walk home with a pretty, young girl named Mattie Silver.

After carefully setting the scene and revealing Ethan's jealousy, Edith Wharton inserts a bit of exposition. The reader is surprised and intrigued to learn that Mattie is not Ethan's girl, but is his wife's cousin. This information explains why Ethan had remained as an observer rather than as a participator in the dancing. However, one immediately wonders about the relationship between Ethan, his wife, and Mattie. Certainly such strong feelings of jealousy are inappropriate for a married man.

As Ethan waits outside in the darkness, Edith Wharton pauses to fill us in on the background. She tells us that it had been Zeena Frome's idea that her cousin come to live with her and her husband in order to help Zeena with her work. The first insight into Zeena's character comes when we learn
that Zeena begrudges Mattie her occasional evenings of amusement and agrees to them only because Mattie is there without pay. Zeena does not want to lose Mattie's help in the house.

As it has turned out, Mattie's rare evenings of amusement are just as pleasurable to Ethan as to Mattie. Although there are occasions when the agony of jealousy interferes with his happiness, he looks forward eagerly to the walk home with Mattie. He enjoys sharing his knowledge with her. Before his father's death, Ethan had spent a year at college and had been interested in physics. He enjoys pointing out the constellations to Mattie; he enjoys her admiration and interest. In fact, he "was never gay but in her presence."16

Edith Wharton has drawn a sympathetic portrait of Ethan. Despite the fact that he is a married man who feels more than he should for his wife's cousin, we are sympathetic toward this man who is so desperately lonely and is searching for a little understanding. To secure our sympathy for Ethan, Edith Wharton begins to draw in Zeena more explicitly. We are immediately alienated by the housewife who grumbles continuously about the housework and tries to draw attention to the inefficiency of her help. Zeena is described as "sickly," but it is implied that she is healthier than she admits. With her absorption in patent medicines and new doctors, definite symptoms of hypochondria are evident. Our dislike of her is assured when her voice is described as a "flat whine" as she tells Ethan, "The doctor don't want I should
be left without anybody to do for me."\textsuperscript{17}

After securing our sympathy totally for Ethan and away from Zeena, Edith Wharton returns to the scene of Mattie and Ethan walking home together. In the conversation between Ethan and Mattie, Edith Wharton's skill is noteworthy. Their words are innocent, simple, almost child-like. There is absolutely nothing said which is not completely harmless. Yet at the same time, there is an intimacy and depth of passion lying beneath the surface which is somehow perceptible to the reader. They discuss innocuous, ordinary occurrences, but there is deep concern of each for the other. We are allowed into Ethan's consciousness; we are told that "he longed to stoop his cheek and rub it against her scarf."\textsuperscript{18} Without being told, the reader knows that Mattie has a deep feeling for Ethan, just as he has for her. The joy and enthusiasm in her voice indicate her pleasure in being with Ethan.

Ethan is even more revealed to us by his quality of boyishness. He is Tom Sawyer doing handstands for Becky. He comments on the danger of coasting down the big hill above the giant elm, but boastfully assures Mattie that he could bring her down past the elm with no trouble. He feels confident and capable. Instead of promising her the moon, he promises to take her coasting. Ethan is bursting with joy to the point of unsteadiness, but at the height of his joy, he is caught up in a mood of despair. He interprets a gesture of Mattie's as one of indifference. He remembers
that he has "no right to show his feelings. . . . Now he thought she understood him, and feared; now he was sure she did not, and despaired. To-night the pressure of accumulated misgivings sent the scale drooping toward despair, and her indifference was the more chilling after the flush of joy into which she had plunged him by dismissing Denis Eady."^19

Longing for some sort of assurance, Ethan mentions the possibility of Mattie's leaving his house. He is hoping for her contradiction and is reassured when she shows extreme consternation at the thought of leaving. Happily, Ethan takes her arm for the rest of the walk. As they pass the Frome graveyard, Ethan remembers how in the past he had felt that those stones mocked his restless longing for freedom. He had imagined that every stone had said, "We never got away--how should you?"^20 But now, with Mattie by his side, Ethan feels warmly content with no restlessness whatsoever. He silently gives in to his dreams and thinks of Mattie as living there always with them. "He was never so happy with her as when abandoned himself to these dreams."^21 There is no resistance when he puts his arm protectively around Mattie.

Edith Wharton uses contrast expertly. After Ethan's joyous walk home with the warm, vivacious, pretty girl, his wife opens the door for them. Zeena is tall, angular, and flat chested. The lamp which she holds "deepened fantastically the hollows and prominences of her high-boned face under its ring of crimping-pins."^22 Her contrast to Mattie is like a blow knocking Ethan out of his "rosy haze."
complaining whine heightens the effect. No reader can miss the comparison nor fail to sympathize with Ethan.

Ethan is further characterized by the fact that he does not want Mattie to see him follow his wife into their bedroom, which is opposite the hall from Mattie's. However, when his hesitation in the kitchen and excuse of mill accounts to go over causes Zeena's fretfulness and Mattie's fear of arousing Zeena's displeasure, Ethan meekly and obediently acquiesces to his wife's wishes.

Following this revealing scene, Edith Wharton leaves the Fromes suspended while she fills us in on Mattie's background. We learn how Mattie was suddenly orphaned and left penniless at the age of twenty with no training nor capabilities for supporting herself. Her cousin, Zeena Frome, had seen in Mattie a good opportunity for free labor and so had offered to take her in—through no altruistic motive. Zeena's constant fault-finding plus the burden which she places upon her husband by squandering money on expensive, but useless, remedies serve further to antagonize the reader. Her plaintive, whining voice is frequently alluded to as is her distasteful appearance. We are told that she had thin strands of hair, a drawn, bloodless face, and "querulous lines from her thin nose to the corners of her mouth." Ethan is twenty-eight and Zeena is thirty-five, but she looks and seems to be an old woman already.

Zeena announces that she is going to see a new doctor and will be away overnight. Instead of dreading her trip as
usual because of the unnecessary expense, Ethan is delighted at the prospect. He relishes the change which will occur when Zeena's gloomy, complaining presence is withdrawn, even though only temporarily.

Edith Wharton carefully draws in the changed atmosphere after Zeena's departure. The kitchen, which has always before been described as cold and dark, is for the first time called bright and warm. Even geraniums are mentioned. Ethan envisions a lovely, domestic picture with Mattie sitting by the stove, laughing and talking to him just as though they were married. It is here that Edith Wharton chooses to close up the gap in Zeena's background and explain how Ethan's unfortunate marriage came to be. When Ethan's mother was dying, her cousin, Zeena Pierce, had come to care for her. After her husband's death, Mrs. Frome had seldom spoken; therefore, Zeena's presence meant that, for the first time in a long, long while, Ethan had someone with whom he could talk. Then Ethan's mother had died, and Zeena had begun preparing to leave. Ethan had felt a duty to Zeena, a debt which money could not pay. As Zeena herself puts it at one time, she had been assured by her relatives that Ethan could do no less than marry her. Also Ethan had dreaded the prospect of silence and loneliness which seemed so much more intensified in the cold, austere New England winter. "He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter. . . ."24

It was only after his marriage that Ethan realized
that he would have to give up his hopes of becoming an engineer. He learned that to transplant his wife would be impossible. She preferred a small town that she could look down upon; to lose her identity in a big city was unthinkable. Her "sickliness" developed, and then she too became silent except to complain. Ethan realized too late that, at the age of twenty-one, he was trapped in marriage to a woman, seven years older than himself, whom he did not love.

Now, after seven years of captivity, Ethan dreams of freedom with Mattie, but all the while he knows that for him in reality there is no release. There is nothing spectacular in Ethan's evening alone with Mattie, but just being with her and exchanging simple conversation is sufficient for him. However, there is Zeena's empty chair between the two to remind them that she will return the following day. Then catastrophe strikes! The evening is spoiled when the cat knocks a pickle dish off the table and breaks it. The enormity of this deed must be explained. The pickle dish was Zeena's favorite possession; she kept it out of reach on the top shelf of the china closet and never permitted it to be used, no matter how special the occasion. The truthful explanation (that Mattie had used a step ladder to get it down because she wanted the table to be pretty for Ethan) would only have made Zeena suspicious of Mattie's wanting to please Ethan. Her reaction might even be to send Mattie away. When Mattie breaks into tears, Ethan remains calm, but it is easy to see that beneath his outward
confidence, he is actually afraid of his wife's anger at Mattie. He replaces the pieces of the pickle dish on the top shelf of the china closet and consoles Mattie with the declaration that he will buy glue and mend the dish before Zeena can discover it.

However, the magic spell of the evening has been broken. After supper, the two sit to talk while Mattie does some needle-work, but she is uncomfortable sitting in Zeena's chair; she moves to her own which is at a distance from Ethan. They talk happily for a while, and Ethan dreams, but he is called back to reality when the cat suddenly sets Zeena's chair rocking. "'She'll be rocking in it herself this time to-morrow,' Ethan thought. 'I've been in a dream, and this is the only evening we'll ever have together.' The return to reality was as painful as the return to consciousness after taking an aesthetic."25 His feeling communicates itself to Mattie; she becomes nervous and restless. She terminates the evening by going up to her room to go to bed. Thus, the evening which Ethan had anticipated so eagerly is over. "When the door of her room had closed on her he remembered that he had not even touched her hand."26 Edith Wharton makes it plain that nothing has happened between these two on the night alone together. There is clearly no physical relationship which might serve to alienate their cause with the reader and make Zeena into the injured party. We must not sympathize with the jailer in the prison of matrimony, Mrs. Wharton is saying.
The following day Zeena returns with the news that she is very sick. Mrs. Wharton makes it clear that we are not to believe her; we see her hypochondria only as an excuse for the fact that she has hired a girl to come to do all her work for her. Naturally, under these circumstances, Mattie will no longer be needed, and Zeena insists that Mattie must leave the following day. Ethan of course balks at the idea, but he is no match for Zeena. She throws it up to him that she had lost her health nursing his mother, a statement for which we can only despise her. She reveals the fact that she had expected him to marry her, that he could certainly have done no less. The fact that Mattie is related to Zeena, not Ethan, deprives him of any voice about her future. He realizes that he is beaten. Any further argument will only increase Zeena's suspicions and make matters worse. "All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way. She had taken everything else from him; and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others."27

The scene is interrupted by Mattie's calling them to supper. Zeena protests that she is feeling much too sick to eat, but Ethan goes. Mattie senses that something is wrong, and it is then that, for the first and last time, he kisses her. Abruptly, Ethan blurts out the news to Mattie. Neither can do anything to alleviate the other's misery.
Edith Wharton has drawn the misery of two who, loving each other, are faced with separation. Even more agonizing is the need for concealment, for Zeena intrudes upon their grief. Edith Wharton's satire grows caustic when she has Zeena tell them that although she does not feel like it, she has decided to eat anyway because she knows the doctor would want her to keep up her strength. That Edith Wharton must hate this jailer of a wife, or rather what she represents, is apparent when she has Zeena make "the familiar gesture of adjusting her false teeth" before eating. Nothing could be more repulsive than perhaps Zeena's mealtime narrative with "vivid descriptions of intestinal disturbances among her friends and relatives." She finishes eating and remarks that she intends to take her stomach powders because Mattie's pie "sets a mite heavy."

However, there is to be no peace because she soon returns with the pieces of the pickle dish which she had found while searching for her stomach powders. With a stern look, but trembling voice, she demands to know who is responsible, and Mattie confesses to having placed it on the table. Zeena is quivering with anger and pain. There are tears in her eyes. She lashes out at Mattie venomously and concludes with "I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em--and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all--." With these words, her voice breaks into "sobs that passed and left her more than ever like a shape of stone. . . . Gathering up the bits of broken glass she went
out of the room as if she carried a dead body."³² For the first time Zeena arouses our sympathy, but it is pity for such emotional poverty that values an inanimate object more than a human being. The pickle dish is the thing that she cares most for beyond all others. Or perhaps Zeena's words have a double meaning. Perhaps she is referring to her husband, but that is unlikely because Zeena would have minced no words. It is the shattered pickle dish which has triggered her emotional outburst, and it is the pickle dish which she mourns.

Ethan spends the night in his "study," with only his thoughts for warmth and company. He rebels against the cruel destruction of all his hopes and reflects upon his possibilities which he had sacrificed for Zeena. He thinks of going away with Mattie, leaving Zeena, and getting a divorce. Caught up in his dream, Ethan writes Zeena a note explaining that their lives must continue separately. He claims no material possessions—and is brought up short. He is not worried about supporting himself, but Mattie will be depending upon him. Also Zeena will not be able to get any support from the farm without him to work it. Finding a purchaser might take time if indeed one could be found at all. Ethan cannot escape his responsibilities. "The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders handcuffing a convict. There is no way out—none. He was a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished."³³
Zeena has been a despicable, although human, character throughout, but the final blow to her character is given the following morning when she announces to Mattie that there are some matters to settle; certain household articles are missing, namely a towel and a match-safe. Zeena's implication is that Mattie is responsible for their loss or has stolen them. Edith Wharton has painted the supremely hateful character in Zeena Frome. The reader must not identify with what would ordinarily be a sympathetic character. In conventional fiction, the wife of a man who loves another woman is pitied for her suffering; while the husband and "other woman" are condemned. However, Mrs. Wharton has achieved the opposite effect. It is clearly shown that Ethan and Mattie are the guiltless sufferers, and Zeena is a cruel obstacle barring their way to a happiness which we feel they deserve. Edith Wharton has not told us in so many words that Zeena is a villainess and that we are to sympathize with Mattie and Ethan, but by contrasting the two women's personalities and appearance, by presenting concrete instances of Zeena's petty cruelties and Mattie's graciousness and lovable qualities, the cards have clearly been stacked.

Ethan is not condemned, but applauded for his hopes of leaving his wife and going away with a younger woman. When Ethan is unable to go through with his plan for getting the money from Mr. Hale, we admire him. His scrupulosity is worthy of a Jamesian character; he decides to sacrifice both his own happiness and that of the woman he loves rather than
obtain money from Mr. Hale by appealing to his sympathy and under false pretenses. In a sense the story of Ethan Frome is finished with this decision of his. Actually he would have been better off if it had ended here. He chooses to give up the opportunity for love and happiness and to accept his responsibilities and tortuous life with Zeena.

As Ethan is driving Mattie to the train, they approach the hill for sledding. Mattie reminds him of his promise to take her coasting, and Ethan insists that she allow him to fulfill his promise now. Ever the dreamer, Ethan will coast down the hill with Mattie and try to forget how near the end is. However, Mattie cannot forget reality. After the first ride, she pleads with Ethan to take her down again, only this time not to swerve away from the big elm. She prefers death with Ethan to life separated from him. She pleads with him and he is moved. "The words were like fragments torn from his heart. With them came the hated vision of the house he was going back to—of the stairs he would have to go up every night, of the woman who would wait for him there. And the sweetness of Mattie's avowal, the wild wonder of knowing at last that all that had happened to him had happened to her too, made the other vision more abhorrent, the other life more intolerable to return to..." Ethan relents. They plunge down the hill (Ethan in front because he wants to feel Mattie holding him), and smash into the tree.

The story of Ethan's youth and crippling smash-up is
finished, but the story of his suffering continues. The narrator brings us back to the present with a jolt. He enters the Frome kitchen to find two women, one preparing supper, the other with a diseased spine, huddled by the stove and complaining at intervals. Ethan introduces the woman preparing supper as his wife, Zeena. The other is Miss Mattie Silver. The horror of the scene becomes complete when one realizes how Ethan, loving Mattie, must have suffered. He cannot even seek refuge in dreams of his great love nor in an unassailable memory. Nothing of the beauty of love (if there is any such thing in Mrs. Wharton’s world) is left him. Only the pain of a decayed love remains.

Mattie too has suffered because of her love for Ethan. Mrs. Hale tells the narrator that Mattie has lost her sweet disposition because "'she's suffered too much—that's what I always say when folks tell me how she's soured. And Zeena, she was always cranky. . . . Sometimes the two of them get going at each other, and then Ethan's face'd break your heart. . . . When I see that, I think it's him that suffers most. . . . anyhow it ain't Zeena, because she ain't got the time. . . . It's a pity, though,' Mrs. Hale ended, sighing, 'that they're all shut up there'n that one kitchen.'"35

Like the three characters in Sartre’s play "No Exit," these three are imprisoned in that one room, and for them too, hell is constituted of the others. Of course they are still alive, but according to Mrs. Hale, that is a doubtful blessing. She says, "'The way they are now, I don't see's
there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.'"36

So ends Edith Wharton's stark, bitter novel which illustrates the tragedy of love without marriage and the tragedy of captivity in a marriage without love. In Mrs. Wharton's next novel, The Reef, marriage is presented as the final solution, but it is an unsatisfactory solution to say the least because a shrinkage of moral character will be the result, a result that is inescapable because of the bonds of love.
FOOTNOTES TO PART B--CHAPTER III


3 Nevius, p. 104.

4 Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," The New Republic, XCV (June 29, 1938), 212.

5 Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 76.

6 Wharton, pp. 4-6.

7 Wharton, pp. 15-16.


9 Wharton, p. 21.

10 Nevius, p. 97.

11 Wharton, p. 27.

12 Bell, p. 265.

13 Wharton, p. 6.

14 Wharton, pp. 9-10.

15 Wharton, p. 12.

16 Wharton, p. 38.

17 Wharton, p. 40.

18 Wharton, p. 49.

19 Wharton, p. 51.

20 Wharton, p. 55.
21 Wharton, p. 55.
22 Wharton, p. 38.
23 Wharton, p. 70.
24 Wharton, p. 76.
25 Wharton, p. 103.
26 Wharton, p. 105.
27 Wharton, p. 128.
28 Wharton, p. 134.
29 Wharton, p. 134.
31 Wharton, p. 138.
32 Wharton, p. 139.
33 Wharton, p. 146.
34 Wharton, p. 180.
35 Wharton, p. 194.
36 Wharton, p. 195.
Part C

We turn now to the novel which followed Ethan Frome where once again we shall see Edith Wharton's unconventional attitude toward love as a destructive force which brings unhappiness and despair.

The Reef (1912)

The Reef, published in 1912, is a complex novel. It is as varied and multi-colored as Ethan Frome is gray and bare. In her other major novels, Edith Wharton is more single-purpose minded. The House of Mirth tells the story of Lily Bart and her love for Lawrence Selden. It is the story of a love which is blocked and which therefore brings misery. The unrequited love of Gerty Farish, a minor character, is mentioned in passing, but the real concern of the novel is the story of Lily Bart. The Custom of the Country single-mindedly tells the story of Undine Spragg who brings pain and destruction to those she touches because she is incapable of love. The Age of Innocence tells the story of Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska and of their love for each other which is obstructed by Archer's wife whom he does not love but to whom he remains faithful. Perhaps the most simple, straight-forward plot line is in Ethan Frome, the love story of Mattie Silver and Ethan Frome who is trapped in a loveless marriage.

In contrast to these novels dealing with a single love
story, *The Reef* is concerned with many. The two main characters, Anna Summers Leath and George Darrow, are in love with each other, and their love is prominent throughout the book. However, there are other love stories which have a powerful influence upon the main story line. Anna Leath's stepson, Owen, is in love with Sophy Viner; Sophy, however, is in love with George Darrow. The irony of the whole situation is that love leads ultimately to unhappiness for all of them.

The basic plot is rather contrived. It depends heavily upon coincidences. First of all, it is a coincidence that in the first scene, on the pier at Dover, Darrow should offer his umbrella to a stranger who turns out to be someone whom he had met previously. Their conversation naturally would not have occurred between total strangers. It is coincidental that Darrow meets Sophy Viner at a time when he is most vulnerable because he unreasonably feels that the widowed Anna Leath has rejected him. The coincidences continue. Her friends, the Farlows, do not expect her and are no longer in Paris. Thus, Darrow and Sophy are thrown together with no one to answer to for their actions. Continued silence from Anna increases Darrow's vulnerability as his friendship with Sophy evolves further and further from its paternal origin. The final coincidence in this Paris episode is the rain. We are reminded of Ethan Frome's words (that he would not have married Zeena had his mother died in the spring rather than in winter) when Darrow says that
perhaps he and Sophy would not have become intimate had the sunshine continued. "Perhaps but for the rain it might never have happened." The rain had ruined their sight-seeing plans and left them with no resources for entertainment. When paraphrased, the excuse sounds quite ludicrous, but Darrow's explanation is perfectly plausible. The important fact is that neither is extenuated nor totally condemned. Neither is seduced; yet, neither intended for it to happen. Neither is naive. Both are sufficiently experienced that they should have realized where their adventure was leading; therefore, we can only conclude that both wanted it to happen.

Ironically, after the damage has been done, Darrow finally hears from Anna, but since it is too late, he tosses the unopened letter into the fire.

The rest of the story takes place mainly at Givré, the home of Anna Leath. Approximately four months have elapsed since our last glimpse of Darrow. He arrives at Givré, knowing that Anna's invitation means that she is ready to accept his proposal of marriage. However, she makes it clear that they can make no concrete plans until the question of her stepson's future marriage has been settled. Anna is certain that her mother-in-law will disapprove Owen's choice of a wife, and Anna is determined to support him in his choice. Darrow naturally sides with Anna and promises that the both of them together cannot fail to bring it off. He promises his support before learning who the bride is to be.

The biggest coincidence is that the governess for
Anna's daughter Effie turns out to be none other than Sophy Viner. After this coincidence, the reader can certainly guess the next surprise. However, Darrow does not guess until after he has already missed his opportunity to express disapproval of Sophy. When Anna had questioned him about Sophy's character, Darrow had seen her merely in the role of governess and so had had nothing to say against her. It is too late to withdraw his implied endorsement when he learns that Sophy's role is to be that of Mrs. Owen Leath. Darrow gravely disapproves of her in this capacity, but it is too late for him to express open disapproval without drawing suspicion upon himself.

Coincidentally, it is not until after all external obstacles to Sophy's and Owen's marriage have been removed that Sophy learns in what relation Darrow is to stand to her. Formerly, she had only thought him a friend of the family. With the realization of the close contact which will exist when she and Darrow become related, she finds that she cannot go through with the marriage. She has realized that she is in love with Darrow; therefore, contact with him would be too painful for her.

By this time Owen and Anna have grown suspicious. To have been so obtuse in the beginning, their perceptions become remarkably acute. They read messages in the others' eyes. They divine the truth almost intuitively. One result is that the relationship between Owen and Sophy is broken off completely, leaving Owen's heart broken for Sophy and Sophy's
broken for Darrow. Sophy holds firmly to her purpose of giving up Owen by going to India with Mrs. Murrett. The implication is that she is not only giving up Owen, but also her moral integrity as well as her reputation.

The effect of the truth upon Anna's and Darrow's relationship is that Anna changes her mind no less than seven times with the final implication being that she will change it an eighth and marry Darrow. But there is no indication that her marriage will bring her happiness. Quite the contrary, Anna's imagining of their future together involves an unhappy moral shrinkage for her and a life plagued by doubt. She feels that she will never be able to trust Darrow: "In that moment of self-searching she saw that Sophy Viner had chosen the better part, and that certain renunciations might enrich where possession would have left a desert . . . . She pictured Effie growing up under the influence of the woman she saw herself becoming—and she hid her eyes from the humiliation of the picture."2 Anna could see arising between herself and Darrow an "insurmountable wall of silence . . . a wall of glass through which they could watch each other's faintest motions but which no sound could ever traverse."3 Yet, she has no alternative. She asks herself: "'Should I be at peace if I gave him up?' and she remembered the desolation of the days after she had sent him away, and understood that that hope was vain."4 She is trapped in a web so complex and subtle that to remain in her course of action is horrible and painful, but to deviate from her course,
to try to escape, is even more horrible and painful. The moral decision which plays so large a part in many of Edith Wharton's other works is not to be found here. There is really no question of morality for Anna. To give up Darrow will not help anyone except perhaps herself, and in her case, the good and bad are so evenly balanced that she vacillates. Giving up Darrow will not spare anyone any pain, for the damage is already done. Instead of a moral dilemma then, there is the intricate, complicated situation in which she has become inextricably entangled. Her tragedy is that hers is a superior nature forced to be subservient to an inferior one. It is, in this sense, a repetition of her first marriage. Also we are reminded of other examples in Edith Wharton's fiction in which a superior personality is bound to an inferior personality. Perhaps the most striking parallel to this motif, however, is in the marriage of Isabel Archer to Gilbert Osmond in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Although Darrow is a more likable and sympathetic character than is Osmond, the parallel nevertheless exists, even to the extent of Isabel's discovery of Osmond's former relationship with Madame Merle.

Millicent Bell has pointed out that, although Anna does resemble Isabel, the situation of *The Reef* is much closer to James's *The Golden Bowl*. Both contain four major characters. Both examine

... the effect upon one couple of the connection already established between the other two. Anna and her stepson, like Maggie Verver and her father, plan
to marry without realizing that the mates they have chosen have themselves once been mated. Anna, like Maggie, must accept and assimilate this knowledge before her own union can be achieved.

What is more significant than this, however, is the fact that the method of The Reef approaches that of The Golden Bowl. . . . The point of view is shared by just two characters, just as The Golden Bowl is divided between the Prince and the Princess. In neither novel is there a crowd of minor characters to give a sense of social density. . . . And neither novel makes use of the cultural contrasts available in the fact that its characters are Americans abroad. . . . The foreign scene, in fact, has become simply an isolating medium, like the clear fluid which surrounds James's four principals in The Golden Bowl.5

Having summarized the main plot outline, let us turn to the writing itself where we discover just how incomplete a picture of the novel is provided by the story. The real merit of The Reef resides in the style and the appropriate blending of style to theme and characters. The intricate Jamesian style, with its long, silent communications, its nuances, and complexities is perfect for the subject, a psychological probe of emotions.

Louis Auchincloss has observed passages which sound like a parody of James.6

"I want to say . . . Owen, you've been admirable all through."

He broke into a laugh in which the odd elder-brotherly note was once more perceptible.

"Admirable," she emphasized. "And so has she."

"Oh, and so have you to her!" His voice broke down to boyishness.7

Certainly there are flaws in the technique, for example, the sentimental clichés, which will be pointed out. Also it seems that the blood is always rushing to someone's forehead,
usually to Anna's; the others, including the men, only color deeply or grow exceedingly pale. Also, at times the description of the scenery seems to be so prettily done that the author has momentarily gotten carried away with the sound of her own eloquence. However, after the complications begin mounting, the pretty background retires to its proper perspective.

On the affirmative side, Edith Wharton is superb in her characterization. The way she gets inside her characters is notable. The quality of her imagination is evidenced by the fact that she knows her characters' feelings and reactions so well that one would almost think that she had experienced what her characters experience. She manages to show precisely and vividly the effect upon the characters' minds. On the first page of the novel, we learn a great deal about George Darrow just from his reaction to Anna's telegram which reads: "Unexpected obstacle. Please don't come till thirtieth. Anna." Edith Wharton tells us that these words are hammered into his ears, rung, rattled, dripped into his brain, shaken, tossed, and transposed until they in turn take life in order to leap at him, sting and blind him. We immediately recognize the importance of the telegram to Darrow and its irritating quality even before Edith Wharton goes on to explain its significance.

We see through Darrow's mind throughout Book I of the novel. Yet, there is a consciousness larger than Darrow's mind which interprets and reveals more than Darrow realizes
that he is revealing. Like the characters in Browning's
dramatic monologues, who reveal more than they intend,
Darrow reveals his conceit and vanity by his petulant reaction
to the postponement. He is understandably disappointed at
the postponement, but he takes it as a personal affront that
any reason could have been sufficient for postponing his
visit. Apparently, he would have Anna ignore her duties to
her mother-in-law, her stepson, and her little daughter. He
is impatient for an explanation. His dignity as a diplomatist
is hurt. He thinks pompously that Anna acts "as if he had
been an idler indifferent to dates, instead of an active
young diplomatist who, to respond to her call, had had to
hew his way through a very jungle of engagements!"

Then his relationship with Sophy adds further insight
into his character. He was flattered by her interest in him.
She helped boost his sagging ego. He is not really inter­
ested in her as a person so much as what she does for his ego.
He also enjoys the fact that admiring glances come to the
lady whom he is escorting. Yet, he often grows impatient
with her. She fails to measure up to his comparison of her
to Anna. His attitude toward her is one of condescension.
She lacks his superior taste. He deplores the fact that at
the opera she is interested in the story. "It was on 'the
story' that her mind was fixed, and in life also, he suspected,
it would always be 'the story,' rather than its remoter
imaginative issues, that would hold her. He did not believe
there were ever any echoes in her soul."


He finally grows bored with her conversation. Later, he remembers how "The kiss, at all events, had come at the precise moment to save their venture from disaster... [She had become] perhaps conscious of her exhausted resources and his dwindling interest... Was it his wounded vanity that, seeking balm for its hurt, yearned to dip deeper into the healing pool of her compassion?"\[11\]

Just as Sophy's conversation had staled, so too did his intimacy with her. After all, she had never meant anything to him as a person. So they parted, and afterward, he had not thought of her at all.

We are not allowed into Sophy's thoughts; we come to know her through her words and actions and through Darrow's comments. There is really very little to say about her except to go into the details of her background, which is not really necessary. It is sufficient to say that she had had a very difficult life without any means of support except her own resources. She had consequently had unpleasant experiences with common, vulgar people. This shady background is not so damning to her here when she is frank and without pretenses. However, it is quite a different story later when she presumes to become Owne's wife. For the present, she has her charm, good looks, and zest for life to recommend her.

Edith Wharton's characterization of Anna through Darrow's eyes is very good. We are told that: "It was a sign of Mrs. Leath's quality that every moment, every
syllable, told with her. Even in the old days, as an intent grave-eyed girl, she had seldom misplaced her light strokes; and Darrow, on meeting her again, had immediately felt how much finer and surer an instrument of expression she had become. We also see the limitation of Anna's character, her limitation in inexperience. "What were all her reticences and evasions but the result of the deadening process of forming a 'lady'? The freshness he had marveled at was like the unnatural whiteness of flowers forced in the dark."

In Book II, Anna's consciousness takes over, and from then on, the point of view alternates between Darrow and Anna. However, this alternation is not a flaw. As E. K. Brown points out, the reflecting consciousnesses have such similar attitudes, both mentally and morally, that their two voices are blended into one. "There is no strain, no harressing process of readjusting one's vision when the reader turns from the consciousness of Anna to go behind the character of Darrow."

It is from Anna's consciousness that we are introduced to Givré. In the descriptions of Givré, the place seems almost to become a living character. The detail, although minute, is not overdone. The detail is important in laying the scene of Anna's surroundings because Anna is so much a part of her surroundings. Givré's beauty in a sense is a reflection of Anna's, and her beauty is enhanced by this background. Givré is not only beautiful, but also it is quiet, peaceful, and reserved, like Anna. Also like Anna,
who is out of any real contact with life, Givré is withdrawn and pleasantly secluded, although at times stifling and almost tomb-like. The motif of Anna's lack of contact with life (reenforced by the symbol of the veil of unreality which separates her from the intensities of life) is repeated throughout the novel.

Our first sight of Givré is at the beginning of Book II.

The light of the October afternoon lay on an old high-roofed house which enclosed in its long expanse of brick and yellowish stone the breadth of a grassy court filled with the shadow and sound of limes.

From the escutcheoned piers at the entrance of the court a level drive, also shaded by limes, extended to a white-barred gate beyond which an equally level avenue of grass, cut through a wood, dwindled to a blue-green blur against a sky banked with still white slopes of cloud. . . . The house-front [had a] double flight of steps meeting before a glazed door under sculptured trophies.15

Future scenes are not so revealing and, although examples of beautiful prose, seem to be included more for the sake of their own beauty than for any furtherance of the story.

Following are three examples:

The delicate frosting of dew gave the grass a bluish shimmer, and the sunlight, sliding in emerald streaks along the tree-boles, gathered itself into great luminous blurs at the end of the wood-walks, and hung above the fields a watery glow like the ring about an autumn moon. . . . So prolonged yet delicate had been the friction of time upon its [the house's] bricks that certain expanses had the bloom and texture of old red velvet, and the patches of gold lichen spreading over them looked like the last traces of a dim embroidery. The dome of the chapel, with its gilded cross, rose above one wing, and the other ended in a conical pigeon-house, above which the birds were flying, lustrous and slatey, their breasts merged in the blue of the roof when they dropped down on it. . . .

They turned away and began to walk down a long
tunnel of yellowing trees. Benches with mossy feet stood against the mossy edges of the path, and at its farther end it widened into a circle about a basin rimmed with stone, in which the opaque water strewn with leaves looked like a slab of gold-flecked agate. The path, growing narrower, wound on circuitously through the woods, between slender serried trunks twined with ivy.  

The noon sunlight sheeted with gold the bronze flanks of the polygonal yews. Chrysanthemums, russet, saffron and orange, glowed like the efflorescence of an enchanted forest; belts of red begonia purpling to wine-colour ran like smouldering flame among the borders; and above this outspread tapestry the house extended its harmonious length, the soberness of its lines softened to grace in the luminous misty air.

Through the crepuscular whiteness the trees hung in blotted masses. Below the terrace, the garden drew its dark diagrams between statues that stood like muffled conspirators on the edge of the shadow. Farther off, the meadows unrolled a silver-shot tissue to the mantling of mist above the river; and the autumn stars trembled overhead like their own reflections seen in dim water.

There is a distance which separates Givré from life, a not unwelcome removal from the bother and hurry. Yet, it is stifling to Owen. There is also a distance between Anna Leath and life; yet, she longs to remove the veil of unreality. It is certainly unwelcome to her. She reflects upon this state of unreality.

A veil she now perceived, had always hung between herself and life. It had been like the stage gauze which given an illusive air of reality to the painted scene behind it, yet proves it, after all, to be no more than a painted scene.

She had been hardly aware, in her girlhood, of differing from others in this respect. In the well-regulated well-fed Summers world the unusual was regarded as either immoral or ill-bred, and people with emotions were not visited. . . .

Little by little the conditions conquered her, and she learned to regard the substance of life as a mere canvas for the embroideries of poet and painter, and its little swept and fenced and tended
surface as its actual substance. . . .

Love, she told herself, would one day release her from this spell of unreality.19

However, her two former experiences with love had proved to be quite disappointing. First there had been George Darrow in her youth, "but he wanted to kiss her, and she wanted to talk to him about books and pictures, and have him insinuate the eternal theme of their love into every subject they discussed."20 Her concept of love was too etherial, too platonic. One sees here the same relationship which Tennessee Williams was to use as his central theme for *Summer and Smoke*.

Anna's second encounter with love had been with her husband. The fact that he had ridiculed the conventions of Anna's society made her glorify him romantically as a man to whom things were bound to happen. Surely, with his disregard for convention, he must be plunged into the middle of life, living and experiencing to the fullest, yet, still preserving his good manners. However, Anna soon discovers that "He exacted a rigid conformity to his rules of non-conformity and his scepticism had the absolute accent of a dogma."21

"In the first bewilderment of her new state these discoveries had had the effect of dropping another layer of gauze between herself and reality. She seemed farther than ever removed from the strong joys and pangs for which she felt herself made. . . . The history of Anna Leath appeared to its heroine like some grey shadowy tale that she might have read in an old book, one night as she was falling
asleep." Anna is constantly reminded of this lack of reality in her life. She feels that she has never experienced intense emotions, that she has never really been thrilled, that in fact she has missed something which other people have. "She was reminded, as she looked at Sophy Viner, of the other girls she had known in her youth, the girls who seemed possessed of a secret she had missed."23

Later, after discovering the nature of Sophy's and Darrow's relationship, Anna thinks again: "I shall never know what that girl has known."24 This same sense of deprivation, of having missed out on life is present when she tries to imagine what her future will be like without Darrow. "She tried to think of herself as wholly absorbed in her daughter's development, like other mothers she had seen; but she supposed those mothers must have had stored memories of happiness to nourish them. She had had nothing, and all her starved youth still claimed its due."25

It is this feeling which prompts her into giving herself to Darrow, an action which binds her to him. She thinks: "For once before they parted—since part they must—she longed to be to him all that Sophy Viner had been. . . . Exasperated by her helplessness, she thought: 'Don't I feel things as other women do?'"26 After spending the night with Darrow, she no longer mentions the unreality of her life, but she is still not happily satisfied with her life. She gives him up twice more, but finally persuades herself that "he and she were as profoundly and inextricably bound together as two
trees with interwoven roots."^{27}

Edith Wharton's writing in *The Reef* occasionally lapses into sentimental clichés. We are told that Anna's "heart began to beat a little faster at the thought of what she had to say to him."^{28} "Her heart leaped up to her throat."^{29} She wanted "to hear Darrow's voice, and to feel his eyes on her, in the spot where bliss had first flowed into her heart."^{30} "Her face leaned to his with the slow droop of a flower."^{31} In addition, Anna is always blushing. The statement, "She seldom blushed, but at the question a sudden heat suffused her,"^{32} is unintentionally humorous because it seems that every time we see Anna from this point on, she is blushing. We are told that "the colour flew to her face."^{33} "She broke off and the blood rose to her face and forehead."^{34} "The name [Sophy] sent the blood to Anna's forehead."^{35} "The colour rose to her forehead."^{36} "Then the blood rose to her face."^{37} "She blushed like a girl."^{38} These random samples are composed only of Anna's blushes. Sophy blushes almost as frequently, Owen and Darrow only slightly less often.

Another overworked device in this novel is the weight and significance attached to a glance or to silent communication. Had Edith Wharton kept the instances of intuitive knowledge and reading messages in the eyes of others at a minimum, they would have been more effective. Certainly it is possible at times to sense the truth and to tell certain things from a person's eyes. However, the eyes only supple-
ment the voice; they are not the primary form of communication. The following examples show how Edith Wharton has overworked this device. In the first example Owen says to Anna: "'They're such awfully conversational eyes! Don't you suppose they told me long ago why it's just today you've made up your mind that people have got to live their own lives—even at Givré?'"  

In the second example, the author tells us that "Silence may be as variously shaded as speech; and that which enfolded Darrow and his two companions seemed to his watchful perceptions to be quivering with the cross-threads of communication. . . . Something was in fact passing mutely and rapidly between young Leath and Sophy."  

In the following scene, we see an undue amount of importance being placed upon the fact that two people do not look at each other.

She [Anna], habitually so aware of her own lack of penetration, her small skill in reading hidden motives and detecting secret signals, now felt herself mysteriously inspired. . . . She had said to herself: "If there's nothing between them, they'll look at each other; if there is something, they won't;" and as she ceased to speak she felt as if all her life were in her eyes. . . .  
"For God's sake, what's happened?" Darrow asked; but Anna, with a drop of the heart, was saying to herself that he and Sophy Viner had not looked at each other.  

In the last interview between Sophy and Darrow, we are told that "their eyes met in a long disastrous gaze." In this one gaze, Sophy tells Darrow that she is giving up Owen because she loves Darrow and therefore cannot bear to live
with Owen whom she does not love in a place (Givré) where there are so many associations to remind her of Darrow.

The supreme example, however, is when Anna is convinced of the foolishness of her former suspicions of Darrow and Sophy. All doubts gone, she can even admit her fears to him and laugh about them. She puts her arms around his neck and starts to kiss him, when suddenly "her arms slipped from his shoulders and she drew away from him abruptly.

'But she was with you, then?' she exclaimed; and then, as he stared at her: 'Oh, don't say no! Only go and look at your eyes!' Her belief has completely reversed itself. From positive belief in his innocence, she is now just as firm in her belief of his guilt. And her evidence rests solely upon the look in his eyes.

Owen also possesses this power it seems. In her last scene with Owen, Anna realizes that Owen knows about Sophy and Darrow. "'He knows....' she said to herself, and wondered whether the truth had been revealed to him by some corroborative fact or by the sheer force of divination." She finally decides that Owen had divined the truth.

Besides these passages of wordless communication, Edith Wharton also uses reflection a great deal. We do not learn the circumstances which led to Darrow's intimacy with Sophy until near the end of the novel when Darrow mentally goes back over the events. The present action is frequently broken by a recollection which may fill us in on past events or may serve to draw in a character's personality. Very
seldom does one chapter begin where the preceding one stopped. Usually there has been a time lapse, and during the following chapter we learn what has taken place during this time lapse. This device is a natural and plausible means of exposition; also it allows less important events to be summarized in a character's mind rather than be presented summarily at the time of the occurrence. However, there is one disadvantage to this method which Edith Wharton usually manages to avoid, but is at times unsuccessful. This disadvantage is a loss of the thread of the present action. For example, at the top of page 106 Anna asks a question. Then she mentally compares Darrow to her late husband revealing Fraser's vanity and self-satisfaction. It is the bottom of page 107 before Darrow answers. We wonder what he is answering because we have forgotten the question.

Edith Wharton is very skillful in her presentation of character. The major characters she presents slowly, first as an outline to which she gradually adds depth until the character has become like a person in real life, whose personality we must build up with a gradual accumulation of fact until he becomes quite familiar. With her minor characters, Mrs. Wharton does not allow them space to develop their personalities gradually. She has perfected the thumbnail sketch which presents the character full-grown and complete almost immediately.

One good example is in her portrayal of Madame de Chantelle, the grandmother of Owen and Effie. She is sixty,
"with a figure at once young and old-fashioned." She represents "the forces of order and tradition. . . . She boasted of her old-fashioned prejudices, talked a good deal of being a grandmother, and made a show of reaching up to tap Owen's shoulder, though his height was little more than hers. This one last gesture captures the essence of the grandmother in her. Also she is quite impressed with Darrow because his grandmother was an Everard of Albany. Finally, her character is totally revealed by the detailed description of the decoration of her apartment which "'dated' and completed her. Its looped and corded curtains, its purple satin upholstery, the Sèvres jardinières, the rosewood firescreen, the little velvet tables edged with lace and crowded with silver knick-knacks and simpering miniatures, reconstituted an almost perfect setting for the blonde beauty of the 'sixties."

This same skillful presentation of character is employed in depicting Madame de Chantelle's friend, Adelaide Painter, whom Anna tells Darrow: "was a spinster of South Braintree, Massachusetts, who, having come to Paris some thirty years earlier, to nurse a brother through an illness, had ever since protestingly and provisionally camped there in a state of contemptuous prostration oddly manifested by her never taking the slip-covers off her drawing-room chairs. Her long residence on Gallic soil had not mitigated her hostility toward the creed and customs of the race. . . . [She is] more American than the Stars and Stripes."
Edith Wharton skillfully catches the spirit of Adelaide in dialogue. The sound of her speech and her expressions complete her characterization. She describes Owen's and Sophy's relationship as "'a real old-fashioned American case, as sweet and sound as home-made bread. Well, if you take his loaf away from him, what are you going to feed him with instead? Which of your nasty Paris poisons do you think he'll turn to? . . . One of your sweet French ingénues, I suppose? With as much mind as a minnow and as much snap as a soft-boiled egg.'"\(^49\)

The final minor character characterized by Edith Wharton is Laura, Sophy's sister. We do not really come to know Laura as we did Madame de Chantelle and Adelaide, but Edith Wharton gets her point across quite effectively. In her presentation of Laura through Anna's eyes as a vulgar and distasteful person, she makes a final disparaging comment upon Sophy, a comment which reveals Anna's prejudices as well as Edith Wharton's. Anna finds Laura in bed, surrounded by her masseur, her dog, and two men, one of whom is presumably her lover. The other remains unidentified. Anna finds herself

... in a dim untidy scented room, with a pink curtain pinned across its single window, and a lady with a great deal of fair hair and uncovered neck smiling at her from a pink bed on which an immense powder-puff trailed. ... In the roseate penumbra of the bed-curtains she presented to Anna's startled gaze an odd chromo-like resemblance to Sophy Viner, or a suggestion, rather, of what Sophy Viner might, with the years and in spite of the powder-puff, become. Larger, blonder, heavier-featured, she yet had glances and movements that disturbingly suggested what was
freshest and most engaging in the girl; and as she stretched her bare plump arm across the bed she seemed to be pulling back the veil from dingy distances of family history.50

Edith Wharton's personal feeling seems quite obvious in her picture of Laura, and we feel that perhaps her indictment of Sophy is not really fair. Blake Nevius points out that the reason for Edith Wharton's change of attitude toward Sophy is that at first Sophy is content to remain in her place in society. However, when she has the audacity to try to rise above her position, Edith Wharton loses her detachment. When Sophy, like Undine Spragg, seeks to marry a man who is her social superior, Edith Wharton becomes "instinctively hostile."51 Of course Sophy's reason for becoming engaged to Owen is not stated explicitly. We do not know if Sophy is motivated by social aspirations as Undine so plainly is. Yet, whatever her motive, she is clearly out of place, and Edith Wharton makes that fact plain in the following passages:

Hitherto he [Darrow] had felt for Sophy Viner's defenseless state a sympathy profoundly tinged with compunction. But now he was half-conscious of an obscure indignation against her. Superior as he had fancied himself to ready-made judgments, he was aware of cherishing the common doubt as to the disinterestedness of the woman who tries to rise above her past. . . . It remained a mere blind motion of his blood, the instinctive recoil from the thing that no amount of arguing can make "straight."52

[Anna] noticed that the girl's unusual pallor was partly due to the slight veil of powder on her face. The discovery was distinctly disagreeable. . . . Much as she wished to think herself exempt from old-fashioned prejudices, she suddenly became aware that she did not like her daughter's governess to have a powdered face. . . . She wondered whether . . . as Mrs. Owen Leath, she would
present to the world a bedizened countenance. This idea was scarcely less distasteful than the other.53

Sophy herself confirms the fact that she had been a willing and knowing participant in her liaison with Darrow: "She flung back: 'I wanted it—I chose it. He was good to me—no one ever was so good!'"54

Then the final indictment, as we have seen, is in Edith Wharton’s implication that Sophy will become a duplicate of Laura and the fact that Sophy is once again established with the notorious Mrs. Murrett. Blake Nevius comments upon this final scene: "Nothing has quite prepared us for the shock of this final revelation and the judgment it implies. With its depressingly narrow sense of human values, it is one of the most regrettable passages in Edith Wharton’s fiction.

"At the same time, it has the function of seeming to justify Darrow in his denial of any genuine responsibility for Sophy’s plight."55

The morality of The Reef is a departure from the usual strict Puritanical standards. In fact the double standard is applied. Sophy is punished; whereas Darrow gets off quite lightly. There is no renunciation of happiness nor sacrifice of self as in the other major novels. Of course Sophy gives up Owen, but this renunciation can hardly compare with Ethan’s, Ellen’s, and Newland’s sacrifices. After all, Sophy realizes that she could not be happy with Owen; she does not love him. She loves Darrow, but he is never hers to give up. Anna
voices the morality of the other novels when she says: "'I couldn't bear it if the least fraction of my happiness seemed to be stolen from his--as if it were a little scrap of happiness that had to be pieced out with other people's!'" 56 However, she does not stick to her statement. Although she tries to sacrifice, she learns what Darrow already knows and what he replies when she suggests that he marry Sophy. He says: "'We've often talked of such things: of the monstrousness of useless sacrifices. If I'm to expiate, it's not in that way.'" 57

As it turns out, Darrow does not have to expiate at all. Of course he goes through some bad moments while Anna is repeatedly changing her mind, but Darrow finally gets what he wants. It is Anna who is to realize that "certain renunciations might enrich where possession would have left a desert." 58 It is Anna who must admit to herself that Sophy Viner has "kept faith with herself and I haven't." 59 Anna is the one who must suffer because she loves a man whom she cannot trust. She has lost her former serenity and, having been plunged into the reality for which she had longed, discovers that it is more harsh and painful than she had ever dreamed possible.

Thus, there is no conventional, sentimentalized happy ending in which love conquers all. Rather love is the source of pain, especially for Anna. She cannot be happy with Darrow; she forsees herself becoming an inferior person as a result of their union, but she is caught in the trap of love
which binds her to him.

Keeping this unconventional view of love in mind, we turn to Edith Wharton's novels following *The Reef* where we shall see this same attitude of hers revealed.
FOOTNOTES TO PART C--CHAPTER III


2 Wharton, pp. 334-335.

3 Wharton, p. 355.

4 Wharton, p. 359.


7 Wharton, p. 102.

8 Wharton, p. 1.

9 Wharton, p. 8.

10 Wharton, p. 61.

11 Wharton, pp. 264-265.

12 Wharton, p. 3.

13 Wharton, p. 28.


15 Wharton, p. 81.


17 Wharton, p. 117.

18 Wharton, pp. 126-127.

19 Wharton, pp. 84-86.

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20 Wharton, p. 87.
21 Wharton, p. 92.
22 Wharton, pp. 94-95.
23 Wharton, p. 237.
24 Wharton, p. 296.
25 Wharton, p. 337.
26 Wharton, p. 343.
27 Wharton, p. 360.
29 Wharton, p. 112.
30 Wharton, p. 233.
31 Wharton, p. 156.
33 Wharton, p. 123.
34 Wharton, pp. 275-276.
35 Wharton, p. 291.
36 Wharton, p. 333.
37 Wharton, p. 345.
38 Wharton, p. 348.
39 Wharton, p. 105.
40 Wharton, p. 176.
41 Wharton, pp. 250-251.
42 Wharton, p. 260.
43 Wharton, p. 272.
44 Wharton, p. 351.
45 Wharton, p. 133.
46 Wharton, pp. 133-134.
47 Wharton, p. 188.
48 Wharton, pp. 157-158.
49 Wharton, p. 217.
50 Wharton, pp. 364-365.
52 Wharton, p. 187.
53 Wharton, pp. 235-236.
54 Wharton, p. 287.
55 Nevius, p. 140.
56 Wharton, p. 120.
57 Wharton, p. 317.
58 Wharton, p. 334.
59 Wharton, p. 361.
Part D

The Custom of the Country (1913)

Following The Reef, Edith Wharton published The Custom of the Country in 1913. Although this novel is likewise unconventional in depicting love as a destructive force, the love story is not the main concern. Ralph Marvell suffers because of his love for Undine Spragg, but Ralph, although one of the major characters, is completely overshadowed by Undine, the main character. It is her story, and therefore not a love story, since she is incapable of love.

Blake Nevius sees The Custom of the Country as Edith Wharton's contribution to the discussion of the "new woman." He sees Undine Spragg, "the perfect flowering of the new materialism," as a heroine in the picaresque tradition.1

According to Michael Millgate, The Custom of the Country is a business novel which presents an early picture in the long line of American businessmen. He tells us that Edith Wharton "presents her businessmen just concretely enough to secure full credibility. While not especially well informed about the world of affairs, she dealt with it in her novels confidently and effectively."2 As a novel about business, the emphasis lies with Elmer Moffatt.

Henry James felt that Edith Wharton failed to make the most out of her story because of the way in which she skimmed over the episode of Undine's life with Raymond de Chelles. James felt that Edith should have been concerned
with the impact of French society upon the American Undine. Actually, the novel combines all of these elements and more: the love of Ralph Marvell, the social aspirations of Undine, the sordidness of her affair with Peter Van Degen, the friction produced by her encounter with French society, and the business career of Elmer Moffatt. However, in this dissertation only the love story will be touched upon briefly.

In this episodic novel, Ralph Marvell falls in love with the vain, shallow, selfish Undine Spragg, whose only redeeming quality is her great beauty. Because Ralph is socially prominent, Undine marries him, but her boredom on their honeymoon is quite apparent, even to Ralph. She wants to go to Paris and buy clothes. She wants to be surrounded by crowds and admired for her beauty and fashionable dress.

Undine's extravagance makes it necessary for Ralph to give up his profession as a lawyer in order to take a more lucrative office job. This job change also makes impossible Ralph's hopes of becoming a writer. He learns that after a day of drudgery at the office, his mind is too drained to be creative.

Undine also hurts Ralph through their son, Paul. First of all, Undine rebelled against having a child. Instead of being glad when she found that she was pregnant, she cries and has a childish tantrum. This unnatural absence of the maternal instinct is a damning feature in a woman, for example, Kathy in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. 
Undine's attitude is reflected in her future neglect of her son. On Paul's birthday Undine is supposed to take him to his grandmother's for a party, but she becomes engrossed in her own affairs and forgets about her son. Paul's disappointment could hardly be more than Ralph's when he learns that Undine has forgotten. But Ralph is hurt even deeper when he discovers what had been so preoccupying to Undine. He watches from the window as Peter Van Degen brings Undine home in his car. To make matters worse, her story does not coincide with the direction from which Ralph saw her arrive. Her deceitfulness is as painful to Ralph as her indifference.

In Europe, Undine has an affair with Van Degen, while Ralph, back in America, misses her terribly. He lives only for her letters which are repetitive, impersonal, and increasingly irregular. When she stops writing altogether, Ralph plunges into his work for relief. As a result of overwork and improper care, he becomes seriously ill with pneumonia. He asks for Undine, and even the doctors advise her to return immediately, but her only response comes two months later when she applies for a divorce.

When Peter Van Degen changes his mind about marrying her, Undine decides to marry Raymond de Chelles. However, as a Catholic, he cannot marry a divorced woman. A great sum of money is required in order to get the Pope to declare her divorce an annulment. In order to get the money, she demands custody of her son Paul. She does not really want
him, but she knows that Ralph will pay exorbitantly in order to keep his child. Even though Paul had been awarded to her by the courts, she had never bothered to take him. The irony is that Ralph could have legally secured Paul had he brought up Undine's involvement with Van Degen, but for Paul's protection, he had refused to attach scandal to his child's mother.

Desperate to keep his child, yet not having one hundred thousand dollars, which is Undine's price, Ralph makes an investment guided by Elmer Moffatt. When Ralph learns that his investment will not pay off in time for him to meet Undine's deadline, he is frantic at the thought of losing Paul. Then when the vulgar, crude, thoroughly repulsive Moffatt reveals that Undine had been married to him before she married Ralph, Ralph is stripped bare of all human dignity. His disgust at the thought of Moffatt's having touched Undine shows that Ralph still has some feeling left for her. He goes home and shoots himself.

According to Michael Millgate, the blame for the misfortunes in the novel, including Ralph's suicide, is the incomprehension or lack of communication that exists between a businessman and his wife. However, it is quite clear that Ralph's love for Undine and its consequences are the factors responsible for his death. He was a sensitive man who had made the mistake of falling in love with an unfeeling, self-centered woman, and he lacked the strength to extricate himself without injury. He could not escape the tragic
consequences of his love.

Following *The Custom of the Country* Edith Wharton's fictional output included a book of short stories published in 1916 and entitled *Xingu and Other Stories*. This book contains several stories which reflect her unconventional attitude toward love.

"Coming Home" (1916)

"Coming Home" contains an unhappy love story which is presented more melodramatically than is characteristic of Edith Wharton. Jean de Réchamp, a young French soldier, returns home and finds that his fiancée, Mlle. Malo had saved the village from destruction by becoming the mistress of the German general, Oberst von Scharlach. As is typical of Edith Wharton's male characters, Jean Réchamp fails his fiancée; he cannot forgive her. Apparently, he would have preferred having her and his whole family dead rather than have had her to use such a method to win their salvation. His love for her is not strong enough to meet the crisis. Even the supposedly objective, uninvolved narrator adopts a critical attitude toward the heroine after he learns the nature of her sacrifice.

Edith Wharton leaves Mlle. Malo's suffering as a result of the loss of her love to the imagination, but she emphasizes the depth of Réchamp's feeling by relating the events of his return to his base. Réchamp and the narrator pick up a wounded German officer who by the greatest coinci-
dence happens to be von Scharlach. Réchamp mercilessly causes the death of the helpless, wounded prisoner and shows no compunction, indeed no second thoughts whatsoever.

"Autres Temps" (1916)

"Autres Temps" is the story of Mrs. Lidcote who, we learn from the exposition, had divorced her husband and remarried for love. The story concerns her punishment for allowing her emotions to rule her reason. Society has ostracized her since her divorce, apparently her second husband has died, and she has lived a lonely, isolated, up-rooted life. Edith Wharton gets in some social satire from the fact that society insists upon continuing their slighting of Mrs. Lidcote even after condoning the same behavior in others. This fact is brought home to Mrs. Lidcote quite sharply when she realizes that society accepts the divorce and remarriage of her daughter, Leila, but continues to reject Mrs. Lidcote. The satire grows caustic when even Leila is embarrassed by her mother's presence. It is in this story that we see Edith Wharton's growing awareness of the increasing leniency in New York social standards. Divorce does not carry the social stigma which it had in the previous generation.

"The Long Run" (1916)

"The Long Run" is a story which regrettably has been overlooked by critics. It does have its faults, however, one being a lack of action. The story is made up of an unidentified narrator's introduction of Halston Merrick who
then takes the tale away from the first narrator and narrates the story himself. Merrick's story contains a minimum of action. A large part of it consists of a remembered conversation between himself and Mrs. Paulina Trant. They are very much in love with each other, but she is trapped in a galling marriage. She comes to him and offers herself upon the condition that he take her not just for a night but for a lifetime. Logically, she defends her proposal that they forget society and convention and go away together, but Merrick fails her. He is too much a creature of conformity to defy society. He would welcome a discreet affair, but he refuses to commit an indiscretion. The end had come; her offer rejected, she leaves. Merrick is telling the story many years later. He regrets his weakness that had failed her. He regrets it not only because of his loss of Paulina, but also because of what they have both become as a result of their resignation to lives of dull conformity.

"Bunner Sisters" (1916)

"Bunner Sisters," the final story in this book, is one of the bleakest Edith Wharton ever wrote. Its barren, sterile tone recalls that of Ethan Frome, and as in Ethan Frome, the tone is perfectly suited to the subject. Ann-Eliza and Evelina Bunner are close to poverty, emotionally as well as materially. The sameness, the drab routine of their lives is appalling. Their world consists of their little hat shop and their living quarters in the back room of the shop.
Miraculously, romance enters their world in the form of Herman Ramy, a storekeeper nearby. However, Ann-Eliza, who is Ramy's first choice, gives him up because she knows that Evelina loves him. Perhaps Ramy is not much of a catch, but the magnitude of her renunciation is that she gives up her one and only chance for love and the happiness which it supposedly brings. The cruel irony of the story is that Evelina's marriage to Ramy ends disastrously. It turns out that Ramy is actually a drug addict. After spending all the money which the two sisters had, he mistreats Evelina, causing her to lose her baby and her health. Ann-Eliza finds her and brings her home in time to die. But the real victim is Ann-Eliza. Having lost her shop, she must search elsewhere for work. There is no future for her though because of her age and lack of skill. Our last sight of her finds her walking down the street looking for any prospect but knowing that she will find none.

**Summer (1917)**

In 1917 *Summer* was published. It is another grim tale which capitalizes upon misery, squalor, and the sordid aspects of life. It leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. The trite situation does not have any great or even any slightly admirable characters to redeem it. Charity Royall had been brought down off of the mountain when she was a child and raised as a ward of Lawyer Royall, who had given her his name although he had not legally adopted her. Her first
name is to serve as a reminder of his charitable act of taking her to raise. She knows nothing of her parents, but during the course of the story she learns that her father had been a drunken convict and her mother a woman of the streets who had followed him up the mountain to live with him. Her mother had not wanted her and had been glad enough for Lawyer Royall to take her. Although Charity is probably better off than she would have been had she stayed on the mountain, her life with Mr. Royall is by no means a good one. They are both terribly lonely and isolated. The bleak New England town, North Dormer is described as

... a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It has no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no "business block"; only a church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the road permitted, and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves.4

Then one night Mr. Royall comes into Charity's bedroom pleading his loneliness. Contemptuously, Charity pushes him out. Her former pity for him turns to disgust, but she realizes a new sense of power over the old man. She laughs in his face when he proposes marriage.

Soon afterward Charity falls in love with Lucius Harney. He is intrigued by her for a while, but after selfishly using her, he leaves her to marry the wealthy Annabel Balch. When Charity learns that she is going to have Harney's child, she decides to go back up the mountain to where she came from. It seems that Edith Wharton is
determined to play the situation for all it is worth. She adds pathos to pathos. When Charity arrives "home," she finds her mother lying dead on a mattress in a corner of the room. The description of her mother's body and comparison of it to a dog lying in a ditch are sickening to say the least. In fact, the novel as a whole is rather sickening. The final blow is Charity's marriage to the repulsive, lecherous Mr. Royall. The novel has more in common with Erskine Caldwell's God's Little Acre and Sherwood Anderson's Poor White than it does with any of Edith Wharton's other novels.

The ascendancy of Edith Wharton's powers to their peak was not a steady one. Summer is a definite low point which is emphasized by the former heights achieved in The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, The Reef, and The Custom of the Country. Yet, it is in 1920, only three years after Summer, that Edith Wharton reached the apex of her achievement. We remember certain outstanding characteristics of previous novels: the character of Lily Bart in The House of Mirth, the plot of Ethan Frome, the style of The Reef, and the character of Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country. Yet never before has any of her novels combined plot, characters, and style to the degree of perfection that is found in The Age of Innocence. Also the novels following 1920 are vastly inferior to the majority of her novels preceding The Age of Innocence.
The Age of Innocence (1920)

The Age of Innocence is primarily a love story employing the triangular situation which often recurs in Edith Wharton's work. Newland Archer first sees Ellen Olenska on the night that his engagement to her cousin, May Welland, is announced. Ellen has left her husband because of his infidelities and come back to America to live. At first Newland is only fascinated with Ellen, but his fascination eventually ripens into a mature love. He realizes that his feeling for May cannot grow. It was like a pretty flower in a vase of water, that is, lovely for a short time, but without a promise of future loveliness. Without roots, it cannot grow; it can only wither.

When Archer reveals his feeling for her, Ellen reminds him that he is still engaged to May, and she is still married. She explains to Newland that he must not sacrifice May's happiness; she argues that, from the moral standpoint, he must not break his engagement to May. This situation echoes that of Fleda Vetch and Owen Gareth in The Spoils of Poynton by Henry James. For Archer to tell May that he no longer wants to marry her because he is now in love with her cousin would be cruel and dishonorable, and Ellen cannot bring herself to be the cause of someone else's suffering the way she has suffered. She impresses upon Archer how much he has helped her and changed her way of thinking. She reminds him, "'You hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before--and
it's better than anything I've known.'

She continues her argument by pleading with him not to let what he has accomplished be undone. "'Ah, don't let us undo what you've done!' she cried. 'I can't go back now to that other way of thinking. I can't love you unless I give you up.'"

Edith Wharton has Ellen present her argument logically and without sentimentality. Ellen is not trying to be a martyr. She is sincerely convinced of the truth and logic of her argument. The finishing touch to her words is the arrival of a telegram in which May writes that her parents have agreed to hasten the date of the wedding. Thus, Newland is trapped; he must go through with his marriage to May. To back out now would be dishonorable, and Ellen has had quite enough of the dishonorable way of acting. Edith Wharton makes it clear that, ironically, Newland's love for Ellen is the reason that he marries May.

The honor which made Newland marry May keeps him faithful to her. He is incapable of overstepping his bonds and reaching out to Ellen. This incapability is dramatized for us on the day that Archer stands at a distance, looking at Ellen, who is standing at the end of the pier. His behavior here is characteristic of him; it serves to illustrate his former renunciation of Ellen and the ones of the future. It also shows the strength of the great barrier which refuses to let them unite. "'She doesn't know--she hasn't guessed. Shouldn't I know if she came up behind me, I wonder?' he mused; and suddenly he said to himself: 'If she doesn't turn
before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I'll go back.'

The boat was gliding out on the receding tide. It slid before the Lime Rock. . . . Archer waited till a wide space of water sparkled between the last reef of the island and the stern of the boat; but still the figure in the summer-house did not move. He turned and walked up the hill."7 Ellen's awareness of Newland's presence, but refusal to turn around, symbolizes her renunciation of him.

In the days following his view of Ellen on the pier, Newland is possessed by an uncontrollable desire to see the place where Ellen is living. "The longing was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving; . . . he was not conscious of any wish to speak to Madame Olenska or to hear her voice. He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty."8

Although Edith Wharton was impervious to the theories of Sigmund Freud, it is plain that Archer repressed his desire to see and be with Ellen because what he wants is morally unacceptable to him. However, he has not accomplished total repression; his desire for Ellen takes the milder, more acceptable form of a desire not for physical possession, but to see, touch, and imagine her physical surroundings. Edith Wharton dramatizes the strength of his craving effectively in the following scene.

When he learns that everyone will be away at a party,
Archer goes to the home where Ellen is staying. Trying to absorb the atmosphere as if Ellen's presence were there, he walks around going finally into the garden. Symbolically, this scene is witnessed by a wooden cupid atop the summer-house. The cupid's aim is ineffectual because his bow and arrow are broken off. Thus, the little archer can never hit his target.

[Archer] caught sight of something bright-coloured in the summer-house, and presently made it out to be a pink parasol. The parasol drew him like a magnet: he was sure it was hers. He went into the summer-house, and sitting down on the rickety seat picked up the silken thing and looked at its carved handle, which was made of some rare wood that gave out an aromatic scent. Archer lifted the handle to his lips.

He heard a rustle of skirts against the box, and sat motionless, leaning on the parasol handle with clasped hands, and letting the rustle come nearer without lifting his eyes. He has always known that this must happen...9

However, Archer is sorely disappointed when the voice of one of the Blenker girls assails his ears. No doubt that voice must have sounded like the grating of a key in a lock (the terms used by Mrs. Wharton to describe her husband's voice).10 The final blow, however, occurs when Miss Blenker reveals that she is the owner of the parasol which Newland has been caressing. The irony is unrelenting. This disappointment, though seemingly trivial, can be interpreted as representing Newland's ineffectual aim and the disappointing life which he endures. While Miss Blenker continues chattering, Archer's thoughts are far away. Sitting there motionless still clutching Miss Blenker's parasol, he has a prophetic vision, which incidentally foreshadows the epilog of the novel. "His
whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling future of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen."

Newland Archer saw his future just as John Marcher in James's "The Beast in the Jungle" saw his life in retrospect. Archer's situation, however, is quite different from Marcher's in that Archer recognizes and realizes his love, without whom his life will be an empty existence, but he is hopelessly trapped and powerless to escape. He tries to escape so that he may find happiness in his love, but the only result of his thwarted love is misery. To make matters worse, from time to time Archer is allowed just enough hope to keep him dangling. On a business trip to Boston, Newland goes to see Ellen. With understandable hyperbole, he reminds her how rare this opportunity is: "'It's a hundred years since we've met--it may be another hundred before we meet again."

Edith Wharton has been accused of presenting melodramatic, sentimentalized love scenes, and in certain works, the charge is undeniable. However, in *The Age of Innocence*, she has drawn some of the most beautiful and realistic love scenes in modern American literature. The firmness of logic is behind Ellen's arguments, but the emotion itself is not hard and cold, nor even logical. Ellen and Newland are sincerely in love, but Ellen realizes that there exists an insurmountable obstacle. She is the realist who must repeatedly call Newland back from his dreams and into the bleakness of reality. They argue, but they argue lovingly.
Newland tells Ellen: "I'm the man who married one woman because another told him to." She insists that he see through what he has begun, and adds her reason: "'If it's not worth while to have given up, to have missed things, so that others may be saved from disillusionment and misery--then everything I came home for, everything that made my other life seem by contrast so bare and so poor because no one there took account of them--all these things are a sham or a dream--'" Newland cannot keep the suffering out of his voice when he says to her:

"What's the use? You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It's beyond human enduring--that's all."

"Oh, don't say that; when I'm enduring it!" she burst out, her eyes filling.

Her arms had dropped along the table, and she sat with her face abandoned to his gaze as if in the recklessness of a desperate peril. The face exposed her as much as if it had been her whole person, with the soul behind it: Archer stood dumb, overwhelmed by what it suddenly told him.

"You too--oh, all this time, you too?"

For answer, she let the tears on her lids overflow and run slowly downward.15

Newland is afraid that Ellen will obey her family's wishes and return to her husband.

The sense of waste and ruin overcame him. There they were, close together and safe and shut in; yet so chained to their separate destinies that they might as well have been half the world apart.

"What's the use--when you will go back?" he broke out, a great hopeless How on earth can I keep you? crying out to her beneath his words.

She sat motionless, with lowered lids. "Oh--I shan't go yet!"

"Not yet? Some time, then? Some time that you already foresee?"

At that she raised her clearest eyes. "I promise you: not as long as you hold out. Not as long as we
can look straight at each other like this."

He dropped into his chair. What her answer really said was: "If you lift a finger you'll drive me back: back to all the abominations you know of, and all the temptations you half guess." He understood it as clearly as if she had uttered the words, and the thought kept him anchored to his side of the table in a kind of moved and sacred submission.

"What a life for you!—" he groaned.
"Oh--as long as it's a part of yours."
"And mine a part of yours?"
She nodded.
"And that's to be all--for either of us?"
"Well; it _is_ all, isn't it?"16

They both know that it is all. The bleak future holds very little for either. Besides their own pain, they both suffer for each other's unhappiness. "'Don't --don't be unhappy,' she said, with a break in her voice, as she drew her hands away; and he answered: 'You won't go back--you won't go back?' as if it were the one possibility he could not bear.

"'I won't go back,' she said; and turning away she opened the door and led the way into the public dining-room."17

After leaving Ellen, Newland reflects upon his meeting with her.

The day, according to any current valuation, had been a rather ridiculous failure; he had not so much as touched Madame Olenska's hand with his lips, or extracted one word from her that gave promise of farther opportunities. Nevertheless, for a man sick with unsatisfied love, and parting for an indefinite period from the object of his passion, he felt himself almost humiliatingly calm and comforted. . . . It was clear to him, and it grew more clear under closer scrutiny, that if she should finally decide on returning to Europe--returning to her husband--it would not be because her old life tempted her, even on the new terms offered. No: she would go only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to Archer, a temptation
Thus Newland is powerless to even strive for happiness. He is afraid that if he tries to bring himself and Ellen closer together, he will succeed only in driving her away from him, back to her husband and the way of life that she wanted so desperately to escape.

Newland's life with May becomes almost unbearable to him. Instead of being pleased with his wife's youthfulness, he thinks to himself: "How young she is! For what endless years this life will have to go on!" Newland must have some relief; he must see Ellen again; so he informs May that he will have to make another business trip. Shortly afterward, however, May's and Ellen's grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, has a stroke, and Ellen is summoned. Newland's planned date of departure will coincide with Ellen's arrival. May remarks that it is a pity that Newland and Ellen will cross each other on the way. However, Newland later informs May that his trip is to be postponed. The reason seems quite obvious.

When Ellen arrives, Newland goes to meet her in his wife's brougham, and Edith Wharton presents her most effective scene between the two lovers. Returning home, Newland tells Ellen that things cannot continue as they are: "What I want of you is so much more than an hour or two every now and then, with wastes of thirsty waiting between, that I can sit perfectly still beside you, like this, with that other
vision in my mind, just quietly trusting to it to come true.'

"For a moment she made no reply; then she asked, hardly above a whisper: 'What do you mean by trusting to it to come true?'" Ellen knows that his vision for them cannot come true. She is the practical arguing with the romantic; she insists that they concern themselves with realities and not visions. When Newland replies that being with her is his reality, she asks if it is his idea for her to become his mistress. Newland answers:

"I want--I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that--categories like that--won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter."

She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. "Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there?" she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: "I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo--and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous... Ah, believe me, it's a miserable little country."

She shows him the impossibility of trying to be happy behind the backs of the people who trust them. It is Edith Wharton's heroines who must be the leaders; they must guide the heroes and show them the way which must be followed.

Their next scene together is in the Art Museum. In the ensuing conversation, we see the strength and the humanness of their love. A platonic relationship is not enough. We are reminded of Edith Wharton's words, "Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty of any love outside marriage, of any
love that is not a living together, a sharing of all:"22

Ellen tells Archer that she has decided to stay there in New
York with her grandmother because she would be safer. He
asks:

"From me?"
She bent her head slightly, without looking at him.
"Safer from loving me?"
Her profile did not stir, but he saw a tear over­
flow on her lashes and hang in the mesh of her veil.
"Safer from doing irreparable harm. Don't let us
be like all the others!" she protested.
"What others? I don't profess to be different
from my kind. I'm consumed by the same wants and the
same longings."
. . . He saw a faint colour steal into her cheeks.
"Shall I--once come to you; and then go home?" she
suddenly hazarded in a low clear voice.
. . . "Go home? What do you mean by going home?"
"Home to my husband."
"And you expect me to say yes to that?"
She raised her troubled eyes to his. "What else is
there? I can't stay here and lie to the people who've
been good to me."
"But that's the very reason why I ask you to come
away!"
"And destroy their lives, when they've helped me to
remake mine?"
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
She turned away, and he followed and caught her by
the wrist. "Well, then: come to me once," he said,
his head turning suddenly at the thought of losing her;
and for a second or two they looked at each other
almost like enemies.
"When?" he insisted. "Tomorrow?"
She hesitated. "The day after."
"Dearest--!" he said again.
She had disengaged her wrist; but for a moment they
continued to hold each other's eyes, and he saw that her
face, which had grown very pale, was flooded with a deep
inner radiance. His heart beat with awe; he felt that
he had never before beheld love visible.23

The planned meeting never occurs. Archer's key is
returned to him unused, and it is not until two weeks later
that he learns the reason. After the farewell party for
Ellen who is returning to Europe, Archer decides that he is
going to leave May and follow Ellen. He tries to tell May of his decision, but before he can, she figuratively turns the key in the lock and throws it away. "In tones so clear and evenly-pitched that each separate syllable tapped like a little hammer on his brain,"24 she informs him that she is expecting a child. She also tells him that she had told Ellen the news two weeks previously. He replies in astonishment: "'I thought you said you weren't sure till today.'

"Her colour burned deeper, and she held his gaze. 'No; I wasn't sure then--but I told her I was. And you see I was right!' she exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory."25

Twenty-six years later, after the birth of three children and May's death, Newland looks back over his life in a decidedly Jamesian epilog.

Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery. There were a hundred million tickets in his lottery, and there was only one prize; the chances had been too decidedly against him. When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed. That vision, faint and tenuous as it was, had kept him from thinking of other women. He had been what was called a faithful husband; and when May had suddenly died--carried off by the infectious pneumonia through which she had nursed their youngest child--he had honestly mourned her. Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways.26
Edith Wharton firmly believes in the veracity of this last statement, but even so, the fact that life had passed Archer by is not reversed. There is nothing left, and to try to begin life at his age would be like trying to grab hold of the wind. Newland goes to Paris, where Ellen is, where he feels "his heart beating with the confusion and eagerness of youth." But his heart is deceiving him as he is soon to realize. He and his son Dallas go to call on Ellen, but Newland cannot go through with it. While Dallas goes up to see her, Newland waits outside on a bench.

"It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say: and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters.

At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel.

Rather than bringing joy into his life, love has cheated Newland Archer out of happiness and made his life into an almost meaningless existence. This fact is brought home by the tremendous power of this final scene.

An interesting sidelight is that the effectiveness of the last scene is borne out by the fact that in the dramatization of the novel by Margaret Ann Barnes, the final scene was retained just as Edith Wharton wrote it, despite the fact that the leading actress, Katherine Cornell, was consequently kept from the stage.
Although primarily a love story, it would be unfair to dismiss *The Age of Innocence* without examining briefly its other attributes. In her book, *Edith Wharton and Henry James*, Millicent Bell states that "Mrs. Wharton's elaborate reproduction of the manners and mores of New York's society in the 1870's is a splendid achievement of satiric archaeology."\(^{30}\) Indeed, its satire is all the more rewarding because Edith Wharton is not trying to grind the proverbial axe. She is not on the soap box advocating reform of the closed society so vividly depicted in the early chapters. She ridicules that society, but her feelings toward it are ambivalent. Notes of fondness are interspersed throughout the ridicule. She sees that "after all, there was good in the old ways,"\(^{31}\) despite the harm caused by a society demanding blind conformity to its conventions. Throughout the novel she records the growing laxity of the social conventions which corresponds with the gradual disintegration of the social aristocracy. At the end of *The Age of Innocence*, we see the collapse of society symbolized by the fact that the son of Newland Archer and May Welland Archer is preparing to marry one of the foreigner "Beaufort's bastards," with no parental objection.

Edith Wharton, writing in 1920, has witnessed the destruction of the social conventions which she had fondly ridiculed. Louis Auchincloss states that the novel was written in a "mood of apology."\(^{32}\) Although the word apology is slightly hyperbolic, certainly there is a nostalgic tone
which permeates the novel. She no longer feels so bitter
toward the destructive conventions of society as she had in
1905 when The House of Mirth was published. In this respect,
Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald have been compared.
Both were acutely aware of "an American class system domi­
nated by the money-power, but although they adopt a critical
attitude towards this society they are not primarily con­
cerned with satirizing it. They recognize the corruption,
but they are drawn irresistably as novelists to the fasci­
nating coruscation of the social surface."33

The opening scene of The Age of Innocence is at the
old Academy of Music where the opera Faust is being sung.
Edith Wharton tells us that the old Academy was cherished by
three groups. The first group, the conservatives, liked it
because its smallness and inconvenience deterred the invasion
of the "new people." Its historical associations endeared it
to the second group, the sentimentalists. Significantly, the
last group mentioned is the music lovers who appreciated the
acoustics of the old building. Mrs. Wharton continues her
satirization with a catalogue of the conventions surrounding
opera attendance. She mentions that arriving in "a Brown
coupé was almost as honourable a way of arriving as in one's
own carriage."34 And for departure, the coupé had a dis­
tinct advantage because "Americans want to get away from
amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it."35

Edith Wharton is stylistically at her best when she
is being mildly satirical. Her witty description of the opera
itself sparkles brilliantly. With a tinge of sarcasm in her voice, she states that

... 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.36

We are informed that it was "the thing" to arrive late, and that Newland was bound by "the thing." Thus, it is with his introduction that Edith Wharton lets us know that Newland is a creature bound by convention. The fact second in importance to his conformity is that he is a dilettante, an inescapable conclusion from the passage quoted above.

It is from Newland's point of view that the story is told but, although we follow his presence throughout, it is Mrs. Wharton's voice as the omniscient author which tells the story. She makes comments upon New York society which, at the beginning, Newland would be incapable of making. He is too pompous. At first, he deplores the appearance of the Countess Olenska in society as much as anyone else does. He is shocked that she, a woman separated from her husband, should try to invade New York society. He defends her only because she is May Welland's cousin, and he feels an obligation to the family; but, he feels, with the rest of society, that her disappearance certainly would simplify matters and
make everything much smoother. However, he finally develops within the novel to the point at which he can see through the façade of society, but at the beginning, he is so caught up within the conventions that he is unable to perceive that they are conventions. He does not question his blind obedience to society and its restrictions, that is, not until he comes to love Ellen. It is this love and his association with Ellen which matures Archer and lifts a veil from his eyes, enabling him to see society and its foibles as it really is. Ironically, it is this love which matures him that also makes him discontent with his life. He was perfectly adjusted to the bonds of society until his love for Ellen makes them odious to him. It is not his resignation, but his struggle, his vain struggle to free himself which causes his suffering.

At the beginning of the novel, Newland is quite resigned to his life and reasonably happy. At the opera he is happy about the fact that May Welland has just accepted his proposal of marriage.

At the opera May is pictured for us, symbolically dressed in white. In fact, throughout the novel she appears always dressed in white, with occasionally a touch of pastel blue or pale green or silver. The whiteness symbolizes her innocence and the fact that she is a finished product of the whole age of innocence. But, as Newland comes to realize, it is a studied and affected innocence which in time comes to represent a complete void or blankness. She is so
innocent that she never has an idea of her own. She had been conditioned not to act, but to react. She never surprises Newland with an emotion; she is completely and blandly predictable. That is not to say that she is phony; she has in fact become what she was trained to be. Her blushes are sincere. Indeed in our first sight of May, she is blushing: "A warm pink mounted to the girl's cheek, mantled her brow to the roots of her fair braids, and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia." 37

Edith Wharton is particularly good with these thumbnail character sketches in which she presents the character with only a minimum of words. It is noticeable how time and again throughout the novel she uses the details of dress or of décor to establish a personality, although at times the detail seems to be given merely for the sake of detail. For example, Mrs. Wharton tells us that Newland's mother "pursed her lips under the lace veil that hung down from her grey velvet bonnet trimmed with frosted grapes." 38 Usually however, the detail is not superfluous nor simply for its own sake. A notable example is in her first description of the Countess Olenska as a "slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds. The suggestion of this headdress, which gave her what was then called a 'Josephine look,' was carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught
up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp."

This description serves to point out several significant contrasts in the characters of May and Ellen. May is the blond lady of nineteenth century fiction. She is modest, prim, and, above all, innocent. Ellen is a carry over from the traditional dark lady of fiction. Although not evil, there is a taint of corruption about her which Edith Wharton hints at time and again, but never explains explicitly. Above all, the Countess Olenska is mysterious; there are unrevealed shadows in her background. May wears white tulle. Ellen wears dark blue velvet. In future scenes May's whiteness is always contrasted by Ellen's wearing black or red velvet trimmed in black fur. Ellen's flowing, supple dress is as free as are her ideas. May is as stiff as the inflexible whalebone foundation of her garments; she is bound by the tight lacings of society.

Newland, who at first does not realize his own captivity, dreams of liberating May's mind. He smiles at her incomprehension of the opera's seduction scene. He envisions their reading *Faust* together. He plans to lift the veil from her eyes, not knowing that he is almost as blinded as she is. He sees himself creating May into a "miracle of fire and ice [that is], . . . worldly wise and . . . eager to please . . . without . . . any hint of . . . frailty." Newland sees himself as May's teacher. He feels superior to the average member of New York gentility. His library is not
just for show; it is an important part of his life. He is one of Edith Wharton's intellectual, but ineffectual heroes. He reads books on anthropology; he reads about man's relationship to society, but he is incapable of freeing himself from the trap in which society has placed him. He is not a man of action. Edwin M. Moseley points out that Newland bears certain resemblances to Faust, but he lacks the strength of Faust. "He has intellectual curiosity, he seeks passion, he wants to develop his aesthetic sense, but he has none of the Faustian tragic intensity that would enable him to experience either the grand damnation of the classical Faust or the grand redemption of Goethe's protagonist."^41

Newland is associated with the law firm of Letterblair, Lamson, and Low, but his tasks are trivial. He seldom does any real work. He comes in very late one morning, and no one has even noticed his absence. He takes off for an unscheduled vacation in mid-winter, knowing that the law firm can get along perfectly well without him. We see him at work only once, and that is when Mr. Letterblair calls him in on Ellen Olenska's divorce case. He is given the case not because of his ability, but because he is going to marry Ellen's cousin and is therefore considered already a member of the family.

Archer's life of leisure is by no means atypical of those of the other men of his class. They all seem to be dilettantes, not businessmen, with the exception of Julius Beaufort, and even his business is largely ignored. This
aspect provides for further comparison of Edith Wharton and
F. Scott Fitzgerald, both of whom treat business "as the
invisible seven-eights of the iceberg, the indispensable,
often unacknowledged basis of the whole social world, the
'given' quantity to which no reference need be made except
in times of personal or general disaster: so business
intrudes into The Age of Innocence only because of the social
repercussions of Beaufort's 'failure.'\(^42\)

A few comments on the traditional style and imagery
will serve to complete the discussion of The Age of Innocence.
The disadvantage of a style such as Mrs. Wharton's which
lacks the eccentricities of James's, Joyce's, or Faulkner's
is that it tends to fade in the memory quicker than a style
with outstanding oddities. For this reason, its virtues are
often ignored or forgotten. One outstanding virtue in the
style of Edith Wharton is its versatility. We have seen how
the styles of Ethan Frome and of The Reef are so perfectly
adapted to the subjects. The same thing is true of The Age
of Innocence. In this novel about a tradition-steeped,
aristocratic society, the structure is controlled and per­
fectly formed. The imagery is conventional and traditional,
in keeping with the subject matter. The sentences are
symmetrical and highly polished, especially in the passages
of social satire. Following are two examples: "'If things
go on at this pace,' Lefferts thundered, looking like a young
prophet dressed by Poole, and who had not yet been stoned,
'we shall see our children fighting for invitations to
swindler's houses and marrying Beaufort's bastards."^43 The second example states that May "was alone for the first time with her husband, but her husband was only the charming comrade of yesterday. There was no one whom she liked as much, no one whom she trusted as completely, and the culminating 'lark' of the whole delightful adventure of engagement and marriage was to be off with him alone on a journey, like a grown-up person, like a 'married woman,' in fact."^44

The conventional imagery includes the constant reference to the family as the tribe or the clan. May's and Newland's wedding was a ritual. May is often referred to as Diana, the virginal archer goddess. There is something inhuman in Edith Wharton's description of May's eyes as having a certain transparency and of her face which makes her look more like the representative of a type than a real person. "She might have been chosen to pose for a civic virtue or a Greek goddess. The blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element."^45 The final comparison of her blood to an embalming fluid is chilling. Louis O. Coxe states that "what Newland has lost is not Ellen, but May, whom he never took pains to know or to love."^46 However, the preceding quote and the following one clearly show that Edith Wharton does not consider May to be a worthy object of love and that Mr. Coxe has read more into May's character than actually exists. Mrs. Wharton tells us that Archer "was weary of living in a perpetual tepid honeymoon, without the temperature
of passion yet with all its exactions. . . . As she sat thus, the lamplight full on her clear brow, he said to himself with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind it, that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty, or an emotion."47

The conventional symbolism of the previously mentioned wooden cupid with his missing bow and arrow is apparent, as is May's torn and muddy wedding dress. The institution of marriage is traditionally, but sarcastically, compared to heaven. The social aristocracy is compared to royalty with the van der Luydens reigning as sovereigns. Even the name Newland Archer, with his initials the same as North America, points out the "new land" of America and the new territory into which society is expanding. The archer symbol is recurrent, carried even to the limit of having the Diana-like May receive a little diamond tipped arrow for winning the archery contest.

Finally, we see in the satirical passages that the hallmark of Edith Wharton's style is her use of the epigram, but it is never forced. The situations give rise naturally to her witticisms, for example, her reference to one's coachman, waiting outside the opera, as having a "cold-and-gin congested nose."48 At times, her clever witticisms are applicable universally, but more often they are narrowed down to a particular character or a special set of mores. "Her ridicule of the absurd in human, and specifically American,
nature is understated, offhand, and enmeshed in the context. Her sentence structure and ordering of sentences within paragraphs produce a style of flashing thrust and unperturbed recovery; of formality and regularity tempered with easiness and studied disorder, a felicitous style for exposure of pretentiousness and complacency." The interaction of style, characters, and plot (with its close connection to the background) is certainly a work of art. The style is perfect for the story; the story and the characters are perfect for each other. The story is moving and beautiful; yet it does not manipulate the characters. No actions seem to be for the purpose of furthering the plot; all actions grow naturally out of the characters, themselves. To echo a passage in The Writing of Fiction, nothing is forced, like a hot house plant. Instead, the whole novel seems to have grown naturally and completely, like a fruit which has been allowed to slowly ripen in the sun.

Thus, we have witnessed the portrayal of an unconventional love story couched within a conventional form with conventional imagery. The second motif concerns the decay of the conventions of society, conventions with which Edith Wharton is in sympathy. Only her view of love as a destructive force is unconventional.

With this novel ends the major phase of Mrs. Wharton's work and therefore the last lengthy discussion of one specific work in this dissertation. The remaining chapter is devoted to Mrs. Wharton's later novels which were inferior
to her previous works and which form one significant basis for the charge against Mrs. Wharton as the writer of conventional, sentimentalized, melodramatic fiction. However, Mrs. Wharton held true to her unconventional attitude toward love as a destructive force even in these later novels which are summarized briefly in the next chapter.
FOOTNOTES TO PART D—CHAPTER III


8. Wharton, p. 224.


14. Wharton, p. 244.

15. Wharton, pp. 244-245.


17. Wharton, p. 246.


21 Wharton, p. 293.


23 Wharton, pp. 314-316.

24 Wharton, p. 345.

25 Wharton, p. 346.

26 Wharton, p. 350.

27 Wharton, p. 356.


31 Wharton, p. 350.


33 Millgate, p. 116.


37 Wharton, p. 15.

38 Wharton, p. 40.

39 Wharton, p. 18.

40 Wharton, p. 17.


42 Millgate, p. 119.

43 Wharton, p. 268.
44 Wharton, p. 153.
45 Wharton, p. 154.


47 Wharton, pp. 234-235.

Summary of Later Novels

The Glimpses of the Moon (1925)

Following the publication of The Age of Innocence, the quality of Edith Wharton's writing took a definite plunge downward. Arthur Mizener finds her later novels "deficient in life." The former realism gives way to frequent lapses into melodrama. For example, The Glimpses of the Moon, published in 1922, is a sentimentalized piece of fiction with very little to redeem it. It tells the story of Susy Branch, who, like Lily Bart, is a social parasite who lives upon her friends' gifts in return for various favors. She is pleasant and popular, and therefore a welcome addition at the social events. Also, like Lily Bart, Susy had planned to marry a man with money who would make a minimum of demands upon her. Like Lily, she also falls in love with a man who has no money. Here the likeness ends. Susy and Nick Lansing marry for love; however, Susy lacks the moral fiber of Lily Bart. She stoops to baseness which Lily held herself above. She excuses herself that what she does is only for Nick, but he cannot comprehend the distinction. He is first disillusioned when Susy steals a friend's cigars for him. Then when he discovers Susy's part in helping her friend, Ellie Vanderlyn, to deceive her husband, Nick is disgusted. He can see only a future of parasitic deception for them if they remain together. Apparently, his love for Susy had previously
blinded him to reality. His suddenly acute moral scruples make that reality so unbearable for him that he leaves Susy and joins his wealthy friends, the Hickses, aboard their yacht.

Edith Wharton does not sufficiently clarify Nick's motivations. We are told that his moral code is stricter than Susy's, as evidenced by his returning the stolen cigars and returning Ellie Vanderlyn's gift of a pearl tie pin. However, these two incidents hardly prove a moral scrupulosity which would justify leaving his wife.

During months of separation, Susy suffers because of her love for Nick, but he seems relatively happy in the company of Coral Hicks, of whom Susy is understandably jealous. Eventually, Susy decides to marry the wealthy Strefford, Earl of Altringham, but first she must get in touch with Nick to obtain a divorce. Nick leaves Coral, knowing that she expects him to propose when he returns with his divorce.

In true melodramatic fashion, when Nick and Susy see each other again, they find that they cannot go through with the divorce. Susy had realized earlier that she still loved Nick, and she had already broken her engagement to Strefford. When Nick sees Susy, he is glad that he had not already proposed to Coral. Thus, the two lovers are reunited in what is almost the conventionalized, stereotyped happy ending. However, the realist in Edith Wharton cannot allow them to float away blissfully on the pink cloud of true love.
Finding happiness in love is impossible in Edith Wharton's world. So, she tells us that Susy's reference to Ellie Vanderlyn "had fallen between them like an icy shadow. What an incorrigible fool he had been to think they could ever shake off such memories, or cease to be the slaves of such a past. . . . The first rapture had been succeeded by soberer feelings. Her confession had . . . roused forgotten things, memories and scruples swept aside in the first rush of their reunion. . . . His mind dwelt on Coral with tenderness, with compunction, with remorse."\(^1\)

The final sentence of the novel makes it sentimentally plain that Nick and Susy will not be happy in their love. "The moon, labouring upward, swam into a space of sky, cast her troubled glory on them, and was again hidden."\(^2\) The title, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, shows that this traditional symbol of romantic love is seen only at infrequent intervals. In the final sentence, we see the moon struggle out from behind the dark clouds briefly, just long enough to be described as troubled, and then be hidden again by the dark clouds. Thus, we know that Nick's and Susy's romantic love is hidden by the dark clouds.

In 1924, Edith Wharton published four volumes which comprise *Old New York*: *False Dawn* deals with the forties, *The Old Maid* deals with the fifties, *The Spark* with the sixties, and *New Year's Day* with the seventies. Of these, only *New Year's Day* is primarily concerned with a love story.
The Old Maid, however, shows the tragic results of love.

The Old Maid (1924)

In The Old Maid, both Delia Lovell Ralston and her cousin Charlotte Lovell had been in love with Clem Spender, but he had been too poor to marry. Delia had married into the Ralston family, but Charlotte had remained an old maid who devoted her energies to charitably caring for underprivileged and orphaned children. When Charlotte tells Delia that one of these children, a little girl named Tina, is her daughter by Clem Spender, Delia suddenly develops an overpowering interest in the little girl. It is clear that Delia is interested in Tina, not because she is her second cousin, but because she is the daughter of Clem. It seems almost as if Delia imagines Tina to be the daughter of Clem and herself.

After the death of Delia's husband, Charlotte and Tina come to live with Delia. Delia seems to prefer Tina to her own two children, and Tina thinks of Delia as mother and Charlotte as her old maid aunt. The two women silently and covertly vie for Tina's affection, but the maternal warmth and tenderness of Delia triumphs over the cold, stiff, old-maidishness of Charlotte. After Delia's legal adoption of Tina, Charlotte realizes that Delia had taken Tina away from her completely. Just as in Elizabeth Bowen's story "The Queer Heart," the aunt has replaced the real mother in the daughter's affections, and the motive is similar also. Thus, Delia has become Tina's mother, and Charlotte is the virginal
old maid aunt who has lost her position as the mother of Clem's child. It is almost as if Delia had taken Clem away from Charlotte also.

The story is well written and on the whole much better than it is generally given credit for being. Edith Wharton is effective in presenting the characters of the two aging women, especially the old maid. Blake Nevius finds the emphasis upon seduction and mother-love to be too Victorian and melodramatic, however, these two elements are not played up as much as are Charlotte's mental, almost physical, state of being an old maid and Delia's somewhat selfish desire to possess her lover through his daughter. When Delia selfishly thinks how nice it would be for Tina to remain with them always, Charlotte is quick to state that Tina must not become an old maid. Charlotte's emotional poverty and loneliness are vivid and perhaps more outstanding in the mind of the reader than any other feature of the story.

New Year's Day (1924)

The final section of Old New York, New Year's Day, is the story of Lizzie Hazeldean who has an adulterous affair with Henry Prest; however, it is not the typical story of two lovers who cannot marry because one is trapped in a hateful marriage. Conversely, Mrs. Hazeldean commits adultery because she loves her husband, Charles. She needs money in order to make the last days of her husband, who is in very ill health, happy.
Apparently, Mrs. Hazeldean is not very resourceful. Edith Wharton makes it clear that Mrs. Hazeldean's background had not prepared her to earn money. She is as incapable of earning money as was Lily Bart. We are told that Lizzie Hazeldean came from a respectable family with influential connections, but no money, a background not unlike that of Edith Wharton's own mother. When Lizzie had been thrust out on her own virtually penniless at the age of twenty, she had been in a situation somewhat like that of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. However, Lizzie's enterprises are more fortunate than those of Lily, and one week after their first meeting, she had become engaged to the wealthy and respected Charles Hazeldean. The hasty marriage to a man of wealth and position provides another parallel to the events in the life of Edith Wharton's mother. The point is that Lizzie had never had to support herself, and she had not been prepared to earn money. Also Charles Hazeldean would have been quite displeased to think that his wife had to work because he could not support them sufficiently. Of course no doubt he would have been even more upset had he known the truth, but Lizzie is careful that he does not learn of her affair.

The reader does not learn the circumstances behind the affair until six months after the death of Mr. Hazeldean. Mrs. Hazeldean reveals the true motive behind her affair to Mr. Prest when he proposes marriage to her. She tells him: "You thought I was a lovelorn mistress; and I was only an
expensive prostitute." She continues by revealing that her motive had been only to get money which her husband badly needed during his illness. She had truly loved her husband and committed adultery as a sacrifice for him. She explains, "I didn't care for the money or the freedom; I cared only for him. I would have followed him into the desert--I would have gone barefoot to be with him. I would have starved, begged, done anything for him--anything."  

Edith Wharton uses dialogue sparingly. For the most part her story consists of narration, with direct speech between the characters reserved for moments of crisis. Lizzie voices the depth of her feelings, whereas, had the author tried to describe Lizzie's feelings in the same terms, the effect would approach the ludicrous. It is true that Lizzie is a bit melodramatic, but her actions had certainly proved the sincerity of her words. Her one consolation is that her husband never knew. When she says, "He was happy to the end--that's all I care for," we believe her. With her own words, she has fully convinced us of her supreme love and concern for her husband. Although her method was certainly not an admirable one, her situation is pitiable. She suffers because of her love for her husband and suffers in a unique manner.  

Thus, New Year's Day is quite an unconventional love story of a woman for her husband. In a situation which could easily lead itself to melodrama, Edith Wharton is careful to use restraint throughout the telling of the story.
The Mother's Recompense (1925)

After New Year's Day, The Mother's Recompense was published in 1925. This novel reminds us of "Autres Temps," the short story discussed in Part D, page 168. It concerns Kate Clephane, who, like Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps," had left her husband to run away with her lover. However, when she returns home twenty years later, unlike Mrs. Lidcote, she is welcomed by society. The complication is that her daughter Ann is engaged to Chris Fenno, a former lover of Kate's whom she still loves. In this relationship, we are reminded of George Darrow who finds his fiancée's stepson engaged to his former mistress.

Kate alienates her daughter by showing opposition to her choice of a husband, without explaining her reason. Finally, she realizes that her interference can only ruin her daughter's happiness. So she returns to her lonely life as an exile.

Twilight Sleep (1927)

Twilight Sleep, published in 1927, emphasizes the growing promiscuity of a frivolous society. Pauline Manford's second husband becomes infatuated with her son's wife. Pauline's daughter, Nona, the novel's protagonist, is in love with a married man whose wife will not give him a divorce. Finally, Nona is accidentally shot when her mother's first husband tries to kill Nona's father. The decay of society is quite evident, as is the decay or abuse of Mrs. Wharton's
The Children (1928)

The Children, published in 1928, also satirizes a frivolous society in which marriage, divorce, and remarriage can produce a group such as is represented by the children for whom the novel is entitled. The fifteen year old Judith Wheater is the oldest; so she acts as the mother to the others. Terry and Blanca are eleven year old twins. After their birth, their parents had divorced. Mr. Wheater had married a movie star, and their daughter, Zinnie, is among the group. Mrs. Wheater had married an Italian nobleman who already had two children, Bun and Beechy. The seventh child is an eighteen months old boy, Chipstone, who was born to the Wheaters after their remarriage.

The story is about Martin Boyne, a middle-aged bachelor, and his love for Judith Wheater. His paternal interest develops into a love which causes him much unhappiness. After breaking his engagement to Rose Sellars, he proposes to Judith, who at first is overjoyed at what she interprets as the prospect of his adopting them. When she learns that he is talking about marriage, however, she laughs at the idea, and Martin is humiliated at his blunder.

In Paris, he goes to see Rose, but he finds that what had previously existed between them is completely over. Then he must get out of the children's lives. Miserably he watches while Mr. Dobree, Mrs. Wheater's lawyer, takes his
Years later, Martin meets Zinnie and learns that Mrs. Wheater is now Mrs. Dobree. He also learns that Judith is going to be at a certain dance that night. Martin is compelled to have one last look at Judith. That night he dresses and goes to the dance, but he remains outside the ballroom, looking in through the glass window. He sees Judith, but, like Newland Archer, he cannot bear to meet her. She does not see him nor even know of his presence. He stays outside the ballroom a long time, thinking, before he finally goes away. The novel concludes with this scene and the following paragraph: "Two days afterward, the ship which had brought him to Europe started on her voyage back to Brazil. On her deck stood Boyne, a lonely man."8

Hudson River Bracketed (1929)

In 1929, Hudson River Bracketed was published. Its sequel, The Gods Arrive, was published three years later. In Hudson River Bracketed, the hero, Advance G. Weston, marries his cousin, Laura Lou Tracy. He soon regrets his marriage to this sickly parallel of Zeena Frome. Halo Spear also makes a mistake in her marriage to Lewis Tarrant. Halo helps Vance with his writing, and although they are in love with each other, their relationship remains a platonic one. Under this pressure and despair, Vance is able to write successfully.

At the end of the novel, Halo comes to Vance to tell
him that she is now free of her husband, and therefore they may resume their friendship. Unknown to Halo, Laura Lou had died a week earlier. One is immediately struck by the artificiality of the sudden removal of all external obstacles between Halo and Vance. The novel closes with them walking arm in arm, but with Vance feeling a veil of unreality drawn between himself and her.

The Gods Arrive (1932)

In The Gods Arrive, another weak novel, Vance leaves Halo for Floss Delaney, but returns to her at the end. However, we do not really believe that he is completely reformed and back to stay. His character has deteriorated. He is the inferior personality to which Halo's superior nature is bound.

Edith Wharton's style and subject matter have fallen off considerably in her writing since The Age of Innocence. The inferiority of these two novels just mentioned is apparent. Her former precision and sense of rhythm are missing. The generalizations abound, as do the clichés. There is a softness, a carelessness, and a lack of control. Her style has become flabby. The former brisk quality has been lost. Certainly, not a great deal would have been lost had Edith Wharton stopped writing fiction after The Age of Innocence, a step (she tells us in The Writing of Fiction) which she considered. Some critics find promise in her
posthumously published novel, *The Buccaneers*, but it is unfinished. Finding promise in an unfinished work of art is not so difficult, because the critic's imagination may supply whatever he likes. There is no way of knowing just how good or how bad the author would have produced the finished product.

The only definite conclusion which can be drawn is that never again after 1920 does Edith Wharton approach the excellence achieved in *The Age of Innocence*. Her attitude toward love remains a harsh one, but her manner of presenting her views deteriorates.
FOOTNOTES TO PART E--CHAPTER III


3 Wharton, p. 364.


6 Wharton, p. 116.

7 Wharton, p. 119.


9 Nevius, p. 235.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

We have seen the paradox of conventionality and unconventionality in Edith Wharton's life and writings. As previously stated, the popular eye sees Edith Wharton as an old-fashioned, strictly conventional author of sentimentalized fiction. The reasons for this judgment of Mrs. Wharton have been discussed—in some instances substantiated and in other instances modified or even reversed.

In Chapter I it was shown that the recent facts which have come to light must alter the long prevailing view of Edith Wharton's life as strictly conventional. The long held opinion was that she was the typical socialite daughter of a wealthy, influential New York family who married an older man of similar background and filled her uneventful days attending teas and writing fiction so unobtrusively that her social acquaintances were unaware of her writing. It was thought that her life was as emotionally barren as it appears to have been on the surface. She was thought to have lived a sheltered life, kept at a protective distance from active participation. It was formerly believed that her one departure from strict conventionality was the negative act of
divorcing her husband, a withdrawal so to speak rather than an active participation in life. Even so she seemed to have remained essentially calm and unaffected by her divorce. However, with the publication of recent facts, we have begun to see the true face behind the mask which Edith Wharton wore. We have seen that her life was not nearly so placid as it had been thought. Whether or not she really was an illegitimate child, she believed or at least suspected that she was. We have also seen her intense involvement with Walter Berry before, during, and after her marriage to Edward Wharton. Mrs. Wharton's own words in her diary and letters prove that she loved Mr. Berry and felt trapped by her marriage. Thus, in an otherwise for the most part conventional life, her love for Walter Berry was strong enough to cause her to defy the conventional standards of society which she believed in and to which she made her fictional characters adhere. It has been seen how Edith Wharton's personal experiences helped to shape and were reflected in her unconventional attitude toward love, and the amount of autobiography in her fiction was also discussed. Thus the unconventional aspects of her life gave rise to and colored the unconventional aspects of her fiction.

In Chapter II we examined Mrs. Wharton's theory of fiction and the technique which she employed in her fiction. We saw her denunciation of the experimentalistic stream-of-consciousness method and the school which she termed "dirt for dirt's sake." On the positive side, we saw her emphasis
upon selection and form. She stressed control and order from the beginning with the motto taken from Thomas Traherne, "Order the beauty even of Beauty is." Her description of a good subject for fiction included traditional qualifications. She believed that a subject should be significant, contain a moral, and typify common experience. She stressed credibility and maintaining the illusion of reality. In her own fiction she usually relied upon the traditional omniscient author for her point of view. All of these traditional theories and practices add up to her classical, formalized, essentially conservative approach to the creation of fiction both theoretically and in actual practice.

Mrs. Wharton's reliance upon the established patterns and practices set by previous authors was mentioned in previous discussion. Specifically noted was her imitation of Henry James, of his early style, especially in her early style in which there were frequent echoes of James's themes, situations, names, metaphors, and methods.

We have seen Mrs. Wharton's formalization and classicism in the content and attitudes expressed in her fiction as well as in her style. She often wrote about New York society, the top of the social pyramid. Unlike her contemporaries, she emphasized the quiet, internal moral struggle rather than physical violence and sensationalism. Her attitude included restraint and control. It is not so much that she ignored the existence of the beast in man which was so much in the foreground with her contemporaries and
successors. Rather, it was because she was aware of this crude, vulgar side of human nature that she saw the need for control and the undesirability of unleashing the human appetite from all restraint. Like Dr. Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift, Edith Wharton had a "genuinely classical recognition of the very real problem of evil inherent in the material world."¹ Like Hobbes, she insisted upon a strict adherence to the discipline of rules. This exaltation of social laws at the expense of individual freedom is the natural consequence of a disbelief in the innate goodness of man. Because man cannot trust his own impulses and instincts, he must curb them and allow himself to be governed by society. The discipline of pain is constantly used to squelch romantic rebellion in the individual. Formal control is exerted not only in her theory and her technique of writing, but also in the content of her fiction. The characters must not be allowed to follow their own desires. Self must be sacrificed to society when a conflict arises. Otherwise institutions such as the social hierarchy and such as marriage will be destroyed. The result will be chaotic; for example, the lenient marriage bonds of Mr. and Mrs. Wheater produce seven orphaned children. When the sanctity of the institution of marriage is destroyed, the result is deplorable promiscuity. Thus Edith Wharton would have rationalism control the individual impulse. The individual must abide by the standards set by society. It is not that she advocates blind obedience to the rules simply because they are in
existence; rather she perceives the standard as the result of the human need for discipline. She is capable of distinguishing "that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established."^2

"If Edith Wharton's moral vision can be described as classical because she believed in consciously disciplining limited human nature to achieve human excellence, her aesthetic vision can also be described as classical because she believed in consciously disciplining and organizing the raw material of art to achieve aesthetic excellence. . . . She is a formal writer . . . in the best sense of the word because she could control her material and control it flexibly, adapting critical means to the aesthetic ends demanded by the story."^3 Thus, in method and content, she followed the formalized, classical approach in the creation of her fiction.

In Chapter III we examined specific works of Edith Wharton in detail. It was in this chapter that we saw Edith Wharton's unconventionality couched within conventional form; paradoxically, conventionality and unconventionality are interwoven, tradition and originality intermingled. Unlike other American writers, Edith Wharton was concerned with man as a social being, his relationship to society, and the responsibility that goes with being a member of society. Unlike her contemporaries, Edith Wharton placed man in society, but held him, as an individual, responsible for his actions. Although a member of society, man could not excuse
himself as a product of his society. Edith Wharton's indi­
viduals are faced with moral decisions, and each individual
is held accountable for his own actions.

It has also been shown that Mrs. Wharton departed
from the mainstream of American literature in her effective
treatment of romantic love. She neither ignored it nor
substituted lust in place of love, but usually handled the
subject realistically and beautifully.

Her treatment of adult, heterosexual love was con­
nected to the focal point of this dissertation which, as had
been seen, is Edith Wharton's unconventional attitude toward
love as a destructive force. Chapter III discussed in detail
the better novels of Mrs. Wharton's major phase. These
novels center upon romantic love and therefore provide
excellent examples of Mrs. Wharton's unconventional attitude
toward love. This pessimistic view of love as the source of
pain distinguishes Edith Wharton from the conventional
writers of sentimentalized fiction who portray romantic love
as the final panacea for all troubles and the source of
unmitigated joy and happiness for those who are deserving.
In Edith Wharton's fiction the "deserving" suffer as much or
more than the others. Although, as Denis de Rougemont has
pointed out in his book Love in the Western World, there is
a tradition in which love and suffering are united,4 Edith
Wharton's attitude toward love goes beyond the tradition and
adds the depth of her own personal experience. For example,
there are occasionally hints of bitterness, and the heroes
are constantly failing the heroines in moments of crisis in Mrs. Wharton's fiction. Also, unlike Rougemont's traditional lovers, Tristram and Iseult, Edith Wharton's lovers choose suffering rather than go against their morality. Edith Wharton's major characters are responsible, moral creatures who hold the good of society above personal, individual good. They consciously choose to sacrifice their own happiness and to suffer as a result.

The later novels must be mentioned separately because they fall into a category different from the novels of the major phase. As has been shown, these later novels support the belief that Edith Wharton wrote sentimentalized fiction with soap-opera plots. It is true that these later novels are inferior. The moral decision is often lacking, and it is fate, coincidence, or just human nature rather than a positive, moral decision which produces the suffering from love. Yet, in this one respect that love does produce pain and not happiness, Edith Wharton remains true to her former concepts. Her attitude toward love remains the same. We saw that even though employing conventional romantic plot and style, she continues her unconventional attack upon romantic love in these later novels.

Thus the paradoxical combination of conventionality and unconventionality remains united in Edith Wharton. Her unconventional love for Walter Berry ruffled the smooth surface of her life, and her unconventional attitude toward love is couched in traditional form and subject matter.
Edith Wharton stands out as an author whose contribution to American literature has been underestimated. It is hoped that the future will bring a just appreciation.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IV


4Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World (New York: Pantheon, 1956).
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Approved:

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