



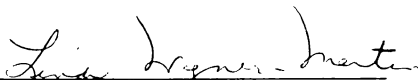
3 1293 00917 3620

This is to certify that the
dissertation entitled
Coming into the Twentieth Century:
Narrative Strategies in
Edith Wharton's Fiction
presented by

Kathleen D. Hadley

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in English


Major professor

Date 6-3-91

LIBRARY
Michigan State
University

PLACE IN RETURN BOX to remove this checkout from your record.
TO AVOID FINES return on or before date due.

DATE DUE	DATE DUE	DATE DUE
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

MSU Is An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution

c:\clrc\datedue.pm3-p.1

COMING INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN
EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

By
Kathleen D. Hadley

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1991

656-1534

ABSTRACT

COMING INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

By

Kathleen D. Hadley

This study considers Edith Wharton's use of narrative strategies, including her pervasive use of irony and her experiments with narrative form, in five novels: The Reef (1912); The Custom of the Country (1913); The Age of Innocence (1920); The Mother's Recompense (1925); and The Children (1928). In writing several novels, Wharton began with a certain center of consciousness, worked with that character for a while, and then changed to another for the finished novel. Much of the irony in these fictions results from Wharton's undercutting her own narrators' perspectives and her concern with the stories she ostensibly leaves untold. Of the works discussed in this study, Wharton's switching the novel's center of consciousness has had the most dramatic impact on The Age of Innocence; critics have so thoroughly accepted Newland Archer's perspective that they have missed the narrative's insistence on the importance of Ellen's and May's stories, along with Wharton's ironic treatment of Newland.

The different uses that Wharton makes of her men characters' and her women characters' untold stories reflects her concern with issues of sexual freedom and the

sexual double standard. Drawing on the work of Rachael Blau DuPlessis' Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (1985), I argue that Wharton removed Ellen Olenska from the narrative center of The Age of Innocence because her story was not "narratable" by early twentieth-century conventions. Conversely, Wharton left the stories of her men characters' sexual "experiments" untold both because these stories were predictable for the reader and because, by showing her women characters' ignorance of such stories, Wharton emphasizes that these women are outsiders to the male world.

The tendency of Wharton's male characters to prefer younger, presumably more malleable women creates an incest motif in her fictions. Wharton's characters also tend to view other people as rivals, usually for another person's love. Ultimately, the failure of these characters to articulate their needs to each other prevents most of them from gaining psychological or sexual fulfillment. As a result, Wharton's novels tend to end without a sense of resolution for her characters.

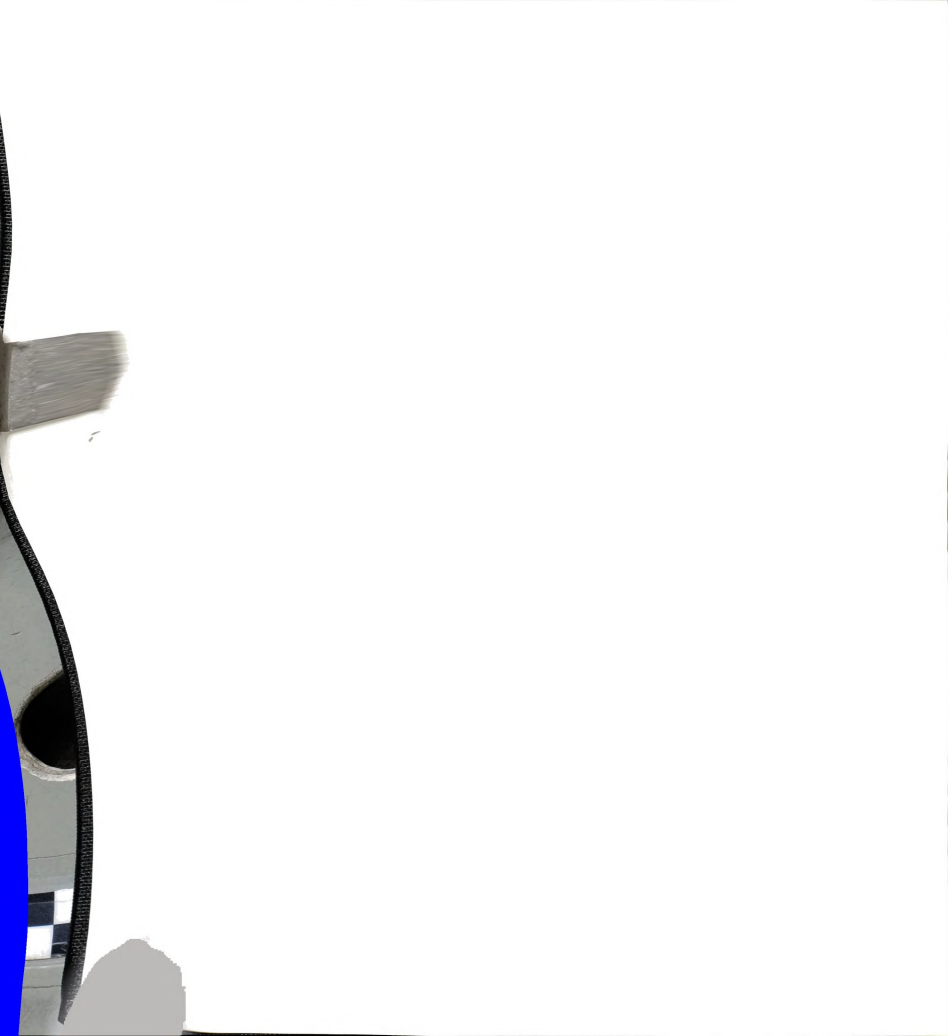
Copyright by
KATHLEEN D. HADLEY
1991

DEDICATION

For my husband, Curt Hadley, once again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to each of my committee members for your consistent support and enthusiasm. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Linda Wagner-Martin for continuing to work with me long after she left Michigan State University.



PREFACE

This study draws on the work of several recent critics who have discussed twentieth-century responses to traditional nineteenth-century novels. In Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis explores the ways in which modern women writers diverge from and therefore often subvert the plot requirements of the sentimental tradition, in which "any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot," with women's stories ending either in marriage or in death (6, 1). DuPlessis, taking The House of Mirth as the representative Wharton text, thinks Wharton's work belongs to the nineteenth-century tradition. But Wharton undermines the novel's apparently traditional structure in several ways. Most obviously, in The House of Mirth, there is no lingering sentimental death scene in which the heroine makes her peace with everyone; Lily Bart dies alone, and Lawrence Selden arrives at her side too late either to speak "the word which made all clear" or to save her (342).¹

¹See Linda Wagner-Martin's discussion of The House of Mirth's denouement, which she sees as performing "the subtle unmasking of the still inaccurate narrator, Lawrence Selden" (36-40).

In contrast to DuPlessis, Dale Bauer and Amy Kaplan focus on The House of Mirth in placing Wharton in the context of twentieth-century realism. In Feminist Dialogics (1988), Bauer notes that Wharton's "ironic distance" from the marriage plot "prevents her from continuing the sentimental trajectory," and discusses Wharton's "textual struggle between the sentimental novel and the realist experiment with those sentimental designs" (95, 99). Kaplan, in her 1990 The Social Construction of American Realism, reassesses Wharton as "a professional author who wrote at the intersection of the mass market of popular fiction, the tradition of women's literature, and a realistic movement which developed in an uneasy dialog with twentieth-century modernism" (66). Discussing Lily's attending another woman's wedding early in The House of Mirth, Kaplan says, "By having Lily miss her chance to play this role [of bride] in the beginning of the novel, Wharton rejects marriage as the narrative teleology of the domestic novel, and implicitly calls attention to her narrative as realistic" (93-94).

In Gender and the Writer's Imagination (1987), Mary Suzanne Schriber says that while William Dean Howells and Henry James challenge the culture's "traditional understanding of woman," Wharton goes further: "The novels of Edith Wharton deconstruct the culture's horizon of expectations, asking previously unthinkable questions and exploring previously unimagined areas of 'woman's nature'



that were anathema or invisible to male novelists" (3). These "previously unimagined areas" include "matters of intellect and female sexuality" (Gender 15). A little more conservatively, Janet Goodwyn views Wharton as providing a bridge from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, as she reacts "to the removal of the inherited securities and values of her nineteenth-century upbringing" and provides a woman's insight into "the fact that the women of America are the creators and arbiters of the social scene" (Traveller in the Land of Letters 4).

My project continues the work of bringing Wharton into the twentieth century. I explore Wharton's narrative strategies in five novels, from The Reef (1912) to The Children (1928). I focus on Wharton's women characters and the ways in which she "writes beyond" traditional novels, ironically undercutting her own narrative structures and calling attention to stories she has ostensibly left untold. I have chosen to discuss works that have been relatively neglected, as is the case with Wharton's "Jamesian" novel The Reef, and two of her presumably inferior later novels, The Mother's Recompense (1925) and The Children; and works whose women characters have been neglected in favor of attention to the male characters, as has happened with The Custom of the Country (1913) and The Age of Innocence (1920).

The publication of these novels spans the time from the dissolution of Wharton's marriage to Teddy Wharton and the

close of her affair with Morton Fullerton, to the death of her close friend Walter Berry. Berry's death capped more than a decade of such losses, beginning with the death of Henry James in 1916. The sexual awakening Wharton experienced in her relationship with Fullerton is evident in her fictional explorations of women's passion. By ending with The Children, this study returns full circle. The Children explores a situation quite similar to that in The Reef. But Wharton's depiction of Martin Boyne's confused desire for Judith Wheater is much more subtle than her portrayal of George Darrow, who assumes that there are two major types of women, each designed to serve different aspects of "the more complex masculine nature" (Reef 25).

Although Wharton's two completed novels after The Children also reflect her narrative concern with untold stories and with her characters' psychological development, Wharton's special concern with religious issues and what Elizabeth Ammons calls "the maternal principle" in Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and its sequel, The Gods Arrive (1932), place them beyond the scope of this study.²

²Edith Wharton's Argument with America, 189. Ammons sees Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive as reflecting the aging Wharton's desire to "synthesize her new endorsement of motherhood with her lifelong belief in woman's right to self-determination" (189).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One "Feminine Types" and the Double Standard in <u>The Reef</u>	7
Chapter Two Undine's Unending Story in <u>The Custom of the Country</u>	41
Chapter Three Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in <u>The Age of Innocence</u>	86
Chapter Four Repaying Her Daughter: <u>The Mother's Recompense</u>	105
Chapter Five Passion and Possession in <u>The Children</u>	147
Conclusion	176
Bibliography	188

INTRODUCTION

Criticism has traditionally overlooked Edith Wharton's narrative strategies and has therefore devalued her fiction, considering it a remnant of the nineteenth century. R.W.B. Lewis, in his 1975 Wharton biography, recalls Vernon L. Parrington's labelling Wharton "'our literary aristocrat'" and implying "that for all its craftsmanship her book [The Age of Innocence] was irrelevant to the more pressing issues of the day" (429). The Literary History of the United States (1959) says Wharton "is likely to survive as the memorialist of a dying aristocracy" (Quoted in Baym 128). And Rachel Blau DuPlessis, whose Writing Beyond the Ending (1985) discusses twentieth-century women writers' experiments with narrative form, sees Wharton as belonging to the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition. Even those making a case for Wharton's place as an important twentieth-century author have often felt compelled to qualify their arguments. Despite rejecting Parrington's view, Lewis refers to The Age of Innocence as "a minor masterpiece" (Edith Wharton 429, my emphasis). Irving Howe, who in 1962 lamented that "justice has not yet come to Edith Wharton," goes on to call her "a writer of wit, force and maturity," though "not the peer of Hawthorne, Melville and James" (1).

Throughout her career, however, Wharton experimented with narrative form, writing ironic variations on the traditional nineteenth-century bildungsroman and sentimental novel. She often, with apparent intention, undermined the ostensible structure of her novels. This study brings Wharton into the twentieth century by considering such elements as her pervasive use of irony, her subtle attention to the often "untold" women's stories, and her concern with her characters' psychological development, in five novels: The Reef (1912); The Custom of the Country (1913); The Age of Innocence (1920); The Mother's Recompense (1925); and The Children (1928). These novels exemplify some of Wharton's most successful experiments with form. I eschew the common view that Wharton's career peaked with The Age of Innocence; her portrayal of Kate Clephane's egocentrism in The Mother's Recompense is certainly more subtle than her characterization of Undine Spragg's egocentrism in The Custom of the Country; and her consideration of the relational triangle in The Children is an astute variation on her earlier treatment of a similar situation in The Reef.

Wharton's concern with narrative form is evidenced in her careful reworking of the plans for many of her novels. For instance, Wharton outlined several versions of The Age of Innocence, each focusing on Ellen Olenska as the novel's center of consciousness but varying the details of her involvement with Newland Archer. Wharton often set a manuscript aside, returning to it as many as 20 years later

(in the case of The Mother's Recompense), when she was ready to return to the subject or to explore her material from a different perspective. Wharton's returning to The Custom of the Country, a novel about multiple divorces, after her own divorce is a classic example. In the interim, she wrote The Reef, exploring issues of women's passion, sexual freedom, and commitment with two seemingly different women--women who, in fact, George Darrow categorizes as opposite "types." It may be that Wharton needed to work more with the issue of two separate, complex women, which she had addressed previously in her 1907 The Fruit of the Tree, before she was ready to depict a character as multi-dimensional as Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country.

In writing several novels, Wharton began with a certain center of consciousness, worked with that character for a while, and then changed to another for the finished novel. Much of the irony in these fictions results from Wharton's undercutting her own narrators' perspectives, and her concern with the stories she ostensibly leaves untold. Discussing the politics of the untold story, DuPlessis says:

To compose a work is to negotiate with these questions: What stories can be told? How can plots be resolved? What is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions? Indeed, these are issues very acute to certain feminist critics and women writers, with their senses of the untold story, the other side of a well-known tale.... (Writing Beyond the Ending 3)

Of the works discussed in this study, Wharton's switching the novel's center of consciousness has had the most dramatic impact on The Age of Innocence; critics have so

thoroughly accepted Newland Archer's perspective that they have missed the narrative's insistence on the importance of Ellen's and May's stories, just as many readers have missed Wharton's ironic treatment of Newland.¹ Similarly, Wharton began what was to become The Mother's Recompense as the story of the abandoned little girl, only much later reworking it to focus on the mother, Kate Clephane. Here, again, Wharton's narrative calls the reader's attention to the other major characters' untold stories, despite Kate's indifference to them. In The Reef, Anna Leath becomes obsessed with a particular story from Sophy Viner's life--that of her sexual involvement with George Darrow--and comes to view Sophy as symbolic of all the risks and involvement with life which she herself has not experienced.

In each of these novels, Wharton's male characters tend to prefer the women who seem the most malleable and therefore the most subject to their influence, because they are either threatened or disillusioned by the relatively independent adult women. The Age of Innocence's Newland Archer, as Elizabeth Ammons says, "mythicizes May after her death, and he does so out of fear of the dark, 'grown up' woman," Ellen (Edith Wharton's Argument with America 152). Wharton repeatedly uses the motif of a relational triangle to explore the ways in which a man categorizes two women as

¹See for example Richard Lawson, who accepts Newland's perception of May: "Her innocence is the innocence of the title," Lawson says, despite her frequent ability to act to protect her world (22).

separate types, usually to the detriment of the older, more experienced woman.² Thus, in The Reef, George Darrow finds Sophy Viner more "natural" than Anna Leath; Chris Fenno marries the daughter of his former lover, Kate Clephane, in The Mother's Recompense; and The Children's Martin Boyne sabotages his engagement with a woman his age because he decides he is in love with a fifteen-year-old girl who views him as a father figure.

Recent critics have questioned readings that rely on the male character's perceptions and that sometimes result in negative, one-dimensional views, as when Edmund Wilson labelled Undine Spragg a gold-digging "bitch" (Argument 101), or Geoffrey Walton contended that George Darrow is morally superior to Anna Leath, who "nags" him for details about his affair with Sophy Viner (Edith Wharton 68-69). Looking beyond the male characters allows, for instance, for Mary Suzanne Schriber's discussion of the ways Wharton's women characters' "behavior is often misconstrued" or "rendered invisible and therefore unappreciated if it in any way outstrips ordinary expectations of woman" ("Convention" 189). This misreading certainly occurs in The Reef, in which George belittles Sophy's professional interest in the theatre as a mere desire for amusement. And in The Children, Martin Boyne is quick to assume that Rose Sellars is motivated by "womanly" jealousy in her response to Judith

²Wharton varies this theme in The Mother's Recompense by using one of the women, rather than the man, as the center of consciousness throughout the novel.

Wheater (252).

Throughout her fiction, Wharton's women forego marriage after becoming disillusioned with their romantic expectations, as does Anna Leath in The Reef. Or they marry, often without romantic illusions, and try to manipulate their world from within their marriages. Both The Age of Innocence's May Welland and The Custom of the Country's Undine Spragg--two very different characters--make the latter choice, but Wharton makes clear the limitations of marriage for each. May lives out her life artificially sheltered but knowing her husband is in love with another woman, and Undine lives in a state of dissatisfaction that stems from her inability to have the things she wants without relying on a man to get them. Interwoven in these fictions is the women characters' tendency to go aground on the male sexual double standard, a problem Wharton addresses with particular force in The Reef.

Chapter One

"Feminine Types" and the Double Standard

in The Reef

In her 1912 The Reef, Edith Wharton explores the implications of the sexual double standard. She allows the reader glimpses of George Darrow's past--a past involving a man's socially-acceptable "experiments" with sex--but shows how keeping a "lady" ignorant of such stories is potentially devastating. For the discovery that George has had an affair while enroute to her turns Anna Leath's world upside down. Wharton further questions the double standard by making the "other woman," Sophy Viner, a sympathetic character and by depicting Anna's attempts to understand a "type" of woman from whose story a lady should presumably be sheltered. Wharton makes a point of Sophy's orphanancy early in the novel (22) and then writes beyond the traditional nineteenth-century options for an orphan girl--respectability as a governess or rescue through marriage--without bringing Sophy's story to a definite conclusion.

Passion is central to The Reef. It is the factor that most strongly connects Anna and Sophy, who defy George's attempts to classify them. Both women struggle to be true to their experiences; Anna, having paid for her silence in the past by losing George, attempts to communicate with him

now, and Sophy refuses to deny her feelings for George. Conversely, George uses language as a tool of diplomacy, first as he seduces Sophy, and later as he attempts to trivialize that affair to Anna. The women are under constraints that do not affect George. For them, sexual passion is to be confined to marriage, and both Sophy and Anna suffer when they fail to honor this constraint. But as a man, George can dismiss his affair with Sophy as unimportant. He exempts himself from responsibility by viewing Anna and Sophy in ways that, in his mind, excuse his behavior.

The structure of The Reef suggests the conflict between George's and Anna's perceptions. Wharton begins the novel with George's perspective but then undermines his point of view in Book II by switching to Anna as the novel's primary center of consciousness. Wharton leads the reader into Anna's perspective gradually; she is introduced first as a "lady," then as "Mrs. Leath," and finally as Anna. The progression parallels Anna's growing self-knowledge throughout the rest of the narrative, as she relies decreasingly on others' perceptions of her to understand herself. Anna is initially shown through the eyes of a narrator, who speculates that "she seemed...to be looking about her with eyes to which, for some intimate inward reason, details long since familiar had suddenly acquired an unwonted freshness" (81-82). That this "was in fact the exact sensation of which Mrs. Leath was conscious" is then

confirmed, and much of the story is henceforth seen from Anna's perspective (82). By starting Book II with a narrator, as well as neglecting to name Anna at first, Wharton introduces Anna as George would see her: "a lady," calmly taking in her surroundings (81).

In the same sentence that we are assured of Anna's perspective, she is also named--though as someone's wife. The use of her married name leads naturally into "Mrs. Leath's" memories of her first marriage. Looking about her at Givre, Anna remembers her attitudes and expectations as a young bride. She had expected love to be a "magic bridge" from the "unreality" of her New York girlhood, into life (86). She had had "romantic associations" about the "chateau" and had expected a "noble and dignified" fate there (82). Elizabeth Ammons, discussing Wharton's use of fairy tales in Ethan Frome and The Reef, points out that Anna's earlier vision of marriage had been a "fantasy," "not of escaping but of passively being freed, being saved, being awakened and reborn into life by the love of a man--the fantasy, in short, of Sleeping Beauty's being awakened by Prince Charming..." (Argument 80). But in her life with the sedate Fraser Leath, Anna had found herself "farther than ever removed from the strong joys and pangs for which she felt herself made," and she had since become used to the house as "the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling," a place where she was comfortable, though not happy (94, 83).

Anna's renewed way of looking at Givré as she anticipates George's arrival ironically mirrors her perception as a young bride. In trying to look at the house through George's eyes, Anna "seemed to be opening her own eyes upon it after a long interval of blindness" (83). She perceives of the court as "full of a latent life" and feels herself likewise filled with "a latent animation." Despite the disappointments of her first marriage, Anna is capable of anticipating her marriage to George with the same naive eagerness. Ammons explains Anna's perspective as follows: "Fraser Leath failed, but his widow blames the man, not the dream, and therefore looks forward to marriage with her old friend George Darrow" (Argument 82-83). Ironically, the "veil" that had always existed between her and life, which Anna believes has now been lifted by George, will be lowered again by his deception (84).

Yet Anna's enthusiasm seems less fallacious when her intense physical passion for George is considered. Wharton takes care to explain how the young Anna Summers had become the "lady" who married Fraser Leath. Anna had been raised in a world in which "people with emotions were not visited" and had had no one with whom to share her interest in "the passions and sensations" of poetry.¹ Anna became externally "conquered" by this society but developed a "visioned region of action and emotion" that contrasted with her increasing

¹In his Wharton biography, R.W.B. Lewis notes the similarities between young Anna Summers and Edith Jones (Edith Wharton 326).

reserve (85). As a result, Anna had felt intense emotions for George but could not express them to him. When they were together, she would behave coldly, "while hot and cold waves swept over her, and the things she really wanted to say choked in her throat and burned the palms of her hands" (87). When they were apart, Anna would resolve to act differently, but she never overcame the strictures of a society which ensured that women, as Florence Nightingale said, "'must act the farce of hypocrisy, the lie that they are without passion'" (DeLamotte 217).

Anna had viewed physical passion as integral to what she hoped would be a passionately intellectual relationship; while George "wanted to kiss her," 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" (85). Perceiving George's interest in another woman, Anna had become disillusioned. Into the void of her "dissolved" hopes had come Fraser Leath, who seemed to offer intellectual, if not carnal, "joys" (89). As James Tuttleton says in "Mocking Fate: Romantic Idealism in Edith Wharton's The Reef," Fraser had represented "the absence of emotional danger" (466). It is no wonder that after a long marriage to a man whose "kiss dropped on her like a cold smooth pebble," Anna now perceives herself as "not used to strong or full emotions" and looks forward to exploring these feelings with George (89, 83).

Because he is unaware of her feelings, George's

perceptions of the adult Anna fail to go beyond her external self. His view of her implicitly relies on her coldness toward him as a girl. The novel begins with George's reaction to a telegram from Anna, telling him to postpone his visit. He is initially "chilled" by her "dealing so reasonably with their case," and works himself up to the point of assuming that "her 'reason', whatever it was, could...be nothing but a pretext; unless he leaned to the less flattering alternative that any reason seemed good enough for postponing him!" His thoughts continue, "She didn't want him, and had taken the shortest way to tell him so" (8). Neither George himself nor the narrative explores the insecurity about his relationship with Anna that his reaction reveals. Instead, George focuses on Anna's character. He belittles Anna's life, "an existence...at once so ordered and so exposed," in which a small complication "might assume the magnitude of an 'obstacle'..." (8). And while his work keeps them apart for months at a time, George is indignant with Anna for supposedly treating him "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!" (8) The implication is clear: George considers his commitments important (at least his professional ones), and Anna's trivial.

George finds this postponement especially rankling because, as he perceives it, Anna had already "submitted so

tamely to the disarrangement of their plans" within the previous few weeks for the sake of her "family obligations." He remembers that, on their last evening together--together also with Anna's step-son Owen and her mother-in-law--"they had had an almost decisive exchange of words." Yet his own memories show that they did not have any plans. Anna has not yet answered his marriage proposal, but he has simply assumed she was "walking to him down the years" and "would come straight to where he stood" (7-8). Anna simply cannot win. George considers her at one moment too cold and reasonable because she has asked him to postpone his visit for, he assumes, a trifling reason; and at the next moment, he silently charges her with failure to use her "ingenuity" to overcome whatever is keeping them apart (8).

Much of George's frustration with Anna appears to stem from his lack of influence on her life thus far.² He believes he had missed his chance, when Anna was young, to "put warmth in her veins and light in her eyes: [he] would have made her a woman through and through." He speculates that Anna "was still afraid of life" because she has always been sheltered, and concludes,

A love like his might have given her the divine gift of self-renewal; and now he saw her fated to wane into old age repeating the same gestures...and perhaps never guessing that, just outside her glazed and curtained consciousness, life rolled away, a vast blackness starred with lights, like the night landscape beyond the windows of the train. (29)

²Ammons discusses George's "Pygmalion" attitudes toward Anna (Argument 94).

George thinks that without his early influence, Anna must be somehow incomplete. His disdain for her "curtained consciousness" is ironic in light of George's later attempts to keep Anna ignorant of certain areas of his life--most notably his affair with Sophy Viner--and in light of the fact that he has these thoughts about Anna while on the train to Paris, on which he shares a compartment with Sophy.

As a girl, Anna loses George because she cannot tell him what he means to her. Soon after George's arrival at Givre, we are told they are happy in each other's presence, "Yet Anna was intensely aware that as soon as they began to talk more intimately they would feel that they knew each other less well" (105). Anna correctly anticipates the same old problem of communication, but this time it is primarily caused by George's deceptiveness, rather than by her reserve. Their first real conversation since his arrival is based on George's interest in letting Anna think he read a letter from her which, in the midst of his affair with Sophy, he had in fact thrown on the fire unopened. Since the letter had contained Anna's "yes" to his proposal, she is understandably upset by his cavalier attitude about "ignoring" it (109). In fact, George came to Givre only after Anna repeated her answer in another letter, several months later. Anna persists in trying to discuss this letter, and their misunderstanding about her telegram delaying his visit, because "'Between you and me everything matters,'" and because "she wanted no less than the whole of

her happiness" (107). But all George can do in his defense is to create a lie that puts Anna in the wrong. He tells her that he didn't believe she really cared, and that he "'cared so much that I couldn't risk another failure'" (110).

Anna correctly senses that she is an outsider to much of George's world and perceives of any secrets between them as a threat to her happiness. Her reference to their first romance carries a double meaning that she is as yet unaware of herself: "'It's curious how, in those first days, too, something that I didn't understand came between us'" (107). George's ability to have a casual flirtation, even a physical relationship, with another woman while courting her is what Anna couldn't understand in the past and, rather than the ostensible misunderstanding about their correspondence, is the underlying cause of her uneasiness now.

Anna's attempt to deal with her perplexity shows that she remembers the lessons of their previous courtship and will not let George go so easily this time. Yet her obtuseness about George's affair indicates that, contrary to the complete understanding Anna claims to want, she is willing to pay the price of ignorance in some areas in order to keep him. When she mentions the pink cloak Owen saw in George's booth at the theatre in Paris, Anna shows how accurate her instincts are. But when George does not immediately give her a full confession of his infidelity,

Anna dismisses her suspicions (114-15). By denying her perceptions Anna protects herself from fully understanding the truth, even when it appears the truth should be most obvious to her, throughout most of the novel.

Their inability to communicate with each other belies George's earlier vision of rescuing Anna from the memory of her first marriage, in which there had been no "communion" (4-5). He assumes this lack of communion, not because of anything Anna says, but because "her very reticence betrayed her" (5). What Anna does not say to him, George takes as evidence of a lack of communion with Fraser. Anna's thoughts about Fraser prove George right, but in their case, Anna is the only one interested in honest communication, while George is snared by his lie about the letter from her which he never read. Even the "deeper feeling of communion" George believes he and Anna had shared in an earlier meeting is a figment of George's "fancy" and is not based on speech (5).

Once Anna begins to suspect what happened between George and Sophy, her feelings are in constant fluctuation. Richard Lawson says Anna's real concern is whether or not her fiance is in love with the "other woman":

Anna, true daughter of her society, can countenance, however reluctantly, George's having sown wild oats. But she fears and dreads the possibility that he might be in love with Sophy, despite his protests to the contrary. (58)

The text, however, does not support the idea that Anna could countenance this particular sowing of oats. Anna is

especially devastated by the fact that George had this affair while he was on the way to her, to persuade her to marry him. She is also unable to accept the idea that George has no responsibility to Sophy. When he says, "there's nothing I can do for her that will help her half so much as your understanding her would," Anna responds, "Nothing you can do for her? You can marry her!" The exchange continues:

"You certainly couldn't wish her a worse fate!"
 "It must have been what she expected...relied on..." He was silent, and she broke out: "Or what is she? What are you? It's too horrible! On your way here...to me..." She felt the tears in her throat and stopped. (292)

Anna's view that George should marry Sophy indicates her failure to accept the standard by which men operate in her society; she is as much appalled at his actions as she is at Sophy's.

This is quite different from George's own perspective, by which he considers Sophy unsuitable for Owen but does not seem to have any compunctions about his own status as Anna's fiance.³ George has already rationalized this double

³The blatant hypocrisy of George's position was noted as long ago as 1950, by Josephine Lurie Jessup. She comments: "The idea of confiding the child Effie to Miss Viner he finds 'peculiarly repugnant,' although he does not question his own suitability for the role of stepfather, any more than he questions his right to marry the child's mother, at the termination of his former liaison" (25). More recently, Richard Lawson succinctly states the three reasons why George opposes Sophy's marriage to Owen: George "is acting out of an exquisite blend of self-interest, class consciousness, and an unquestioning assumption of a double standard of sexual morality" (57).

standard by classifying women according to "types." He "had had a fairly varied experience of feminine types, but the women he had frequented had either been pronouncedly 'ladies' or they had not" (25).

Grateful to both for ministering to the more complex masculine nature, and disposed to assume that they had been evolved, if not designed, to that end, he had instinctively kept the two groups apart in his mind, avoiding that intermediate society which attempts to conciliate both theories of life. (25)

This extremely reductive view of women enables George to enjoy Sophy's sexual "ministering," on the basis of which he categorizes her as "not lady," without perceiving that their affair stigmatizes him in any way. The idea that George "liked his 'ladies' and their rivals to be equally unashamed of showing for exactly what they were" also suggests that George does not like the "rivals," such as Sophy, to attempt to cross over into the other category (25). This is later confirmed by George's "obscure indignation" at Sophy when he discovers she is engaged to Owen Leath and his "doubt as to the disinterestedness of the woman who tries to rise above her past" (187).⁴

When Anna declines to view George's affair as he does, George changes tactics and tries to blame the affair on her.

"I was on my way to you....At the very last minute you turned me back with a mere word....I'm not saying this to justify myself. I'm simply trying to make you understand." (293)

⁴Lady Ulrica--about whom George now has such unpleasant feelings--is a third type: "the woman who uses the privileges of one class to shelter the customs of another" (25).

But clearly George is trying (as he does at the beginning of the novel) to take attention off of himself by focusing on Anna's faults.⁵ George also tells her that "'a woman like you'"--the lady-type he had earlier admired so greatly--could never understand the "'miseries and humiliations'" that influenced Sophy to have an affair with him: she is "'too fine'" to grasp the fullness of life of which his affair with Sophy Viner is a part (293, 295). Thus George rationalizes his affair with Sophy on the basis of Anna's presumed coldness and her inability, as a "lady," to understand the complexities of life. But Anna has had miseries and humiliations directly related to George. His earlier flirtation with another woman, when Anna had thought they would be together, is ironically the major experience that has influenced her to speak more openly with George in their new relationship.

Both Anna and Sophy are far more complex than George is willing to recognize. George's attempt to dismiss his affair with Sophy as a "'moment's folly'" (293) indicates not only the level upon which he operates, but how little he expects of Anna, as well. By asking Anna to overlook the affair, George is asking her both to sanction the sexual

⁵George's attitude reflects his profession as a diplomatist. Part of the Oxford English Dictionary's 1933 definition of diplomacy is "artful management in dealing with others." A diplomatist is "a shrewd and crafty person" (OED 385-86). These definitions apply to George as he attempts to manage both Anna and Sophy, and as he attempts first to make Sophy leave Givre without revealing their affair, and later to overcome Anna's scruples.

double standard and to ignore her "too fine" misgivings about what his having engaged so lightly in a sexual relationship with someone says about George's character. As Margaret McDowell comments, George's thus making light of the affair is, for Anna, "only a sign of Darrow's callousness, insensitivity, and masculine complacency" (60). Anna tries to understand the situation from his perspective (a greater courtesy than George extends to her), but she cannot resolve her conflicting urges,

to shut out every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be; and at the same time...to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexperienced in matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience. (282)

Though Anna cannot view her fiance objectively, she does come to understand a great deal about him and the patriarchal world in which she lives. Listening to him explain his affair with Sophy,

She wondered at his composure, his competence, at his knowing so exactly what to say. No doubt men often had to make such explanations: they had the formulas by heart... (294, Wharton's ellipsis)

This insight is so overwhelming to Anna that "For a moment she simply ceased to feel" (295). Her eyes are now opened to other times when such "formulas" may have been prepared but were unneeded because of her own blindness:

It had never occurred to her that [Fraser] might have passions, interests, preoccupations of which she was absolutely ignorant....She tried to picture him...walking furtively down a quiet street, and looking about him before he slipped into a doorway. (321)

Anna can no more imagine this than she can understand what

George's affair with Sophy was like. She realizes that, by supposing her first husband may have had affairs, she was "simply trying to justify Darrow" so that she "could hope to keep" what she "could not give up" (322). This is true, yet it is also true that Anna now understands much more about the male world--and her status, as a woman, as an outsider to that world--than she ever had before, Fraser's actually being faithful or unfaithful notwithstanding.

Anna resents her new insight and becomes extremely upset with herself for seeking the truth; "...suddenly she was filled with anger at her blindness, and then at her disastrous attempt to see. Why had she forced the truth out of Darrow? If only she had held her tongue nothing need ever have been known," and "there flashed through her the longing to return to her old state of fearless ignorance" (322). Ironically, while George attempts to make others responsible for his actions, Anna focuses bitterly on herself just for demanding to know. Discussing Anna's "probing," Moira Maynard notes the novel's imagery of light and shadow:

Wharton will describe Anna pulling back veils and peering through mists to discover truth, while Darrow, in shadowed hallways and beneath wet umbrellas, will work to conceal the truth. As Darrow labors to distort and contain, Anna strains to see all the way to the heart of the Sophy-Darrow relationship and its implications.... ("Moral Integrity in The Reef" 292)

Anna's new perspective completely undermines the rest of her interactions with George. She begins to see manipulative intentions in everything he says and does. She

distrusts his explanation of how he was able to return to Givre, because "he had looked and spoken in the same way when he had answered her probing questions about Sophy Viner," and Anna realizes "she would never again know if he were speaking the truth or not" (324-25). When he had first returned, Anna noticed that "he always knows what to do," but rather than comforting her, "The idea that his tact was a kind of professional expertness filled her with repugnance..." (323).⁶ Later, as they sit together before the fire, Anna's tranquility is disrupted when she realizes "that she knew nothing of the inner thoughts of this man who was sitting by her as a husband might" (330). What had not mattered with Fraser has become essential with George, since his duplicity regarding his affair has taught her not to assume their thoughts will always be in harmony.

The idea that she cannot know George's mind is extremely threatening to Anna. She begins to question the depth of his love and worries that he will leave her when she ages.

He loved her now; she had no doubt of that; but

⁶The phrase "professional expertness" echoes two earlier uses of "expert" in the novel. George had initially considered Sophy "expert enough to understand his intention and spare him the boredom of hesitations and misinterpretations" (264). Later, Anna wants "to feel herself less ignorant and inexperienced" about such things as George's affair with Sophy (294). The concept of expertness underscores both the relevance of George's profession as diplomatist to his perception of women, and his miscalculations about these two particular women. Sophy, as he discovers too late, is not an "expert" at having affairs; and Anna understands far more than either George or she herself give her credit for.

how could she hope to keep him?....She thought with a pang of bitterness: "He won't grow any older because he doesn't feel things; and because he doesn't, I shall..." (318, Wharton's end ellipsis).

Her musings appear to focus on inadequacies Anna perceives in herself; she may not grow old gracefully, and "She put no faith in her own arts" to hold George (331). But Anna did not have such concerns until she knew about George's affair with the young and beautiful Sophy, and her real concern is that she may be unequal to overcoming George's shallowness. Anna expects to age more quickly as she internalizes all the pain she associates with George's insensitivity, as she has already internalized both the knowledge of his affair and his nonchalance about it.

Anna's anxiety about her appearance is in contrast to her earlier confidence in George's love, which had made her feel that "as she was, with her flattened hair, her tired pallor...he would like her better, feel her nearer, dearer, more desirable, than in all the splendours she might put on for him" (124). The irony of this contrast is heightened by the fact that Sophy's naturalness, to which George had compared Anna, was one of the major factors that had attracted him to her (27-28). Anna's fears are especially poignant in that she is looking ahead to a time when George may stop loving her, and comparing that time to a present in which he can have an affair with another woman while he still loves her.

From the first, Anna's feelings are complicated by her

strong sexual passion for George. This passion overwhelms her even before she has any hint of his unfaithfulness. A letter from George gives Anna "a keener edge to every sense," and following his arrival, she finds that "Every sensation of touch was thrice alive in her" (82, 103).

Wharton's reference to touch underscores the physical impact George has on Anna. As McDowell says, "every detail that connects [Anna] with Darrow becomes sexually charged" (59). Anna's passion continues to guide her after the revelation of George's affair makes her wish she could break away from him completely. When George accuses Anna of not understanding "the strings that pull us," she thinks, "I do understand. I've understood ever since you've been here!"

For she was aware...of sensations so separate from her romantic thoughts of him that she saw her body and soul divided against themselves....she discerned for the first time instincts and desires, which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of mutiny. (316-17)

But because Anna had come to believe in her outer reserve as a reflection of her inner self, she views her "sense of incompleteness, of passionate dependence" on George as "somehow at variance with her own conception of her character" (319).

Anna is forced to readjust her thinking about herself and come to terms with this passion. She realizes "she knew now" what George and Sophy know about themselves; she "knew weaknesses and strengths she had not dreamed of, and the

deep discord and still deeper complicities between what thought in her and what blindly wanted..." (320, Wharton's ellipsis). This passage foretells the difficulty Anna will have as she tries to leave Darrow. Her past behavior is echoed in the attempt; when away from him, "she formulated with a fervent lucidity every point in her imaginary argument" to break their engagement. But her passion overcomes these efforts:

...as soon as she was alone with him something deeper than reason and subtler than shyness laid its benumbing touch upon her, and the desire to speak became merely a dim disquietude, through which his looks, his words, his touch, reached her as through a mist of bodily pain. (329)

Anna's dilemma is complicated by her awareness that Sophy has experienced George's passion in a way she as yet can only imagine. Anna feels "humiliated" that George does not act upon her passion, "as though his forbearance, his tacit recognition of her pride, were a slight on other qualities she wanted him to feel in her," and she feels "Exasperated by her helplessness" (343). These feelings also echo her girlhood response. Watching George with Kitty Mayne, Anna had felt "a rage of possessorship" and felt that "none but she had a right" to be looked at as he was looking at Kitty (86). Her long habit of repression has left Anna without any words to express her passion to George, no matter how acutely aware of it she is herself, just as her upbringing in old New York society had rendered her unable to express her love for him as a young girl.

The problem is not resolved when George stops her from

leaving his room one night, for now Anna fully understands what she has missed, and the experience makes her extremely possessive of George. She decides to travel to Paris with him when he leaves the next day, for "She had an intense longing to be with him, an almost morbid terror of losing sight of him for a moment." When he goes to buy a newspaper, "she felt as though she should never see him again" (330). Anna's possessiveness and "morbid terror" hardly suggest healthy sexual fulfillment. Her passion has simply taken over. "Her scruples were not overcome; but for the first time their voices were drowned in the tumultuous rumour of her happiness" (331).

Her scruples do re-surface, however. Even before they reach Paris, Anna recognizes that her love for George contains a "new element": "a sort of suspicious tyrannical tenderness that seemed to deprive it of all serenity" (346). This is a key sentence, for it indicates that their relationship must yet end. Anna's physical union with George cannot alter her knowledge of him, and the next several pages of the novel continue to catalog her destructive suspicions and insecurities. When George becomes impatient with her efforts to discuss Owen, Anna fears he will "grow indifferent to me as he did to her..." (347, Wharton's ellipsis); when Anna suggests a restaurant in Paris, she "fancied she saw a shadow on his face," and concludes that George had been there with Sophy (354); and after they return from a night at the theatre, Anna thinks

about George and Sophy doing the same, and pulls away from George's touch (357). At this point George tells her "things can't go on like this" and starts to leave, but Anna stops him. She simply cannot let George go, and the novel ends without a definite break between them.⁷

Interwoven with George's and Anna's points of view is The Reef's third major character, Sophy Viner. We initially see Anna through the eyes of a narrator; we first see Sophy, in the novel's opening chapter, through George's eyes. Like Anna, Sophy remains unnamed for several paragraphs, but this is because George cannot remember who she is. The fact that George cannot name Sophy for so long (although she immediately remembers his name) symbolizes both his failure to ever know her beyond a superficial level and the fact that her story remains largely a mystery throughout the narrative.

Sophy is a greater abstraction to George than Anna is, and she will continue to be so in many ways. While Anna is initially described as "a lady," Sophy is "a helpless female arm" holding a broken umbrella, then a "young lady," and "the loveliness in distress under his umbrella," and

⁷Concurring with the view that Anna cannot stay with George, Moira Maynard says: "Though the novel ends in ambiguity, there is reason to hope that Anna will be true to her perception of 'things as they are.' She knows that George Darrow is charming but untrustworthy in his avoidance of conflicts that can clarify rather than destroy" (294). And, as Merryn Williams points out, Anna's deciding she can't live with Darrow "is partly self-preservation (she has no answer to the question, 'And when she ceased to please him, what then?' [34]) and should not be seen as prudery" (Six Women Novelists, 31).

ultimately "his companion" (11-12). The progression of these terms suggests both the progression of their relationship and George's perception of Sophy, which undergoes a series of adjustments. In his mind, Sophy changes from damsel in distress, to a woman associated with something "unpleasant," to a pitiable "creature," and finally to prostitute. The something "unpleasant" that Sophy was part of is the "Murrett mob," a group with which George had associated but toward which he clearly feels superior. In another setting he may have dismissed her completely, but since George feels angry and hurt by Anna, and because Sophy is both beautiful and "amusing," he does not yet abandon Sophy (11, 16). George considers himself Sophy's rescuer, much as he imagines himself rescuing Anna from the memories of an unsatisfying first marriage.

George's shifting perception of Sophy makes it difficult for him to categorize her effectively: "She might be any one of a dozen definable types, or she might--more disconcertingly to her companion and more perilously to herself--be a shifting and uncrystallized mixture of them all" (60). But George's failure to mail Sophy's letter telling the Farlows she is in Paris suggests that the fourth stage of his perception soon begins to form in his mind. In fact, George's "persistent sense connecting her with something uncomfortable and distasteful" (13), which sums up his attitude toward the Lady Ulrica in his past, also foretells the sensations in which his brief affair with

Sophy will end.

When Sophy and George become lovers, George can presumably fit her into the category of those women who are "decidedly not" ladies.⁹ It takes only ten days for him to grow tired of Sophy, and he laments to himself that rainy weather has made him think about his "situation" by keeping him inactive (75).⁹ George considers his drab hotel room in terms of its "anonymous part," and as he listens to Sophy's step in the next room, he thinks, "It was strange how much better he knew it than the person to whom it belonged!" (73, 76) George knows Sophy only as a physical being, a set of movements; to him she is as anonymous as the hotel room in which their affair takes place.

George doesn't accord Sophy the intelligence or adulthood of a woman of his class; he thinks of her as a "child," even though he knows she has had to support herself for some time. From her enthusiastic acceptance of a night at the theatre, he concludes she is "starving" for

⁹Cynthia Griffin Wolff, commenting on George's perception of Sophy and his compartmentalization of women into two major "types," says: "Clearly Sophy will fit into neither of these comfortable compartments, principally because they are ways of construing the feminine nature that make it entirely ancillary to masculine needs" (211).

⁹In Traveller in the Land of Letters, Janet Goodwyn makes an interesting observation about the rain. "Wharton shows Darrow attempting to distance the experience [of his affair with Sophy] with use of the language of visual art," Goodwyn says. "He had never 'pictured' such a scene, but once having become involved he loses the power to step outside it...and the 'perspective' which he was first able to maintain on the affair is destroyed by the simple visual distortion of the rain" (34).

amusement, which he can provide (55). By trivializing her enthusiasm, George discounts Sophy's interest in acting as a profession, even though he recognizes her interest in "observing the details" of the play's "interpretation" on stage and her "sharp apprehension" of "things theatrical" (46-47). Yet George does distinguish Sophy from Anna on the basis of class, including Sophy's "avowed acquaintance with the real business of living" (26). George discounts Sophy's experiences so that he can treat her condescendingly as a child, and then he paradoxically remembers Sophy's experiences so that he can treat her condescendingly as a lower-class woman, as he does when he later encounters her as Effie Leath's governess and Owen Leath's fiance.

In a sense, Sophy's desire to act is an inversion of Anna's visioned world. Just as Anna had retreated into her imagination to escape from a world where she was known as a "model of ladylike repression" (83), an acting career would allow Sophy to escape being dependent on other people to survive. But Sophy's economic dependence--the fact that she must take a governessing position far from Paris, rather than taking acting lessons--keeps her dream of acting from coming true. Ironically, it is Anna who has always played a role in her life, and Sophy who ultimately cannot act the part of innocence in the presence of her former lover.¹⁰

¹⁰Eugenia DeLamotte says acting is "the center of nineteenth-century woman's relation to her world" (217). Although the Wharton character with whom she is concerned is Lily Bart, the observation also applies to Anna, with her old New York upbringing.

George's Pygmalion impulses are also revived through Sophy, in whom he sees "the effects of a perfectly fresh impression on so responsive a temperament," and for whom "he felt a fleeting desire to make its chords vibrate for his own amusement" (50, my emphasis). George's desire to entertain Sophy is completely self-serving, as this quote reveals. He finds it amusing to exercise control over this young woman, who he considers "intrinsically young" and malleable (46). George finds Sophy beautiful--"He had dashed past that to reach Lady Ulrica Crispin!"--and, when he is first postponed by Anna, "the candid approval of her eye" helps him recover "his usual sense of being a personable young man" (15-16). Sophy serves a purpose for George by assuaging his "wounded vanity" in this way, a purpose that is confirmed by his pleasure at being seen with her around Paris (46, 48). Yet the limits of his pleasure are revealed later, as George muses about Anna: "to be loved by a woman like that made 'all the difference'...He was a little tired of experimenting on life..." (127, Wharton's middle ellipsis). His affair with Sophy, and with Lady Ulrica before her, is simply an experiment.

Sophy gives George ample opportunity to perceive her depth. For instance, she recalls that Lady Ulrica was "'false from head to foot'" and "'took apart like a puzzle'" (17). Her insight toward this woman George had once pursued indicates that Sophy is on a different level than Lady Ulrica. Unlike Undine Spragg in The Custom of the Country,

who consciously mimics those around her, Sophy indicates no desire to make Lady Ulrica her role model. Sophy does, however, admit to envying her because she had "'all the things I've always wanted: clothes and fun and motors, and admiration and yachting and Paris...'" Sophy tells George:

"And how do you suppose a girl can see that sort of thing about her day after day, and never wonder why some women, who don't seem to have any more right to it, have it all tumbled into their laps, while others are writing dinner invitations, and straightening out accounts, and copying visiting lists, and finishing golf-stockings, and matching ribbons, and seeing that the dogs get their sulphur? One looks in one's glass, after all!"
(18)

Sophy speaks more candidly than the young Anna Summers. But by listing admiration in the middle of a list of objects, Sophy reveals this part of herself while keeping within the boundaries of what young girls were supposed to want.¹¹ At this moment, even George sees her face as "no longer a shallow flower cup but a darkening gleaming mirror that might give back strange depths of feeling." Yet to explore those feelings would mean risking greater involvement with Sophy than he intends, so George pulls back, vaguely concluding: "the girl had stuff in her--he saw it..." (18).

Sophy's reaction to the second play George takes her

¹¹Compare The House of Mirth, 71-79. Annette Zilversmit notes that while critics tend to pity Lily for desiring admiration, this is a perfectly normal thing for a person to want ("New Directions"). The same applies to Sophy, who buries her desire for admiration by mentioning it in a string of "things."

to, the Oedipe, reveals another aspect of her character.¹² She does not have a formal education through which to view the production, but she "felt...the ineluctable fatality of the tale, the dread sway in it of the same mysterious 'luck' which pulled the threads of her own small destiny" (59). This passage recalls Sophy's thoughts about some women having "it all" while others do not; that, too, is a matter of luck. Her interest in and enjoyment of the play further muddies George's perception of Sophy. Himself bored with the production, he had assumed she was merely feigning interest and was too polite to express her true opinion (57-58). In this case, rather than George making a "perfectly fresh impression" on Sophy, Sophy enables him to see the play differently. Following her response, he "pierced to the heart of its significance" and felt anew the play's "supreme and poignant reality" (59).

There is an additional significance to this passage. George had just laid his hand on Sophy's, and when he asks her opinion, his own preoccupation with what he is doing makes him "only half-aware of his words" (58). And by pouring out her impressions of the performance, Sophy avoids acknowledging George's hand on hers--though the gesture makes her blush. Since George is of a different social

¹²Discussing the novel's "entanglements," Tuttleton says, "Although the blood relations between these characters are utterly discrete, it is not accidental that Darrow and Sophy attend a performance of Oedipe in Paris, for Mrs. Wharton intends to...offer a contemporary novel based on 'the ineluctable fatality of the [ancient] tale...' (465).

class than Sophy, and therefore no one she would perceive as a possible mate for herself, it is no wonder Sophy disclaims against marriage shortly afterward. She tells George, "'Oh, I never mean to marry,'" partly because no one desirable has proposed to her, but also because: "'I'm not so sure that I believe in marriage. You see I'm all for self-development and the chance to live one's life. I'm awfully modern, you know'" (61). In response, George ponders, "It was just when she proclaimed herself most awfully modern that she struck him as most helplessly backward..." (61). "Backward" is George's term to describe attitudes he does not understand because they don't fit neatly into his view that women are made to please men.

Yet Sophy's proclamation does seem defensive. She may not believe in marriage as it has been presented and offered to her, but her rhetoric and her later engagement to Owen Leath suggest she would like to. She simply does not have the faith in marriage that Anna does. And Sophy is "backward" in a way George would never understand. As Ammons says, Sophy is "in bondage to the past" like other Wharton heroines because, while she is "modern, self-confident, practical,"

She is also completely unable to free herself from certain traditional notions and impediments. Her lack of marketable skills, her vulnerability to the double standard, and her own romantic infatuation with George Darrow keep her from gaining authority over her own life. (Argument 89)

Paradoxically, while Sophy's feelings for George show her to

be bound to the past in one way, she fights a tradition that separates love and marriage. Because of her affair with George, and because he did provide an escape for her (however temporary), Sophy has a feeling for him which she, using the language society gives her, interprets as love.¹³ In this sense, tradition does hold Sophy. Yet she, knowing George would never marry her, renounces the alternative: marriage with Owen, who she ultimately realizes she does not love.

Sophy is vulnerable not only to the way the double standard condemns women who have affairs, but exonerates men; she is also vulnerable to a woman's need for the security of marriage. Initially, she becomes engaged to Owen even though she is not sure she loves him. She credits George with warning her "'That I'd be miserable if I married a man I didn't love,'" and when George chides her for not telling Owen sooner, Sophy answers, "'I told him as soon as I knew'" (260). Sophy had understood that marriage provided her best chance to permanently escape poverty. This does not mean Sophy is cold or calculating; she is forced to depend on someone, and Owen is a "good catch." Her financial vulnerability makes her decision to face her

¹³The scene in which Sophy tells Darrow she wants to "keep you all to myself" in her heart is, Maynard says, "Wharton depicting neurotic need": "Sophy's behavior is not a frank facing of realities; it is a blind ignoring of reality and the choosing of an unusable past over a viable, if unromantic future" (289). This is an astute observation, but Sophy's attempt to address her feelings rather than simply accept society's limited options--as the young Anna Summers had done--is nevertheless commendable.

feelings for George, and her lack of feelings for Owen, quite impressive. Despite a tremendous cost to herself, Sophy cannot maintain the pretext that she knew George only casually.

Anna has a very different perspective of Sophy than George does. She has a natural sympathy for Sophy, despite their difference in age and social status. Before Anna knows of the affair, she encourages Sophy to be open with her and to trust her.

She had, in truth, so many reasons for wanting Sophy to like her: her love for Owen, her solicitude for Effie, and her own sense of the girl's fine mettle. She had always felt a romantic and almost humble admiration for those members of her sex who, from force of will, or the constraint of circumstances, had plunged into the conflict from which fate had so persistently excluded her. (236, my emphasis)¹⁴

Anna does not yet know that part of this "conflict" is Sophy's sexual involvement with a man on whose kindness she has depended, and to whom Anna happens to be engaged. Rather than denigrating Sophy as a person of inferior social rank, Anna recognizes her as another woman and as one who is admirable for having faced life in a way Anna has not had to do. It is because of this understanding that Anna can

¹⁴Similarly, Anna views Owen's "humours" as "the voice of her secret rebellions" and, we are told, "her tenderness to her step-son was partly based on her severity toward herself. As he had the courage she had lacked, so she meant him to have the chances she had missed; and every effort she made for him helped to keep her own hopes alive" (96). Although Anna attributes the difference between them to her lack of courage, it is apparent that Owen can rebel because he is a man. By attempting to support his choice of a bride, Anna is in a sense trying to live vicariously through him.



promote Sophy's marriage to her step-son Owen, despite his grandmother Madame de Chantelle's disapproval. Anna also trusts Sophy with her little girl; she comments to George on how Effie "'expands'" when she is with Sophy, who is "'gay and kind and human'" (222).

Even after Anna knows Sophy has had an affair with George, she still acknowledges the similarities between herself and Sophy. Meditating on her own passion for George and the passion on which Sophy had acted, Anna "thought of the girl with a mingling of antipathy and confidence. It was humiliating to her pride to recognize kindred impulses in a character which she would have liked to feel completely alien to her." Yet Anna also has an "absolute trust" in Sophy because she had "instantly obeyed the voice of her heart when it bade her part from the one [Owen] and serve the other [George]" (320-21). Anna wants to see Sophy completely as "other" but cannot, any more than she can condemn Sophy but exonerate George. Both women have experienced intense passion for George. The major difference is simply that Sophy has acted on her passion, while at this point, Anna has not.

Anna ultimately sees Sophy as the only one who can "save" her, and plans to regain her serenity by finding Sophy and telling her that she is giving up George (361). In effect, Anna is trying to create in herself the firmness she has noted in Sophy by announcing her resolution to Sophy. But when she meets Sophy's sister (who is evidently

a prostitute), Anna's empathy and admiration for Sophy disintegrate. She sees in Mrs. Birch's "trivial" and garish face "a suggestion...of what Sophy Viner might, with the years...become" (351-52). Sophy becomes in Anna's mind--as in George's--a type: "not lady," prostitute.¹⁵ Only by viewing Sophy in this way, it appears, can Anna fully separate herself from the "other" woman.

Mrs. Birch is a red herring, however; her presence leads the reader to disregard Wharton's hints that Sophy and Owen elope. In addition to causing the reader to question the narrative's otherwise favorable characterization of Sophy, Mrs. Birch tells Anna that Sophy has "'gone to India with Mrs. Murrett'" (352). These two things appear to settle Sophy's future: at best she will pay for her integrity by remaining a dependent of Mrs. Murrett's; at worst she will become, as Anna suspects, a prostitute. But when Mrs. Birch said Sophy had left "suddenly" the night before (the same night Owen left for Spain) Anna had immediately thought, "Could it be that the girl had tricked them all and gone with Owen?" (351) Anna is easily dissuaded from her suspicion, just as she had been happy to

¹⁵Both Lawson and Ammons point out that the effect of the novel's final scene is to show how much Sophy has overcome. Ammons says this scene "implicitly admires rather than punishes Sophy Viner: against all odds, she has managed so far to avoid her sister's fate" (Argument 91). Lawson, while not agreeing that Wharton intended this effect, says that the "overkill" of the final scene "may well induce the modern reader to sympathize with Sophy...because she has the integrity to emerge from such an environment as an honest, attractive person....[who] instinctively tells the truth, however painful for herself" (59-60).



dismiss her early suspicions about George's involvement with Sophy.

Yet the possibility that Owen and Sophy elope would also explain Owen's strange behavior when Anna visits him, shortly before he leaves for Spain. It is so dark in his room that "his features were barely discernable," and when Anna turns on a lamp, Owen cries, "'Oh don't--I hate the light!'" (335-36) Though he blames an attack of neuralgia for wanting to keep the room dark, he may simply be afraid Anna will know the truth if she looks in his eyes. That this is so is corroborated by Owen's asking Anna not to come back up to his room when she returns with his neuralgia medicine--perhaps Sophy will be there--and by his unwillingness to say when he will return from Spain. Not yet suspecting anything else, Anna attributes Owen's behavior and the "veil" she senses between them to the idea that Owen has discovered George's affair with Sophy. "'He knows, he knows....' she said to herself" (336, Wharton's ellipsis).

Wharton's hinting at an elopement expands the possibilities for how Sophy's story may end. But even if the reader assumes that Sophy is with Owen, she has not achieved a traditional heroine's resolution; because she is not in love with Owen, Sophy has at best achieved another kind of compromise. The very possibility that Sophy marries Owen makes Anna's view that Sophy had shown the greater integrity by breaking her engagement extremely ironic,

especially considering that Anna--with her searing passion but agonizing distrust for George--cannot make such compromises.¹⁶

¹⁶Tuttleton discusses Anna's "romantic ideal of love and emotional and sexual fulfillment that is unsullied by desecrating compromises," and concludes: "Can such an ideal be preferable to an actual man who, however needed, cannot complete the whole woman? I suggest that the novel commends this view..." (471).



Chapter Two
Undine's Unending Story in
The Custom of the Country

Wharton's The Custom of the Country (1913) presents Undine Spragg, a woman whose story "ends" in marriage--over and over again. Wharton tears away the obscuring veils so prevalent in The Reef and sheds a glare of publicity on the characters in her next novel, creating the illusion that all is revealed. Even the closely guarded secret of Undine's first marriage, to Elmer Moffatt, becomes public knowledge when it can no longer hurt her. But while Wharton allows the reader relatively full knowledge of Undine's story, those characters who represent old society--Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles--let themselves be dazzled by Undine, rather than concerning themselves with her history, with the result that they remain ignorant of her story until it is too late.¹ Just as George Darrow attempts to categorize Anna and Sophy, the men in The Custom of the Country operate according to serious misconceptions of Undine; both Ralph and Raymond assume she wishes to adopt their values.

¹Janet Goodwyn considers The Custom of the Country Wharton's "movement into the twentieth century" both because Undine--with her lack of a "sense of the past"--is "unprecedented," and because in this novel, Wharton "moves away from the Jamesian model with which she experimented in The Reef" (Traveller in the Land of Letters 38).

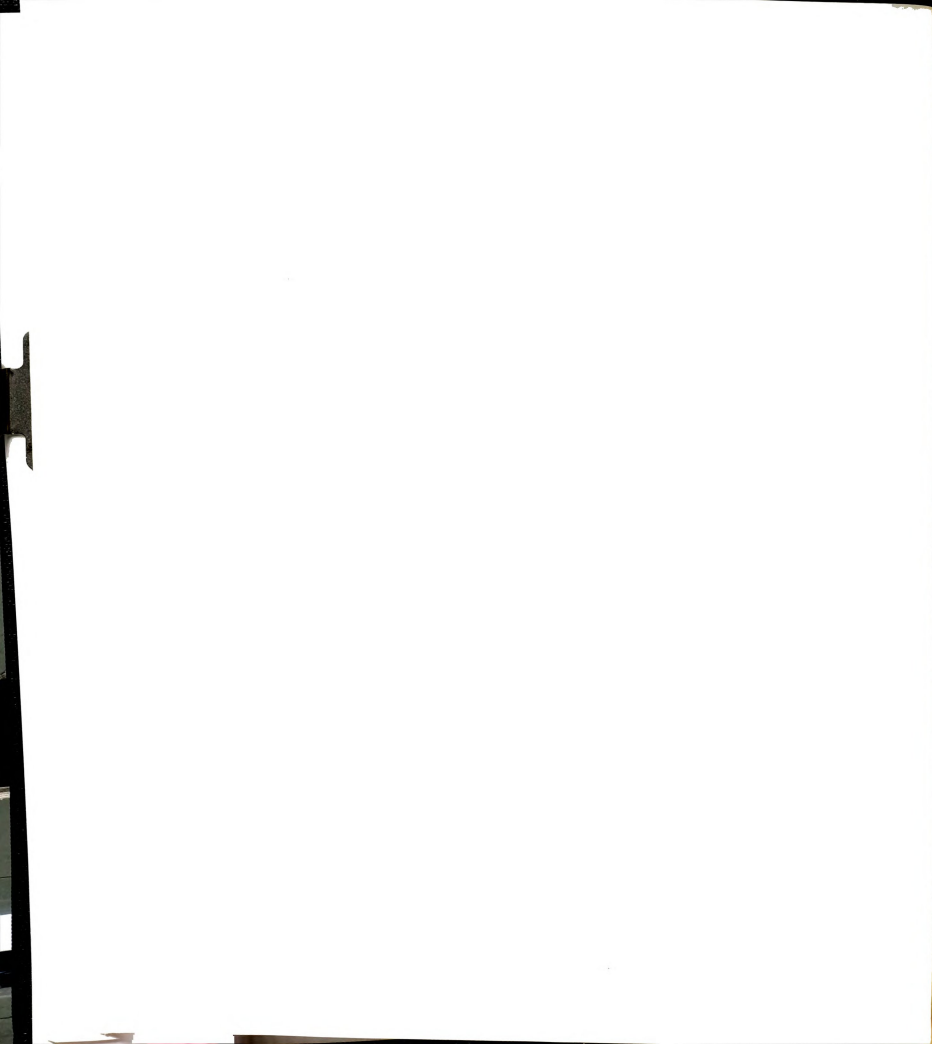


Conversely, Undine makes assumptions about both of these men, based on her gossip-page reading and on an inflated sense of her own power, which cause her to become disillusioned with them as well.

The Custom of the Country, unlike The Reef, begins with the heroine; "'Undine Spragg'" are the first words of the novel. Undine's immediate introduction is appropriate not only because she is the central character in the novel, but because she is completely egocentric. She perceives other characters solely in relation to herself. Wharton explores this egocentrism through Undine's love of mirrors and with imagery of light. Undine's "delight" in dressing up and playing "'lady'" in front of a mirror "had outlasted childhood" and as an adult, "she still practised the same secret pantomime" (22). Preparing for a dinner at the fashionable Mrs. Fairford's, Undine yields to the "joy of dramatizing her beauty" and practices her "incessant movements" because "she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society" (22). The passage reveals Undine's vanity, but more importantly, it anticipates her way of dealing with the world. As the narrator says,

Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met.... (19)

She is imitative in both senses of the word: copying and artificial. Undine mirrors people externally but fails to improve her inner self. Her concern with the external,



established so early in the novel, anticipates Undine's constant search for new and better mirrors as she moves from one segment of society to another.²

Later, when Undine has a dealer come to appraise the Chelles tapestries, she looks at them "as complacently as though they had been mirrors reflecting her own image" (529). The tapestries are symbolic of mirrors for Undine because their sale could buy her several seasons in Paris, where her beauty would be reflected in, and appreciated by, the society she craves. Undine needs this type of reflection because she relies on the "mirror" of others' views as much as she relies on literal mirrors; lacking any sense of self-reflection, the "image of herself in other minds" is "her only notion of self-seeing" (401). Even as a girl Undine had craved the approval of others; she had thrived on "the public triumph which was so necessary to her personal enjoyment" (549). Discussing the role of publicity in Wharton's earlier The House of Mirth (1905), Amy Kaplan says that Lily Bart "depends on the mirror of the gaping mob to maintain her identity" (102). Like Lily, Undine defines herself through mirrors--both literal and metaphorical. But in The Custom of the Country, Wharton shows what happens when members of the "gaping mob" break into the upper class.

²Ironically, Undine's "originality" is mostly comprised of switching between models. Margaret McDowell comments, "when Undine changes her life style by changing her friends and husbands, she does so in order to find more significant mirrors for her beauty and untried ranges of behavior to copy" (80).

At the same time, just as a mirror can reflect only what is within its range, so Undine can "see" only those who are reflected in her mirror, those who are with her and who complement the image she sees of herself. Her first night in her own opera box, Undine perceives herself as reflecting all of society; she is the "core" of the auditorium, "the sentient throbbing surface which gathered all the shafts of light into a centre" (60). At Laura Fairford's dinner, Undine finds that "All was blurred and puzzling...in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene" (37).³ Later, Undine is surprised to learn how much has happened to Elmer Moffatt while she has been living at Saint Desert, because "It never occurred to her that other people's lives went on when they were out of her range of vision..." (412). In this sense she is like an infant, unaware of anything it cannot see.

Undine's egocentrism is further suggested by her tendency to blame others whenever something goes wrong. Although Undine believes "she was ready enough to acknowledge her own mistakes," she rarely seems to think she had made any (58). Wharton establishes this characteristic

³Carol Wershoven notes the prevalence of light imagery in The Custom of the Country and comments, "As Undine travels through the various classes she brings that glaring radiance with her, and casts a hard light on realities carefully evaded by the members of each group" (61). Similarly, McDowell says that Undine "illuminates the weaknesses of each group as she mirrors them" (79).



with the relatively trivial episode of the opera box. Undine "exulted" when her father bought her a box for every other Friday, after he had initially refused to buy her one at all. But on her first night in this hard-won opera box, Undine laments, "now she saw that it might but emphasize one's exclusion. And she was burdened with the box for the rest of the season! It was really stupid of her father to have exceeded his instructions" (68).

Later, married to Ralph Marvell but enjoying the flattery of society artist Claud Popple, Undine reflects: "Popple's homage seemed the subtlest proof of what Ralph could have made of her if only he had 'really understood' her. It was but another step to ascribe all her past mistakes to the lack of such understanding..." (190). And, "Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes" as her decision to marry Ralph, "it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame" on him (193). Undine pities herself for marrying Ralph. "She found a poignant pleasure...in the question: 'What does a young girl know of life?'" (193-94) The question is ironic for Undine, who had been married once before and engaged three times.

Undine attributes all her problems to external sources because she believes the world owes her happiness. She considers herself "essentially peace-loving" but unable to live in harmony with her parents because they are "unreasonable":

Ever since she could remember there had been "fusses" about money; yet she and her mother had always got what they wanted....It was therefore natural to conclude that there were ample funds to draw upon, and that Mr. Spragg's occasional resistances were merely due to an imperfect understanding of what constituted the necessities of life. (45)

In Undine's eyes, anything that interferes with her will is unreasonable. She refuses to acknowledge any need for moderation; such things as opera boxes have become her "rights" simply because she has never been denied them (44).

Wharton explains the Spraggs' oversolicitousness by referring to the death of their only other two children by typhoid fever (80). Undine is the ultimate stereotypical only child; she is twice as spoiled because she is all her parents have left of their three offspring. Yet early in life, Undine underwent the "terrible initiation" of discovering that others were not content with the things she had thought worth having. She came to believe that "There was something better beyond" and that "it was always her fate to find out just too late about the 'something beyond'" (54). When Undine subsequently regrets accepting money from Peter Van Degen, she reflects: "What she wanted was not a hand-to-mouth existence of precarious intrigue: to one with her gifts the privileges of life should come openly" (234). This is the message Undine has gotten from a mother who "seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child" (11), and a father who allows her to cajole him into the most impractical expenditures. The feeling that she is always missing out on something, plus her attitude that life

should treat her in a privileged way, keeps Undine from ever being fully satisfied with what she has.

Because she had learned early that money was always available, Undine continues to assume that whenever someone fails to meet her "needs," that person does not care about her. When her third husband, Raymond, refuses to sell his ancestral tapestries, Undine pouts to Elmer Moffatt: "'he'd rather see me starve than part with one of his grandfather's snuff-boxes'" (559). This single complaint indicates the way Undine glorifies her problems and trivializes others' positions. Undine's idea of starving is going without one more expensive dress, or not taking over the top floor of the Chelles hotel in Paris. In contrast, she equates the Chelles tapestries, extremely valuable heirlooms whose "'history has been published,'" with "snuff-boxes" (530).

Due to her extreme egocentrism, Undine views even her own son as a rival for her "rights." For instance, "Partly as a result" of her financial "excursions" with the money she has borrowed from Van Degen,

she had a 'nervous breakdown'...and her physician having ordered massage and a daily drive it became necessary to secure Mrs. Heeny's attendance and to engage a motor by the month. Other unforeseen expenses...were added to by a severe illness of little Paul's....During these days Ralph's anxiety drove him to what seemed to Undine foolish excesses of expenditure.... (229)

Undine happily pampers her own illness (which the passage suggests is feigned), but resents money spent on her son's illness as "foolish." Conversely, Undine attempts to use a

later illness of Paul's to her benefit. Before she and Raymond leave Paris one season, "a doctor had been found to say that Paul...was in urgent need of sea air" because Undine does not want to return to Saint Desert (491, my emphasis). And when Paul had missed his own birthday party because Undine had forgotten it, she showed no regret for his disappointment. Instead, she was irritated at finding herself "put in the wrong" with her in-laws (220).⁴

Undine is similarly self-centered in her attitude toward her parents. As the Marquise de Chelles, Undine "felt no compunction in continuing to accept an undiminished allowance," although her allowance breaks her parents financially. She does feel "a sentimental pity for her parents," however. "Aside from all interested motives, she wished for their own sakes that they were better off." Ironically, among Undine's supposedly disinterested motives is the idea that "renewed prosperity would at least have procured them the happiness of giving her what she wanted" (562). Undine can't imagine that her parents might have interests outside herself.

The harshest indicator of Undine's selfishness, however, is that she views Ralph's death in terms of its financial advantages. His suicide:

brought about a sudden change in her situation.
She was now no longer a divorced woman struggling

⁴Ralph is not entirely blameless in the birthday party incident. He is more than an hour late himself, although that is because he "'stayed down town to make provision for [Paul's] future birthdays'" (209).



to obtain ecclesiastical sanction for her remarriage, but a widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations. (483)

A subsequent line suggests that Undine does take some responsibility for Ralph's death: "she continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it" (487). But the appearance is deceptive. Undine is actually feeling sorry for herself, as her reaction to Paul's inheritance confirms:

she wished she could have got [the money] some other way--she hated the thought of it as one more instance of the perverseness with which things she was entitled to always came to her as if they had been stolen. (488)

Undine turns Ralph's tragedy, and the windfall which comes to her through Paul as a result, into an occasion to pity herself.

Undine's attitude toward the male business world also reflects her self-absorbed perspective. Wharton makes it clear early in the novel that Undine does not want to participate in that world. When Mr. Spragg tries to reason with her about her expenditures,

Her eyes grew absent-minded, as they always did when [her father] alluded to business. That was man's province; and what did men go "downtown" for but to bring back the spoils to their women? (44)

This passage is a clue to much of Undine's subsequent behavior. She expects to be lavishly supported, without being bothered with the details of the way money is earned.⁵

⁵Elizabeth Ammons discusses the way Undine's idea of marriage fits Thorstein Veblen's description of "the function of the rich man's wife, who should be 'supported in

Wharton confirms Undine's view when, preparing for her wedding to Ralph, Undine and her mother feel "secure in their invariable experience that, once 'father' had been convinced of the impossibility of evading their demands, he might be trusted to satisfy them by means with which his womenkind need not concern themselves" (127).

Undine's persistent ignorance of the business world cannot be wholly attributed to men's attempts to shelter her. Ralph does initially try to assume Mr. Spragg's role of providing everything Undine wants, but he soon realizes that her "disregard for money may imply not the willingness to get on without it but merely a blind confidence that it will somehow be provided" (149). When he tries to explain their financial situation, however, Undine objects; "it was always hard to make her see why circumstances could not be bent to her wishes" (171). Charles Bowen, a minor character who watches Undine from a distance, says she is a "perfectly monstrous result of the system" in which "money and motors and clothes are simply the big bribe" a woman is paid "for keeping out of some man's way!" (208) But this assessment does not apply to Undine. She instead refuses to understand so that she can avoid taking responsibility for her expenses.

Wharton shows that Undine is perfectly capable of

idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of his pecuniary strength" (Argument 113). But of Undine's husbands only Elmer, who sees her as another item to collect, adheres to this view.

understanding finances when doing so is to her advantage. From Moffatt's scheme to buy some real estate from Ralph's firm, Undine "finally extracted, and clung to, the central fact that if the 'deal went through' it would mean a commission of forty thousand dollars to Marvell's firm, of which something over a fourth would come to Ralph" (251). Undine's face is "alive with interest" when Ralph later discusses the deal with her, and she wants to know if he intends to make the sale (255).

Her carefully maintained ignorance of the male business world is one aspect of the business Undine does understand: marriage. Elizabeth Ammons, discussing the way Undine makes marriage her business, says her "avaricious approach" to it is "simply realistic" in her world (Argument 101). Ammons goes on to describe the ways in which Undine's business world parallels her father's:

Wall Street is the field of battle for the modern robber baron, and although his female counterpart...is denied that battleground, she is given her own stock exchange: the institution of marriage in which she herself is the stock exchanged. To create her empire, she invests herself in the right marriage--an enterprise Undine understands and embraces. (107)

This enterprise requires frequent re-adjustments in Undine's thinking. For instance, she initially perceives Ralph as "a little fellow" whose primary distinction was being in the same room with the more overtly-stylish Claud Popple (5). After learning of Ralph's social status, however, Undine decides he is "so much less negligible than his brilliant friend" (23), an assessment which is followed by a new

appreciation for Ralph's physical appearance (69). Undine ultimately convinces herself that she is in love with Ralph: "It was pleasant...to meet Ralph's grey eyes, with that new look in them, and to feel that she had kindled it" (92).

But this feeling "was only part of her larger pleasure in the general homage to her beauty" at her engagement dinner, and "in the sensations of interest and curiosity excited by everything about her, from the family portraits overhead to the old Dagonet silver on the table--which were to be hers too, after all!" (92) Love, for Undine, means both power over another, a type of "possessorship" (97), and possessing things. At this dinner Undine plays one of her major roles. She tells herself that the "part" of a young woman "very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment" was "not hard to play, for she was in love, of course" (91). But Wharton makes it clear that she is playing a role; she feels none of this intensity of emotion toward Ralph, as a later reference to "her first impersonal affection" for him confirms (226, my emphasis). Undine is--and remains--completely detached from such feelings, as Ralph eventually realizes.

Undine suffers from none of the sexual upheaval that characterizes so many of Wharton's women characters, from Anna Leath and Sophy Viner to Kate Clephane. For Undine, men's sexual feelings are simply factors to consider in her efforts to form ever more socially and financially rewarding partnerships with them. Placing Wharton in the context of

nineteenth-century ideology about "woman's nature," Mary Suzanne Schriber argues that "Undine's absolute indifference [to sex] deconstructs the culture's frame of sexual reference, rendering it meaningless," because it subverts the patriarchal standard that says "a woman's sexuality is her pearl beyond price" (Gender 177). Wharton symbolizes that Undine is outside the sexual frame of reference by showing that stereotypes of light and dark women do not apply to her. While fair, light-haired women in literature are traditionally innocent, and dark-haired women are sexually "experienced," Undine is alternately referred to as light or dark. With her red hair, Undine can be either the "brunette" "bit of flesh and blood" that Popple contrasts with the blond Clare, or a "fair haired" "lady," as de Chelles first sees her (72, 276).

Undine is also detached from any sense of commitment to marriage. Wharton warns the reader--and Ralph's entire family--of this attitude when, at their engagement dinner, Undine flippantly remarks that her friend Mabel Lipscomb will probably "'get a divorce pretty soon'" because her husband "'isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him'" (94). Janet Goodwyn says of Undine, "She is a modern version of the water-nymph who could only gain a soul by marrying a mortal; Undine marries mortals enough but never commits herself to the act and so remains soul-less" (39).

Her talent for rationalizing helps Undine evade her

true motive for marrying Ralph. Dismayed that he will be expected to support the newlyweds, Mr. Spragg suggests that Undine break her engagement. She wonders, "Did he suppose she was marrying for money? Didn't he see it was all a question...of the kind of people she wanted to 'go with'?"

(123) Even if Undine's lack of concern for money is accepted, she clearly expects Ralph to serve a purpose: getting her into society. She is not marrying him for love. The following passage confirms that Undine is marrying for money, as well. When Mr. Spragg says that if she's in love with Ralph, "'you and he won't mind beginning in a small way,'" Undine reacts by theatrically tearing off her engagement ring and threatening to tell Ralph, "'I thought he was a rich man, and now I see I'm mistaken---'" (124-25).

Ralph initially fails to understand the extent of Undine's egocentrism because he, too, is egocentric.⁶ Just as George Darrow perceives of women as "designed" to please men, Ralph perceives of Undine in relation to himself, rather than as a separate person who actually has very little in common with him. Based on a conversation with Undine's mother, Ralph concludes that the Spraggs "had been 'plain people'" and that this "drew them much closer to the Dagonet ideals than any sham elegance in the past tense."

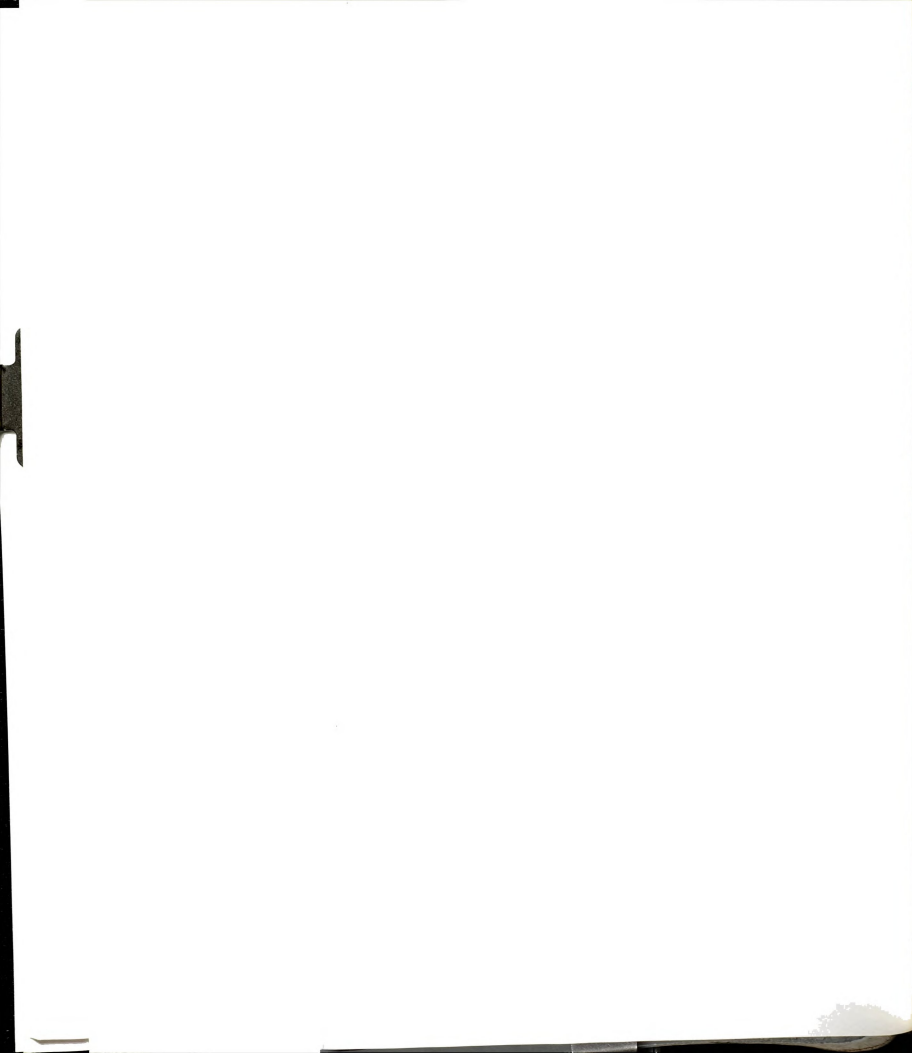
⁶I am primarily concerned with how Ralph perceives Undine. Several critics have responded to Ralph in greater depth. See, for instance, Collins, Ammons (Argument 112-14), and Stein (244-46). McDowell discusses how Wharton uses Ralph's perspective to delineate Undine as "more than a stereotype" (81).

From here, Ralph makes the leap to speculating, "To save her [Undine] from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission--the 'call' for which his life had obscurely waited?" (82)

At first, Ralph thinks he judges Undine clearly; he recognizes "her crudity and her limitations," but somehow views them as "a part of her grace and her persuasion" (83). He assumes Undine shares her mother's "virgin innocence" and "unaffected frankness" and can yet be spared from "swell[ing] the ranks of the cheaply fashionable" (81-82). But Undine is frank because "some intuition had already told her that frankness was the tone to take with him" (69). Wharton makes it clear that Ralph falls in love simply because he is ready to; "his faith in the great adventure" of romance to come in his life is what "made him so easy a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the attributes of romance..." (83). Having lost his first love, Clare, because he waited too long, Ralph is quick to assume Undine is suitable for him.

Ralph's egocentric view is also apparent in his attempt to change Undine.⁷ While he recognizes her "sensitiveness to new impressions" and "obvious lack of any sense of relative values," he dwells on these characteristics as

⁷Gary Lindberg notes, "what he is really trying to do is not to rescue her from social submersion but to protect her from a particular class that he abhors," and "what most disturbs him is not her general moral deficiencies but her specific obtuseness to the delicacies that inform his own class" (73).



enhancing Undine's vulnerability, rather than as negative qualities to consider before deciding to marry her. He envisions her as a "lovely rock-bound Andromeda" and imagines himself "whirling down on his winged horse...to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue" away from the "devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her..." (84). He takes on the project of rescuing and protecting, he assumes, an as yet unspoiled daughter of the Invaders. In discussing The Custom of the Country, Ammons comments on Ralph's Pygmalion attitudes: "A would-be artist who has never been able to finish a single work, he sees Undine as raw material for his creative impulse" (Argument 112). Ralph, however, has always been a passive artist (he lies under trees and waits for poetic words to drop on him like leaves), and the project of molding a living being into his desired shape is far more than he can handle.²

Undine initially has no idea of Ralph's view and is puzzled, during their engagement, by his "reluctance to introduce her to the Van Degen set" (93). His attitudes continue to cause frustration for Undine, who expects certain rights as a partner in the marriage-business. She is afraid Ralph will thwart her growing friendship with Peter Van Degen, a fellow "Invader" who has become a part of

²As Ammons concludes, Ralph mistakenly "assumes that Undine wants to be lifted and will adopt his unostentatious way of life, his taste for reserved people, and his educated aestheticism," and that she "wants to become...both the object and the nurture of his creativity" (Argument 113).

old New York society through his marriage to Ralph's cousin Clare. Undine muses, "It was hard to be criticized for every grasp at opportunity by a man so avowedly unable to do the reaching for her!" She "felt herself trapped, deceived" because, she realizes, Ralph will "not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was man's natural tribute to woman's merits" (227). In Undine's view, Ralph fails the partnership because he does not support her adequately, although he does stop trying to control her activities.

Alexandra Collins suggests that Undine's relationship with her father influences her view of Ralph:

From her father, Undine derives her energy and her pleasure in complicated manoeuvres designed to advance her own social position. She wheedles him into giving her money....In contrast, Ralph's refusal to bring home enough money to satisfy her desire for luxury, and his inability to understand her desire to barter for what she wants...prove disappointing. (205)

Ralph does not refuse to provide enough money, however; he simply does not have the business acumen which would enable him to do so. Finding that their combined allowances were not enough to meet his and Undine's expenses, Ralph had left his "profession"--a seat in a law office--and had joined a real estate firm (215). But he perceives that "his business" is to defend Undine from her "weakness" for Van Degenism and "lift her above it" (177), not to provide her with unlimited funds. His efforts to do both cause Ralph to develop the same symptoms of stress as Undine's father; within a few years of their marriage, he is characterized by "anxious eyes" and "the strain of long fatigue" brought on

by the "incessant struggle to make enough money" for Undine (209, 218).

Ralph treats Undine as he does because he perceives her as a child. As Undine begins to resist him, Ralph maintains his purpose of protecting her. He realizes she can be inconsistent, as when she complains that he hastened their marriage. But he is "still enchanted" by her and, when Undine complains about being hidden away in Italy on their honeymoon, he says, "'We'll go wherever you please--you make every place the one place'...as if he were humouring an irresistible child" (145, my emphasis). Ralph's tendency to view Undine as a child is consistent with his desire to protect her; if he thought of Undine as an adult, he would realize that she can function without his constant guidance. Discussing their relationship, Susan Wolstenholme points out:

Because Undine is tyrannical and demanding, readers have generally perceived her as less sympathetic than Ralph, who is soft, tender, and vulnerable. But taken together, the two characters represent the two attributes of childhood. (101)

As Ralph takes Undine into his arms, "he felt her resign herself like a tired child" (152). But again, this is his perception; the context reveals that Undine is only "resigned" in allowing him to hold her. "She had never shown any repugnance to his tenderness, but such response as it evoked was remote and Ariel-like..." (152).

Finding her response not up to the level of his passion, Ralph briefly emphasizes Undine as goddess. He

daydreams about the "pot-boiler" novel he plans to write and thinks, "Did not the worshipper always heap the rarest essences on the altar of his divinity?" (155) A goddess does not need protection from a mortal, however, and Ralph soon returns to his view of Undine as a child.* He "told himself that there is always a Narcissus-element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration" (157). Because he considers this a characteristic of youth, rather than an intricate part of Undine's personality, Ralph expects her to outgrow her need for general admiration. "With her quick perceptions and adaptabilities she would soon learn to care more about the quality of the reflecting surface..." (157).

As Ralph becomes disillusioned with Undine and recognizes her "instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in," he becomes concerned about "what her ignorance might expose her to" (160). When Undine says she can choose her own friends, Ralph patronizingly responds, "'No, you can't, you foolish child. You know nothing of this society you're in...'" (161). He is "exasperated by what seemed a wilful pretense of ignorance" in Undine's accepting the companionship of the notorious Madame Adelschein. But it is old New York's hypocrisy that is

*James Bailey has discussed the resonances of Undine's name and Wharton's use of the undine, or water sprite, myth in The Custom of the Country. Bailey notes that while in the myth the undine must relinquish her power in order to become mortal, Undine Spragg wants the "best bargain: love that empowers" ("Wharton's Water Sprite").

highlighted by his rebuke. Ralph explains, "'The Adelschein goes about in a place like this [St. Moritz] because it's nobody's business to stop her; but the women who tolerate her here would drop her like a shot if she set foot on their ground.'" Undine draws the logical conclusion and responds, "'Well, that's easy enough: I can drop her if she comes to New York'" (160-63).

Ralph is upset that she "had so amply shown him her ability to protect herself" and by "the perfect functioning of her instinct of self-preservation" (163). He takes no pleasure in his wife's ability to make her own choices, since it means she will not be easily molded. For the same reason, Ralph dislikes Undine's practicality. He is upset by her suggestion that they ask the Marvels for money, ostensibly because "it was always she who made the practical suggestion, hit the nail of expediency on the head. No sentimental scruple made the blow waver or deflected her resolute aim" (165). Yet as Carol Wershoven notes in The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton, "since the Spraggs have made a life-long commitment to 'helping out' Ralph," Undine's suggestion "hardly seems an audacious request" (63). Ralph cannot accept his wife's ability to take charge where he has, in her opinion, failed.

When he tells Undine that they cannot afford to stay in Paris any longer because the return passage to New York is so expensive, Undine secures an invitation on Van Degen's yacht. She tells Ralph so with a "laugh of triumph,"



obviously proud of her resourcefulness. "'I'm not such a fool as you pretend!'" she exclaims (176). Undine is understandably confused by Ralph's horrified response to her news, just as Ralph is surprised when she does not immediately bow to his will in the matter.

He was used to women who, in such cases, yielded as a matter of course to masculine judgments: if one pronounced a man "not decent" the question was closed. But it was Undine's habit to ascribe all interference with her plans to personal motives.... (179)

Still, Ralph believes he is "learning to influence her through her social instincts" and expects Undine to drop Van Degen once back in New York (180). But Undine does not do so, and subsequent events show just how little influence Ralph has had over her.

By the time of Undine's pregnancy, Ralph has relinquished enough of his illusions to notice her true reaction. He is struck by the "chill of her tone" as she bewails the year she will lose to her pregnancy, and he perceives her thoughts about "the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives." He responds "bitterly" to Undine, but Ralph wants to "disguise from himself the hateful fact that he felt it [the same way] too" (185).

A few years later, as he wonders what excuse Undine will offer for missing their son Paul's second birthday party, Ralph reflects: "For a long time now feminine nearness had come to mean to him...the ever-renewed dread of small daily deceptions, evasions, subterfuges." The

discovery that Undine had reset her Marvell heirloom jewelry, after telling him she would not, had marked "the point beyond which there was no returning" from disillusionment (213). Ralph now realizes,

it was admiration, not love, that she wanted....and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity--the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security. (223-24)

This, Ralph's most accurate perception of Undine, does not help him address their problems, because he remains passive. He simply resigns himself to the idea that "They were fellow-victims in the noyade of marriage" and concludes that "if they ceased to struggle perhaps the drowning would be easier for both..." (225, Wharton's ellipsis). His growing unhappiness with Undine includes an escapist attempt to return to his first love, who he had lost to the "Invaders" long before he met Undine. As his marriage disintegrates, Ralph begins to compare Clare and his wife. He begins to see Clare more favorably; she is "light and frivolous" like Undine, but Clare "would never have lied to him or traded on his tenderness" (215). Yet Ralph views Clare in much the same condescending way he had previously viewed Undine. He is content in Clare's presence because she makes him feel important. "With her eyes on him he felt the exquisite relief of talking about himself as he had not dared to talk to anyone since his marriage" (321). And though speaking with her lets "light into the dusty shuttered places" in Ralph's mind, he thinks, "Clare's mind

was neither keen nor deep....But she had his own range of allusions, and a great gift of momentary understanding..." (323). For Ralph, even Clare isn't too bright; she is just sympathetic. Ralph's view of Clare's intelligence is belied by the fact that, when Undine sues for custody of Paul, Clare is the first person to understand her motive. "'Why not give the money to Undine instead of to your lawyers?'" she asks. Clare sees that "'What [Undine] wants is the money for her annulment'" and that she wants to "'make you buy [Paul] back from her'" (445-46).

Despite his disillusionment with Undine, Ralph cannot stop struggling over the "drowning" of his marriage. During Undine's prolonged stay in Europe--which ultimately ends in their divorce--Ralph becomes obsessed with her letters and tries to envision her through them. Sometimes "he saw her, closely, palpably before him, as she sat at the writing-table, frowning and a little flushed,...her short lip pulled up by the effort of composition..." (308). But this vision of Undine focusing on him, as if she is away from Ralph against her will, is destroyed by the letter in which she says: "'Everybody's talking to me at once, and I don't know what I'm writing'" (308). As Ralph realizes, "Though his feeling for her had changed, it still ruled his life." He is aware now of her "weakness" but is still held by "the power of youth and radiance that clung to his disenchanted memories..." (309). He begins to blame himself for their failed marriage, not because he made no effort to understand

Undine, but because perhaps he had not "done all he could to draw her half-formed spirit from its sleep" (309). To the end, Ralph refuses to understand that Undine could not be transformed into the woman he wanted her to be.

Yet despite all he has learned about Undine since their marriage, so sure is Ralph that she had been innocent as his bride, that he is thrown into complete shock by the revelation of Undine's previous marriage to Elmer Moffatt. This news follows the discovery that a business venture with Moffatt won't yield the expected quick return, leaving Ralph both without the money he needs to buy his son's custody and unable to repay Clare's loan, the money she had been saving in order to someday escape "Van Degenism."¹⁰ Ralph cannot accept the fact that not only had Undine been married before, she had been married to "This man...this man...", Moffatt, "this coarse-grained man with whom," he had just been thinking, "he hadn't a sentiment in common" (466, 464). The impact of all this on Ralph causes him to feel that he is "stumbling about in his inherited prejudices"--the ones which had made him believe he could rescue Undine from the Invaders--"like a modern man in mediaeval armour," so that "the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions

¹⁰The ongoing story of the business dealings surrounding the Apex water works, which functions primarily as a constant reminder of Elmer's power and influence, exemplifies the way in which Wharton undermines the narrative's illusion of accurate publicity. Information about the water works is filtered through the perceptions of partially-informed characters and is never made entirely clear.

tumbled down about him" (469).

Even with his perception of society destroyed, however, Ralph's view of his role toward Undine somehow fails to change. He sees Undine herself quite differently; the "overwhelming sense of her physical nearness which had once so haunted and tortured him" now "filled the room with a mocking glory" (471-72). Realizing that his life's project had been a sham because it had already been too late to influence Undine in the way he had envisioned, Ralph commits suicide. But even in the act of suicide, Ralph perceives himself as rescuing Undine. "He said to himself: 'My wife...this will make it all right for her...'" (474, Wharton's ellipses). In his confusion, Ralph apparently understands that his death will enable Undine to remarry and so, unable to bear the strain of knowing she had been married before him, he tells himself that he is really doing this for her.¹¹ In the midst of unbearable disillusionment, Ralph cannot relinquish his vision of himself as his wife's savior.

While still married to Ralph, Undine had begun her attempt to negotiate a marriage to Peter Van Degen, who could both support and display her lavishly. Undine had long since rationalized her friendship with Van Degen: "it

¹¹Auchincloss questions the credibility of Ralph committing suicide because "his ex-wife had been secretly married and divorced before she had married him" (104). But Ralph never really perceives Undine as no longer his wife, and the shock of learning about her previous marriage is the culmination of a series of shocks to Ralph.

ennobled her in her own eyes to influence such a man for good," since he "was noted for not caring for 'nice women'" (201-202). Undine does not admit to herself how much he may be influencing her. As subsequent events show, in fact, Peter does not view Undine any differently from the other women she places herself above.

When they do become involved with each other, Van Degen refuses to enter a partnership with Undine, partly because he does not trust her to uphold her side of it. After Undine divorces Ralph, Peter won't see her. As her friend Indiana Rolliver reveals, "'He says that the very day you went off with him last year you got a cable from New York telling you to come back at once to Mr. Marvell, who was desperately ill'" (358). Yet Wharton makes it clear that Undine did not return to Ralph because she did not believe he really was ill. Just as she later perceives Raymond as acting when he confronts her about the Chelles tapestries, Undine quickly assumes Laura's cable is an act, an attempt to force her to return to New York and "spoil her pleasure" (297). "Ralph was always perfectly well--she could not picture him as being suddenly at death's door and in need of her....what if the cable were a device of the Marvell women to bring her back?" (297) Herself aware of playing roles throughout the novel, whether young girl in love, noble mother, or incorruptible American woman, Undine readily assumes that others do the same. Of course, it is also a matter of convenience for Undine to rationalize away Laura's

cable in this way; she is about to begin her affair with Van Degen when the cable arrives. When Undine rightfully points out that Van Degen went with her anyway, Indiana explains, "One day when he wasn't feeling very well he thought to himself: "Would she act like that to me if I was dying?" And after that he never felt the same to you'" (360).

Undine clearly saw her affair with Van Degen as a business move; "It had been a bold move, but it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street 'stroke'" (364). During their affair, Undine "had preserved her self-respect by telling herself that she was really [Van Degen's] wife, and in no way to blame if the law delayed to ratify the bond" (364, my emphasis). She takes credit for her affair as a skillful maneuver but denies any moral responsibility. Her "business" during their affair was to "make each of their days so agreeable that when the last came he should be conscious of a void to be bridged over as rapidly as possible; and when she thought this point had been reached she packed her trunks and started for Dakota," for the divorce court (366-67). Consequently, she has trouble understanding why the "move" didn't work. Undine had failed to take into account that Peter might have emotional needs, other than passion, in her attempt to form a marriage partnership with him. Undine also fails to realize the extent to which she is an outsider to the male world. She is an outsider to the world of business by choice, as I have discussed. But Undine discovers with Van



Degen that even in her business, men play by different rules. While their affair costs Undine her place in society, Van Degen can have both a wife and a mistress, with no apparent loss of social status.

Van Degen perceives Undine's initial refusal to "'be a little fond'" of him as an act, not realizing how repulsive she finds him (233-34). Undine had noted his "grotesque saurian head, with eye-lids as thick as lips and lips as thick as ear lobes" the first time she saw him (49). She never does overcome her physical repugnance for Van Degen; when he first kisses her, "she felt a moment's recoil" (294). But as Undine learns more about the extent of Peter's wealth, and has been married long enough to realize the dearth of Ralph's, she decides she likes his type of "'exclusiveness,'" which is a "contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy" (192). He is "nice" to listen to her financial problems (and give her two thousand dollars), so Undine decides she wants to marry him, despite being repulsed by him.

During their affair, Van Degen seems perfectly aware that Undine wants the social and financial security of marriage with him. While he never explicitly agrees to marry her, he does nothing to correct her expectation that he will. He "seemed in no way disturbed" by her references to divorcing Ralph, and "though Undine could not remember his ever voluntarily bringing up the subject of their marriage he did not shrink from her recurring mention of it"

(366). Thus Peter, by seeing clearly aspects of Undine's character to which Ralph was initially blind, is able to control his relationship with her and end the affair when it no longer suits him.

Undine realizes too late that "her companion's view of their relation was not the same as hers. She saw that he had always meant it to be an unavowed tie, screened by Mrs. Shallum's companionship and Clare's careless tolerance..."

(365). This is partially a rationalization for Peter's never coming to Dakota; Undine doesn't want to believe that anything she did had such a negative effect on him. But Undine's perception is also supported by what we have already seen of Van Degen. This is not his first extra-marital affair, and he had said much earlier, in Undine's presence, "'Marry somebody who likes all the things you don't, and make love to somebody who likes all the things you do'" (174). This is precisely what he has done.¹²

While Peter retains his place in society after his affair with Undine, she, now divorced, experiences the "lost advantage" of no longer being Mrs. Ralph Marvell. "Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her

¹²Nancy Morrow makes a similar point. Morrow, however, does not believe there is anything more than Van Degen's use of the double standard involved in his failure to marry Undine. Morrow says, "that Van Degen suddenly reproaches Undine for leaving Ralph practically on his death bed must be seen as simply the most graceful retreat he can manage, and not as some kind of moral awakening, as his story implies" (35). Van Degen clearly is rationalizing his actions, but that does not mean he wouldn't be disturbed by the way Undine treated Ralph.

husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity" (361).

Because Van Degen entered into an affair with her, Undine had thought he was in love with her. She believed that the "cool spirit within her" which "seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations" made her "capable of measuring the intensity of those she provoked" (294).

Undine reflects,

It was wonderful how cool she felt--how easily she could slip out of his grasp! Any man could be managed like a child if he were really in love with one... (294, Wharton's ellipsis).

What had been true of Ralph does not apply to Peter, however, and Undine miscalculates her control over Van Degen. Her failure to understand Van Degen's rules led Undine to bargain away the prestige of the Dagonet-Marvell line without receiving the superior display she expected in return.

Feeling devalued, Undine becomes defensive. "She feared to be associated with 'the wrong people,' and scented a shade of disrespect in every amicable advance. The more pressing attentions of one or two men she had formerly known filled her with a glow of outraged pride..." (361). When Indiana chides her for leaving Van Degen in the middle of their affair in order to get her divorce from Ralph, Undine responds: "'But what could I do? I'm not an immoral woman'" (346). Undine can still view herself this way because:

The pleasures for which her sex took such risks had never attracted her, and she did not even crave the excitement of having it thought that

they did. She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability.... (353-54)

Being thought sexually immoral damages the respectability Undine wants, so she protects her self-image by believing that, because she has no intrinsic interest in sexual "pleasures," she is immune to criticism on that basis. As Ammons points out, even women such as Undine "still live through men" because "In Wharton's view the woman who wants to make it to the very top of the American pyramid still has only one route: confederate with a man already up there, or one on the way" (Argument 112). Undine's period of social ostracism confirms this in her mind, and she proceeds next to align herself with Count Raymond de Chelles.

If Ralph fails his partnership with Undine because he cannot provide enough money, Raymond fails because he refuses both to fund Undine's extravagances and to display her.¹³ Undine had believed she was truly flattered by Raymond's courtship; "Nor was there anything calculated in her attitude" (401). But Undine's persistent "want of money" is soon mentioned again, and it is not surprising when she explores the possibility of buying her way into a marriage with Chelles. She assumes both that he would end her financial problems and that her "scarcely-gained footing" in French society would be secured (402-05). When

¹³As Ammons says, "His lovely jealousy...is not a sign of affection but of power" and "the 'charming' Raymond is simply a nightmarish exaggeration" of Ralph (Argument 115-16).

Madame de Trezac suggests she become Chelles' mistress, Undine self-righteously invokes the moral standards of Apex; when her friend responds, "'Personally, of course, I've never quite got used to the French view--,'" Undine says, "'I hope no American woman ever does'" (404).

There is more to Undine's refusal to have an affair with Raymond than moral scruples, however. She had already been "cut" by society after her affair with Van Degen and her divorce from Ralph, and Undine does not intend to make the same mistake again. Thus, "her demeanour to Chelles was that of the incorruptible but fearless American woman, who cannot even conceive of love outside of marriage," and she determines to "give up Chelles unless he was willing to marry her" (404-05). She is learning to adjust her strategies to the rules by which men play.

But once they are married, Raymond repeats Ralph's efforts to control Undine's social life. He requires her to "report of every hour she spent away from him" because he considers her "too young and good looking" to be "mixed up" with Princess Estradina's "crew" (481-82). After a season in Paris, "the lights went out"; he takes her to Saint Desert, where Undine loses her hard-won publicity (489). "At first she was sure she could laugh Raymond out of his prudence" and convince him to spend more freely on her. But Raymond, like Ralph, initially expects Undine to understand the limitations on their finances: "he appealed to her good sense....But his economic plea was as unintelligible to her

as the silly problems about pen-knives and apples in the 'Mental Arithmetic' of her infancy..." (495-96). Then, Undine notices,

He had apparently decided that his arguments were unintelligible to her, and under all his ardour she felt the difference made by the discovery. It did not make him less kind, but it evidently made her less important; and she had the half-frightened sense that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him. (496)

From this point on, the story of Undine's marriage to Raymond is the story of a woman who is increasingly an outsider to her husband's world. Raymond leaves Undine at Saint Desert, where only her in-laws visit, while he takes care of family affairs--usually getting his brother out of debt---and engages in extramarital affairs. Whenever he returns from a trip, Undine, very much aware of her isolation from his life, "had a curious sense of his coming back from unknown distances and not belonging to her or to any state of things she understood," and she is "mortified by the discovery that there were regions of his life she could not enter" (497, 507). As Wershoven says, "This is a terrible punishment for Undine, who can define herself only through other people's eyes" (68). The only eyes watching her at Saint Desert are those of her disapproving in-laws.

Wharton does not need to tell Raymond's story, simply because it is the same old story and she has fully anticipated it earlier in the novel. Just as Van Degen had baldly stated his philosophy of marriage and affairs, Raymond had told Charles Bowen that his relatives had been



pressuring him to marry, and he had concluded, "'One knows that, like death, it has to come'" (276). Raymond's readiness to ignore Undine while indulging himself elsewhere is therefore completely predictable. After their argument about leasing the premier to Raymond's brother and his bride, Raymond shuts Undine out even more. When his efforts to discuss literature with her fail, they stop talking. And, while the Chelles family judges Undine inadequate for her failure to have a baby, the fact is that Raymond will not sleep with her (506, 509-10).

Undine responds to this isolation in her usual way; by focusing on her appearance at the expense of any intellectual development: "her dresses were more than ever her chief preoccupation" and "she scanned the fashion-papers for new scents and powders, and experimented in facial bandaging, electric massage and other processes of renovation" (520-21). This process fails to regain her husband's affection and does not, as Undine discovers, secure her place in French society. Madame de Trezac tells Undine that the members of Raymond's "set" "'think you beautiful....But a woman has got to be something more than good-looking to have a chance to be intimate with them: she's got to know what's being said about things'" (541).

Undine appears to take this criticism very seriously, believing "she had never lacked insight into the cause of her own failures," and having noticed herself that "Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel"



(541). But she is unable to take seriously the idea that beauty alone does not always suffice (although her failure with Van Degen should have convinced her of this truth), and soon abandoning her desultory attempts at learning, she "prolonged her hours at the dress-maker's and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty" (542). As a result, Undine remains an outsider not only to the male world but to all of the French aristocracy. "As soon as people began to talk they ceased to see her" will continue to be the response to this beautiful but uninformed woman (541-42).

Raymond's condescending treatment of Undine is similar to Ralph's. When Undine complains that Raymond leased the premier to his brother without consulting her, he replies, "'But, my dear child, you've always professed the most complete indifference to business matters...'" (502). What we know of Undine suggests this is probably true. Yet by calling her a "child," Raymond indicates that like Ralph, he does not consider his wife an adult whose opinions matter. Undine shows some patience with Chelles, for "the discipline of the last years had trained Undine to wait and dissemble." But when Raymond announces that she must give up another Spring in Paris because he is needed at Saint Desert, she "wanted to burst into sobs like a child." She rebels, telling Raymond, "'You can do as you please; but I mean to go to Paris'" (525).

Undine's subsequent attempt to fund her trip with the

Chelles tapestries completely disillusion Raymond. Like Ralph, he is genuinely appalled at Undine's lack of concern for his heritage and traditions.¹⁴ During their confrontation about Undine's having the tapestries appraised, Raymond "stood looking at her coldly and curiously, as though she were some alien apparition his eyes had never before beheld" (545). He lumps her into the class of Invaders, declaring "'you're all alike,'" and:

"You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about...and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!" (545)

Raymond now fully understands Undine's superficiality. Judith Fryer notes that, unlike Ralph, Raymond "asserts himself in the face of her power" through speech. Raymond "asserts his own ability to see clearly, and to speak clearly, over her inability to see anything at all beyond herself..." (Felicitous Space 114).

Raymond's impassioned speech, however, is lost on Undine, who perceives him as acting:

¹⁴Morrow discusses the parallels between Undine's marriages to Raymond and to Ralph and says, "In both marriages Undine tries to convert the symbols of order and tradition into fashion and cold cash, by resetting the Dagonet jewels and by trying to sell the de Chelles tapestries" (36). Indeed, Undine's behavior highlights one of the major differences between the old order and the Invaders: the Invaders focus on collecting things, while old society focuses on protecting (often unsuccessfully) what it has.

He stopped again, his white face and drawn nostrils giving him so much the look of an extremely distinguished actor in a fine part that, in spite of the vehemence of his emotions, his silence might have been the deliberate pause for a replique.... (546)

Because Undine understands emotions only as an act, she can discount Raymond's feelings. She protects herself from the force of his anger by assuming he is playing a part.¹⁵ Thus she can answer, "waiting long enough to give the effect of having lost her cue," "'Do you mean to say you're going to refuse such an offer?" (546) But Raymond's protests are valid, and Undine can respond only by leaving him and returning, through marriage to Elmer Moffatt, to the world from which Raymond now realizes she has come.

The story of Moffatt's social and financial rise is woven throughout The Custom of the Country. Undine's feelings for him come closest to romantic love. After meeting Elmer in New York, following years of separation, Undine returns home crying and shaken (116-17). "She had been drawn to him from the first" and, years later, Undine is still attracted by Elmer's strength and power (548, 563). She had allowed her father to arrange for their divorce

¹⁵In contrast, the reference to Chelles as a "fine actor" has been cited to suggest that his outbreak should not be taken too seriously. See for example Wershoven, who says Raymond's expression when he delivers his "long and angry speech" contributes to "a sense of an innate phoniness" which was already established when he "took the part of ardent suiter" during their courtship and "Undine seemed to sense that he was acting" (69). But again, this is Undine's perception; having acted but never felt ardently herself, she does not think others actually have such feelings either.



within a couple of weeks of their marriage because, as Undine says, "'I was so young...I didn't know anything...'" (110, Wharton's ellipses). After learning that Elmer has enough wealth to be "'The greatest American collector'" (530), Undine develops a desire to "cry out her wrath and wretchedness" to him. At first, "She did not think of Moffatt as a power she could use, but simply as some one who knew her and understood her grievance." Yet as Undine observes the pieces of Elmer's collection scattered about his room, "her heart beat at the signs of his altered state" (566-67). Undine wants to be with Elmer both because she is still attracted to him and because he now has the means to support her in the way Raymond has not.

Unlike Ralph and Raymond, Elmer understands Undine clearly and is able to use his understanding of her to further his own success. When they met in New York early in the novel, he blackmailed her with hints of revealing their past marriage, because he knew how desperately Undine wanted it kept secret. She had told him, "'If any of [Ralph's] folks found out, they'd never let him marry me....And it would kill me, Elmer--it would just kill me!'" (114) Undine recognizes that she is an outsider to his world:

he gave her, more than any one she had ever known, the sense of being detached from his life, in control of it, and able...to choose which of its calls he should obey. If the call were that of business...she knew she would drop from his life like a loosened leaf. (563)

This is no condemnation of Elmer, however. Undine perceives that "He used life exactly as she would have used it in his

place" (563). Elmer's "place" is that of a man. While The Reef's Anna Leath faults herself for not living life as fully as her step-son Owen, Undine sees in Elmer someone whose dealings with the world are not limited by gender, as hers are.¹⁶

Wharton uses this relationship as another gauge of Undine's ignorance, which is related to her inability to feel anything deeply. Undine simply does not care about the same things as other people. Her ignorance is most fully explored in the contrast between Moffatt's genuine love of art and Undine's complete indifference to it, except as an indication of wealth. The contrast is especially important because they are so alike in other ways. When she takes Moffatt around to look at various art objects, Undine finds that "the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand," whereas she "had lived in almost total ignorance" of such objects and has now simply "acquired as much of the jargon as a pretty woman needs to produce the impression of being well-informed..." (563, 561; my emphasis). The contrast between Elmer's and Undine's reactions to art confirms Ralph's earlier perception of

¹⁶Allen Stein notes how Undine is affected by her lack of power:

Barred because of her sex from the sources of power available to men and incapable of understanding the underlying causes of her resultant sense of frustration...she is chronically restive, dissatisfied, grasping--seeking feverishly in possession, social position, and men the power for which, largely unbeknown to herself, she really longs. (244-45)



Undine as "a creature of skin-deep reactions" who "remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (224).

As she reminisces with Elmer about their first romance, Undine tells him that her life so far has "'all been an awful mistake. But I shouldn't care if you were here and I could see you sometimes. You're so strong....'" And, we are told, "She had never spoken more sincerely. For the moment all thought of self-interest was in abeyance, and she felt again...the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his" (568). She tells Elmer that their relationship "'was the only time I ever really cared--all through!'" Undine cries out, "'Oh, Elmer--if I'd known--if I'd only known!'" What she really means is that if she had known how well Elmer would do, she could have stayed with him in the first place and foregone her other marriages. This is symbolically confirmed by the way she "turned away, touching with an unconscious hand the edge of the lapis bowl among his papers" (570).

Knowing that her husband is having an affair, Undine sees a way to gain the same kind of amusement without losing her respectability as a French Marquise. She proposes to Elmer that she become his mistress. The plan appeals to Undine because it would not entail the vulnerability she had faced as divorced mistress to Van Degen; "she had no wish to affront again the social reprobation that had so nearly wrecked her" (564). Elmer Moffatt, however, does not want a mistress; he wants a wife. He tells Undine, "'if you want



to come back you've got to come that way...walk in by the front door, with your head up....'" That Undine expects him to give in to her is clear in her belief that "the great moment of her life had come at last--the moment all her minor failures and successes had been building up with blind indefatigable hands" (572). But Moffatt stands firm, and her "great moment" ends in finally accepting Elmer's ultimatum to divorce Raymond and remarry him.

Just before her marriage to Raymond, Undine had asked Elmer if he intended to marry. He had answered, "'Why, I shouldn't wonder--one of these days. Millionaires always collect something; but I've got to collect my millions first'" (419). Once he does, Moffatt is ready to "collect" Undine and give her, along with the Chelles tapestries, the display for which she has longed.¹⁷ Blake Nevius says Undine "is bound to fall short of her goals because her ideals are incompatible" (152). But the contrast between Undine's situation and the behavior of both Peter Van Degen and Raymond de Chelles shows that, in her world, respectability and amusement are incompatible only for women.

Ultimately the most sympathetic character in this novel is one of the least developed: Undine's son, Paul. As The Custom of the Country nears its end, Wharton strips away the

¹⁷The aristocracy, as well as the "Invaders," is implicated in the sale of the tapestries; Raymond sold them in order to pay off his brother Hubert's gambling debts (592).

narrative's sympathy for Undine by showing her through Paul's point of view.¹⁸ Just as Ralph had learned of Undine's movements through lawyers' cables and newspaper articles, Paul seeks "clues" to his mother's marital "transitions" in Mrs. Heeny's bag of clippings. This eight-year-old child does not remember Ralph, so he thinks of Raymond as his father (582). He is sickened to learn how his mother got her divorce from Raymond:

She said things that weren't true...That was what he had always feared to find out...She had got up and said before a lot of people things that were awfully false about his dear French father... (586, Wharton's ellipses).

The publicity surrounding Undine's adventures has also made "a lot of people" privy to information that those who should be closest to her must learn of in the same forum. Even the fact of Undine's and Elmer's first marriage, so carefully guarded by Undine until this point, is reported in the outrageous gossip-page article that records the "'Quick work untying'" Undine from de Chelles and "'tying'" her to Moffatt, "'the billionaire Railroad King, who was the Marquise's first husband'" (584-85).¹⁹

¹⁸Beth Kowaleski-Wallace has discussed how Wharton's use of Paul's perspective manipulates the reader to feel outraged for Paul, thereby keeping us distanced from Undine. Wallace also convincingly argues that we are harsher toward Undine as a failed parent than we would be toward a man ("The Reader as Misogynist").

¹⁹As Robert Caserio comments, "Wharton's story is about a marriage that is uncannily, simultaneously, also a divorce....For Undine marries Elmer again as husband number four, in a way that makes us feel she's been both married to and divorced from him without a break" ("Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Public Commentary" 197).

Wharton encourages the reader to empathize with Paul with several pages describing his wanderings through Undine's new house, where he has arrived on a school holiday, and by contrasting these ostentatious surroundings with Paul's loneliness. Brief references to "pictures he would have liked to know about" and his love of books suggest Paul's affinity to the father he has forgotten. Paul especially likes Vandyck's Grey Boy because the boy looks "so sad and lonely that he too might have come home that very day to a strange house in which none of his old things could be found" (578).

Paul's perspective is credible because Undine had previously shown so little interest in him. Before she wanted to marry Raymond, Undine had "consoled" herself "by thinking of [Paul] as 'better off' with Ralph's family, and of herself as rather touchingly disinterested in putting his welfare before her own." But Undine actually wanted to keep herself free of "the additional burden" of caring for Paul (370). The extent of her feelings for Paul is revealed in the following lines: "She could forget him when...things were 'going her way,' but in moments of discouragement the thought of him was an added bitterness, subtly different from her other bitter thoughts, and harder to quiet" (370). Wharton allows Undine some maternal feelings, only to use them to emphasize her shallowness. Having been raised to put herself first, Undine cannot understand her vague feelings for her son. When her mother had previously told

Undine that Paul did not recognize a photograph of her, Undine merely reflected, "It was dreadful that her little boy should be growing up far away from her, perhaps dressed in clothes she would have hated" (406, my emphasis).

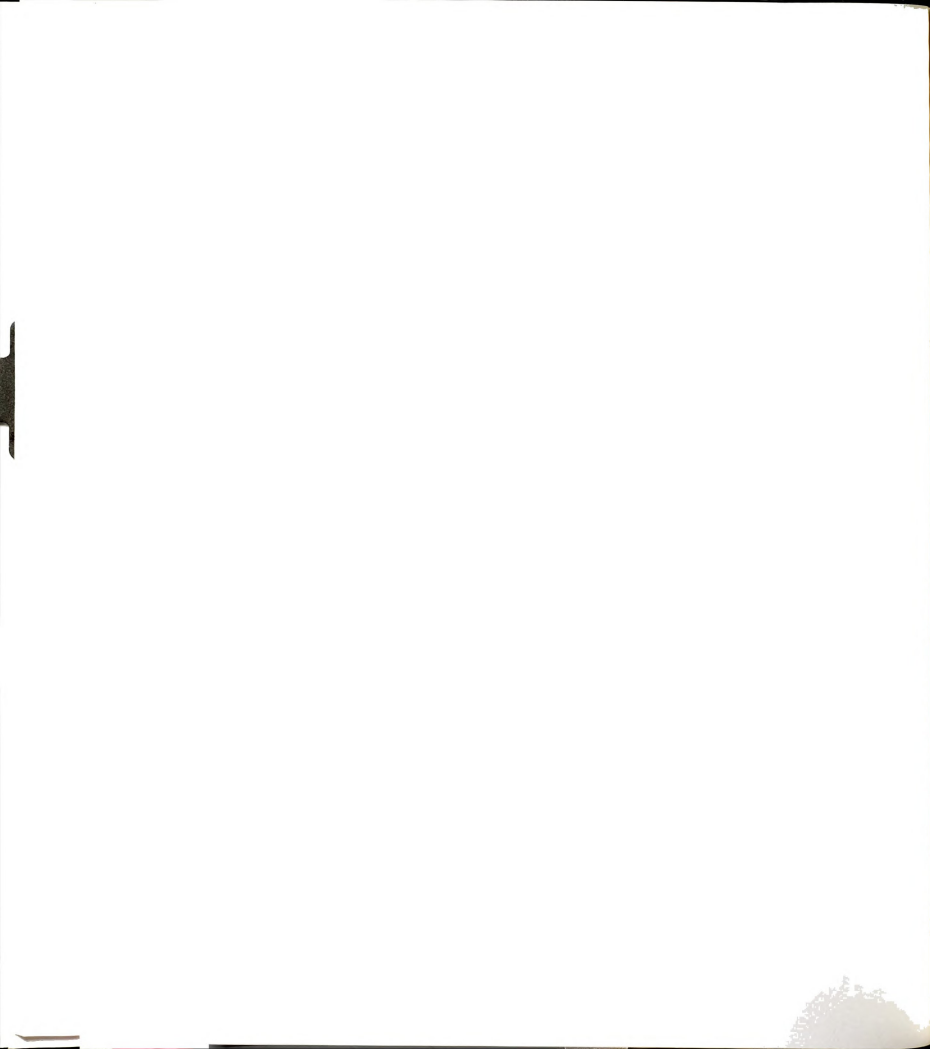
Undine's feelings for Paul had suddenly become important only when Moffatt suggested that she press her claim for custody, in order to get the money from the Marvells that she needed to buy her way into marriage with de Chelles. Undine says to Moffatt, "'I can't tell you how I miss him,'" with "a ring of truth that carried conviction to her own ears if not to Moffatt's," and "she did not understand how she could have lived so long without him..." (417-18, Wharton's ellipsis). Only now does Undine find the separation from her son unbearable. Once she has Paul, Undine soon lapses back into indifference toward him. She is "pleasantly absorbed" in him for a while but soon finds it "more and more difficult to fit his small exacting personality into her cramped rooms and crowded life" (485, 491). Reunited with Paul again after her honeymoon with Moffatt, Undine criticizes his haircut, protests the intensity of his hug, and cuts off his efforts to talk to her, because she has a party to give (587-88).

By ending the novel with a party, Wharton underscores again both Undine's insatiable need for display and her chronic dissatisfaction with life. Discussing changes in New York social life in the early twentieth century, Kaplan says, "The upper-class home functioned less as a private



haven from the competition of the marketplace than as the public stage for that competition" (93). This is certainly true of the Moffatts' two mansions; the New York one is "an exact copy of the Pitti Palace," and the Parisian one features a ballroom with the Chelles tapestries "set in great gilt panels" (586-87). But as Judith Saunders argues, Undine ultimately fails in that there is always something she cannot have.²⁰ When Undine learns that Moffatt cannot be an ambassador because she is divorced, she "burst into an angry laugh" and is insulted, "as if the rule had been invented to humiliate her" (594). The novel ends without a sense of closure for Undine. Instead, she greets her guests while saying bitterly to herself that the unreachable part of an ambassador's wife "was the one part she was really made for" (594).

²⁰Saunders has discussed how, in Wharton's fiction, characters tend to repeat struggles that do not succeed. Thus, as Saunders notes, Undine's story appears to be one of upward movement, but there is actually a theme of failure, because she is never satisfied ("Repetitive Action").



Chapter Three
Ironic Structure and Untold Stories
in The Age of Innocence

In her 1920 The Age of Innocence, Wharton presents a story which, on the surface, is a man's story, and which in many ways appears to be a conventional nineteenth-century romance. These things appear to be so because Wharton tells the story from Newland Archer's point of view, focusing on his consciousness and the way he deals with the potential love triangle in which he finds himself. But as Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, while nineteenth-century authors made certain "that Bildung and romance could not coexist and be integrated for the heroine at the resolution," twentieth-century women writers are "writing beyond" such endings, breaking the narrative structure which says that women must ultimately sacrifice their questing to marriage, or die (3-4). In The Age of Innocence, Wharton writes beyond a traditional nineteenth-century ending by ironically undermining the structure of the novel and its focus on Newland Archer, a would-be American hero, and by drawing the reader's attention to the untold stories of Ellen Olenska and May Welland.

Wharton's careful structuring of The Age of Innocence is evidenced by the three different plans she outlined for

the novel.⁴ In the first version, May and Archer break their engagement. Archer is shocked when Ellen responds to his proposal by suggesting that they spend a few weeks together to make sure of their feelings for each other. Ellen and Newland marry despite Archer's misgivings but eventually separate because Ellen's soul "'recoils'" from the prospect of an old New York marriage. Ellen returns to Europe, where "'She is very poor, & very lonely, but she has a real life'"; Archer returns to his mother's house. Apparently this version of the novel would have emphasized Ellen's ability to act and to cause extensive changes in the lives of others.

Wharton's second plan calls for a much more conventional novel: Archer marries May and has a brief affair with Ellen, who then returns to Europe. Discussing these plans, Alan Price concludes that Wharton shifted the focus from Ellen to Archer in the second version partly because:

she could not be confident [in her first plan] that her readers would share her sympathy for a woman who broke up the engagement of a nice girl, suggested a trial marriage, and then abandoned her husband because she thought New York's seasonal social life was dull (24).

The third plan again has Archer marrying May but having an affair with Ellen. Although everyone else surmises that Newland and Ellen are lovers, May "'suspects nothing.'" As

⁴Price 24-27. See Price for Wharton's three plans for The Age of Innocence and for further discussion of those plans.



a Catholic, Ellen cannot divorce, so she could not marry Newland even if he left May. But Ellen again grows tired of New York and her affair with Archer and returns to "the freedom and variety of her European existence.'" The final dinner for Ellen in versions two and three is simply a good-bye, not the ritual of ostracism it becomes in the finished novel.

By the time she had completed The Age of Innocence in its published form, Wharton had made Ellen Olenska an ostensibly minor character, while Newland Archer became the novel's central figure. As Wharton's chosen center of consciousness, Newland appears to be a traditional American hero: the American male whose search for a new frontier, according to such critics as Henry Nash Smith and Richard Chase, makes this country's literature distinctly American (Baym 131-32). Discussing the way the myth of the American hero has displaced women writers from the canon and has trivialized women characters in fiction, Nina Baym says that the myth entails "the pure American self" confronting "the promise offered by the idea of America...that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition...." Society becomes "something artificial and secondary to human nature" which "exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality." Because both society and landscape are "depicted in unmistakably feminine terms," the American hero is realized as the opposite of the feminine, and the myth

becomes exclusively male (Baym 131-33).

The American hero's story becomes, in effect, a male bildungsroman; thus Archer, whose first name refers to the American hero's quest for a new land, struggles with his romance triangle and his need for self-definition. Newland persistently fails to define himself, however. Married to May for a year, he contrasts his present life with his "vision of the past" and muses, "'What am I? A son-in-law--'" (215). At the end of the novel, Newland reminisces about having "risen up at the call" to politics (dropping "thankfully" into obscurity when not re-elected), and of having been "'A good citizen'" and "what was called a faithful husband" (346-47). To the end, Wharton emphasizes that Newland is defined by his social roles.

May is originally the frontier on which Newland plans to exercise his self-hood. She is to be a "miracle of fire and ice," both passion and purity, which he will create by his "enlightening companionship" (7). But Newland relinquishes this goal after his wedding, concluding that "There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free," an assumption based largely on the "most tranquil unawareness" Newland believes he sees in May's eyes (195-98, 188).

Ellen is the promising landscape; for Newland, this quite unfree woman comes to represent the freedom of a world different from his own. Sitting beside Ellen in his wife's carriage, Newland tells her, "'The only reality to me is



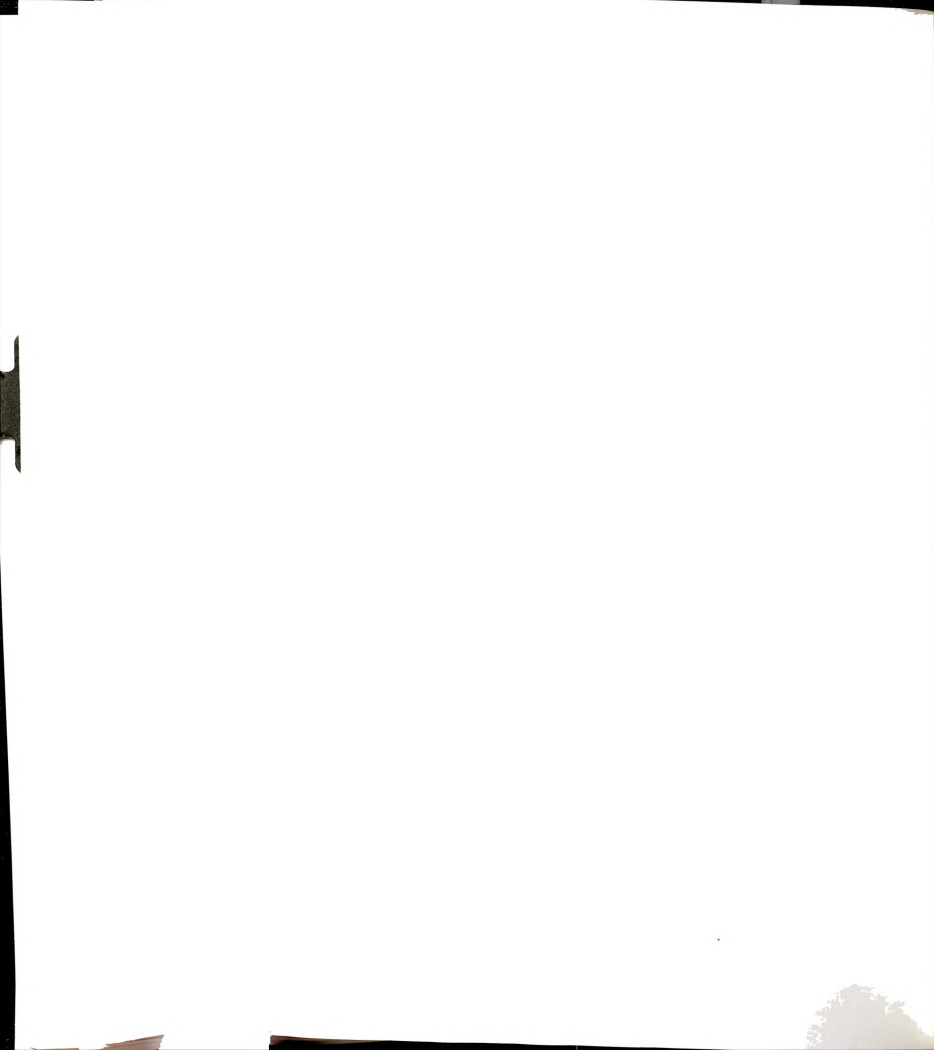
this.'" When Ellen asks if he wants her to be his mistress, the flustered Newland replies:

"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." (288-90)

This is the new-land of Archer's name. What he really wants is the ability to move between May's and Ellen's worlds without any cost to himself, and without deciding between the two worlds. That Newland seeks a dream world rather than an actual place is suggested by the fact that he had previously rejected the possibility of a physical quest. When Ned Winsett had spoken of emigrating, Newland had thought, "Emigrate! As if a gentleman could abandon his own country!" (126) Ironically, one of the few physical journeys Newland does make is his flight from Ellen to Florida, where he begs May to hasten their wedding--with the result that Ellen can be, at most, his mistress.² Ellen sees through his romanticized longing for another world and responds, "'Oh my dear--where is that country?'" (290)

Wharton undermines her own form throughout the novel, writing beyond the story about Newland Archer to convey a sense of the women characters that her attention to her

²Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads the novel this way, noting that unlike most bildungsromans, Newland's is an "entirely internal" search: "He cannot flee the provincial world of old New York; he must learn to transmute it into something valuable." What his search leads to, Wolff argues, is Newland's "dedication to generativity," the same commitment to the future that May and the other mothers in the novel share (314-15).



audience and to acceptable forms removed from center stage. Beside Newland's bildungsroman is that of Ellen Olenska, whose search is manifested by a physical journey--"home" to New York, then back again to Europe.³ Wharton makes it clear that Ellen's return to New York is a type of quest. At the van der Luydens' dinner, Newland assures Ellen that she is "'among friends.'" She answers, "'Yes--I know. That's why I came home. I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again...'" (65, my emphasis).

Not that Ellen's journey to New York involves a wholesale acceptance of its ways. She refuses to live with her grandmother because she "'had to be free,'" and she moves away from the social center of New York to be surrounded by artists, as she was in France (77, 68). When Archer tells her that her house is in an unfashionable quarter, she says, "'Why not make one's own fashions? But,'" she concedes, "'I suppose I've lived too independently; at any rate, I want to do what you all do--I want to feel cared for and safe'" (74-75). She continues, "'Being here is like--like--being taken on a holiday when one has been a good little girl and done all one's lessons'" (75). She appeals to Newland for help with learning how to

³Wendy Gimbel also discusses Ellen's bildungsroman. But Gimbel considers this primarily an "interior quest" manifested by Ellen's movement among houses (127-30). She also argues that in returning to New York, Ellen initially seeks oblivion and regression (144). Similarly, Carol Wershoven discusses R.W.B. Lewis' criteria for an American hero and says, "Wharton's novels with their intruder heroines are a variation of the American theme," with the heroines working "toward their own autonomy" (17).

fit in: "'But you'll explain these things to me--you'll tell me all I ought to know'" (76). Newland responds, "'It's you who are telling me: opening my eyes to things I'd looked at so long that I'd ceased to see them.'" He has turned Ellen's appeal for help around, thus re-focusing her energies, and the reader's, on his quest (76). Newland is unable to truly help Ellen because he is so self-absorbed.

Ellen's respect for the ways of old New York becomes increasingly tinged with skepticism.⁴ She soon begins to see New York differently: it is no longer a haven. Ellen's early ability to see through the van der Luydens' reclusiveness (76) anticipates her increasing ability to make her own informed judgments about New York and to decide whether or not her quest should end there. Newland, trying to steer Ellen away from the influence of Julius Beaufort, assures her that the older women "'want to help you.'" Ellen answers, "'on condition that they don't hear anything unpleasant...Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!'" (78) Ellen has already discovered that she must continue to be a "good little girl" if she is to get along in New York; her success there depends on behaving to please others, as children must

⁴Carol Wershoven discusses the way that, in Wharton's novels, a woman who becomes an outsider often "begins to form her own, new values, and to act and to grow independently" (16). Fryer also discusses Ellen's place as a "marginal" character who "threatens to engulf the little world of order and purity in a world of sexual and cultural richness that would destroy it" ("Purity and Power" 164).

do, and stifling her adult views and feelings. If she fails to do so Ellen may, like a bad little girl, lose her allowance.

In a later scene, Newland (not yet married) confesses his love for Ellen and speaks of their freeing themselves for each other (170). But Ellen rejects Newland's plan because of the sense of loyalty he had made her feel: "'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'" (172). Ellen's words suggest that Wharton wants the reader to view Newland positively, as a champion of loyalty, kindness, and concern. But while Ellen sees his advice that she give up her divorce suit as evidence of Newland's strong moral character, Newland was simply representing the family's view when he gave her that advice (96-98). By speaking for the family and urging Ellen not to divorce, Newland has, in effect, sabotaged his own quest. Finding that they are now inconvenient to him, he is willing to overthrow the principles for which he had stood. Ellen, however, refuses to do so.

In this scene, Ellen also tells of Granny's revealing how New York sees her.

"I was perfectly unconscious at first that people here were shy of me--that they thought I was a dreadful sort of person....New York simply meant peace and freedom to me: it was coming home" (172).

She tries to explain to Archer the way this realization has



affected her: "'I was lonely; I was afraid. But the emptiness and the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I'm like a child going at night into a room where there's always a light'" (173). This is a critical stage in Ellen's quest. She has learned to find comfort and strength within herself, rather than seeking them in the external world.² She is now able to leave New York (returning only when her grandmother has a stroke), so that she does not disrupt Newland's and May's wedding. But Archer responds, "'I don't understand you!'" He still assumes that a woman needs a man to sustain her; earlier in their confrontation, when she cried "'I can't love you unless I give you up,'" he had retorted, "'And Beaufort? Is he to replace me?'" (173) Newland, unable to comprehend Ellen's psychological self-reliance, continues to think that she is simply rejecting him in favor of another man.

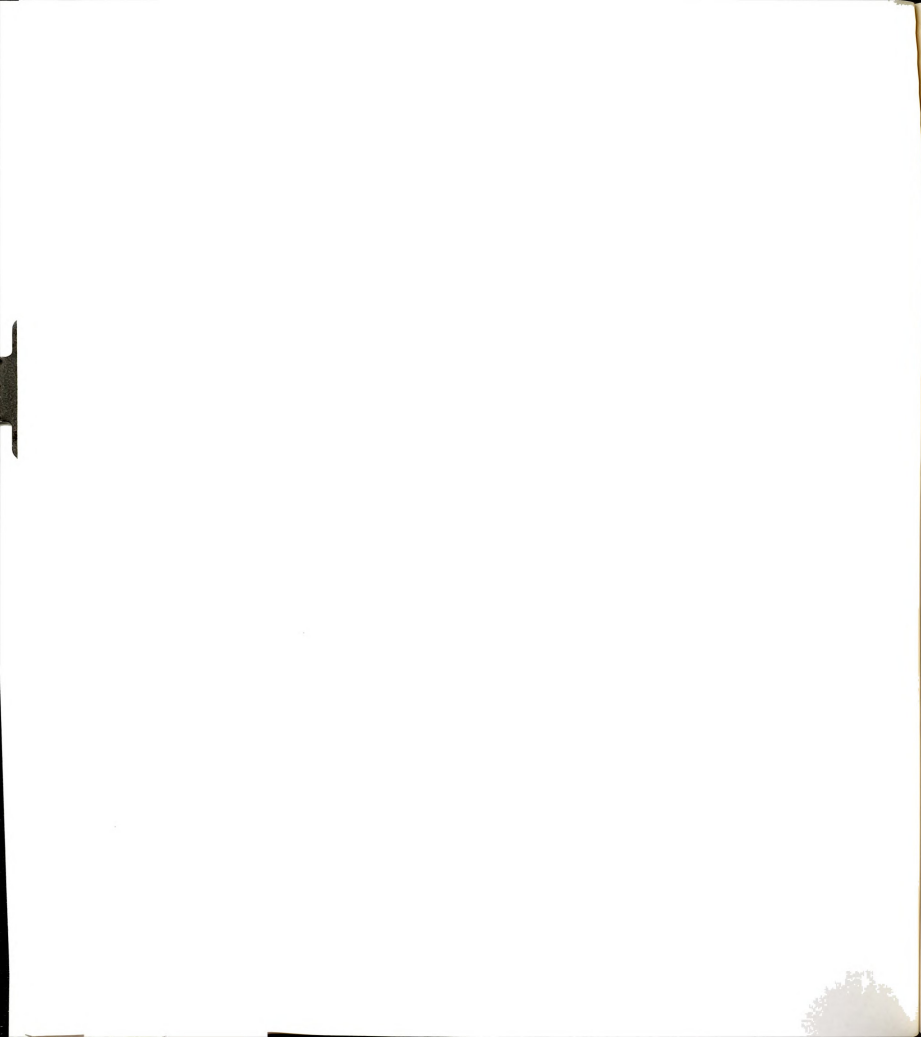
Because she is seen through Newland's eyes and appears primarily as a factor in his quest, much of Ellen's story is untold. Yet Wharton constantly reminds us that this is the case. She ironically invites the reader to speculate about Ellen's story by focusing on Newland's obsessive curiosity about it--a curiosity that is fed by Ellen's own willingness to leave her story untold. In this way, Newland's quest becomes largely a search for information about Ellen's. In Ellen's legal file, Newland finds a letter from her husband

²Gimbel, in contrast, interprets this scene as evidence that Ellen is still acting and thinking as a child (147).



which he tells himself contains "the vague charge of an angry blackguard"--that Ellen had had an affair with his secretary. Yet Newland wonders, "how much truth was behind it? Only Count Olenski's wife could tell" (110). Many of Newland's subsequent conversations with Ellen involve attempts to answer this question. Initially, he gropes for a denial, but Ellen does not give one. When he asks what she thinks she can gain by divorcing her distant husband, Ellen says, "'But my freedom--is that nothing?'" Newland concludes that "the charge in the letter was true, and that she hoped to marry the partner of her guilt" (111-12). For Newland, apparently, Ellen's freedom does mean nothing; he assumes that she would only want to be free from one man in order to marry (i.e., relinquish her freedom to) another.

Unsettled by Ellen's failure to deny having had an affair, Newland "rambles on" in "his intense desire to cover over the ugly reality which her silence seemed to have laid bare" (112). Newland needs to know whether or not Ellen has had an affair because for him it is important to keep women in categories: he remembers how young men make an "abysmal distinction between the women one loved and respected and those one enjoyed--and pitied" (97). He tries to tell himself that in Europe, there might arise situations "in which a woman naturally sensitive and aloof would yet, from the force of circumstances...be drawn into a tie inexcusable by conventional standards" (97). Newland is clearly uncomfortable with such a scenario, however; only when Ellen



implicitly denies her husband's accusation, saying "'I had nothing to fear from that letter,'" is Newland ready to commit himself to her (170).

Contrasted with Ellen's bildungsroman is May's seemingly conventional romance. But Wharton undermines May's romance plot, as well. One of the more obvious ways in which Wharton wrote beyond a traditional nineteenth-century novel ending was her handling of Newland's and May's wedding. Rather than concluding the novel with Archer's feelings for Ellen resolved beforehand, as it would have a conventional novel, the wedding begins Book II of The Age of Innocence. Structurally, placing the wedding here suggests a new beginning, but in fact Newland's conflict continues--and intensifies--once he is married.

The wedding itself is an extremely ironic occasion. It takes place the Tuesday after Easter, a holiday that symbolizes regeneration, new life, hope; yet, as Virginia Blum notes, the service is "cast in funereal language" (25). Newland compares his wedding with an Opera night and wonders if,

when the Last Trump sounded, Mrs. Selfridge Merry would be there with the same towering ostrich feathers in her bonnet, and Mrs. Beaufort with the same diamond earrings and the same smile--and whether suitable proscenium seats were already prepared for them in another world. (181)

With this imagery, Wharton juxtaposes the two traditional nineteenth-century novel endings: marriage and death become one. Newland cannot concentrate on the ceremony; he looks for Ellen, and misses half of the bridal procession (183-

84).

Placing the wedding in the center of the novel suggests that The Age of Innocence will fit another pattern that developed early in the twentieth century: novels "which either begin with [the heroine's] marriage or launch her rapidly into it, and concern a working out of her identity within or against the context of the marriage" (McNall 76-77). Wharton does not work out May's identity, however; May's story, like Ellen's, remains untold. The difference is that, while Newland becomes obsessed with Ellen's story, he has almost no curiosity about his wife's. He prefers the potentially scandalous past of another woman even to the present of his own wife who, he assumes, has no past worth his notice.

Newland discounts May's experience because he perceives her as completely innocent.⁶ In fact, we see May only through his eyes; Newland projects his ideal of innocence onto May (just as he projects an aura of secrecy onto Ellen). May appears to be the innocent of the novel's title, but she is not, and Newland must misinterpret his interactions with May in order to continue viewing her as innocent. When May questions his reason for wanting to hasten their wedding, Newland recognizes her insight. But

⁶Elizabeth Ammons discusses the "American girl" idealized in late nineteenth-century novels--"adventurous, ignorant, virtuous, self-assured"--and says that "Wharton was attacking an entire tradition when she entered May Welland in the lists of nineteenth-century American girls," because this ideal of innocence is so negative and destructive ("Cool Diana" 213-15).

when she "flushed with joy" at his assurance that "'There is no pledge--no obligation whatever--of the kind you think,'" May "seemed to have descended from her womanly eminence to helpless and timorous girlhood..." (148-50). Ironically, he is disappointed with May for believing that he is telling the truth.

This scene also indicates May's "potential for growth and change" (Wershoven 87). This potential is what Archer does not see. One of the few times in the novel that he really looks at his wife is near the end, when he "was struck by something languid and inelastic in her attitude" and briefly "wondered if the deadly monotony of their lives had laid its weight on her also" (293). He does not consider that she may suspect his feelings for Ellen, much less that she may be pregnant. Newland then trivializes what he sees by attributing May's languid demeanor to the fact that he had forgotten to meet her at her grandmother's that day (293).

Only in the novel's penultimate chapter, at the dinner for Ellen, does Archer realize how much his wife has suspected and how often she has acted.

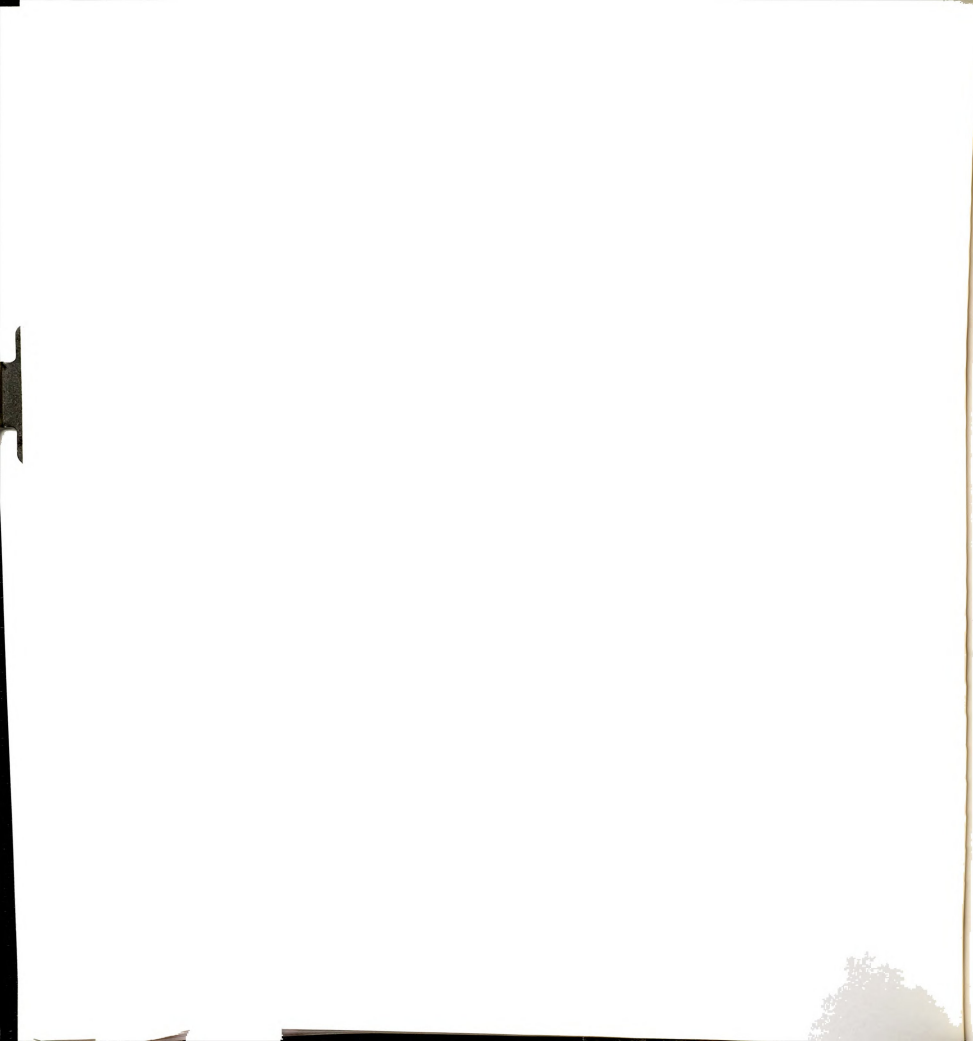
And then it came over him, in a vast flash made up of many broken gleams, that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers....he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything.... (335)

The "means" had culminated in May's telling Ellen she was pregnant, before she knew for certain; and in telling this

lie, May was "acting with the knowledge and approval of the family" (Felicitous Space 138). Fryer says that "Because of the way we are used to reading novels, the romance of Newland and Ellen at first obscures the force of the countersubject: the inexorableness of the offensive launched by the women" against Ellen (F.S. 138, my emphasis). Wharton gives us what appears to be a traditional novel and then surprises us with this most powerful glimpse of May's untold story. In fact, it has been Newland's lack of attention to May's story that has enabled her to destroy his hope of "escape": while he fell asleep exhausted after arranging for Ellen to come to him once, May was having the "really good talk" with Ellen that causes her finally to decide to return to Europe (314-15).

May's careful, knowing control of her situation--contrasted with Newland's ignorance--makes the title of The Age of Innocence especially ironic. Wharton appears to have intended this effect. Her working title for this novel was Old New York. In both of the plans in which Newland and May marry, Newland has an affair with Ellen which his wife never suspects (Price 24-27). Only in the final version, when she changed the title to The Age of Innocence, did Wharton invert the relationship between suspicion and truth, changing May into a woman who assumes that her husband has had an affair when he has not.

Also ironic is the way Wharton treats May as domesticator. This role, like that of May's innocence, is



largely projected onto her by Newland. Early in the novel, Newland had "thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind" (32). But as he becomes enamored with Ellen, "there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future." His response is to rush to May, to encourage her, in effect, to seal his future before he risks involvement with Ellen (140). Much later, at the dinner which is "the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe," Newland "felt like a prisoner in the center of an armed camp" (334-35). These and other references to Newland's feeling trapped are juxtaposed with the fact that he begged that his wedding be hastened, and that May offered to break their engagement when she sensed that he loved another woman.

As Wharton takes care to describe it, May's house represents all the negative aspects of domesticity; here Newland also feels trapped, as the following scene indicates. One winter evening in his library, watching May as she sews, Newland opens the window because "'The room is stifling; I want a little air.'" Leaning out the window,

The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe. (295)

May is infringing on Newland's space; this is his table, his lamp, his library--the only room in the house he has



decorated as he likes. He looks out the window to "a whole world beyond," much as the traditional American hero looks to the landscape and the frontier for escape from a domesticated world.

But Wharton undermines Newland's perception in two ways. In this scene, Newland is frustrated because Ellen has just refused to become his mistress. And Newland's sense of May as entrapper is ironic because he has considerably misunderstood her character. Before opening the window,

...he said to himself with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind [her clear brow], 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....
(295)

Yet Wharton makes it clear that Archer does not know May's thoughts; he not only hasn't realized that she suspects his feelings for Ellen, he does not yet know that May and the rest of the family have determined to exclude him from their discussions of Ellen (296). When May says, "'Do shut the window. You'll catch your death,'" he wants to tell her, "'I am dead--I've been dead for months and months.'" But any sympathy we may feel for him wanes when he thinks, "What if it were she who was dead!....[May] might die, and set him free" (295-96). Having failed to take control of his own life, Newland now passively hopes for a catastrophe to change his life for him.

If May represents domesticity and her house, that domesticating force, Ellen's house represents escape for



Newland. Ellen's drawing room is "unlike any room he had ever known"; it contains pictures that "bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) when he travelled in Italy" (70-71). In the same way, Newland is "unable to see" Ellen herself; she will remain, for him, wrapped in an aura of European mystique. Newland had contrasted Ellen's drawing room, with its "vague pervading perfume...like the scent of some far-off bazaar," with the stuffy, conventional house that awaited him after his conventional honeymoon with May (71-72). As Fryer notes, Ellen "offers the possibilities of individual freedom and experience, instinct and variety, cultural and sexual richness...[so] Newland sends her not lillies-of-the-valley, but yellow roses" ("Purity and Power" 161).

Unlike the typical nineteenth-century woman's bilqunqsroman, Ellen's story ends in neither death nor marriage. Her quest has not been sacrificed to romance, as far as we know; she rejects the novel's two major romance possibilities: an affair with Newland and return to her husband.⁷ At the end of the novel, twenty-six years after Ellen is banished from New York, Newland has an opportunity to see her again. May has died, and Newland, in Paris with his son Dallas, has received an invitation to Ellen's. But upon reaching her apartment building, Newland decides not to

⁷DuPlessis discusses the way that, in traditional nineteenth-century novels, "any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot" (6).

go in. Critics have offered several convincing reasons for this ending: Newland may be afraid to take the risk of a real relationship, or that Ellen will have changed too much; or, he may be so struck with Dallas' revelation that May had understood what it meant for him to give up Ellen, that he does not want to disturb his memory of May, who had "guessed and pitied" (356).[•]

However we choose to interpret Newland's declining to see Ellen at the end, the fact is that with this ending, Wharton leaves the resolution of Ellen's bildungsroman open, and once again invites us to speculate about her untold story. Like Newland, we can only imagine whether or not quest and romance coexist for Ellen, just as we can only imagine what it was like for May to live at the center of "a kind of innocent family hypocrisy" in which her husband and children treated her as one "so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth" that she saw nothing that happened around her (348). Wharton does invite us to imagine the best for Ellen, however, by suggesting that she has kept herself free all these years.

So the novel ends with the bittersweet denouement of Newland Archer's quest in which, because his son touches on what he and May had never spoken of, "He had to deal all at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime," a life which "had been too starved"

[•]See Fryer ("Purity and Power") 156; Gimbel 162; and Ammons ("Cool Diana") 210-11 for these three major interpretations of the ending.

(356-57). And in the same city where his quest comes to an end is Ellen, who so far as we can tell, enjoys the "freedom and variety of her European existence" on the same street in Paris where the divorced Wharton lived for many years, surrounding herself with "a quiet harvest of friendship" (357).

Chapter Four

Repaying Her Daughter:

The Mother's Recompense

In The Mother's Recompense (1925), Wharton again presents as the novel's center of consciousness a character who persistently misinterprets and oversimplifies other characters, and who misunderstands her own motives and actions. The difference is that now the center of consciousness is a woman. Wharton explores Kate Clephane's perspective with the same mixture of subtle irony,¹ partial sympathy, and psychological realism which marks her treatment of Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country and Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence. The result is Wharton's most poignant (if not most sympathetic) woman character. Kate's egocentric nature and her obsession with the one sexually fulfilling relationship of her life combine to blind her to the stories of the other major characters in the novel--her daughter Anne and her one-time lover, Chris Fenno--and prevent her from accepting Fred Landers' love. But, as in The Age of Innocence, Wharton's narrative directs

¹There is, of course, nothing subtle about the irony of Chris' meeting and falling in love with Kate's daughter. What is subtle is Wharton's treatment of Kate's psychology throughout the novel, as she becomes first "the mother" and ultimately her lover's mother-in-law.

the reader's attention to elements of the other characters' ostensible untold stories, ironically undermining the assumptions upon which Kate acts. The narrative makes it clear that, contrary to Kate's view, Anne is not "perfect" despite her mother's having abandoned her. Nor can Kate force Chris out of Anne's life by treating him as though he were the same careless young man she had once known.

In The Age of Innocence, Wharton changed the center of consciousness from Ellen Olenska to Newland Archer. Similarly, The Mother's Recompense is a revision of an earlier manuscript that focused on the daughter's story, after her mother has abandoned her and her father and married another man. Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the 1902 manuscript, "Disintegration," and concludes that Wharton lost interest in the theme of childhood "desolation" which she had already addressed in her 1902 The Valley of Decision. Instead, Wolff says, the "plight of the mother" intrudes so forcefully into the narrative that Wharton ultimately made it the focus of the novel (A Feast of Words 100). Wharton's outlines of The Age of Innocence document her conscious decision to remove Ellen Olenska from the center of that novel, a decision that allowed Wharton to focus ostensibly on the more socially acceptable character of Newland Archer. Conversely, when Wharton returned to "Disintegration" in 1925, she was ready to tell "the other side" of her story, that of Kate Clephane. In the finished 1925 novel, The Mother's Recompense, it is primarily the

daughter's story that is now untold.

The change in focus allows Wharton, herself now in her early 60's, to return to the subject of a mature woman's passion--a theme she had addressed earlier in The Reef and, more obliquely, in The Age of Innocence. The crux of The Mother's Recompense is the much-discussed incest quote. As Kate watches Anne and Chris embrace,

a furious flame of life rushed through her; in every cell of her body she felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover's cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne's chin to press her closer. (221)

This passage has engendered much critical debate.² But when Kate wonders, "Was she physically jealous?", the answer is clearly yes. In a letter to her long-time friend John Hugh Smith, Wharton notes the importance of "the incest element" in "justifying [Kate's] anguish," and continues, "but I felt it would be hardly visible in its exact sense to her, & wanted to try to represent the business as it seemed to her, culminating in the incest-vision when she sees the man holding Anne in his arms" (Letters 480). Initiation into sexuality would traditionally have been the role of one's

²For instance, Wolff says seeing the young lovers embrace forces Kate to acknowledge that she "has violated Nature's taboos....she has been...almost willing to sacrifice Anne on the altar of her own propitiations to time by attempting to engross all of the girl's affections into herself" (Feast of Words 368-69). And Keiko Beppu, in "Wharton Questions Motherhood," argues that the scene's significance is that Kate "realizes with a sense of satisfaction as well as of disillusionment that she need no longer expend herself for the welfare and happiness of her child" (167). Neither reading, however, addresses Kate's intensely physical involvement in this scene.

husband. But Chris, not Anne's father, awoke Kate to her sexuality, as he is now awakening Anne. For Kate to accept a sexual relationship between Chris and Anne would therefore be tantamount, psychologically, to accepting such a relationship between her daughter and her husband. The way Kate projects herself onto Anne in this scene, vicariously sharing Anne's sensual experience, graphically illustrates that in Kate's mind, her daughter is usurping her place.³

Kate's projecting herself onto Anne also reflects a mother's intense psychological identification with her daughter, an identification which, in Kate's case, begins only upon her return to New York. In The Reproduction of Mothering (1978), psychologist Nancy Chodorow argues that a mother tends to experience her daughter "as an extension or double of [the] mother herself, with cathexis of the daughter as a sexual other usually remaining a weaker, less significant theme" (109). Because Anne grew up away from her, Kate never learned to view her as a "sexual other" at all. Kate's "horror" at encountering Chris embracing Anne is therefore magnified by the fact that the daughter she has always viewed as a baby, in order to continue viewing herself as youthful, is now the woman "her lover" prefers.

³Similarly, Adeline Tintner comments, "Why should a mother in 1925 living for the past two decades in the most sophisticated society in Europe regard [this situation] as so horrifying? It can only be because Mrs. Clephane views the lover as a husband and the coupling of the daughter and the husband-figure becomes an incestuous act" (150). At any rate, while she was in France Kate, who lived among groups of American expatriates, was not immersed in French culture.



The wedding dress that Anne and Chris are admiring as they embrace is in stark contrast to the physical intensity of the scene. Both the dress, a "dazzle of whiteness," and Anne's "narrow bed" symbolize her sexual purity. But Wharton's narrative shift from the dress to the young lovers' embrace signifies the transition to adulthood that Anne is already making. And just as the lovers stand "between Mrs. Clephane and the bed," Chris' presence in Anne's life blocks any possibility that Kate might play a mother's traditional role in establishing her daughter in marriage.⁴

Kate's anguish is compounded by the fact that she still considers Chris her lover. Wharton has taken care, from the beginning of the novel, to show that Chris is the person Kate really cares about--no matter how much she would like to think she is mostly concerned about Anne. At the novel's opening, Chris is among Kate's waking thoughts, before she gets the telegram announcing her mother-in-law's death and the one from Anne, asking Kate to come live with her. After the first telegram, as Kate wonders if she'll be allowed to see "little Anne" now, her thoughts quickly return to Chris. She even tries to determine Anne's age by working backward from Chris'. In fact, using Chris as the reference point from which she reckons everything continues to be Kate's

⁴This is a major point of contrast with Grace Aguilar's The Mother's Recompense, whose title Wharton apologizes "for deliberately appropriating and putting to uses so different" (Dedication, Wharton's The Mother's Recompense).



approach throughout the novel.⁵ When the second telegram arrives, Kate's hope that it is from Chris makes Anne seem "so far away, so invisible, so unknown," while "Chris of a sudden had become so near and real again..." (10).

Kate dates her own existence from the time she met Chris. "For the first time, when she met him, her soul's lungs seemed full of air. Life still dated for her from that day....At thirty-nine her real self had been born..." (15).⁶ At one point, Kate is disgusted to realize that Chris and Anne are in her thoughts at the same time. Although she thinks this has never happened before and "felt as if she had committed a sort of profanation," Chris and Anne have often been in her thoughts simultaneously, simply because she seldom has Chris out of her mind (73).

Kate's view that Chris "inflicted on her the bitterest pain she had ever suffered" (15) further belies her posture that Anne is (or ever was) paramount in her life. In fact,

⁵Wharton clearly drew on her affair with Morton Fullerton, which lasted from about 1908 to 1910, in her depiction of Kate's relationship with Chris Fenno. Kate's focusing on Chris echoes Wharton's response to Fullerton. As Wharton wrote him near the close of their affair, "'When one is a lonely-hearted & remembering creature, as I am, it is a misfortune to love too late, & as completely as I have loved you. Everything else grows so ghostly afterward'" (Colquitt 76).

⁶Wolff says that Kate "came into existence" when she met Chris, and that Kate tries to create herself anew, first as Anne's mother, then as "the woman who has refused Fred Landers" (361, 364, and 370). Kate's inability to establish her own identity separate from other people is reminiscent of Newland Archer, who muses at one point, "'What am I? A son in law'" (Age 215), and of Undine Spragg's attempts to redefine herself by mirroring other people.



the subsequent action of the novel bears this out; Kate is much more concerned with getting rid of Chris, if he is to be part of her world in any role other than as her lover, than she is with Anne's feelings. Later, during the night before the wedding, Kate reflects that "her lover was going to marry her daughter, and that nothing she could do would prevent it" (241). Kate, who had waited so long for Chris to say "Take me back" (7) still thinks of him as her lover--not her former lover. She simply cannot let go of Chris or their relationship, "the central fact of her experience."

Kate is also disturbed by the intensity of her daughter's passion. She had assumed she could manage Anne, because she completely underestimates the strength of Anne's feelings for Chris--another tremendous irony, given Kate's own inability to forget him. In fact, Kate had deliberately ignored the physical side of Anne's attraction for Chris, once she knew who he was, until she was forced to confront their passion. Fred Landers had earlier pointed out that "'Anne's a young woman of considerable violence of feeling...of...of...In short, there's no knowing what she might have ended by doing if we'd all backed you up in opposing her'" (199). Wharton has already hinted at this side of Anne; for instance, the paintings she did on her trip to Washington (where she became engaged to Chris) are "freer and more vigorous than any of her previous work" (119). The comment recalls similar moments in other Wharton

novels, such as Anna Leath's intense awareness of the physical world as she anticipates her marriage to George Darrow, in The Reef, and Newland Archer's obsession with anything Ellen Olenska may have touched, in The Age of Innocence. Although Kate perceives Fred's reference to her daughter's passionate nature as a reproach to herself (199), he is right to accept a grown woman's passion for her fiancé. Kate cannot do so, because she can accept neither Anne's adulthood nor the object of her passion.

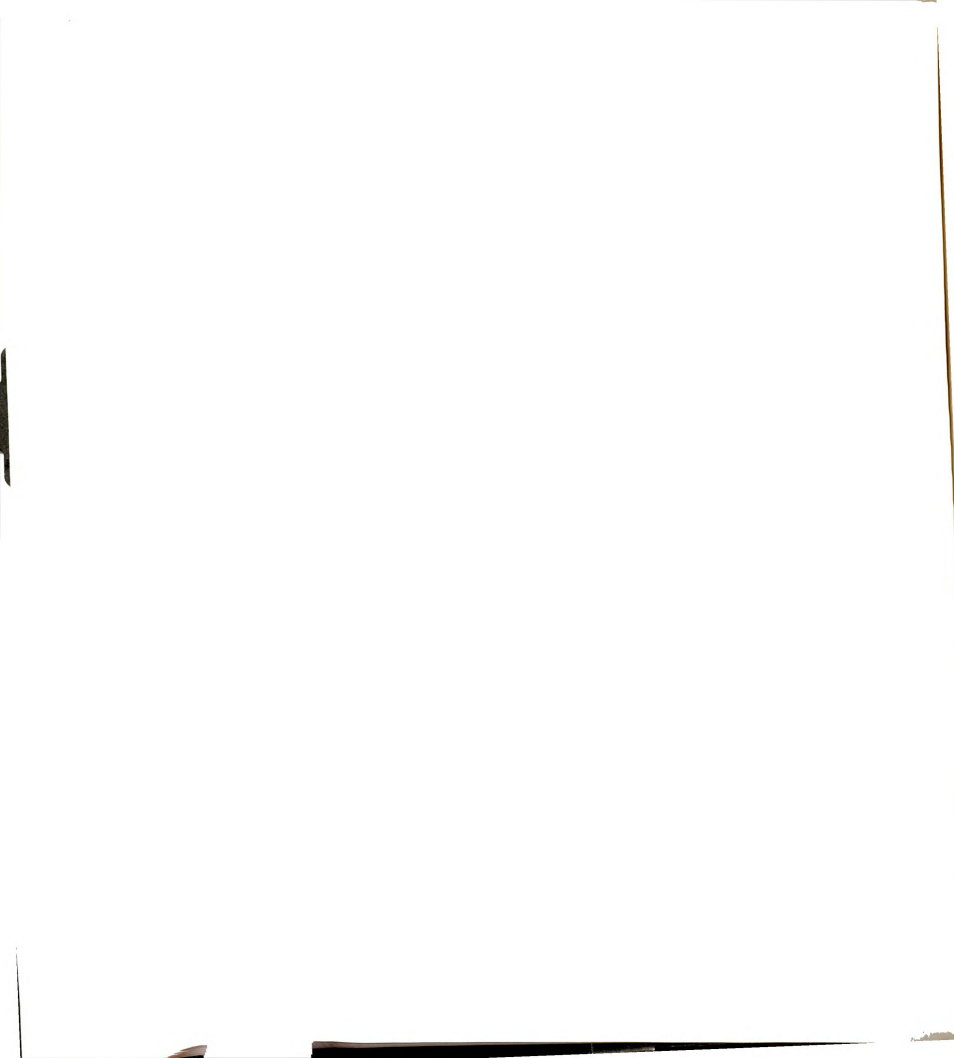
Anne has remained a baby in Kate's mind because, in her life on the Riviera, Kate disassociated herself from the past in which she had had a child. In fact, the central irony of the novel--that Chris becomes involved with Kate's daughter--can occur only because Kate never told him about Anne. Thus Kate's denial of the role she later tries to assume so wholeheartedly, the "part" of Anne's mother, ultimately precludes her from successfully taking on that role. When she berates Chris for becoming involved with Anne, he rightfully points out, "'you never spoke to me of her--I never even knew you had a daughter'" (133). Acknowledging the truth of Chris' words, Kate reflects that she "had never been able" to tell anyone of Anne, whose name was spoken only in "the depths of her heart" after her second attempt to see her had failed (133). By focusing on the Clephanes' refusal to let her see Anne many years ago, Kate can see herself as the bereft mother, suffering silently, rather than as careless of or completely alienated

from her child.⁷ And although Kate subsequently tries to bridge the intervening years, her lack of the type of knowledge of her daughter that daily contact brings prevents her from knowing how best to address Anne's involvement with Chris. As a result, Kate still can be Anne's mother only in a symbolic sense.

Kate's continued attempts to position herself as Anne's mother, with varying success, are extremely ironic.⁸ Throughout the novel, Kate has trouble keeping herself fixed on this goal; she vacillates between roles, one moment behaving like a child for Anne to nurture, and another like a sexual rival to her daughter. Indeed, much of Kate's position as Anne's mother is acting, and was so even when Anne was still very young and Kate tried to see her. Once, visiting New York, Kate learned that Anne was in Canada and "dreamed of a dash to Canada, an abduction....She gave that up in favour of a midnight visit (inspired by Anna Karenine) to the child's nursery" (15). Kate's having looked to a novel to see how to act is ironically appropriate for, in fact, all of Kate's mothering is a fiction.

⁷In "Shame in Edith Wharton's The Mother's Recompense," Lev Raphael says, "It is not surprising that she keeps Anne's existence a secret from her Riviera set, even when Anne calls her back to New York: she could not bear the sense of exposure which would cause her to reexperience the overwhelming shame of her double abandonment..." (192).

⁸In Edith Wharton's Argument with America, Elizabeth Ammons argues, "the subject of mothers who refuse to mother blinds Wharton; she sacrifices Kate as a person to her theoretical preoccupation with Kate the mother" (163). But Ammons' reading misses much of the novel's irony, as she views Wharton as affirming the value of motherhood.



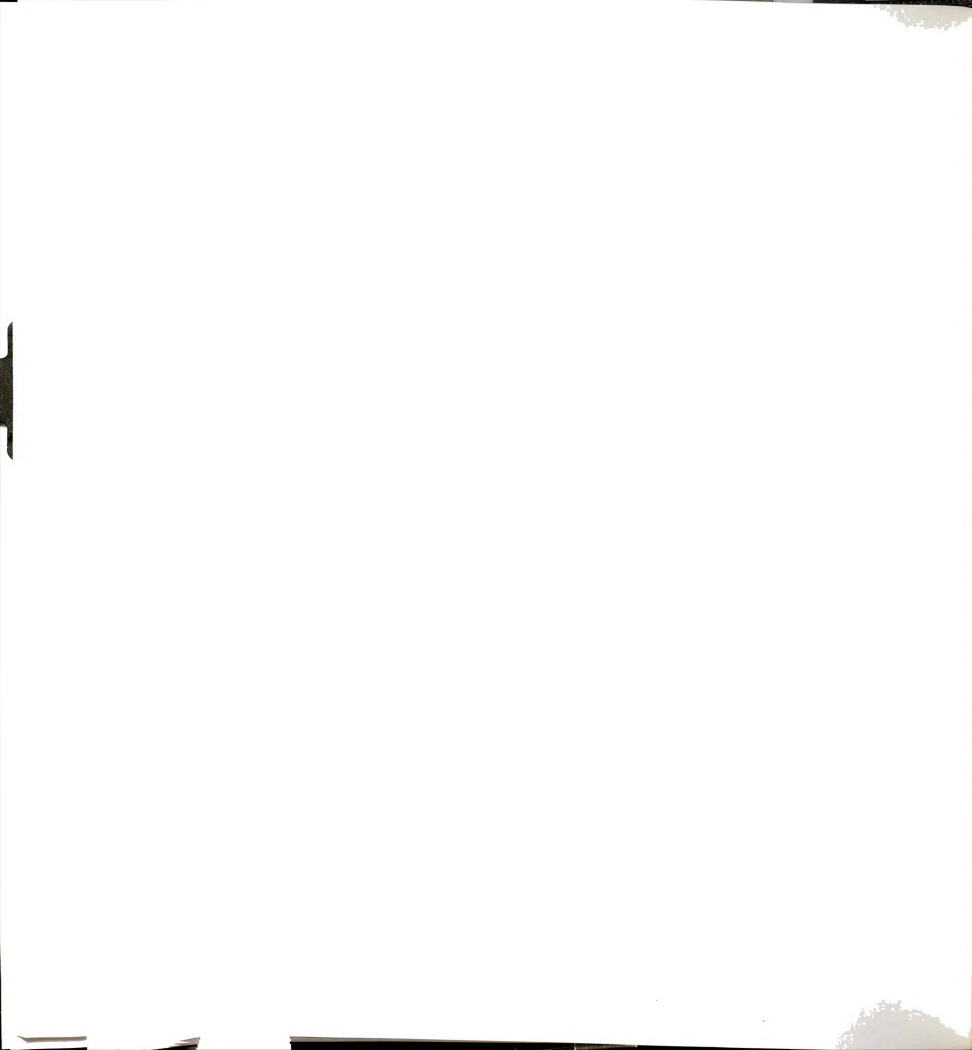
Not that Kate is always aware of her role-playing. She cannot admit even to herself that she deliberately abandoned her child.

..."lost" was the euphemism she had invented, because a mother couldn't confess, even to her most secret self, that she had willingly deserted her child. Yet that was what she had done; and now her thoughts...were forced back upon the fact. She had left Anne...with a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibres, and yet a sense of unutterable relief, because to do so was to escape from the oppression of her married life....So she had put it at the time--so, in her closest soul scrutiny, she had to put it still. (13)

Wharton's phrasing of this thought is important. Kate remembers feeling "a dreadful pang" over leaving her three-year-old, but in her own mind, she immediately amends this to the more intense "rending of the inmost fibres"; even the reference to "the" inmost fibres--rather than hers--suggests that Kate's mind is seeking a formula to express the sort of anguish a mother should feel upon separating from her child. Even as she pretends to face what she had done, now that she is returning to Anne, Kate continues to gloss over and justify her abandonment. When she receives Anne's "summons" to New York, Kate is "transfigured," as much because of the opportunity to escape her meaningless life as because she wants to be with her daughter. That Kate is largely motivated by her desire to flee the Riviera is suggested by her suddenly finding fault with the members of her "set," from "the vulgar fussy old woman" Mrs. Minity, to the younger women, about all of whom "'things' had been said" (18, 23).

The artificiality of Kate's and Anne's attempt to be mother and daughter is further demonstrated by the fact that, in any nurturing sense, Anne does the mothering. Finding Kate drooping on a couch after her arrival, Anne puts an arm around her "protectingly" and scolds, "'You must never be tired or worried about things any more....Remember, I'm here to look after you now....'" (45). Kate enjoys this treatment; she "felt herself sinking down into a very Bethesda-pool of forgetfulness and peace." Anne's mothering her is symbolically appropriate, since Kate had so long ago rejected the mothering role. Kate muses, "it was so sweet to be compelled, to have things decided for one, to be told what one wanted and what was best for one" (45-46). After a lifetime of running from her own choices, she is now happy to be a child for a while. Kate's failure to see anything odd about this role reversal is another symptom of her denial, as both she and Anne pretend that Kate had no choice in being separated from her daughter so many years ago.

Another oddity that doesn't seem to bother Kate is the point everyone makes of noting how well she and Anne get along. At the opera, as Kate and Anne admire each other, Nollie Tresselton proclaims: "'You two were made for each other'"--as if they were lovers or friends, rather than that Anne was literally created by Kate and her father (64). Later, Enid Drover tells Kate, "'It's wonderful, my dear, how you've done it....[Anne's] taken a tremendous fancy to you'" (76). All of these statements of admiration and



encouragement serve to highlight the fact that Kate has had no relationship with Anne. Yet Kate's gratification with the idea that "Everyone noticed how beautifully it worked" (76) indicates her desire to simply take over as her adult daughter's companion. Kate quickly becomes used to playing "the part of Anne's mother," even to the point of telling herself that her relationship with this woman, who she abandoned as a child and has not seen for eighteen years, is "the one perfect companionship she had ever known, the only close tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust" (69).

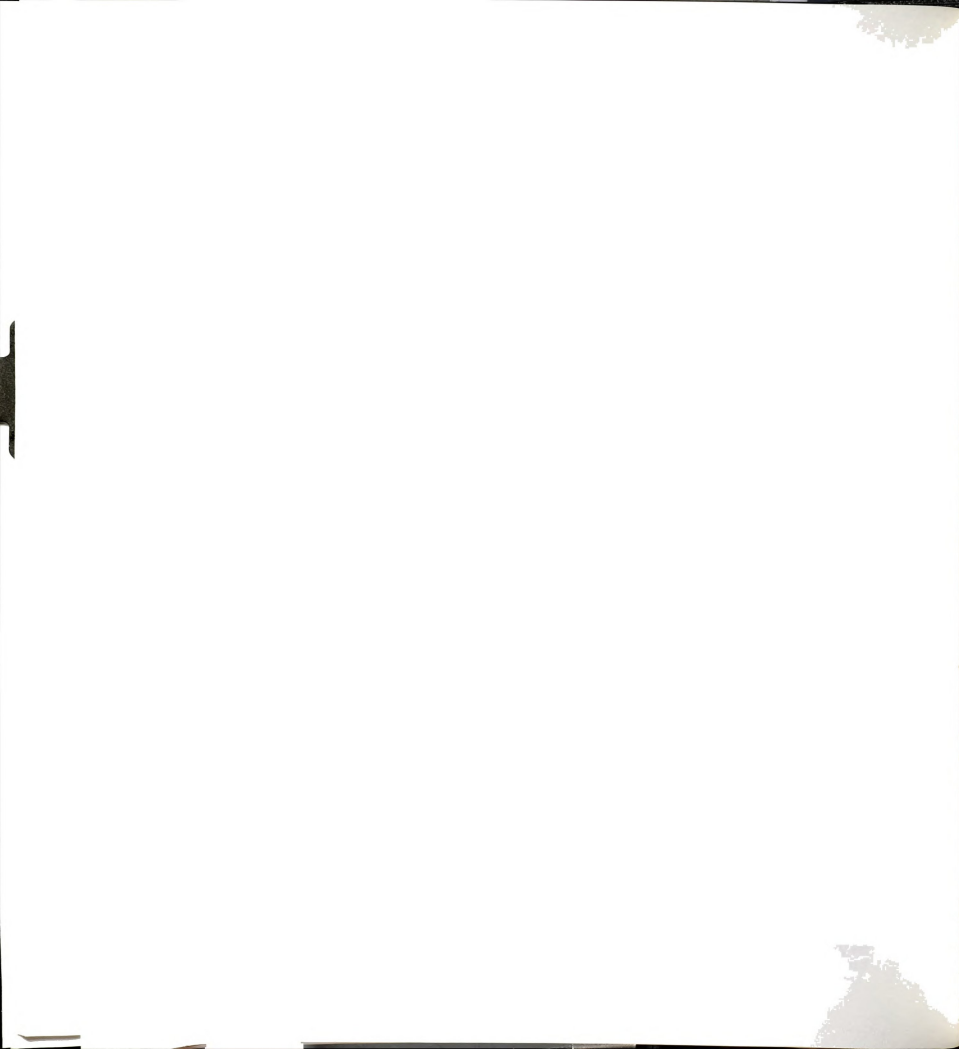
The psychological flight from reality that such thinking demonstrates parallels Kate's pattern of literally running away. Through Kate's memories of Hylton Davies, Wharton establishes that Kate has perpetually run away, choosing new roles to play whenever she cannot face her present situation. Kate recalls the man with whom she left her husband as being "as unreal as somebody in a novel....he had vanished into a sort of remote pictorial perspective, where a woman of her name figured with him...herself as unreal as a lady on a 'jacket'" (14). Kate had unfortunately chosen the role of Davies' mistress after deciding that she could no longer play the part of John Clephane's wife, a role which required "the continual vain effort to adapt herself to her husband's point of view, to her mother-in-law's standards, to all the unintelligible ritual with which they barricaded themselves against the real business of living" (58). This passage, so reminiscent



of Newland Archer's perception of his in-laws, is ironic, given Kate's own perpetual flight from "the real business of living."

Wharton shows the reader that Kate especially has trouble facing her own aging. In her affair with Chris, Kate had tried to seem younger than she was; during a week alone with him in the Normandy countryside, she "dashed herself with cold water and did her hair and touched up her face before he was awake, because the early light is so pitiless after thirty" (4). Self-conscious about their age difference, Kate perceives Chris as having used it to his advantage. When trying to determine how old he must be, Kate reflects, "That boyish way of his, she had sometimes fancied, was put on to make her imagine there was a greater difference of age between them than there really was....And of course she'd never been that dreadful kind of woman they called a 'baby-snatcher'" (9). Much later, as she struggles to accept the idea of Chris' marrying Anne, she thinks, "From the first she...had insisted...on her own sense of the necessary transiency of the tie....Anything rather than to be the old woman clutching at an impossible prolongation of bliss" (219, my emphasis).⁹

⁹Like Kate, Wharton was the "older woman" in her affair with Morton Fullerton. She wrote to Fullerton in August 1908 that she "'dreaded to be to you, even for an instant, the 'donna non piu giovane' ['the woman who is no longer young'] who clings & encumbers'" (Colquitt 84). Wharton's coming to terms with her affair so many years after it ended may further explain her change in focus from the daughter's to the mother's point of view in The Mother's Recompense.



Several years after her affair with Chris, Kate is still trying to pass for a much younger woman. She recognizes that she has done so when, after getting Anne's telegram, she sees the "absurdly youthful" hat she'd previously ordered and concludes, after an argument with the milliner, that everyone views her as "one of the silly vain fools who imagine they look like their own daughters" (17). In her new role as Anne's mother, Kate seems to have accepted her age. But she is gratified by allusions to her having kept her good looks. When Enid Drover says "'Anne admires your looks so much,'" Kate feels a "glow of satisfaction" that "the youth and elasticity she had clung to so desperately should prove one of the chief assets of her new venture" (76-77). Later, when Anne says "'what a beautiful mother you are!,'" she is referring to physical beauty only: "'I knew from an old photograph that you were lovely; but I couldn't guess that you hadn't grown any older since it was taken'" (123). But Kate, unperturbed by the narrow meaning of Anne's exclamation, thinks "What praise had ever seemed as sweet?" (123)¹⁰

Yet even before she is forced to recognize the physical attraction between Chris and Anne, Kate is clearly jealous of her daughter's youth. Wishing to unburden herself after

¹⁰Kate's enjoyment of this praise is another important point of contrast between Wharton's The Mother's Recompense and Grace Aguilar's earlier novel by the same title. In Aguilar's novel, the mother basks in the praise of those around her, not for her physical appearance, but for successfully guiding her children through life.



first seeing Chris in New York, Kate imagines telling Anne about their affair. She pictures Anne responding with a "look of wonder...that said...`You, mother--and Chris?'" At the thought of such a reaction, Kate decides "It was necessary for her pride and dignity" that her past should remain "unembodied" in Chris Fenno (105-06). Apparently Kate thinks her daughter would be incredulous at the idea that she could have been involved with a man young enough to be in Anne's own social set.

Anne's persistent failure to guess that Chris and Kate had had an affair, even in the face of Kate's strange behavior, confirms Kate's perception. Anne's brief moment of recognition occurs when she pushes Kate for a concrete reason for hating Chris. When Kate blushingly responds, "'I don't--hate him,'" Anne cries, "'But then you're in love with him--you're in love with him, and I've known it all along!'" (226) Anne, however, is easily dissuaded from this painful knowledge. All Kate has to do to convince Anne that the idea is absurd is to look her in the eye and say "'Anne!'" with "a little shrug" (226-27).¹¹ Anne's rejecting her realization that Kate had been involved with Chris suggests that Anne cannot view her mother as a sexual being, any more than Kate can accept the fact of her daughter's passion.

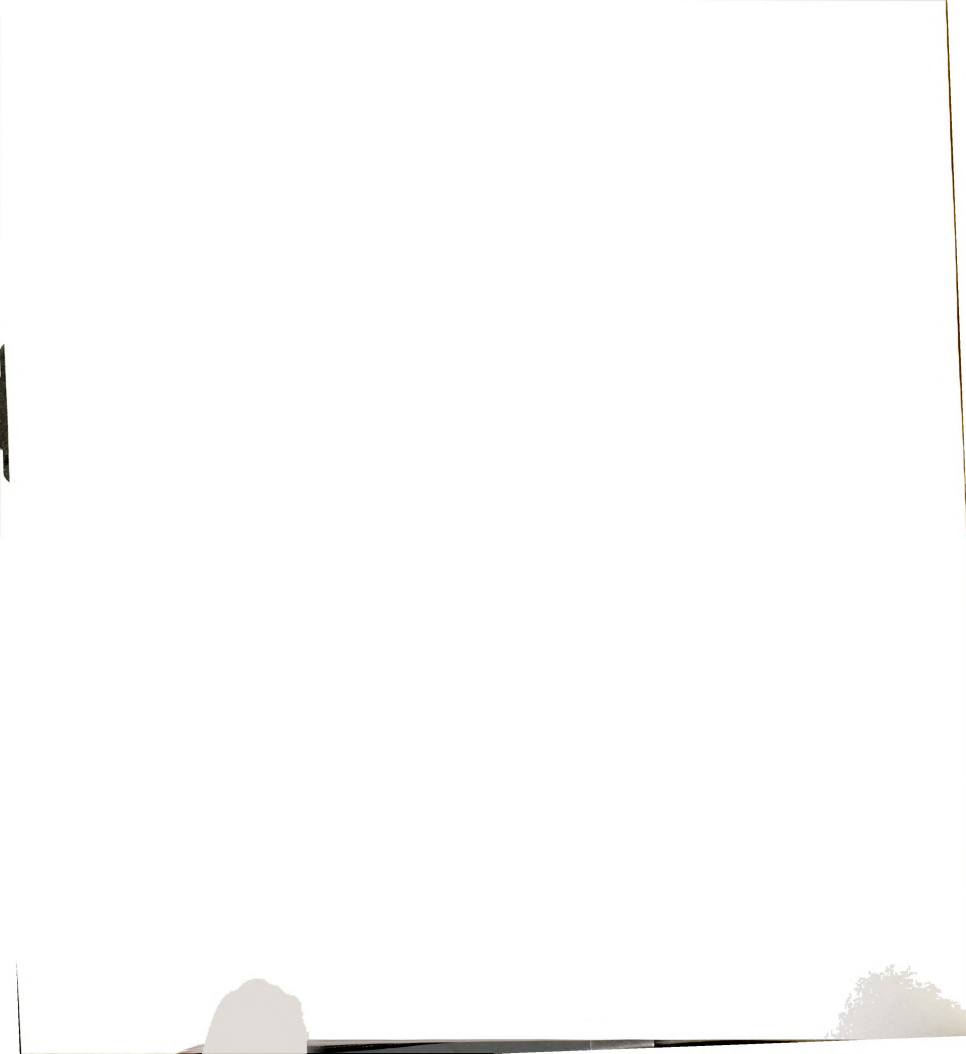
Because of her jealousy, Kate's behavior, ostensibly

¹¹Anne's willingness to have her suspicions so easily allayed parallels Anna Leath's persistent denial of the idea that George could be involved with Sophy, in The Reef.



directed toward saving Anne, is often simply vengeful. She is quite willing to inflict on Chris the same kind of "bitterest pain" he has caused her to feel, although she never consciously admits this. This is "her" lover, and the truth about their affair is a "weapon" Kate wields over Chris (241, 180). She takes great satisfaction in Chris' discomfiture when she announces that she is "'never going to leave Anne'": "It had been almost worth the agony she had bought it with to see the look in his eyes when he heard that" (204). Kate's willingness to wound often extends beyond Chris to Anne. Before the above confrontation, when Nollie won't reveal where Chris is living, Kate feels "a sort of fierce satisfaction in the thought" that Anne doesn't want her to see him, for Anne has in effect acknowledged a fear of Kate's power (172).

Even before Kate knows that Chris is Anne's suitor, her desire to be included in the secret of Anne's romance is couched in terms of a rivalry. Musing on "the man who had been too shy to come into the [opera] box" one night and the possibility of "losing" Anne to marriage, Kate reflects: "Her task...was gradually, patiently to win back, of all she had forfeited, the one thing she really valued: her daughter's love and confidence"--an achievement that presumably would keep Anne loyal to Kate, whatever her romantic involvement (68-70). Kate considers discovering who Anne is in love with a challenge, because he is competition for Anne's affection; "she might be able to live



out the rest of her days in peace between Anne and Anne's husband. But the mere possibility of a husband made everything incalculable again" (69).¹² Indeed, any suitor would be a threat to Kate's new self-definition as "the mother"--a precarious definition to begin with, not only because of their long separation, but because of Kate's fear of aging. She had told herself that "in this existence it was Anne who mattered, not Anne's mother," but this is not true once Chris is involved. The "blessed anonymity of motherhood" is the last thing Kate wants (64). She wants New York's forgiveness, earned with the passage of years, without giving up her youth and beauty.

Once Kate recognizes that she can neither stop the wedding nor accept it, her appearance ages rapidly: "People were beginning to notice how tired and thin she looked. Her glass showed streaks of gray in her redundant hair, and about her lips and eyes the little lines she had so long kept at bay" (229). Alone with Fred Landers, Kate remembers a similar scene with Chris and thinks in retrospect, "How young she had been then--how young!" (231) While she had considered herself the "older woman" in her affair with Chris, it is only when Kate realizes he really is going to marry her daughter that she is truly forced to recognize her

¹²Keiko Beppu argues that Kate's anguish is caused by the "highly charged condensation of time" in which Kate must come to terms with the "declaration" of independence that Anne's engagement to Chris represents. This is one element of Kate's problem, but Beppu's assertion that "The fact of the marriage is the bone of contention, not necessarily the man involved" overlooks Chris' importance to Kate (166).

aging. Later, when Fred admires Kate's hair, "at that moment she hated it, as she did everything else that mocked her with the barren illusion of youth" (238).

When Chris is a little late for the wedding, Kate joyously reflects, "And she had called the sky indifferent! But of course he was not here....She had always known that she would wear him out in the end." She is so ecstatic at the thought that Chris isn't coming, that she "suspected her own [eyes] of shooting out rays of triumph" (245). Although Kate briefly acknowledges that "Anne's suffering would be terrible," she concludes, "But she was young--she was young, and some day she would know what she had been saved from..." (245, Wharton's ellipsis). At Chris' arrival, Wharton shifts from the irony of Kate's exulting in her daughter's being left at the aisle to the poignancy of Kate's position. Kate is to give Anne away, and once Fred has walked her down the aisle, "The mother stood alone and waited for her daughter" (246). The statement echoes Kate's position in the incest scene, when she stood behind the unheeding lovers "like a ghost" (221); both passages reflect Kate's total estrangement from her daughter. Wharton further emphasizes that once Kate gives Anne away, her role as "the mother" is over; all subsequent references to her in the narrative are to "Kate" or to "Mrs. Clephane."

Kate's attitude about Anne's wedding exemplifies her egocentrism, a trait Wharton establishes from the beginning. When Kate is first reunited with her daughter and is

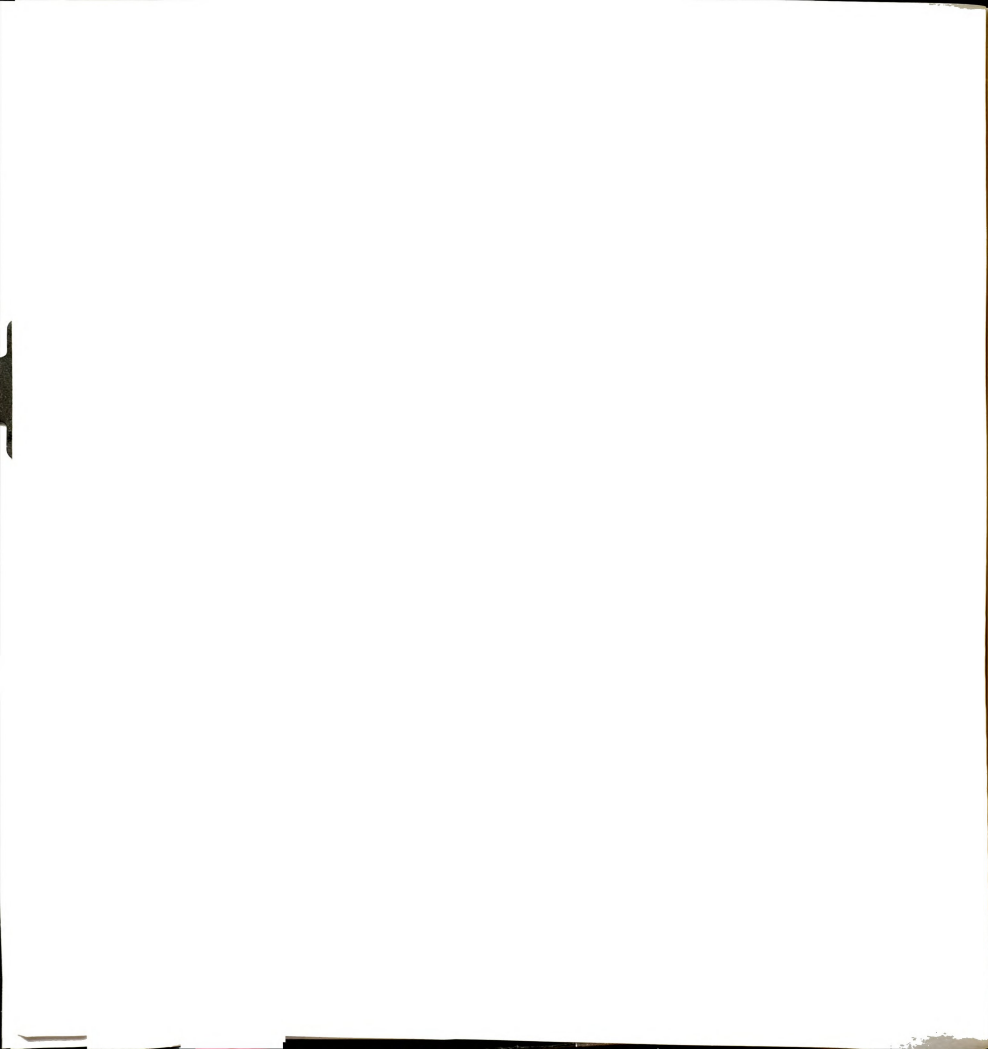
travelling to the Clephane house with Fred and Anne, her question is, "'What do they think of me?'" (30) She notes Anne's "shyness" and "embarrassment" but, because she is preoccupied with her own reception, Kate makes little effort to learn about her daughter. In fact, Kate's only question about their eighteen years of separation is "'What does Anne know?'" about the circumstances of Kate's leaving. Kate's response is not surprising, given that when she first heard from Anne, she could not even remember who her daughter's co-guardian was (8).

Wharton shows the reader that, to keep up the illusion that Anne was unscathed by her abandonment, Kate must continually misinterpret situations. For instance, Anne's keeping the old nursery because she "should never have felt at home anywhere else" is undoubtedly a sign of insecurity, but Kate is touched, as though the action were an untroubled tribute to their time together there (33). Anne's sitting room shows the absence of a mother's influence; it is "a sober handsome room" that strikes Kate as more like a son's study. Its masculine appearance is due to "Uncle Fred's" decorating suggestions, as Anne explains. The fact reveals the absence not only of her mother, but of any substantial feminine guidance beyond that of Anne's grandmother, who is remarked mainly in negative terms--for refusing to let Anne ever see her mother or open an art studio (39).

When Anne gives Kate back her jewels, Kate thinks, "She was rewarded for having given up her daughter; if she had

not, could she ever have known such a moment as this?" (65) Kate's pleasure in this false recompense indicates her continued focus on herself. Beyond momentary surprise that Anne did not have the jewels reset for her own use, Kate wastes no thought on what this gesture might mean for her daughter. Kate experiences no guilt or remorse at this moment. She disregards the psychological costs to Anne of her mother's abandonment, focusing instead on her own pleasure at Anne's thoughtfulness. Further, by imagining that "others" had carried out the task of raising Anne "as she could never have done," so that Anne is "perfect," Kate lets herself off the hook; since Anne has turned out so well, Kate assumes, her actions must have had little negative effect on her (65, 36).

At the sight of Anne's painting on the wall, Kate slips. "'I didn't know you painted,'" she says, and "the abyss of all she didn't know about her daughter had once more opened before her...." Kate recovers with "'I mean, not like this.'" But of course Anne is not fooled. In fact, she doesn't expect Kate to know much about her, or to even remember her. When Kate reminisces about Anne's sitting before the fire as a child, Anne exclaims, "'You darling, to remember!'" Kate apparently sees nothing strange about Anne's response. She simply enjoys "the young warmth" of her embrace and assumes that "together they were watching the little girl with the bush of hair coaxing the sparks through the fender" (34-35).

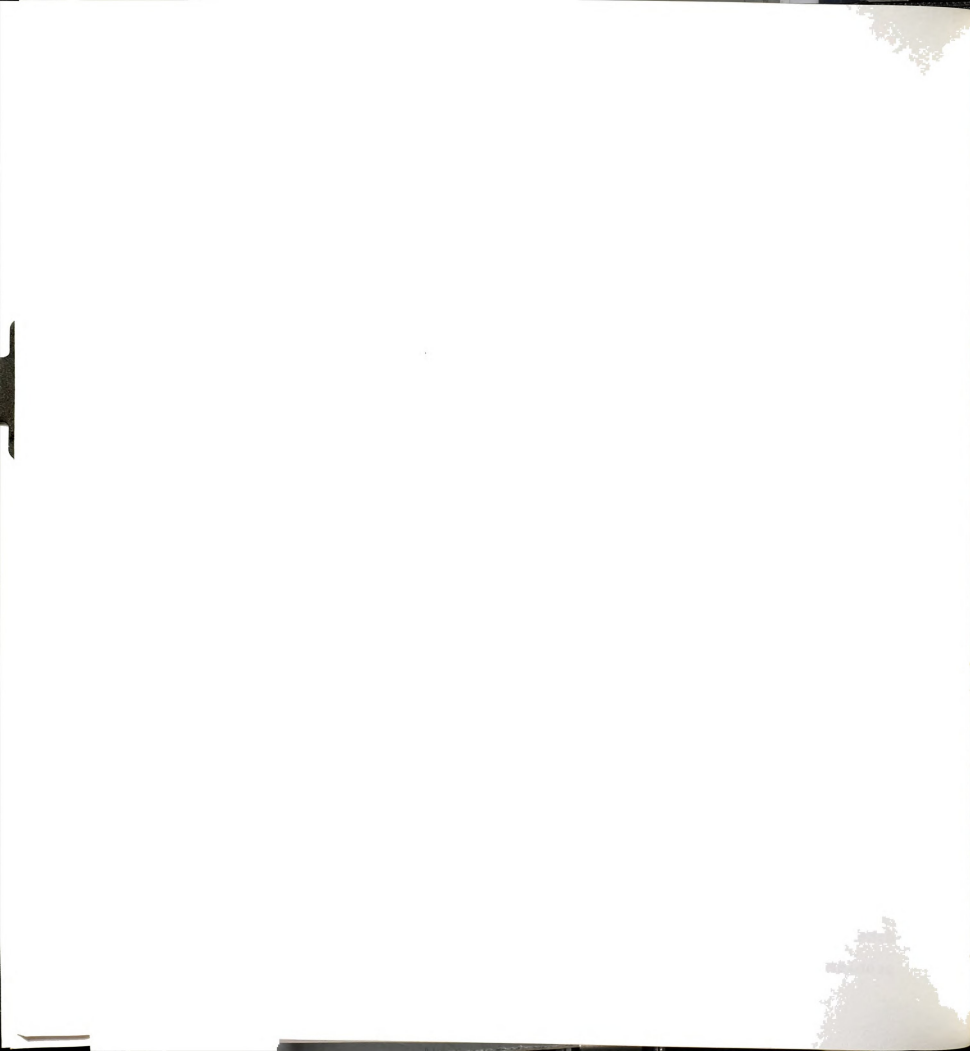


When she later seeks Chris to tell him to leave Anne and learns that he doesn't live with his employer, Kate thinks:

perhaps [he's] actually living with some unavowable woman? What a solution...to be able to return to Anne with that announcement! It seemed to clear the way in a flash--but as a hurricane does, by ploughing its path through the ruins it makes. (129)

But Kate isn't thinking of Anne at all; the "ruins" are her emotions, for she "would never...be able to think evil of Chris without its hurting her" (129). And after she has blackmailed Chris into leaving, Kate assumes her pain is greater than Anne's. "Well, the girl was young--time would help....there could not be, in any woman's life, another such hour as the one she had just lived through!" (140)

To prove Kate's self-centeredness, Wharton consistently shows that she expects others to share her focus. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Kate sends her daughter a telegram that says, "'Coming, Darling,'" as if Anne would remember those words from her infancy (18). But Anne doesn't remember Kate at all. Explaining how she picked Kate out on the pier when she arrived from France, Anne says, "'I recognized mother too--from such a funny old photograph...'" (31). Later, musing about her affair with Chris, Kate wonders, "When had there ever been a question of what she wanted?" (91) Given Kate's history, her question is doubly ironic. So far as the reader can tell, she has done very much what she wanted all along. Perhaps the real problem for Kate is that Chris left her; accustomed to



choosing for herself when to change roles, Kate could not stop playing the part of Chris' lover after he left.

Kate's limited perspective causes her to perceive Chris as "cruel," when she forces him to choose between abandoning Anne with no explanation, or having his entanglements revealed to his mother, and when Kate makes vague charges against Chris that make it hard for him to get a job. Kate focuses on Chris' presumed cruelty rather than noting the irony of her telling him to leave Anne, because Kate focuses on her "abandonment" by Chris. Earlier, as she had considered the possibility of Chris' having an affair with Anne's friend Lilla, Kate had thought:

Wasn't it most probably in pursuit of a new [love-affair] that he had left [Kate]? To think so had been...in spite of the torturing images evoked, more bearable than believing he had gone because he was tired of her. (108)

Yet Kate would rather have Anne think that Chris had left her for precisely that reason, than risk Anne's suspecting the truth.

The way in which Kate thinks about her past shows that she denies responsibility for her actions. Just as she tells herself she had "lost" her daughter, she thinks of running away from her husband and child as "the mad course allotted to her" (65). She remembers her flight in passive terms: she had spoken to Hylton Davies of how she "'couldn't breathe'" in her marriage, "with the result that two months later she was on his yacht" (13-14). Kate implicitly asks Anne to comply with her view of the past by



speaking to Anne as if she hadn't left her voluntarily. Confessing that she wasn't sure she recognized Anne on the pier, Kate says, "'You were just there...in me...where you've always been...'" (31-32). On the Riviera, Kate had avoided thinking about her actions by making sure she didn't spend too much time alone:

...being face to face with her own thoughts was like facing a stranger. Oppressed and embarrassed, she tried to "make conversation" with herself; but the soundless words died unuttered, and she sought distraction in staring about her at the unknown faces [of the crowd]. (17-18)

Much later, everyone seems so much the same at Chris' and Anne's engagement dinner as when Kate first married, that it is "as if she had become young again, with all her desolate and unavoidable life stretching ahead to--this" (202, my emphasis). Wharton uses the same phrasing in the first chapter, as Kate wonders how she ended up in her third-rate hotel on the Riviera (5). In both cases, Wharton's text emphasizes, Kate does not see that her actions led to these results. Kate's belief that she is a passive figure upon whom life has acted is again evident in the passive phrasing of her thoughts following Anne's wedding, as she compares the present with her first day back in New York: "It was curious," Kate thinks, "in what neatly recurring patterns events often worked themselves out" (249).

Wharton's use of the egocentric Kate for her center of consciousness in The Mother's Recompense reduces the potential impact of Chris as a villain and displaces him



from the narrative center. Kate operates with the same double standard as does George Darrow in The Reef, Wharton's 1912 novel involving a relational triangle between two women and a man. George decides that the woman he had an affair with, Sophy Viner, is not even good enough to be governess for his fiance's daughter, yet he sees no problem with himself becoming the stepfather of that same child. Similarly, while Kate Clephane cannot bear the thought of Chris' marrying her daughter--or, before that, of his even being in Anne's company as Lilla Gates' husband--Kate is extremely relieved to discover that no one had known about her affair with Chris and considers herself a perfectly suitable companion for Anne (41).

When Kate orders Chris to leave, he asks if she thinks a "'past like that'" is "'irrevocable.'" Ignoring the fact that she shared "that" past with Chris, Kate explodes, "'you ask me this...with her in your mind?'" (135) Kate's attitude toward Lilla Gates further illustrates her double standard. The thought of Lilla with Chris causes Kate to feel "actual physical nausea" because Kate would like to see the "impudent" Lilla, with her "dyed hair, dyed lashes, drugged eyes and unintelligible dialect," as completely different from herself, despite their both supposedly having had extramarital affairs, and despite Kate's own preoccupation with making herself appear youthful (94, 48-50).

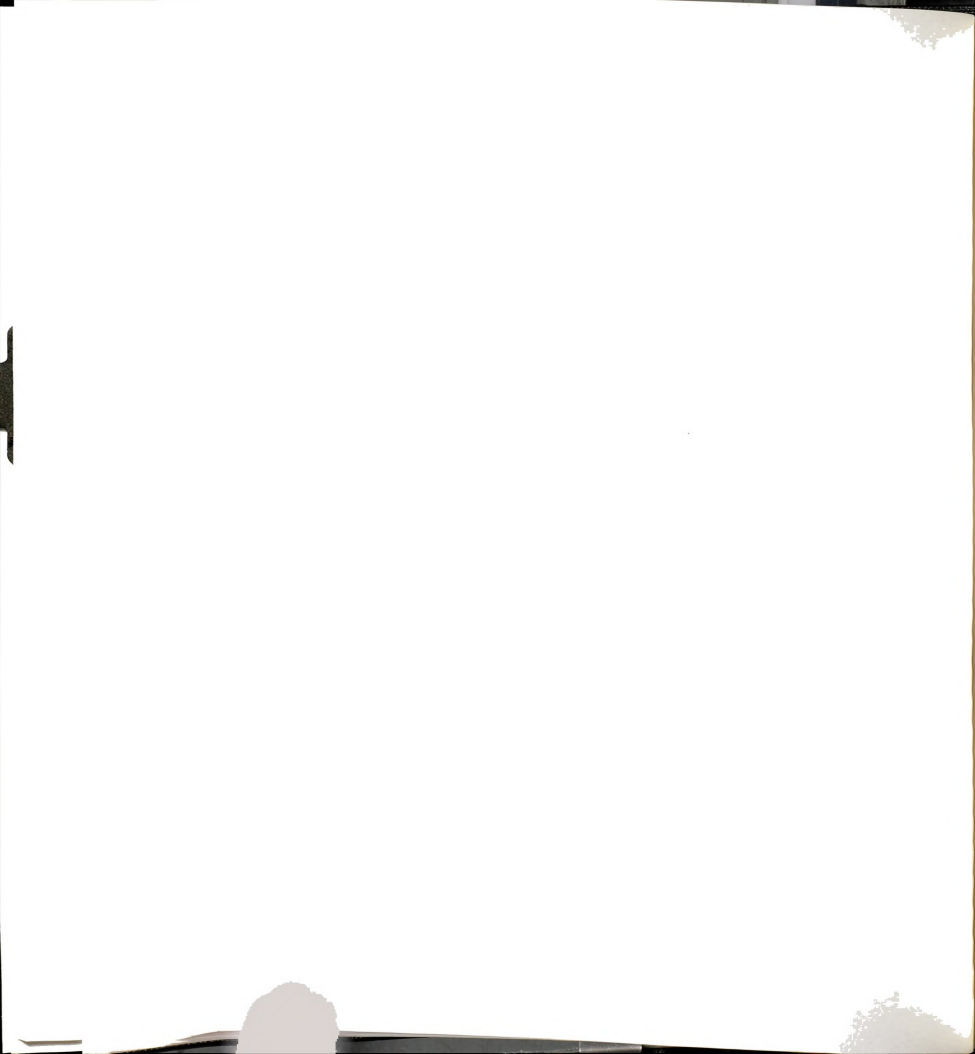
Kate misjudges both of the other people in her

relational triangle. In addition to underestimating the tenacity of Anne's desire for Chris, Kate misreads Chris himself. She assumes she can treat him as the careless, drifting excitement-seeker she thinks she knew and can influence him with a bribe or, when that doesn't work, blackmail. What leads Kate to this error is her refusal to read the story of Chris' life since she was with him. Wharton takes great care to show that Chris has changed. The most striking measure of Chris' maturing is his joining the service. He is a decorated war hero; he has received the Distinguished Service Medal and the French Legion of Honor, awards which are mentioned at least twice (103, 170). No doubt Wharton intends Chris' service record as a positive reflection on his character, given her own involvement in the war and her having been awarded the Legion of Honor.¹² Also impressive is Chris' behavior in the present of the novel, at least compared to Kate's reliance on duplicity, bribery, and blackmail in her desperation to end his relationship with Anne. Chris keeps their "compact" by going away, returning only when Kate's insinuations against him have nearly "ruined" him (175-76).

Kate cannot see Chris clearly because he has become a symbol for her. During Chris' and Anne's engagement dinner, Kate reflects:

there was Chris himself, symbolizing what she had flown to in her wild escape; representing, in some horrible duality, at once her sin and its harvest,

¹²The Letters of Edith Wharton, 331.



her flight and her return. At the thought, her brain began to spin again, and she saw her own youth embodied before her in Anne, with Anne's uncompromising scorns and scruples, Anne's confident forward-looking gaze. (202-03)

In Kate's mind, Chris symbolizes her "other life," the "confused intermediate life which now seemed so much more remote" than her life with baby Anne (65). That is another compelling reason why his presence in her new life as Anne's mother is so unacceptable. Kate is determined to view her life abroad as completely separate from the present, as if she had never left her daughter. But Chris' presence belies the idea that Kate's many years of "expiation" could undo her actions (42). Although the action Kate focuses on is her affair, Chris has also become the retribution for her having abandoned her daughter; he is "the mother's" recompense. For what Kate had flown to implicitly contains what she flew from--in addition to the weight of John Clephane and his "non-conductive, non-explosive family," her daughter Anne (203). Chris' symbolic importance for Kate overrides her attempt to re-make herself as Anne's mother, and, unable finally to banish Chris from her new life, Kate feels that she must flee again.

Her moment of recognition with Anne at the dinner suggests that Kate is feeling some empathy for her daughter. "The mother" briefly appears overwhelmed with sympathy for the blows Anne's innocence must inevitably suffer as she faces adult life. But what is so upsetting for Kate is that Anne will have what Kate did not--a passionate love

relationship which does not require sacrificing her home or lifestyle--and with Kate's lover. That this is what upsets Kate is signalled by her perception of Anne's "scruples" and her "confident, forward-looking gaze," which set Anne apart so dramatically from the Kate whose youth she supposedly embodies.

Anne's calling Kate "home" to New York at the beginning of The Mother's Recompense is reminiscent of Charity Royall's quest for her mother in Wharton's 1917 novel, Summer. As Anne confronts her sexuality she, like Charity, tries to come to terms with her own mother. Chodorow notes, "Before she can fully develop extrafamilial commitments...a girl must confront her entanglement in familial relationships themselves," a process that focuses on the daughter's relationship with her mother (135). Anne needs to see Kate before she can complete this process and form a permanent relationship with Chris.¹⁴ The story of Anne's attempt to do so, and of her confronting her mother's abandonment of her as a child, is the "untold" story behind Wharton's narrative about Kate Clephane.

Anne, like her mother, appears to be very independent; she keeps her own hours, establishes a studio, and takes care of herself. But Wharton ironically contrasts the two women's seeming independence. While Kate's was manifested primarily in abandoning her husband and child, Anne's is

¹⁴Viewed in this way, the timing of Anne's engagement to Chris seems as much a natural outcome of Kate's presence as a plot convenience.

shown by her keeping the old ways when other people no longer do; requiring, for instance, that her opera box remain empty during the period of mourning for her grandmother. Such social gestures exemplify the "memorial manner" Anne's friends note in her (60). In fact, while Kate sees only that Anne takes after old Mrs. Clephane, Wharton seems to be emphasizing that Anne has compensated for being different. Having grown up without a mother's influence and protection, Anne shows herself faultless by engaging in such extreme, antiquated social correctness. Her "memorial manner" both establishes her as unlike her mother and as having achieved proper socialization without a mother's guidance.¹⁵

This characteristic also provides an insight to Anne's tenacity in protecting her engagement to Chris. In her study of women writers' narrative techniques, Rachel Blau DuPlessis says of marginalized characters in nineteenth-century novels:

if a plot simply provides a character with access to what must usually be taken for granted, the atmosphere of gratitude will finally impede any criticism from occurring....The critique of social conditions that orphans symbolize...will be muted by the achievement of the blessed state of normalcy.... (Writing Beyond the Ending 9)

With the presence of both her mother and her fiance Anne, like her literary predecessors, gains the appearance of such

¹⁵Enid Drover and her daughter, Lilla Gates, present a contrast to Anne's situation. Lilla, one of Wharton's quintessential flappers, is anchored in society by the presence of her very respectable mother, despite Lilla's being divorced.

"normalcy"; when she tries to interfere with Anne's engagement, Kate threatens both elements, and Anne rebels.

When Anne announces her engagement to Chris, Kate responds by blackmailing Chris into doing the same thing to Anne that she did eighteen years before. Although Anne is as yet unaware of Kate's interference, the parallel between the two situations is not lost on Anne, and this second, unexplained abandonment crushes her. Unable either to accept Chris' abrupt departure or to be comforted by the woman who represents her first major loss, Anne announces that her engagement is off and then withdraws into a "rigid reserve" as "her soul seemed to freeze about its secret" (148). Kate's answer to Anne's pain is for the two of them to run away, as she always has before. But running away does not work for Anne. One evening abroad, Anne cries out, "'All this beauty and glory in the world--and nothing in me but cold and darkness!'" (149) Anne does, however, eventually seek comfort from her mother. She asks Kate what Chris could think has come between them, but Kate's need to keep Anne from the truth--along with her pain at being viewed as an "obstacle" by Chris--leads her to again respond with inadvertent cruelty: "'You can only conclude that he gave you back your freedom because he wanted his'" (151).¹⁶

Kate's delusion that her "'little Anne'" had been essentially undamaged by her mother's abandonment is finally

¹⁶Kate is misreading the situation. Her insistence that Chris leave Anne, not Kate herself, is the "obstacle" to which Chris refers.



shattered when, in response to Kate's refusal to write to Chris on her behalf, Anne cries: "'why should you care what happens to me? After all, we're only strangers to each other.'" Stunned, "The mother dared not speak; she feared her whole agony would break from her with her first word" (152-53). Kate is agonized by Anne's refusal to comply any longer with her fantasy that she could suddenly become Anne's mother after an absence of eighteen years.

When they return to New York, Anne goes to Baltimore to see Chris and returns to tell Kate that the maid had complained of a prior woman visitor's "'making a scene.'" Kate's verbal slip (a reference to "'the negress'" maid) reveals to Anne that she was that woman. Anne says, "'You made him break our engagement....And all this time...you let me think it was because he was tired of me!'" When Kate responds that she "'didn't think he could make you happy'" and invokes her right to intervene as Anne's mother, Anne says, "'What right? You gave up all your rights over me when you left my father for another man!'" She adds, "'It was my own fault to imagine that we could ever live together like mother and daughter. A relation like that can't be improvised in a day'" (160-61).

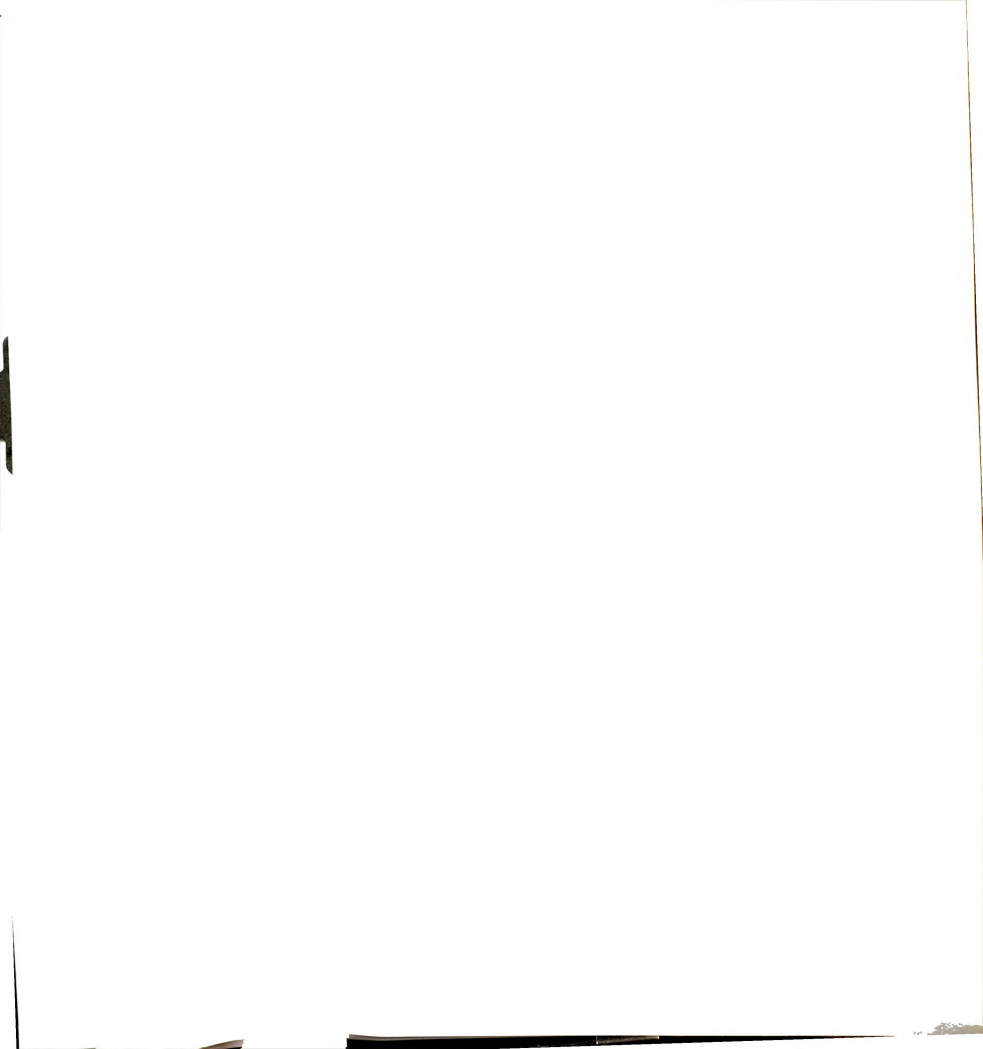
Anne has only stated the obvious, but the fact that she quickly relents reveals the desperate desire of the abandoned girl to please her mother, so that she will not leave again. When Kate follows Anne to the Drovers' after this confrontation, Anne tries to cajole her into accepting

her relationship with Chris and agreeing to "'just be the perfect friends we were before'" (186). Anne says "with a half-whimsical smile" what would be too painful to say otherwise; that "'Mothers oughtn't ever to leave their daughters.'" Anne says that it was Fred's idea to ask Kate to return to New York and that she "'didn't know how well I should behave to my new mother, or whether she'd like me....'" She tells Kate that she was "grateful to you for coming, and more and more anxious to make you forget that we hadn't always been together'" (186-87, my emphasis).

In her effort to keep her mother from leaving her, Anne has already bestowed gifts upon her, in the manner of an insecure child who assumes she must buy others' friendship. In addition to giving Kate back her jewels, Anne even offers her the house. "'I want you to stay here always, you know; I want the house to belong to you,'" she tells Kate, just before announcing her engagement to Chris (63, 123). Evidently Anne had hoped that if she gave her mother a place to stay, she would "'stay always.'" Explaining her feelings about their argument to Kate, Anne continues:

"And then, suddenly, the great gulf opened again, and there I was on one side of it, and you on the other, just as it was in all those dreary years when I was without you; and it seemed as if it was you who had chosen again that we should be divided...." (187)

Anne recognizes what Kate has denied: that Kate chose to leave her, however compelling her reasons. Yet, even having revealed her pain and vulnerability, Anne continues to try to please her mother; the purpose of her confession is to



explain why "'in my unhappiness I said dreadful things to you...'" (187).

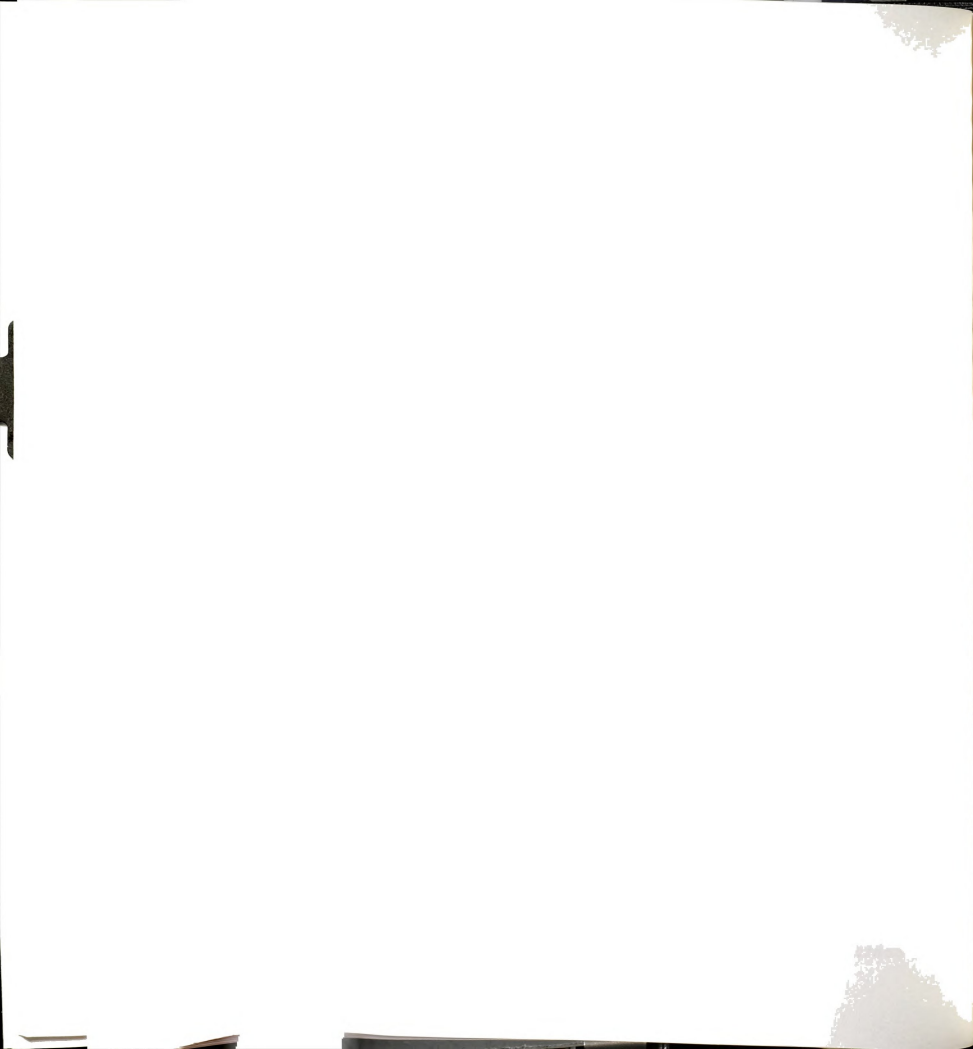
Although the limits of Kate's experience in nurturing her child cause her to respond "as a mother would to a child that has fallen and hurt itself," their conversation forces Kate finally to confront the impact her leaving had on Anne more than eighteen years before. As a result, Kate experiences more empathy and genuine concern for her daughter in this scene than at any other point in the novel. Kate feels "as if it were her own sobs that were shaking her daughter's body" and "no longer knew what she herself was feeling" because "All her consciousness had passed into Anne," whose "young anguish, which is the hardest of all to bear, must be allayed" (187-88). These thoughts are in sharp contrast to Kate's typical belief that her pain is more devastating.

But this moment fails to change the relationship between Kate and Anne, both of whom perceive themselves as separated from each other by an abyss or gulf. Anne's physical overtures toward Kate can be seen as her attempt to bridge this "gulf" but, because Chris is between them, Anne's efforts cannot succeed. For Kate, the abyss includes everything about her life since she left Anne, including her ignorance of Anne's life and her affair with Chris. Kate perceives herself as endlessly skirting this abyss, constantly in danger of falling in and disappearing forever. When she first suspects Anne's being involved with Chris,



"the shock of finding herself for a second over that abyss sent her stumbling back half-dazed to the safe footing of reality" (115). Similarly, her future with Anne is a "precipice" into which she must not look, for "a glance forward or down might plunge her into the depths." Because this abyss of her past and future is so threatening to Kate, she cannot bear to reach across it to truly embrace a relationship with her daughter.

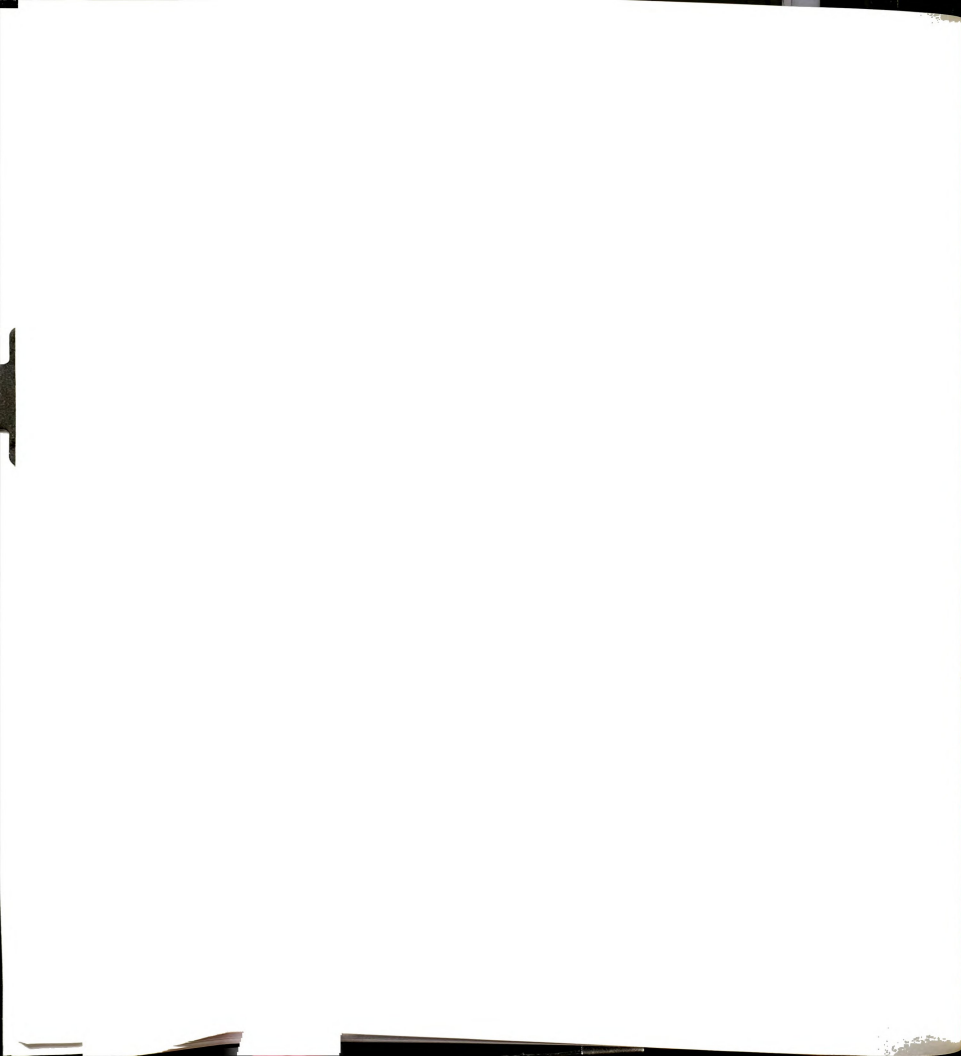
Kate's early assumption that she would be able to close the distance between herself and Anne as easily as she could walk into her old house--"with the ease of a long-absent mistress"--indicates her failure to revise her mental image of Anne with the passage of time. During their years of separation, Kate's primary memory of Anne was of a three-year-old calling: "'Mummy--Mummy--I want my Mummy!'" (18) The image is of an imperious but easily pacified child. Because of this powerful image, Kate expects Anne to have remained in the same posture all of her life, to have spent her life focused on her mother, waiting until she finally answers "'Coming, Darling,'" eighteen years later (18). But Kate discovers that, unlike the toddler, the adult Anne cannot be pacified by her mother's mere presence. Finding that Anne's "round child's body" cannot be "disengaged" from her adult figure, Kate relinquishes her initial urge to "touch her hair, stroke her face,...kiss her over and over again," to feel the child's body that "she had so long continued to feel against her own...as the amputated feel



the life in a lost limb" (30). Instead, Kate waits for Anne to take the initiative. At one point, when "Anne's hand stole out to her," Kate thinks, "How many old breaches the touch healed!", as though Anne, not Kate, had caused those breaches (122).

Kate's awareness of the great distance between herself and Anne that she cannot cross parallels her sense of her standing with Chris. When Chris tells her that he considers himself free of his promise to leave Anne, Kate "stretched out her hands as if to catch him back," and "saw herself in another scene, stretching her arms to him in the same desperate entreaty, with the same sense of her inability to move him, even to reach him" (176). Kate's inability to reach either Anne or Chris, juxtaposed against her witnessing the young couple's embrace in the incest scene, symbolizes that Kate is irrevocably an outsider to their lives. Ultimately, the abyss signifies that Kate is as completely separated from both Anne and Chris as the dead from the living. Wharton had anticipated this irreparable separation early in the narrative. When Kate momentarily thinks the telegram announcing "'Mrs. Clephane dead'" refers to her, she is more right than she knows (7-8). For the subsequent action shows that she must remain dead to Anne, at least as her mother. And her memory of Anne's calling for her "Mummy" is also ironically appropriate; Kate has been like a mummy, not a mommy, to her child.

Yet despite the narrative's positioning of Kate as



outsider, Wharton suggests that as women, Kate and Anne may share similar limitations on their happiness. Early in the novel, Wharton draws the reader's attention to Anne's kunstlerromane.¹⁷ The importance of Anne's work is shown not only by her having a studio and keeping regular hours there, but also by the fact that her studio is located outside of her house, that is, separate from domesticity. The lack of furnishings in the studio confirms this. Yet there are hints that Anne's artist self will end with her marriage. For instance, telling Kate about Chris' military honors, Anne concludes, "'But he never talks of all that; all he cares about is his writing'" (103-04). The specific medium through which Chris defines himself as artist has changed; painting was his passion when he was with Kate (4, 34). As Patricia Meyer Spacks notes, Chris' creativity is "attested by assertion rather than accomplishment" (The Female Imagination 250). While Anne works at her craft daily (like Wharton herself), Chris talks about writing.

The setting of this discussion--as Anne cleans up and puts away the tools of her art--lends an ominous character to Anne's observation that is easily missed as the reader speculates on Anne's relationship with Chris. As far as we know, for Anne, as DuPlessis would say, "Soon after she accepts the man in the love plot, the female hero becomes a

¹⁷Wolff also notes that Anne as "the image of woman as potential artist" is the submerged, undeveloped narrative in The Mother's Recompense ("Behind the Lines," Revisions conference).



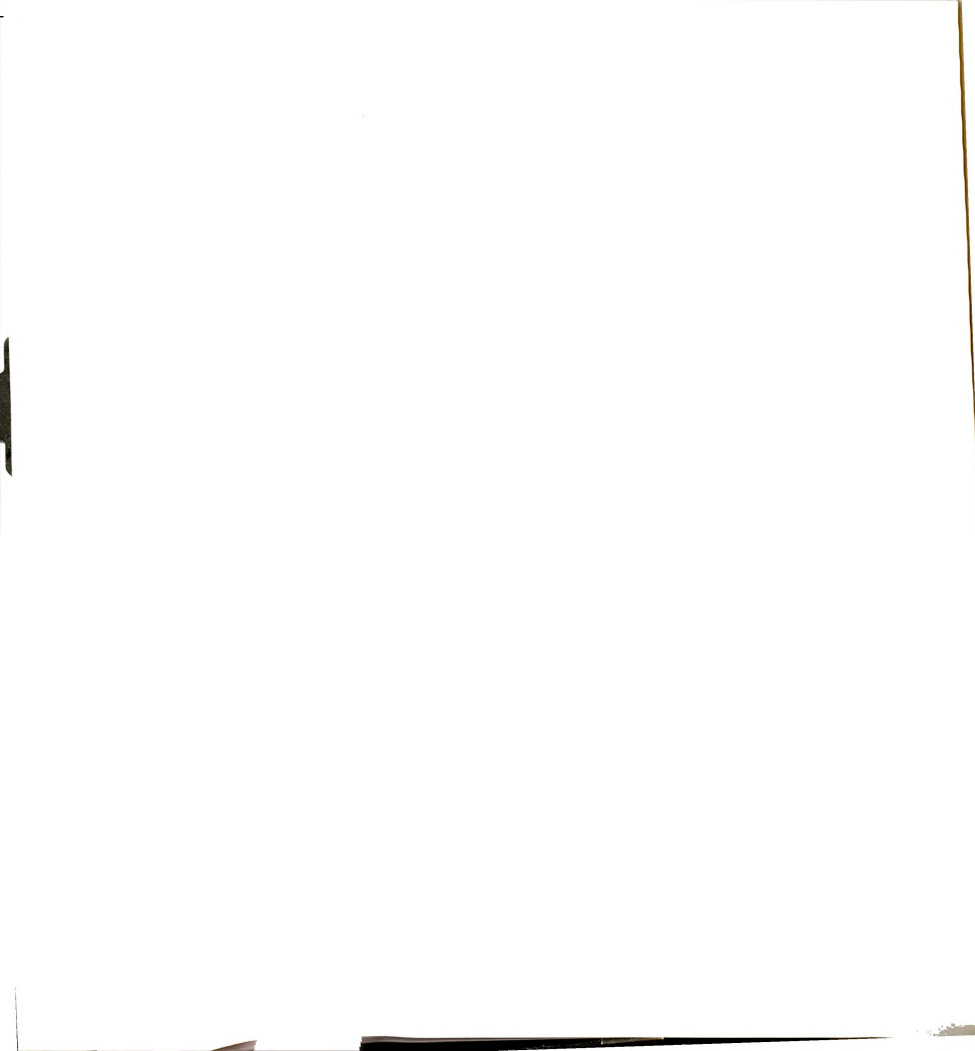
heroine, and the story ends" (8). Anne is as likely to become the background to Chris' writing as her mother was to his painting. These suggestions that Anne's married life will entail less than perfect happiness enrich the novel's irony. Neither the prodigal mother nor the proper daughter who gets her way will likely find lasting happiness.

Up to the day of the wedding, Kate struggles with the idea that she should tell Anne about her affair with Chris. When Kate goes to arrange the wedding date with the minister, she explains her "friend's" situation to him on the spur of the moment. Dr. Arklow's initial, horrified response is, "'it is her duty to tell her daughter,'" because "'Such a shocking situation must be avoided...at all costs'" (211). But he modifies his position and gives Kate a way to escape telling Anne about her affair when he says, "'The thing in the world I'm most afraid of is sterile pain....I should never want any one to be the cause of that'" (212). Kate consciously recognizes that Anne is the one the rector intends to be spared such pain; but subconsciously, Kate applies his words to her own flight from feeling.

...once the girl knew the truth, her healthy youth might so revolt from Chris's baseness, Chris's duplicity, that the shock of the discovery would be its own cure. But when the blow had fallen, when Anne's life had crashed about her, and the ruins been cleared away--what then of her mother? Why, her mother would be buried under those ruins; her life would be over; but a hideous indestructible image of her would remain, overshadowing, darkening the daughter's future. (214)

The reference to "ruins" recalls the earlier passage in which Kate contemplates the emotional "ruins" she suffers when she thinks "evil" of Chris (129). Here, as in that previous passage, Kate is really focused on herself. That she is is confirmed in the way in which Anne becomes an abstraction, as Kate imagines "the daughter's" future. Her response to Dr. Arklow's words is another symptom of Kate's self-centeredness; she's more than willing, despite what she wants to believe about herself, to inflict pain on Anne if doing so will save her pain.

Kate approaches Fred's marriage proposal in much the same way. She is ambivalent at best about marrying him. She had viewed him as the friend to whom she may eventually unburden herself about her affair with Chris, so her first thought when he proposes is "now I shall never be able to tell him--never!" (199-200) Kate doesn't immediately answer Fred's proposal. She decides to marry him only when she needs to give Anne a reason for refusing to stay with the newlyweds, in order to steer Anne's mind clear of the truth about her and Chris (226-27). Having made the decision to marry Fred as she makes the announcement, Kate reflects merely, "'Poor Fred! Well--if it's what he wants--'", and then returns immediately to what she wants: "all she now wanted, was never again to see that dreadful question in Anne's eyes. And she had found no other way of evading it" (228). As this passage indicates, Kate's deciding to marry Fred is an expediency, a way out of a threatening



conversation. Kate's ambivalence about her decision is evidenced by her insisting that Anne not tell anyone; by making it their "secret," Kate can change her mind more easily than if everyone knew of her engagement (227).

Wharton makes it clear that Kate does not love Fred: "she reflected with self-derision that all her suicidal impulses seemed to end in the same way; by landing her in the arms of some man she didn't care for" (228). Rather than considering the implications of her attitude for Fred, Kate distances herself from her situation, much as she had previously denied the impact of her abandoning Anne. Waiting for Fred to visit her on the night before Anne's wedding, Kate "felt a curious sense of aloofness" at the thought of marrying him (236). When he arrives, Kate wonders, "How would the evening ever drag itself to an end?", and the thought of addressing Fred's proposal is as "intolerable" as discussing Anne's wedding (238).

Still unwilling to accept her aging, Kate dislikes Fred's allusions to their both being middle-aged (237). She notes that Fred "had the deliberate movements of the elderly," but "Her own body still seemed so supple, free and imponderable" (237-38). And when she agrees to marry him and he rushes to embrace her, Kate "shrank back a little, not from reluctance but from a sense of paralyzing inadequacy. 'It's I who am old now,' she thought with a shiver" (240). Kate feels old in experience compared to her friend, but the narrative makes it clear that the thought of



living out her life with Fred, with the "click of [his] key" in the door each day and his "honest boot-tips" before her fire every night, is what's most aging to Kate (243, 239).

Kate's thoughts about Fred suggest that her sudden realization that she would "have to tell him" about her affair with Chris is prompted by her need to escape their marriage. Kate's own consciousness skirts this motive when she thinks, "Whether she married him or not seemed a small matter in comparison. First she must look into those honest eyes with eyes as honest" (251). When Fred realizes what she is trying to tell him, "he seemed years older," and Kate reflects, "Sterile pain--it appeared that she was to inflict it after all" (255). Assuming Fred will no longer want to marry her, Kate is satisfied to have "his pain and his pity," for "the centre of her wretchedness seemed the point at which they were meant to meet." The thought shows that Kate remains focused on her affair with Chris and expects Fred to do the same. Indeed, she is so shocked when Fred still wants her, that she says, "'Don't you see that I can't bear any more?'" (259). Relieved to have someone finally share her burden, Kate cannot view the only other person who knows about the most important relationship in her life in any other terms. This is why, at the end, Kate reflects: "[Fred] had overcome his strongest feelings...he had held out his hand to her, in the extremity of her need,...and she had blessed him for it and stood fast on her own side" (271-72).



Kate's fleeing Fred is another instance of her running away.¹⁸ Her relationship with Lord Charles, back on the Riviera, confirms her need to keep free of commitments. "Marry him? God forbid!....What she most wanted of him was simply to fill certain empty hours..." (267). When Dr. Arklow (now a bishop) visits the Riviera, he tells Kate she can marry Fred without returning to New York; "'He would be prepared to begin his life again anywhere'" (270). But in addition to her desire to stay free, Kate prefers to dwell on her memory of Fred's understanding, rather than move beyond that moment, as she would have to do as his wife. Just as Newland Archer enshrines his memory of Ellen in The Age of Innocence, Kate enshrines her memory of that moment with Fred, "shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her" (272).

Wharton's epigraph from Prometheus Unbound, "Desolation is a delicate thing," sheds additional light on the novel's ending. A delicate thing needs tending; so by shutting herself off from Fred, Kate can tend and preserve--and focus on--her desolation, rather than accept the risks involved in a real relationship.¹⁹ But the fact that Kate's doing so is a poor substitute for genuine involvement with people is

¹⁸Discussing the novel's ending, Raphael says, "Kate's return to France is anything but positive and hopeful because it caps a lifetime marked by hiding, silence, and flight" (188).

¹⁹Along the same line, Wolff says pain ultimately becomes the thing that confirms Kate's existence. "If she were to accept [Fred], she would be plunged into time and change and the compromises of reality" (370).



indicated by the way "her loneliness came down on her like a pall" when she tries to explain herself to Dr. Arklow (271).

The title of The Mother's Recompense has typically been read as referring to Kate's punishment for abandoning Anne. Kate perceives her experience this way; she tells Fred that Anne "'said I'd given up any claim on her...when I...left her years ago. And so she wouldn't listen to me. That was my punishment: that I couldn't stop her'" from marrying Chris (256). Of course, if Kate had not left her husband and child and eventually had an affair with Chris, she would have no reason for opposing the marriage in the first place. But the title also refers to "the mother's" recompense to her daughter. Kate had returned to New York with the mistaken idea that she could repay Anne for having abandoned her, simply by becoming the "perfect" companion. The denouement is therefore tragic not only because Kate cannot come to terms with a relationship with Fred, but because Kate, despite her hopes, could not directly recompense her daughter for her abandonment.

Yet Anne does receive a recompense of sorts. Kate's returning to New York allows Anne to resolve her feelings toward her, which in turn frees Anne to commit herself to Chris. Then, once Anne and Chris are engaged, Kate's interference only serves to strengthen Anne's determination to marry him. Kate's presence in New York at this point in Anne's life, and her failure to ever tell Chris that she had a daughter, combine to create a situation in which "the



mother" in effect gives her lover to her daughter, in spite of herself. Ironically, then, Chris is ultimately Kate's recompense to Anne.

Chapter Five
Passion and Possession in
The Children

In her 1928 The Children, Wharton returns to a male center of consciousness' dichotomous views of the two women he alternately desires. But while in previous novels in which Wharton uses this framework the major women characters are only metaphorically "children" vs. adults, in The Children, Wharton juxtaposes a fifteen-year-old girl against the middle-aged Rose Sellars. Uncomfortably aware of his own aging, Martin Boyne escapes into a world of children, only to be forced to confront his age when young Judith Wheeler fails to see him as the potential lover he longs to be for her. Boyne has much in common with Kate Clephane of The Mother's Recompense, also uncomfortable with aging, and with many of Wharton's male characters, whose passions are strongest for the women who are beyond their reach.

The opening scenes of The Children are strongly reminiscent of the beginning of The Reef. Like George Darrow, Martin is enroute to a recently widowed woman who he believes he is in love with but has not seen in many years, to ask her to marry him, now that she is finally free. Also like George, Martin is easily distracted from his purpose. Darrow becomes sexually involved with another woman when he

is enroute to Anna Leath; Martin becomes involved with the Wheater children while on his way to Rose. The parallel is instructive, for just as George vacillates between his perceptions of Sophy Viner as the object of his passion and a "child," so Martin wavers between his desire to possess Judith sexually and his recognition of her youth.¹

From the first, Boyne feels a confused attraction toward Judy. He has difficulty trying to "situate her in time and space," and his efforts at thus "cataloguing" her are complicated by the way in which she seems so different when she is with the children than when she is away from them (36). Forced into an adult role with the children, Judy behaves accordingly in their presence. Away from them, she simply relaxes and behaves like the teenager that she is. But Boyne, who has been bemoaning the fact that "adventure...perpetually eluded him," views these different sides of Judy as making her mysterious--and therefore interesting. Coinciding with this process of endowing Judy with mysterious qualities, Martin increasingly disparages Rose Sellars. Her very "perfection" becomes a weakness in Boyne's eyes, as he compares her experienced grace with Judy's childish tactlessness.

The Children begins with Boyne's looking forward to the possibility of finally possessing Rose, the recently widowed woman he had unsuccessfully pursued when she was married.

¹Carol Wershoven compares Sophy Viner and Judith Wheater, in The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton (112, 119-20).

But he has not seen her in five years, and he travels toward her with a feeling of "prolonged apprehension" at the "fateful uncertainty" of what will happen between them (3). When he meets Judith Wheeler, he soon begins comparing her with Rose, to the latter's detriment. Boyne realizes:

He could never think of [Rose] as having been really young, immaturely young, like this girl about whom they were exchanging humorous letters, and who, in certain other ways, had a precocity of experience so far beyond Mrs. Sellar's. (39-40)

Being "immaturely young" hardly seems like a positive trait, but it becomes so simply because it is a quality Rose lacks. Yet Boyne's inability to imagine Rose as young is juxtaposed against the youthful aspects of her that he notes when he finally meets with her. He perceives that "Freedom of spirit and of body had mysteriously rejuvenated her" (she's wearing shorter skirts than were the style when he last saw her), and he "found her prettier and younger than when they had parted" (85). Wharton takes care to present additional evidence of Rose's vitality; for instance, she is a "tireless walker" and is "proud of her light foot and firm muscles" (85).

Although these qualities are more attractive than the immaturity Martin sees in Judith, Rose's vibrant youthfulness threatens to interfere with Martin's need to distance Rose and keep her asexual. Boyne needs Rose to remain "aloof", for "In the course of his life so much easy love had come his way...that he needed to feel there was one woman in the world whom he was half-afraid to make love to"



(84). In other words, Boyne needs for Rose to remain on the pedestal where he had long ago placed her, after failing to break her "sternly imposed will" and convince her to have an affair with him while she was married (84). Confronted with a woman in whom he found that "Every change in her was to her advantage," and who offers "no resistance," Boyne's "passion lay with folded wings" (85).

Boyne imagines this will be his response "just at first," but in fact, he is unwilling ever to let Rose off of her pedestal. As the woman he could not have, Rose had represented perfection; "each time he returned, she had simply added a little more to herself, like a rose unfurling another petal" (39). But now that she is available, even her "perfection" begins to irritate Boyne. He begins to find fault with many of the qualities that make Rose attractive. Early in the novel, for example, Rose slips away from the hotel dining room so that he and Judith can talk privately, when the children first arrive in Cortina. "Damn tact!" is Martin's response to her courtesy. And while he had previously appreciated her "consistency and continuity," Martin begins to see Rose and her life as "arranged" (39, 38). As an emblem of perfection Rose can scarcely be human, much less sexual.

Since no living person can be perfect, however, Boyne increasingly perceives Rose as a "ghost." Wharton prepares for this with some of Boyne's first thoughts about Rose; he is going to her to "discover what it was that he had found

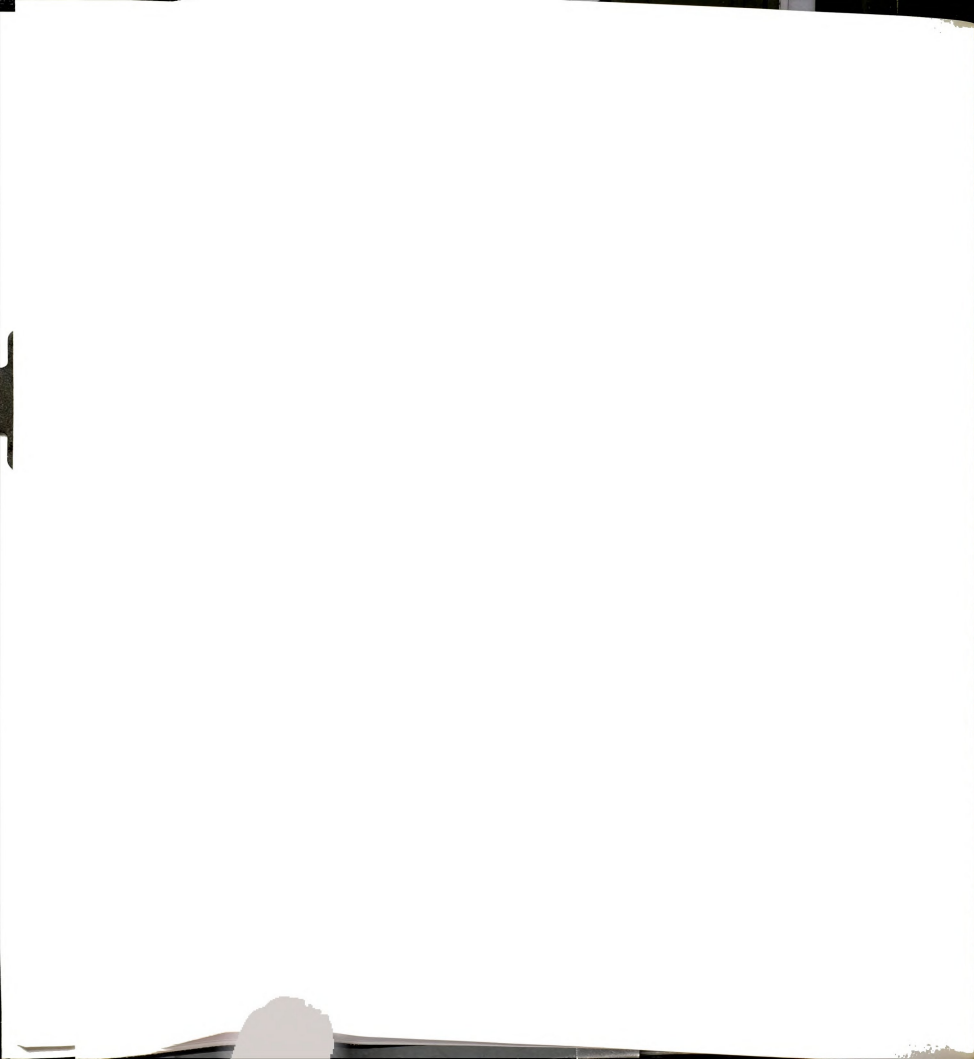
so haunting" in her (40). As the novel makes increasingly clear, it was Rose's inaccessibility that Boyne found haunting. When he first climbs up to the chalet to meet with Rose after so many years, he "saw his problems float away from him like a last curl of mist swallowed up in the blue behind the peaks." Boyne attributes his tranquility to "this wonderful resurrection of a life he had secretly thought dead" (82). But the tranquility of this "resurrection" cannot last once Martin's and Rose's initial meeting has passed and they must begin to deal with each other and their relationship. In fact, the major problem to which this passage refers is Boyne's desire to, by his own admission, "'have it both ways.'" Although he ostensibly rejects this "craving," Boyne's subsequent behavior shows that he has failed to achieve "the moral support of believing that the woman who had once seemed to fill his needs could do so still"--a sentiment he feels before even being reunited with Rose. She had already become an "embalmed mummy" to Boyne, who "the live Rose Sellars" he meets on the mountain ostensibly, but never really, replaces (82).²

²In "Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World," Virginia L. Blum notes Freud's study of "the nineteenth-century man's inability to find sexual and emotional fulfillment in a single woman." This inability, Blum says, is "an integrative failure repeatedly manifested by Wharton's male characters," and usually results in these characters' preference for a woman who is "dead" to them, "a living woman being too difficult and threatening" (12-14). In this sense, Boyne's perceptions of Rose are similar to George's view of Anna in The Reef, and especially to Newland's perception of Ellen in The Age of Innocence.

When Martin and Rose kiss for the first time, Martin thinks, "'It will be so much easier now to consult her-- she'll understand so much better'" (90). "He didn't quite know why he felt that; perhaps because the merging of their two selves seemed to include every claim that others could have on either of them." Although he had previously had misgivings about how Rose would respond to his involvement with the Wheater children, Boyne assumes that "now it was enough that she had him in common, and must share the burden [of the children's problem] because it was his" (90). His sense that Rose will enter into his concerns in perfect harmony with him suggests that Boyne subconsciously expects their kiss to awaken Rose, like a sleeping beauty, to his world, his view of things.³ That expectation is most appropriate, for *Sleeping Beauty* is essentially dead until the prince's kiss awakens her, just as Rose is essentially dead--a ghost--to Boyne.

But Rose's annoying habit of dealing in realities thwarts Martin's hopes of perfect communion. Returning from the Wheatons with news of a temporary reprieve for the children, Boyne tells Rose he's been made the children's trial-guardian. When she asks him to explain what that means, Boyne thinks, "To Judith and Terry....He would only have to say: 'It's all right,' and be smothered in hugs and jubilations....But here sat lovely Logic..." (172). Boyne's

³Wharton also draws on *Sleeping Beauty* in *The Reef*. See Elizabeth Ammons (Edith Wharton's Argument with America 79-84).



irritation with Rose's response indicates his true view of communion: for Rose to place an unquestioning, child-like trust in him, rather than using her own mind.

Rose's reasonableness also unsettles Boyne because she refuses to join in his escapist fantasy of saving the children from their parents. Certain that Rose is jealous of Judith--at the same time that he insists to himself she can have no reason to be jealous--Boyne sees an ulterior motive in Rose's very sensible suggestion that they adopt Terry and Blanca--Terry who, being sickly and having been rejected by his father in favor of Chip, "'needs care and sympathy more than any of them,'" and Blanca, who is Terry's twin (251). "If she had really loved him," Boyne reflects, "would [Rose] not have entered into his feeling about the little group, and recognised the cruelty of separating them?" (252) Yet Rose's letter, which outlines the reasons why they cannot adopt the other children, is perfectly right.⁴ She notes that Judith is nearly of age, that the Wheaters would never give up Chip, and that the other children's natural parents would not consent to their adoption by outsiders (250-51). Ironically, Martin is irritated with Rose's "infernal air...of thinking away whatever it was inconvenient to admit"--in this case, his purpose of keeping the children together--when in fact, this is what Boyne has done all along. He has refused to admit

⁴Wershoven accepts Boyne's view of Rose and concludes that Rose behaves with "positive malice" toward her "rival," Judith (115).

the impossibility of his keeping the children together in any more than a temporary way, despite his relief at every new "reprieve" (252-53).

His position places Boyne at the opposite extreme from the children's parents. While the parents are careless of the children, Boyne steps far beyond his bounds in his desire to help Judy keep them together. Boyne agrees to watch over the run-away brood without informing the Wheaters of their whereabouts; he asks Grandma Mervin to adopt the children, without anyone's knowledge or consent; and he even hides the children away at a remote villa, when Judith's having been summoned to Venice creates a risk of "being run down by an outraged parent" (315). In fact, the latter action amounts to kidnapping.

The extremes to which Boyne is willing to go indicate he is not thinking clearly. His horror at the Wheaters' and other parents' lifestyles only partly explains his actions; it is his desire for Judith that compels Boyne. His protecting the children thus stems from motives just as selfish as their parents' neglecting them. Rose sees the situation in its true light the first time Martin considers running away with the children, and he resents her for doing so. When Judith first brings them all to Cortina, her arrival is followed by a letter to Boyne from Cliffe Wheeler, asking if they are there. To Boyne's idea that he take the children away, Rose responds "with a little silken laugh," "'Then you're a child yourself, dear. How long do



you suppose it will be before you're run down? You'll only be making things worse for the children--and for yourself'" (137).

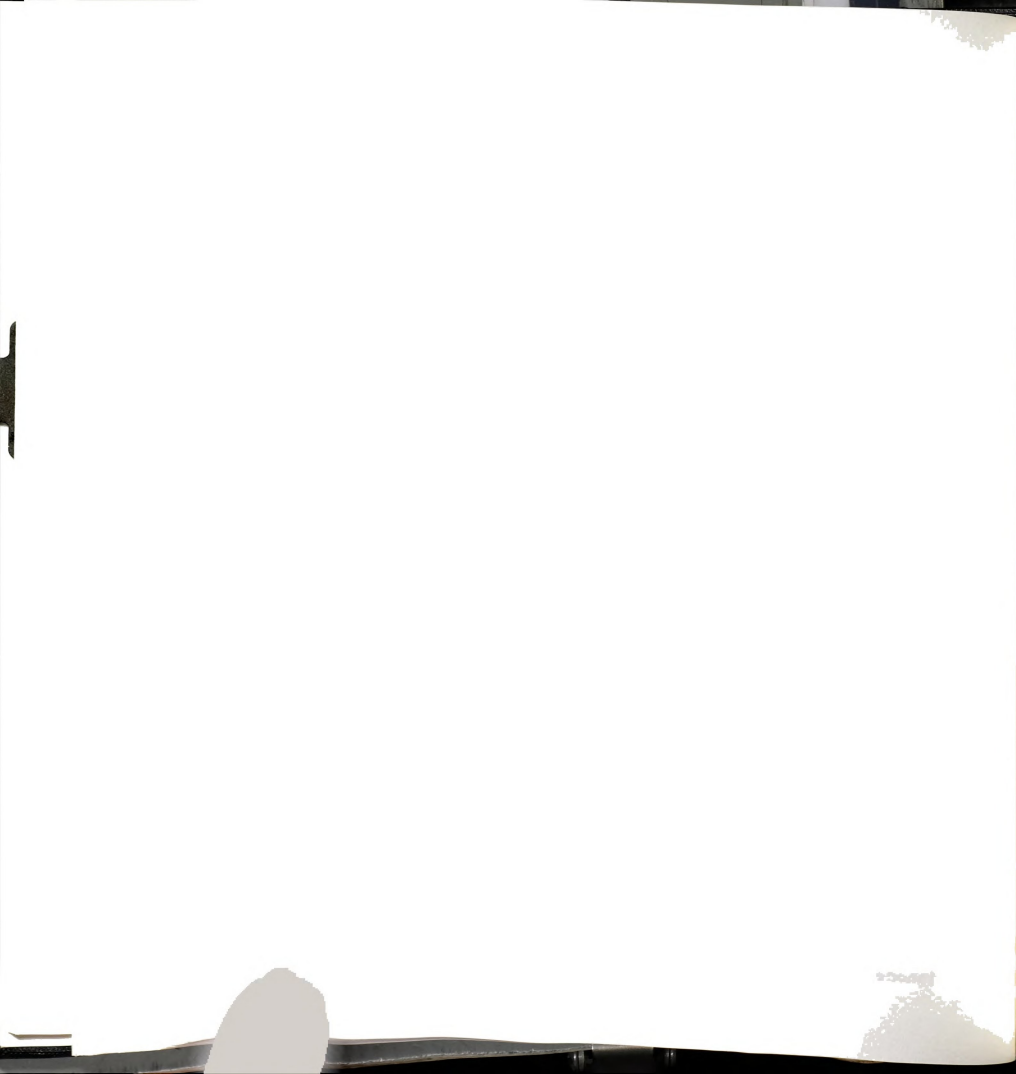
Rose's allusion to the legal risks of Boyne's contemplated action belies his perception of her as out of touch with the world. Boyne assumes Rose would not be able to understand the children's situation, yet, ironically, he tries to shield her from learning about their world in order to understand it. When he contemplates introducing Rose to Judith, "Boyne did not see how any good will on either part could bridge the distance between Mrs. Sellars's conception of life, and Judith Wheater's experience of it" (124).⁵ Yet Rose has a clearer grasp of the situation than Boyne, as her more practical response indicates. The logical extension of Boyne's increasing disgust with Rose's presumed innocence is to prefer the world Judith has known to Rose's--a choice that, with his disdain for that world, Boyne would hardly make on a conscious level. As Newland Archer does with May in The Age of Innocence, Martin assumes that Rose cannot understand the world as he does; but in both cases, it is actually the man who is the innocent. Just as Newland misses May's role in getting rid of Ellen, so Martin underestimates Rose, at the same time that he is the one who is aligned with a group of children, and he has spent much

⁵Similarly, The Reef's George Darrow self-righteously bemoans Anna's supposedly being "too fine" to understand the experiences of a Sophy Viner--experiences that only become romanticized when contrasted to Anna's presumed ignorance of the world.

of his life outside of society.⁶

Wharton uses gifts in this novel as a metaphor for physical and sexual possession. When Zinnia LaCross visits her daughter, Zinnie is as much interested in the present she hopes for as she is in her mother herself--an attitude Zinnia has obviously encouraged. Having watched Zinnia leave the garden (she's gone to get her husband from the gondola), Zinnie says: "'She hasn't gone away without seeing her own little Zinnie, has she?....Did she bring a present for me? She always does'" (67). Giving her daughter a present is Zinnia's way of making a claim on her, in competition with Joyce Wheater. Zinnia makes little effort to hide her motive; she suggests that Blanca should look at the pearls she's given Zinnie "'under the microscope, and then tell you if they're false, like your momma's'" (73). Zinnia's childish pleasure in flaunting her wealth before these kids further indicates that she views her own material possessions as the level on which to compete with Joyce for her daughter's loyalty. She makes a point of telling Zinnie that, unlike Joyce, "'movie queens don't have to wear fake pearls'" (74). And in return for bestowing gifts on her daughter, Zinnia views Zinnie as a possession to be used for her own purposes; her reason for visiting at all is to "'show Wrenny [her husband] that I can have a baby if I

⁶Wershoven comments, "Having been a wanderer, a waif, himself for so long, he [Boyne] identifies with these waifs" (117). Yet this fact does not make him any less of an innocent in his dealings with regard to them.

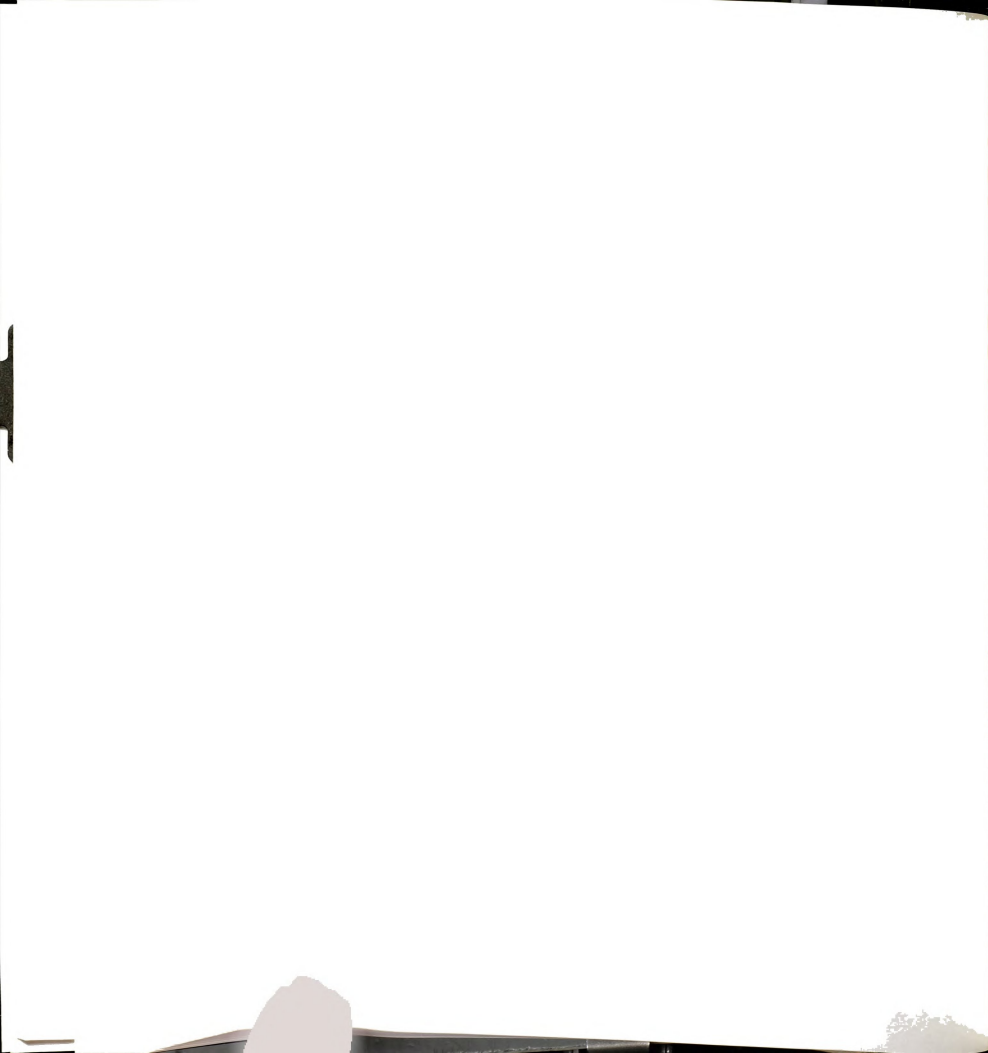


choose'" (65).

A later, parallel scene illustrates both Martin's focus on Judith and his propensity for inferring Rose's thoughts. On his return from seeing the Wheaters in Venice, Boyne presents Rose with an engagement ring he decides is "utterly commonplace," which he had bought in a hurry because he had spent too much time choosing an antique pendant for Judith (173, 188). Because Rose expresses pleasure at the pendant which he mistakenly starts to give to her, Boyne assumes she is then disappointed with her gift. Yet Rose says the ring is "'much too beautiful'" and admires it, albeit "diligently," from Boyne's perspective. Martin goes on to contrast this imaginary crisis with how Judith would supposedly behave in the same situation:

Judith Wheeler, if he had been trying an engagement ring on her finger (preposterous fancy!) would have blurted out at once that she preferred the trinket he had shoved back into his pocket. But such tactlessness was unthinkable in Mrs. Sellars. Not for the world, he knew, would she have let him guess that she had given the other ornament a thought. (173)

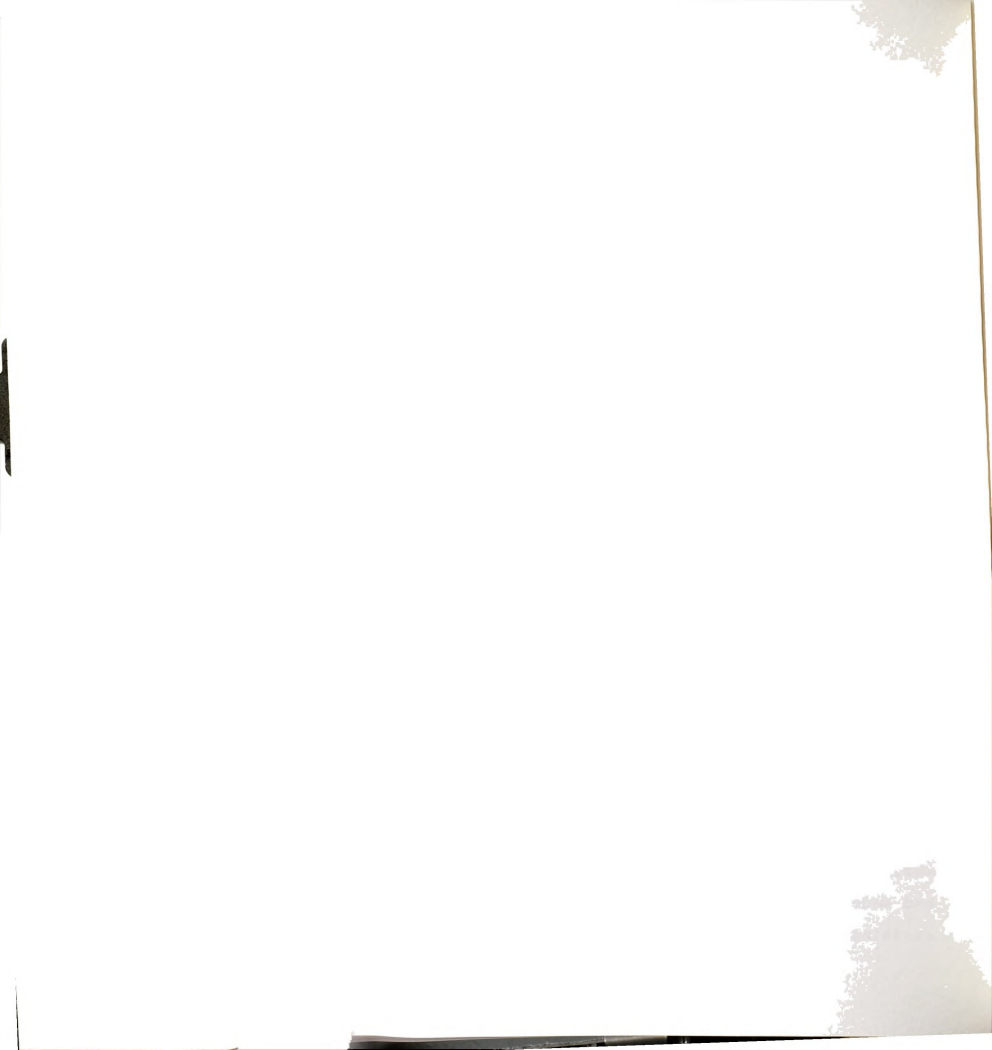
When Rose doesn't say anything to offend Martin, he can still find fault with her by assuming she is exercising that tact which he now finds so distasteful. Boyne's thought is telling; the pendant is a substitute for the ring he would rather give Judith, and the thought touches on his desire to possess Judith, as his ring now possesses Rose's finger. Just as Zinnia LaCross stakes her claim on Zinnie with a gift, Boyne reveals his desire to possess Judy by giving her, rather than his fiance, the expensive jewelry.



Wharton's irony is enriched by the fact that the pendant, an antique, is more like Rose, while the new and common ring exemplifies Judith's world--the world of hotel living in which, as Rose had said, beauty is becoming "'standardized'" (105).

Boyne's assumption about how Judith would react in the same situation is based on her previously having admitted her disappointment that Blanca had "wangled" her present out of Zinnia (75). And after the incident at Rose's, Boyne had decided that Judith "must again be left out" when he showers gifts on the other children. But when they take a walk "in the mountain dusk" and "She hung on his arm, pressed close by the intruding fir branches, he needed more and more to think of her as a child, and, thinking thus, to treat her as one." So he gives Judith the pendant. Doing so hardly accomplishes Boyne's purpose, however, for the grateful Judith wants to kiss him. Unnerved by the suggestion, Boyne literally turns and runs (188).

Knowing that Judith is bound to wear her gift in front of Rose, Boyne justifies his complete lack of tact in the entire matter with the reflection that the pendant "was Judith's by right because, like her, it was odd and exquisite and unaccountable" (188). Martin's description of Judith here echoes his previous thoughts about Rose, a woman who, out of the "mediocre" material of her New York life, had made "something distinguished, personal, almost exciting--so that, in her little world, people were



accustomed to say 'Rose Sellars' as a synonym for cleverness and originality" (39). The hint of disparagement inherent in the reference to her "little world" notwithstanding, clearly Boyne once viewed Rose--when she was unavailable--similarly to how he now sees Judith.

After giving Rose her ring, Martin imagines she is "brooding over her newly imprisoned finger" (176). But he is projecting his perspective onto Rose. He, as the narrative increasingly shows, is the one who feels imprisoned. Boyne has been very aggressive with Rose regarding their wedding date, ostensibly because, having waited so long to possess her, he does not want to wait any longer. But like Newland Archer, Boyne is trying to seal his fate, in order to avoid dealing with his attraction to Judith. Even as he argues with Rose about their wedding date, Boyne notes that "During their first fortnight not a cloud had shadowed their comradeship; but now that love and marriage had intervened the cloud was there..." (96).

Since Boyne flatters himself that Rose's life had been "hopeless," "vacant," and a series of "cold empty years" without him, he cannot understand why she does not immediately comply (91, 85). But Rose's reluctance to rush into a new marriage is understandable, given that she has been widowed only seven months, after a long, unhappy marriage (93). Pushed to give a "better" reason for hesitating, Rose says she does not want to offend her Aunt Julia (who has made Rose her heir)--only to have Boyne

denigrate the idea of caring what anyone else thinks about the timing of their marriage: "trimming his course to suit the whims of rich relations had never been his way--perhaps because he had never had any rich relations. Anyhow, he was not going to be dictated to by his wife's; and it gave him a feeling of manliness to tell her so" (95). Wharton's humor at Boyne's expense elucidates his self-centeredness. And in fact, Boyne's attitude is hypocritical, for while he disparages Rose's sensitivity to others' wishes, he does not hesitate to put the children first.

Also like Newland Archer, Boyne is appalled when Rose finally does agree to hasten their wedding, ostensibly because "everything that happens between us always seems to happen at the wrong time" (231). Rose, however, realizes the truth. "'You're pledged because you want to be,'" she says when Boyne tells her he can't leave the children. "'You're in love with Judith Wheeler, and you're trying to persuade yourself that you're still in love with me'" (233-34). Indeed, Rose had had the same realization earlier but had tried to dismiss it, until Boyne's behavior finally forces her to address what, as she says, "'I believe I've always known'" (220). Noting Rose's distress, the horrified Boyne reflects:

He had often mocked at himself as a man who...had never had a real adventure; but now he saw that he himself...had been Rose Sellars's Great Adventure, the risk and the enchantment of her life. While she had continued, during the weary years of her marriage, to be blameless, exemplary, patient and heroically gay, the thought of Boyne was storing up treasures for her which she would one day put



out her hand and take....She had trained herself to go on waiting for happiness...like a tireless animal waiting for its prey. One day her prey, her happiness, would appear, and she would snap it up; and on that day there would be no escape from her... (235, Wharton's final ellipsis).

While Boyne had preyed on the married Rose Sellars (to no avail), he now perceives of himself as her prey. His seemingly perverse reaction to Rose's agreeing to marry him can be understood in psychological terms. Discussing relationships between adult men and women in The Reproduction of Mothering (1978), Nancy Chodorow explains, "Men both look for and fear exclusivity"; they tend to both "want and fear" the intensity of heterosexual intimacy (199). This tension stems, according to Chodorow, from a man's desire to recreate the "primary intimacy and merging" of his early relationship with his mother, a desire that is countered by a "fear of fusion." Coinciding with this tension, "fear of loss of a love object may make the experience of love too risky" (79). Thus Martin fears both being "snapped up" and consumed by Rose, now that she is available, and risking himself in a love relationship with this woman who, he discovers, seldom responds to his thoughts in the same harmony as his imagined Rose (237). His reaction to this fear is to question his feelings for Rose; he tells himself that "The thought of her deep submissive passion" concerns him because "He knew now how much she loved him--but did he know how much he loved her?" (238)

Corresponding with Boyne's perception of Rose as a

predator, her chalet comes increasingly to mean entrapment to him. Sitting by Rose's fire early in the novel, Boyne had looked forward to "an eternity of such evenings, in just such a hushed lamplit room, with...that quiet silvery-auburn head...bending over a book across the hearth" (86). Later, returning from one of his forays into the Wheaters' Venice, Martin enters the chalet and contentedly feels "the spell of the place weave its noiseless net about him" (170). Yet both of these images, though ostensibly positive, reflect Boyne's unconsciously ominous view of his relationship with Rose. Both the references to "eternity" and to a "net" enclosing him convey Boyne's sense of being trapped, forever unable to escape, which he only later articulates.

While Rose--who the narrative closely identifies with her small chalet--represents enclosed space to Boyne, South America represents the frontier on which Boyne, an engineer, can literally make his mark. He longs to return to "the glorious soul-releasing world of girders and abutments, of working stresses, curvatures and grades" (240). His profession enables Boyne to easily flee what he perceives as the restricting snare of a relationship with a woman, through a means unavailable to Wharton's previous male characters.⁷ His desire to flee is strengthened when he discovers the cradle in his room.

⁷See Chapter 3, "Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in The Age of Innocence," for Nina Baym's discussion of the myth of the American hero, which places women in league with society, an "unmitigatedly destructive" force against individuality (Baym 131-33).



The cradle, which is the children's wedding present to Martin and Rose, upsets Boyne not so much because it represents sexuality, but because it is a concrete symbol of true commitment. Boyne can, and ultimately does, leave "the children" whenever he likes. But the cradle represents a "pledge" not so easily broken: marriage, with all its attendant ties (regardless of whether or not Martin and Rose were actually to have a child). Boyne discovers the cradle in his room after taking a long "tramp" to think about his relationship with Rose, and asking himself of the jealousy which presumably motivates her, "was that loving him at all?" (252) As he had continued his walk, Martin's thoughts had turned from Rose to a memory of "that other night...when he had climbed the same path, and his feet had seemd winged...because a young girl's shoulder brushed his own, and he listened to unpremeditated laughter" (253-54). So appalled is Martin at the children's choice of a gift that he "stared at [the cradle] incredulously, as if he knew it must be an hallucination," and then breaks into hysterical laughter (255-56). And as if to deny its meaning, Boyne uses the cradle to keep his boots in, a purpose for which he finds it "uncommonly handy" (267).

But the narrative suggests that the claustrophobic Boyne overestimates Rose's need for him. After all, it was he who initially rushed their wedding. And when Boyne's subsequent reluctance to marry becomes clear, Rose quietly withdraws. After confronting Martin with her realization

that he is in love with Judith, Rose suggests they "'say good-bye till tomorrow'" and "'produce our respective plans'" regarding the children at that time. Martin tries to embrace Rose, but she "slipped out of reach, and softly, adroitly closed the door on him." He feels "that that deft gesture had shut him up with her forever" (235-36). His perception is ironic for two reasons. First, the idea that Rose captures him by refusing to embrace him reflects Boyne's tendency to feel most tied to Rose when she is unavailable to him; it is when they do embrace that he cannot regain the desire he felt for Rose when, alone in the jungle, he first learned that her husband was dead (221). Secondly, this is the last time Boyne sees Rose for several weeks; she leaves for Paris the next day without telling him. And when he writes a letter that angrily rejects her proposal to adopt Terry and Blanca, Rose returns her engagement ring without comment (259-61). Nor does she make any recriminations against him when they finally meet again. She welcomes him graciously, reassuring him that "'You're free, you know. We're just two old friends talking'" (318).

At this time--now that the threat inherent in their engagement is over--Martin recognizes Rose's independence. Meeting her in her rooms in Paris, "He felt only her mastery of life and of herself, and thought how much less she needed him than did the dishevelled child he had just left" (318). Boyne, who had perceived Rose as a ghost, now feels "'like a ghost'" in Rose's presence (319). The sight of her graying



hair makes him feel "like a stranger coming back to her" (318). In fact, his noting her aging confirms that Boyne is no longer in love with Rose; before he was first reunited with her, he had thought, "When a man loved a woman she was always the age he wanted her to be; when he had ceased to, she was either too old for witchery or too young for technique" (40). In Paris, he looks wistfully around Rose's sitting room, at the "pleasant firelit room," with her "work-basket in its usual place" and a "familiar litter of papers on a desk" (319, my emphasis). Rose represents comfort and familiarity but, having rejected those things from her, Boyne cannot find his way back to her now.

He registers the way in which, "under the graying temples, her face looked changed and aged, like her hair" (318). Clearly, despite Rose's "undaunted smile" and gracious behavior, these signs of aging reflect the toll Boyne's actions have taken on her. He seems to have realized as much in an earlier scene, when in response to his implying that Dobree is interested in Judith, "He saw the faint lines of perplexity weaving their net over her face, and reflected that when a woman is no longer young she can preserve her air of freshness only in the intervals of feeling," and felt "vexed with himself for upsetting the delicate balance of her serenity" (216). But Boyne's perception in that earlier scene implied that Rose is weak, an implication Wharton extends when Boyne sees Rose as reduced to "glittering fragments" when her trust in him is



first broken (220).² Only once his obsession with Judith has caused an irrevocable split between them can Boyne note Rose's true strength.

Before this moment of recognition, Martin had turned to Judith both because he finds Judith's real need less threatening than the need he perceived Rose to have for him, and because rejecting the adult Rose, with her individuality and inconvenient scruples, had freed Boyne to enjoy the Pygmalion myth that he could form the relatively undeveloped Judith to please himself.³ Boyne's desire to do so is demonstrated at two key points in the novel. The first is in the cathedral at Monreale. Finding that "she could see nothing" of the cathedral because of her "complete ignorance of the past" and of art, Boyne is disappointed, "for he was already busy at the masculine task of endowing the woman of the moment with every quality which made life interesting to himself" (35). Later, Boyne sees an opportunity to help Judith rectify her ignorance. He encourages her to take advantage of her parents' "educational mood," when they've agreed to hire a tutor for Terry, "to get herself sent to a

²The situation is strongly reminiscent of the scene in The Reef in which Anna Leath notes the effects of her anguish on her appearance and, fearing she will not be able to keep George as she ages, thinks, "he doesn't feel things; and because he doesn't, I shall..." (318).

³Discussing the tendency of Wharton's male characters to "perceive woman not as she is but as he would have her," Ammons says, "Indeed, what is the Pygmalion impulse, so ubiquitous in Wharton's novels, but the wish to project a preconceived, or mythicized, image of woman onto a real human being?" (Argument 176-77)



good school" (59-60). But Judith points out that she will have no opportunity for schooling because she's sworn to keep the children together, and "'There'll always be some of the children left to look after.'" Boyne responds, "'But now that all the children are safely with your own people'--they're in Venice with the Wheaters--"'couldn't you let the oath take care of itself, and think a little of what's best for you?'" (60) Boyne's question reveals his true priority: Judith herself, not the children as a group.

Judith's response indicates both her better understanding of her situation and her sense of responsibility; while Martin sees life in terms of what he wants, Judith focuses on her commitment to others. Judith, aware of what she faces, resents any suggestion that she is merely precocious. When Boyne chastises her for hinting at her mother's interest in Gerald Ormerod, something "'silly'" for a girl "'your age'" to say, Judith retorts, "'What do you know about my age? I'm as old as your grandmother. I'm as old as the hills'" (61). Indeed, in terms of her experience of life, Judith is as far beyond Boyne's influence as is Rose.

The second key point at which Wharton portrays Martin's desire to form Judith is the scene in which he and the children play "Ambition" with the Princess Buondelmonte. When Judith writes that she would like to be "An exploarer," "something darted through Boyne like a whirr of wings" (296). Judith's ambition thrills Boyne because it seems to



suggest she is a kindred spirit. Judith could be someone to see the world with him, someone to follow him wherever his work takes him. Judith's ambition suggests a desire to be free of the children some day, after all. But by reminding the reader of Judith's lack of education with her spelling of "exploarer," Wharton suggests that, like an education, exploring anything that would take her away from the children is just a fantasy for Judith.

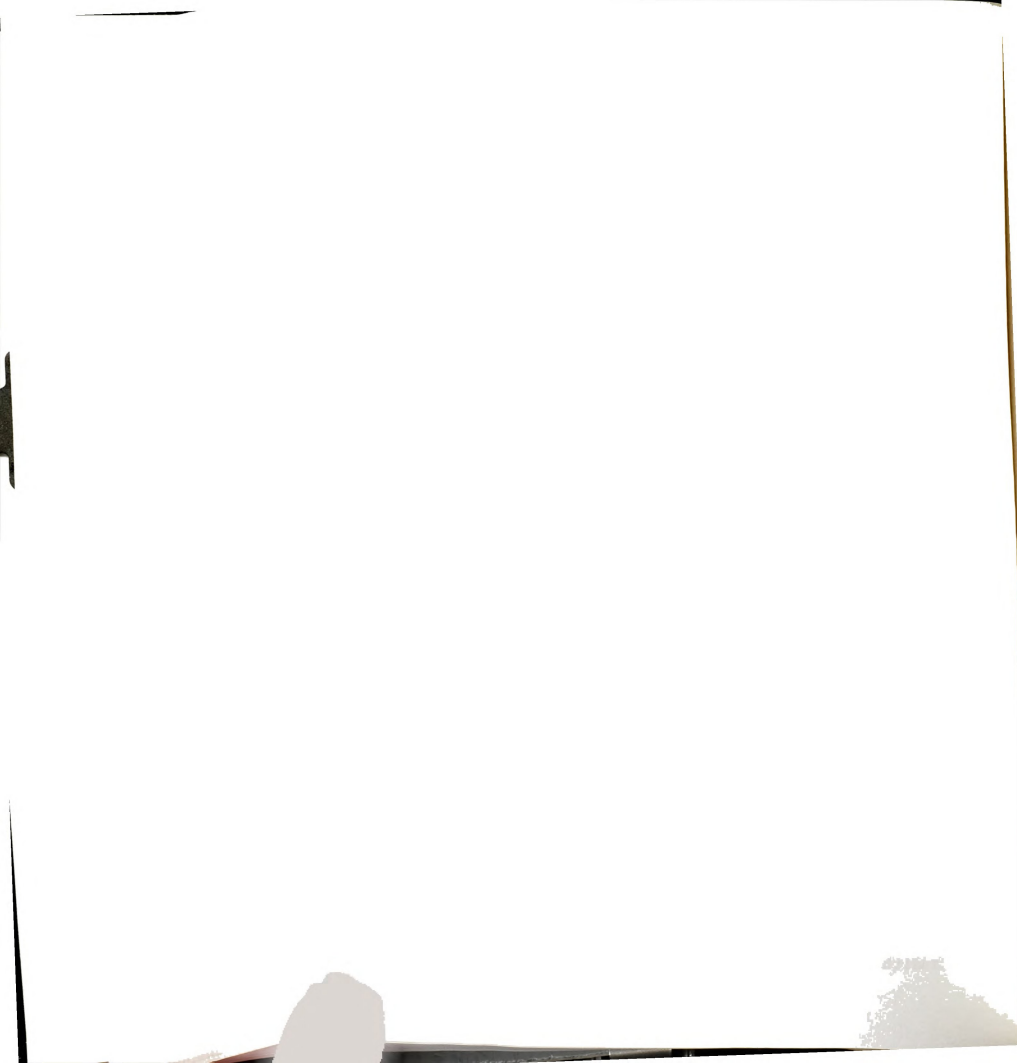
And Boyne's implied comparison with Rose is unfair; Boyne gives more credence to the dreams of a young girl playing a game than he does to the adaptability of his fiancée. So far as the reader can tell, Boyne has never asked Rose if she would travel with him, though both her active enjoyment of the outdoors and her preference for a quiet chalet away from the tourists' hotel suggest that Rose would be pleased with such a life (82-83). Before the game of *Ambition*, Boyne had thought, "Perhaps he could make Mrs. Sellars understand that...she must let him go off on these remote exciting expeditions which seemed the only cure for...the creeping grayness of age..." But he never asks Rose if she would allow him to travel, much less invites her to join him. He can imagine nothing beyond getting her "established" in New York, and "then--flight!" (240-41) That Boyne's motives for helping Judith are largely self-serving is further confirmed by his earlier reflection that "it was pleasant, for once, to play the god," when he realizes how easily he can assure Judith that everything



will be all right (187).

Although Boyne appears to find Judith more vibrant and real than Rose, he actually has trouble seeing Judith as real, too. "Whatever she was," Boyne thinks when he first sees her, "she was only intermittently, as if her body were the mere vehicle of her moods....As for her very self, when she's not with [the other children], you grope for her identity and find an instrument the wind plays on, a looking-glass that reflects the clouds, a queer little sensitive plate..." (36-37). Boyne makes numerous assumptions about Judith, despite his difficulty in "situating" her. But in reality, he knows very little about her. Martin's frequent glimpses of Judith's childlikeness only reinforce his romanticised view of her; she is enchanting because she remains largely child-like despite having the responsibilities of age. His first glimpse of Judith places her as a Madonna figure: "His attention had been drawn to a young woman--a slip of a girl, rather--with a round flushed baby on her shoulder, a baby much too heavy for her slender frame, but on whose sleepy countenance her own was bent with a gaze of solicitude which rung a murmur of admiration from Boyne" (3).¹⁰ Seeing Judith first in this pose with Chip, Boyne immediately views her as maternal and therefore sexual by implication, just as Rose is sexual by implication of the "disturbing" word widow. Yet his

¹⁰In "Wharton Questions Motherhood," Keiko Beppu says this scene "presents motherhood in caricature," as it places Judith, "'a slip of a girl'" as "an exemplary mother" (163).

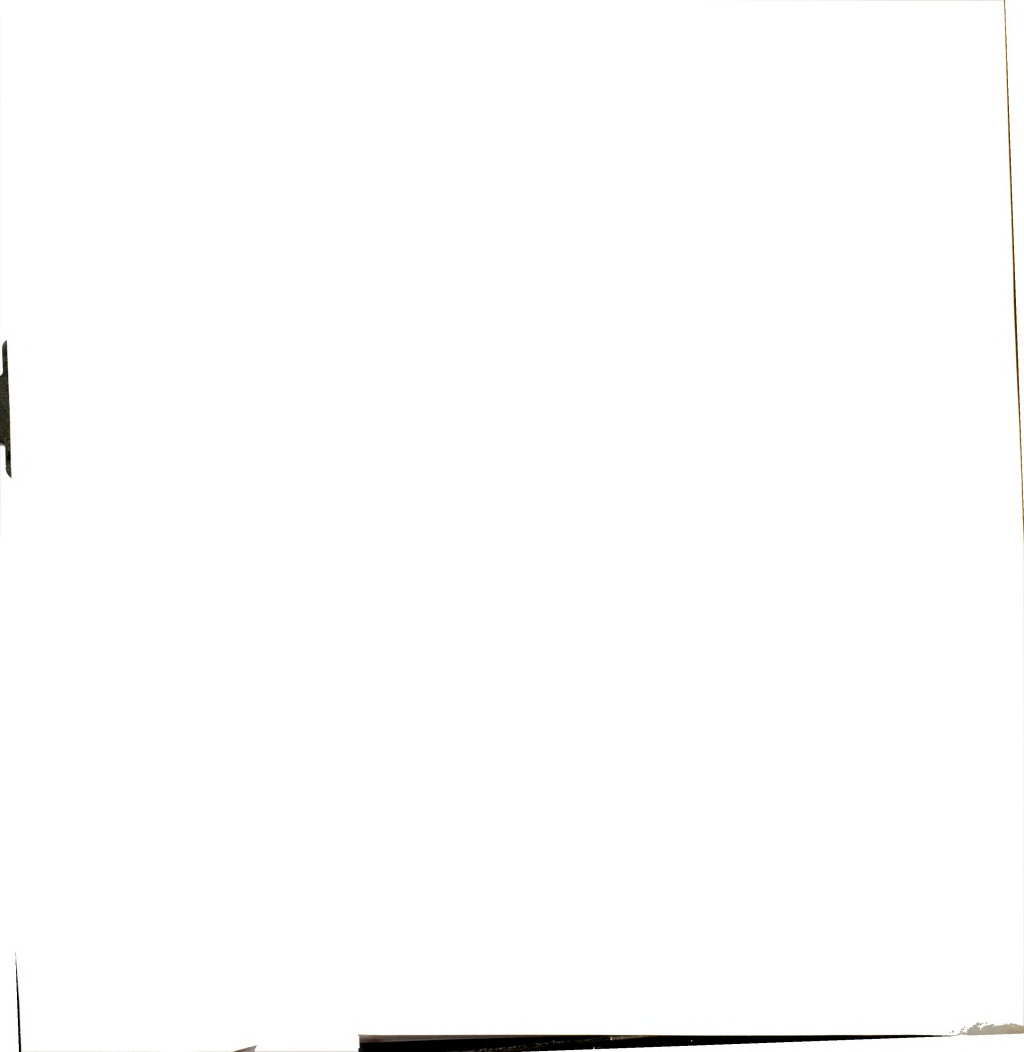


making this assumption about Judith, rather than initially assuming she is a sister or a governess (or simply not trying to categorize her at all), indicates Boyne's predisposition to be attracted to Judith as a woman, rather than as a child. His indignant remarks about the "damned cad" who could have married such a young girl mask his immediate response: "'Jove--if a fellow was younger!'" (3-4)

Throughout the novel, Judith remains oblivious to Boyne's vacillations between viewing her as a child and as an adult. She sees him strictly as a paternal figure, and assumes he views her as a child. She is thrilled for Boyne when he announces his engagement to Rose, though he expects her to be devastated (193). And she develops an elaborate plan for her and the other children to live in New York as tenants of Boyne and Rose because, she says, "'As long as you're with us I always feel safe'" (266).

But Judith's and Martin's different priorities are evident when he, now "freed" by Rose, tries to propose to her.¹¹ Having concluded that the children cannot be kept together and anticipating Judith's "heartbreak of separation" from them, Boyne thinks he can "ease" that pain by marrying Judith. That Boyne's proposal excludes their keeping the children together is evidenced by his failure to answer her when he says "'Perhaps after all there's a way,'"

¹¹Wharton had originally intended for Judith and Boyne to marry, and for Boyne to take in the rest of the children, as well (Wolff 381).



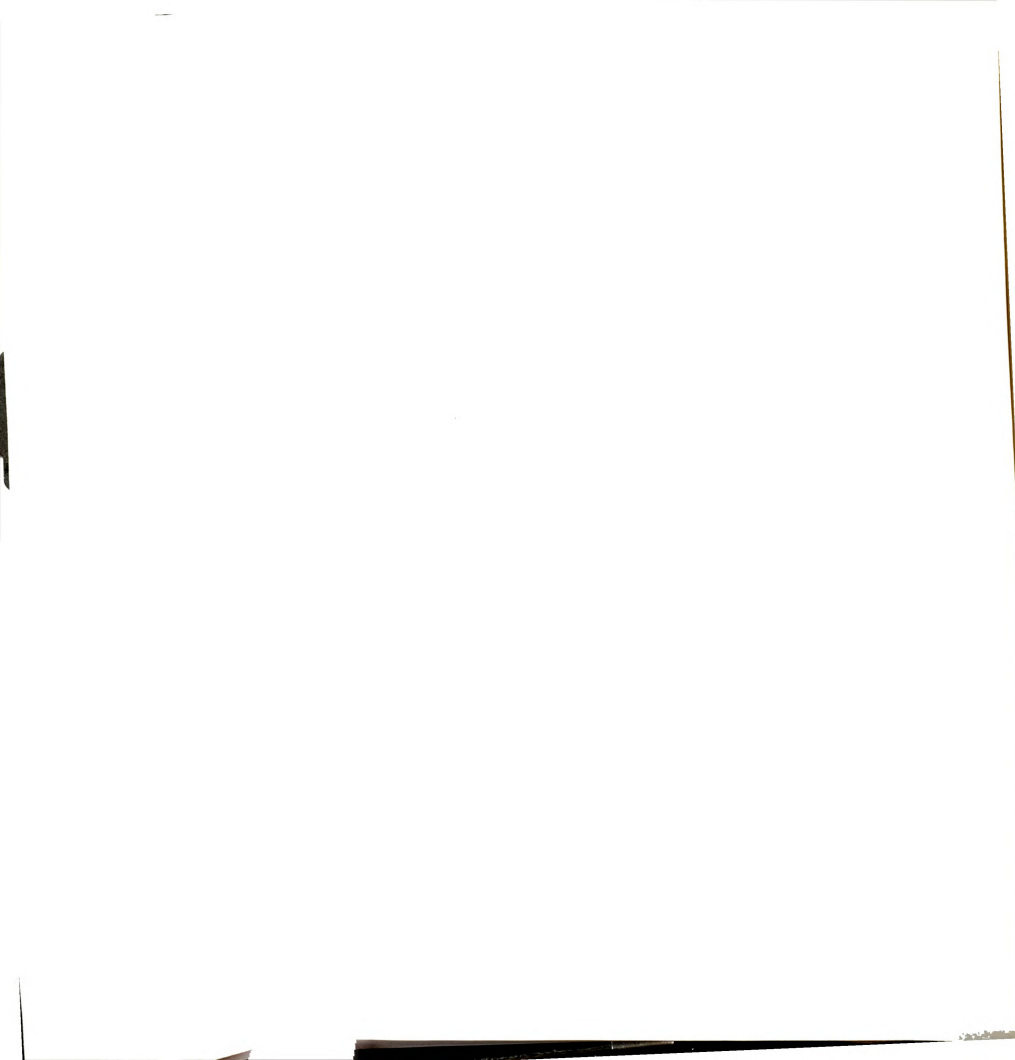
and Judith asks, "'a way of keeping us all together?'" (307-308) Upset by his silence, Judith says: "'Martin! You're not going to desert us too?'" He responds:

"Darling, I'll never desert you; I'll stay with you always if you'll have me; if things go wrong I'll always be there to look after you and defend you; no matter what happens, we'll never be separated any more...." (308)

But while Boyne is using "you" in the singular tense, her own perspective leads Judith to assume he is including all of the children and that he means to adopt them all.

That Boyne is not including the others is further confirmed by his next attempt at proposing marriage to Judith. Finding that she is understandably perplexed when he fails to clarify his meaning, Boyne decides to try again. "'If we can't prevent the children being taken away from you, you'll be awfully lonely,'" he says. "'If things went wrong, and you were very lonely, and a fellow asked you to marry him--'" "'Who asked me?'" she says. "He laughed again. 'If I did.'" Judith "joined him in his laugh" at what she considers a joke, but remains "disconsolate" at what must seem to her as Boyne's making light of her coming separation from the children (313-14).

Discussing this miscommunication between Martin and Judith, in "Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type," Judith Sensibar notes that Boyne "phrases his proposal in the same vocabulary he and Judith have used throughout to describe Martin's role as good surrogate father, the grown-up who will not desert the Wheeler children," so it is no wonder



Judith misconstrues his meaning. And as for Boyne's second proposal, "Because he is the parent, she the child, she looks to him for cues....Therefore when he laughs, she joins in" (584).

Having been made to feel that he is not, after all, "only as old as he feels" (307) by Judith's inability to take his proposal seriously, Boyne becomes obsessed with her.¹²

He was caught body and soul...and real loving was not the delicate distraction...he had imagined it when he thought himself in love with Rose Sellars; it was this perpetual obsession, this clinging nearness, this breaking on the rack of every bone, and tearing apart of every fibre. (323)

Boyne can allow himself to experience these strong feelings for Judith only now that the momentary "madness" of opening himself to commitment to her is safely over (307).

Conversely, his feeling for Rose--with whom he may still be able to salvage at least a friendship--is now limited to "pity" (323).

Martin's ego suffers an additional blow when he discovers that, just as he had overestimated Rose's need for him, he has overestimated his importance to Judith even as a father-figure. Judith genuinely needs help, but she readily transfers her confidence to Mr. Dobree as soon as it becomes practical to do so. Although Martin is dismayed by this

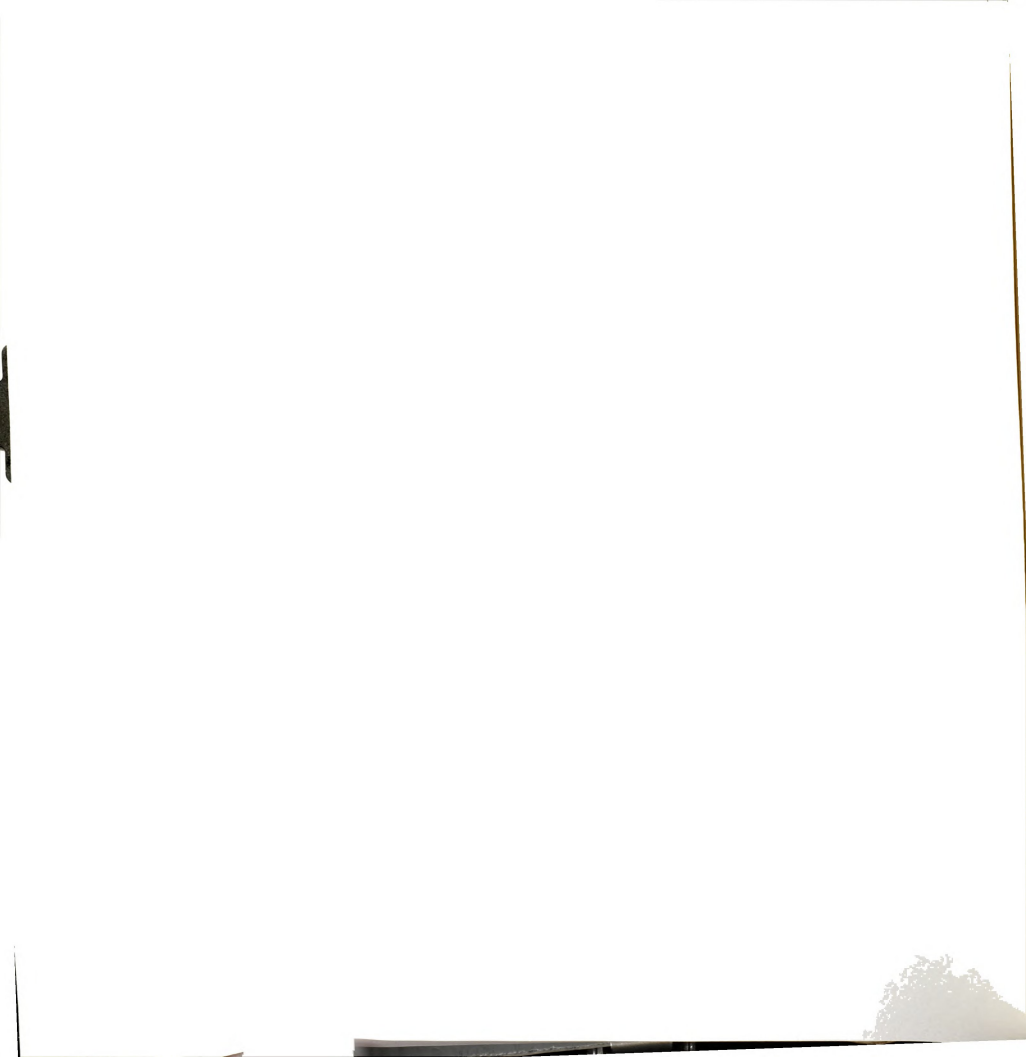
¹²As Sensibar says, "As long as he can continue to insist that Judith is a child and also continue to desire her, he succeeds in replicating the comfortable situation he had with Rose Sellars before her husband's death" (583).



turn of events, he should hardly be surprised, given how easily the children had latched onto him as a possible savior. In her desire to keep the children together, Judith has essentially looked for any port in the storm of her parents' squabbles. And since Boyne had established himself as having some influence with the Wheaters by convincing them to hire a tutor for Terry, Judith had thought he could help. That is why she brought the children to Cortina when the Wheaters started fighting again, and asked him to "'promise and swear to see us through'" (109-10). Later, when she learns that Dobree now has her mother's attention, Judith turns to him; "'he can make mother do whatever he tells her,'" she explains to Boyne (330).

Disillusioned at finding himself so easily replaced, Boyne promises Judith and the other children a visit to Versailles, and then flees to South America (332). He had "sat watching her with insatiable eyes" while she chattered on about Dobree, and had concluded that his relationship with Judith had been "A moment only." Boyne leaves without saying good-bye to her, because he prefers "The busy man's way of liquidating hopeless situations" (333). But his work--which now, ironically, he perceives as a "stiff harness"--does not make Boyne forget Judith, as the novel's denouement shows.

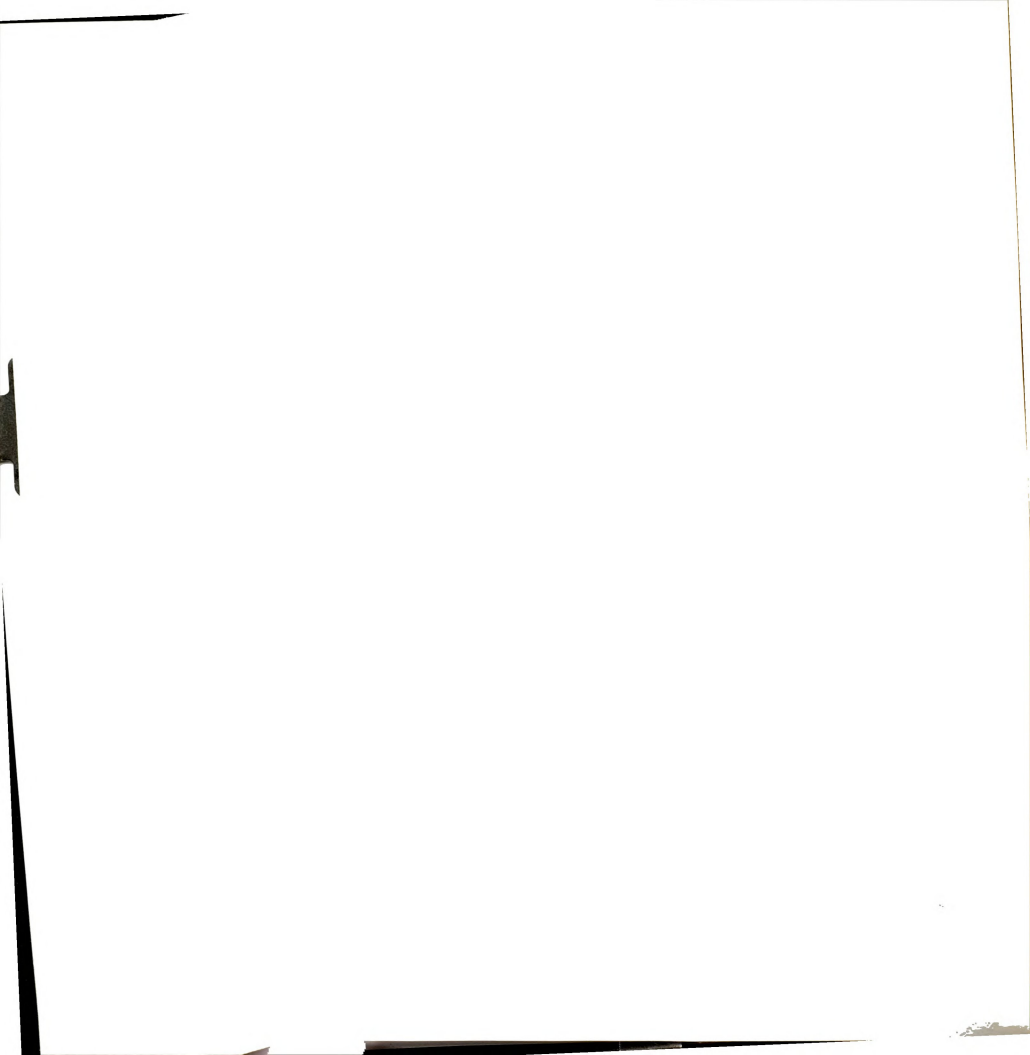
In the final chapter, Wharton adds an unexpected coda to Boyne's preference for Judith. Boyne discovers Zinnie at his hotel in Bordeaux, where he is taking a brief respite



before returning to work in Brazil. Zinnie tells him that Chip is dead. Although the narrative presents this fact with little comment, Wharton's meaning is clear; the promise of youth is not always fulfilled. Cliffe Wheater's preferring Chip to Terry, which had seemed to be just another instance of his parental shortcomings, parallels Boyne's preference for Judith over Rose; in both cases, the men had preferred the unrealized potential of youth to the reality of the more independent older person.¹³ The parallel is strengthened by Rose's affection for the intellectual Terry (134-35).

Boyne's not speaking with Judith at the end, preferring to speculate on the person she may now be, reflects his desire to continue viewing her in terms of her potential. Instead, he watches Judith "from without," through a window. The image recalls Boyne's early impression of Judith as a "looking glass", and by viewing Judith only through a pane of glass, Boyne can continue to remember her in terms of how she had "reflected" him. But such a stance toward another human being is fragile. Boyne can only guard his image of Judith from shattering into "fragments," as did his relationship with Rose, by avoiding contact with her. He had mistakenly hoped that the real Rose could live up to the standard of mental harmony he had achieved with his

¹³Ammons similarly notes, "Rose, the woman Boyne rejects, represents Judith Wheater grown-up....Boyne does not choose between two women but between two stages of development in woman, as he perceives her: the child and the grown-up" (Argument 175).



imaginary version of her. Rather than risking a similar mistake with Judith, Martin, like Newland Archer at the end of The Age of Innocence, never even enters the building. So while he voyeuristically registers every detail of her appearance with "a passionate attentiveness," he need never know whether "she was in love with the young man" she is with at the dance or "was still a child, pleased at her new dress, and half proud, half frightened in the waking consciousness of her beauty, and the power it exercised" (347). The very terms in which he thus speculates about her allow Boyne to go away with his image of Judith as both woman and child intact.



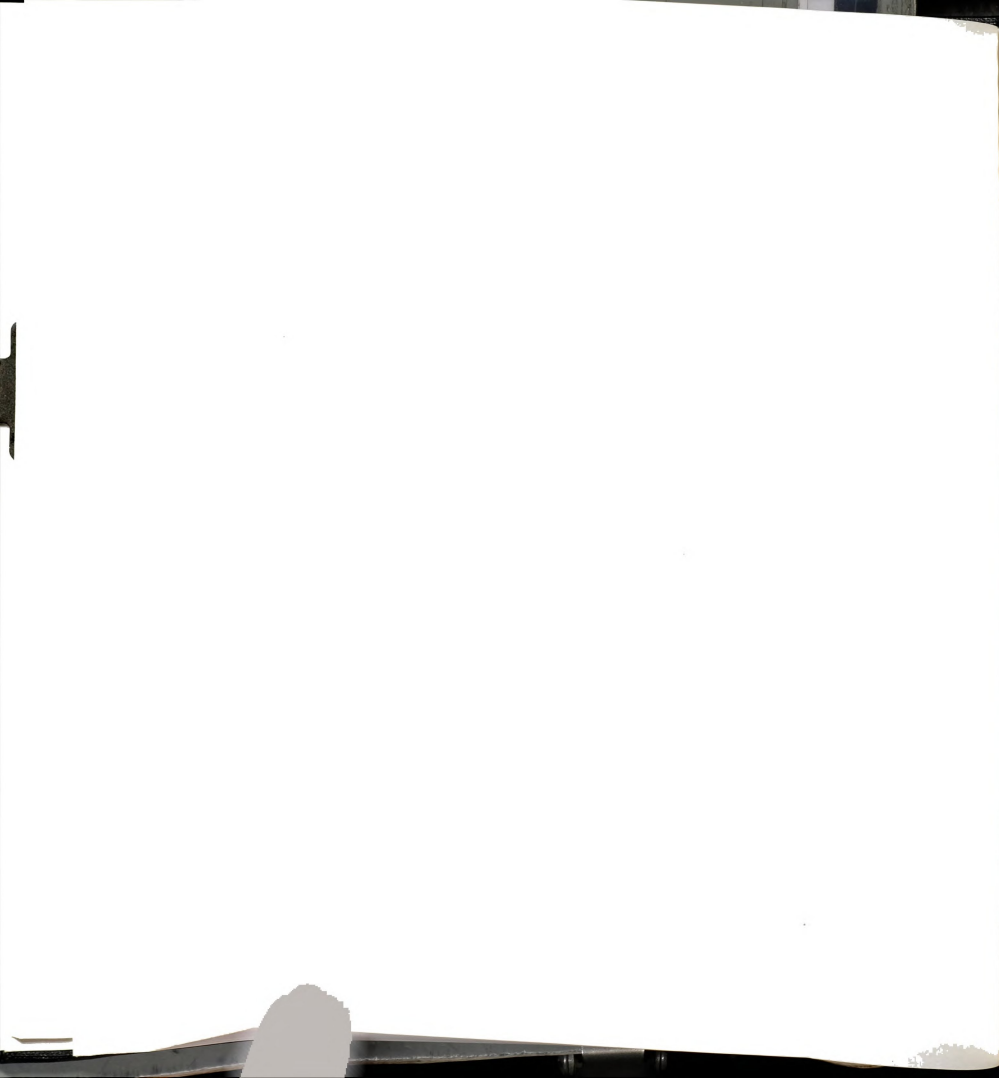
Conclusion

Summer and other Seasons

In writing each of the novels I have discussed, Wharton drew on her own experience in having had an affair with Morton Fullerton, the journalist with whom she was involved from about 1908 to 1910. The affair, as several critics have noted, was marked by Wharton's exuberant but troubled love for this man who, as she once complained, would sometimes "write to me like a lover, [and] treat me like a casual acquaintance!" (Colquitt 91)¹ As Wharton eventually discovered, she was one in a long string of lovers for Fullerton. Her women characters frequently experience their sexual awakenings as mixed blessings, as did Wharton herself; for characters from Charity Royall through Kate Clephane, Wharton shows sexual initiation to be an intense, invigorating experience, but one with a variety of negative repercussions.

In an undated letter to Fullerton, Wharton says she is afraid that "the treasures I long to unpack for you...are

¹In addition to Colquitt, see R.W.B. Lewis' and Nancy Lewis' "Introduction" to Wharton's Letters, 11-17; Wolff 192-98; and McDowell 24-26 for discussions of Wharton's affair with Fullerton. McDowell notes, "Like many female characters in her novels and stories, [Wharton] never found in one man the love that included physical, mental, and esthetic elements" (25).



only, to you, the old familiar red calico & beads of the clever trader, who has had dealings in every latitude,'" and that he will smile at these "treasures." Wharton continues:

"Well! And if you do? It's your loss, after all! And if you can't come into the room without my feeling all over me a ripple of flame, & if, wherever you touch me, a heart beats under your touch, & if, when you hold me, & I don't speak, it's because all the words in me seem to have become throbbing pulses, & all my thoughts are a great golden blur--why should I be afraid of your smiling at me, when I can turn the beads & calico back into such beauty--?" (Colquitt, 85)

Wharton's portrayals of sexual passion throughout her fiction clearly draw on this description. Her own feeling for Morton Fullerton is echoed in "the long flame" of passion consuming Charity Royall in Summer; in Anna Leath's vibrant awareness of George Darrow's presence in The Reef; and in Kate Clephane's juxtaposing herself onto the young lovers in The Mother's Recompense and feeling that she "burned with the heat of [Chris'] palm" as he touches Anne (221).

At the same time, Wharton's letter conveys her sense that her lover--with his "'dealings in every latitude'"--has had experiences far beyond her realm, and that she is an outsider to his world. Yet apparently even before becoming Fullerton's lover, Wharton had affirmed the value of her feeling for him, despite the pain she anticipated.

"I want you to know once for all what [my] feeling is--how grave & deep & tender--& how it has so illuminated my life & kindled my heart, that even now, with the certainty ahead of profound pain & a long, long abnegation, I give thanks, I rejoice, I



exult in it...." (Colquitt 84)²

Many of the concerns that permeate the novels I discuss are encapsulated in the short novel Wharton wrote during the First World War. Wharton's 1917 Summer shows the high price Charity Royall pays both for her sexual initiation and for her ignorance of her lover's story. Her sexual "freedom" is ultimately shown to have been far from liberating; pregnant and abandoned by her lover, Lucious Harney, Charity marries her guardian and remains in the village from which she had longed to escape. Summer illustrates the way in which Wharton uses untold stories as a narrative strategy to explore issues of sexual freedom and the sexual double standard. Charity's ignorance of her lover's life when he is away from her remote village has disastrous consequences. Wharton makes the importance of Lucious' untold story apparent in the scene in which the pregnant Charity sees him with Annabel Balch--to whom, it turns out, he is engaged--and Charity realizes: "Behind the frail screen of her lover's caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life..." Charity is filled with "a terror of the unknown, of all the mysterious attractions that must even now be dragging him away from her, and of her own powerlessness to contend with them" (198).

Wharton's women's stories tend to remain untold because they are not "narratable" according to early twentieth-

²Colquitt believes this letter, dated March 31, was written in 1908, and that "within days" of writing it, Wharton became Fullerton's lover (84).



century social conventions; Wharton ultimately removed Ellen Olenska from the ostensible narrative center of The Age of Innocence, and she has Kate's and Chris' affair occur outside the narrative present of The Mother's Recompense. In contrast, Wharton tends to leave the stories of men's sexual liaisons untold both because these stories are predictable to the reader and because, by showing her women characters' ignorance of such stories, Wharton underscores that these women are outsiders to the male world. Until she realizes that George Darrow has had an affair with Sophy Viner, it never occurs to Anna Leath that her husband may also have had affairs. Even the manipulative Undine Spragg must learn from someone else that her husband Raymond's frequent business trips are really a cover for his visits to his mistress.

Throughout her fictions, Wharton also continues to write variations on the incestuous element inherent in Charity Royall's marrying the man who has raised her. Wharton's interest in the incest motif was doubtless piqued by her knowledge of Katherine Fullerton. This young cousin of Morton's, who his parents had adopted, grew up thinking she was his sister. Once she learned that she was Morton's cousin, Katherine "made known her feelings to him," and they became engaged--and remained engaged, throughout Fullerton's affair with Wharton. The fact that Katherine was fourteen years younger than Morton increased the seeming



incestuousness of their relationship.³ Similarly, Wharton's male characters' preferences for younger women (and Kate Clephane's preference for a younger man) expand on the incest motif Wharton explored in Summer. George Darrow has an affair with a woman who then becomes engaged to George's fiancée's step-son. Martin Boyne longs to "possess" Judith Wheeler, despite his repeated attempts to remind himself that she is a child, and despite the fact that she envisions herself as a daughter to him and Rose.⁴

Finding themselves involved in relational triangles, Wharton's characters tend to respond to each other as rivals. Much of this rivalry occurs between parents and children; Undine Spragg views her son as a rival for the things she wants, while Kate Clephane comes to see her daughter Anne as a sexual rival who is usurping her place as Chris Fenno's lover. At the same time, Kate considers Chris a rival for the affection of her daughter, with whom Kate fancies she has "the one tie unmarred by dissimulation and distrust" (69).

In The Children Wharton plays on the pattern of parent-child rivalry by having Martin Boyne see his young charge, Judith, as a rival with his fiancée, Rose. He expects Judith

³This and other entanglements of Morton Fullerton's are discussed in Colquitt 89-91. See also Wolff 198-202.

⁴Elizabeth Ammons discusses the way in which the relationship "between Judith and her would-be paternal guardian Boyne, who would also like to be Judith's husband and lover, reiterates the symbolic paradigm of patriarchal incest first developed in Summer" (Argument 182).



to be devastated by the news that he is engaged to Rose, and he is relieved that her knowing he's engaged "would do away with no end of hedging and prevaricating." Martin even admits to himself that "he was perhaps disappointed by Judith's prompt congratulations" on his engagement (193-95). Likewise, Martin sees the elderly Mr. Dobree looking at Judith, assumes he is interested in her, and is then incredulous to learn that Dobree has proposed to Rose. And The Reef's rivalry (as Anna sees it) between Anna Leath and Sophy Viner for the love of George Darrow is complicated by the fact that Anna was about to become Sophy's mother-in-law.⁵

Even aside from any incestuous ramifications, Wharton shows that indulging one's passion can be costly. In The Reef, Anna Leath is so overcome by her passion for George Darrow that she feels a "morbid terror" at letting him out of her sight, even though she realizes she cannot marry him. For The Age of Innocence's Ellen Olenska, even the hint of a scandal makes it impossible to become "a complete American again." Although Kate Clephane in The Mother's Recompense feels that "Life still dated for her" from the day she met Chris, that is "in spite of his having inflicted on her the bitterest pain she had ever suffered," and in spite of Kate's having felt that their affair had "stained" and

⁵Wharton's 1911 Ethan Frome also draws on a symbolic parent-child rivalry, as Ethan becomes interested in his wife Zeena's young cousin Mattie Silver, and imagines beginning life anew with her. In Ethan Frome, however, Wharton develops the women characters very little.



"defiled" her years of atonement for leaving her husband and child (15).

While Wharton's women characters struggle with intense sexual passion and with their attempts to make sense of their lives, Wharton's male characters tend to view these women as static and unchanging. This tendency is symbolized by the way in which these men often imagine women as works of art. George Darrow notes the "quality of reticence" in Anna's beauty and compares her to "a fine portrait kept down to a few tones, or a Greek vase on which the play of light is the only pattern" (Reef 122). She is "like a picture so hung that it can be seen only at a certain angle: an angle known to no one but its possessor. the thought flattered his sense of possessorship..." (125, Wharton's ellipsis). These quotes further reveal that George views Anna solely in terms of his relationship with her; he is the "light" which can provide a "pattern" to her otherwise "closed and curtained" existence, and he imagines that he alone can really "see" or understand Anna. Ironically, as is the case with Newland Archer's perception of May in The Age of Innocence, George understands very little about Anna.

Like George, Martin Boyne compares his feeling for "Mrs. Sellars" to "something apart, like a beautiful picture on the wall of a quiet room" and hopes that interacting with the real Rose will not force him to modify this view of her (Children 226). At the end of The Children, Martin similarly records the details of Judith's appearance as



though she were a portrait or a tableau vivant, as the men do of Lily Bart in the tableau vivant scene in The House of Mirth. In each of these cases, the men's perceptions are contradicted by the ways in which the narrative presents the woman in question. Anna is alive, albeit painfully so, with questions about her relationship with George; Lily has far more integrity than Lawrence Selden gives her credit for; and Rose and Judith are both vibrant and, ultimately, independent of Martin.

While these male characters tend to damn women as unchangeable--usually because the women fail to bend to fit them--the men ultimately show the least ability to grow. Ralph Marvell's inability to change his picture of Undine and move beyond their relationship, in The Custom of the Country, is ultimately fatal; Martin Boyne rejects the love of the woman he had fantasized about for years, in favor of a return to the frontier; and Newland Archer refuses to acknowledge May's complexity, beyond realizing her role in separating him and Ellen. Even The Custom of the Country's Elmer Moffatt remains vulgar and loud, despite the genuine love of art he has cultivated.

These men also persistently fail to act at critical moments. Distraught that Undine is divorcing him, and complying with his family's desire to avoid publicity, Ralph unthinkingly agrees to a settlement that gives Undine sole



custody of their son Paul.⁶ Later, Ralph passively trusts Elmer Moffatt with the details of the business transaction which he hopes will enable him to buy Paul back. Newland Archer refuses to see Ellen Olenska at the end of The Age of Innocence. And, as Judith Saunders says of The Children, Martin Boyne is a "perpetual voyeur" who "merely watches his women, while claiming to seek 'adventure' and to long for love" (578).

Because these men are resistant to change, as they grow older, they continually sabotage their chances to realize the dreams of their youth. George has a "fling" while enroute to Anna; Newland prefers to maintain his vision of Ellen rather than to see her; and Martin uses his "pledge" to help the children as a way to avoid committing himself to Rose. Like nineteenth-century romance heroines, Wharton's men may quest, but they seldom change.⁷ In The Mother's Recompense, Wharton reverses this tendency by creating a woman character who assumes that others do not change, while in fact she is static. Despite much narrative evidence to the contrary, Kate Clephane assumes Chris Fenno has not changed in the years since they were lovers. Conversely, Fred Landers, unlike the typical male character in Wharton's

⁶Wolff also notes "Ralph's fundamental passivity"; "Even the most important transaction in Ralph's life is contaminated by this deadly lassitude. The details of the separation, where the interests of his son most intimately concern him, slip unnoticed through his limp fingers" (Feast of Words 238-39).

⁷See McNall's discussion of nineteenth-century romance heroines and their inability to change (Intruder 9).

fiction, seizes his opportunity to realize his dream: marriage to Kate. Fred is still willing to marry Kate, even after she tells him about her affair with Chris, and he continues to pursue Kate even after she flees to the Riviera.

One trait that nearly all Wharton characters share, regardless of gender, is their failure to articulate themselves clearly to one another. Just as Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden fail to find "the word which made all clear" in The House of Mirth (342), so many other Wharton characters suffer for their inarticulateness. Wharton contrasts Anna Leath's inability to speak about her feelings to George, in The Reef, with George's deliberate use of language as a diplomatic tool. In The Children, Martin Boyne's ambivalence about his engagement to Rose Sellars is symbolized by his inability to articulate his feelings about her to Judith. "'Mrs. Sellars is the most perfect, the most exquisite....' He broke off, feeling that such asseverations led nowhere in particular..." He tries again, telling Judith, "'Being with somebody like her is so exactly what...'" But, as the narrator says, "This, again, seemed to land him in a sort of rhetorical blind alley" (194). Similarly, Boyne's failure to make his meaning clear when he proposes marriage to Judith prevents her from understanding, much less accepting, that proposal--although Wharton had



originally intended for Martin and Judith to marry.²

When in The Mother's Recompense the Reverend Arklow counsels Kate Clephane that she can avoid telling Anne about her affair with Chris, if she "could be sure of never betraying herself in the future," Kate wonders, "where should she find the courage to conform" to this advice (215). In fact, Kate has neither the courage to speak nor to keep silent; she cannot force herself to reveal her secret to Anne, and, since she cannot bear the thought of remaining forever silent, she tries to rely on Chris to solve her problem by leaving Anne. Her efforts to make Chris leave also epitomize Kate's inability to speak. When Chris informs her that his pledge to stay away from Anne is broken because Kate has "insinuated" things about him, Kate recalls an earlier time when she felt "the same sense of her inability to move him, even to reach him" (175-76).

Perhaps the most compelling example of inarticulateness in Wharton's fiction is the long passage in The Age of Innocence in which the narrator explicates Newland's and May's few words regarding a "business" trip Newland has

²Wolff discusses Wharton's outline of The Children, in which Boyne marries Judith and takes in the rest of the children. As the outline says, "'He sees the folly of the marriage, and yet is so frightened by her loneliness...that...Boyne marries [Judith]--but as if he was taking a little sister home'" (Feast of Words 381). The plan is very similar to Summer in this respect. Wolff notes that this ending "makes concessions...to the older generation's fantasy of rejuvenation through a sexual union with youth" and speculates that the death of Wharton's close friend Walter Berry in October 1927 caused her to change the ending to the final "one of renunciation and bleak resignation" (382).

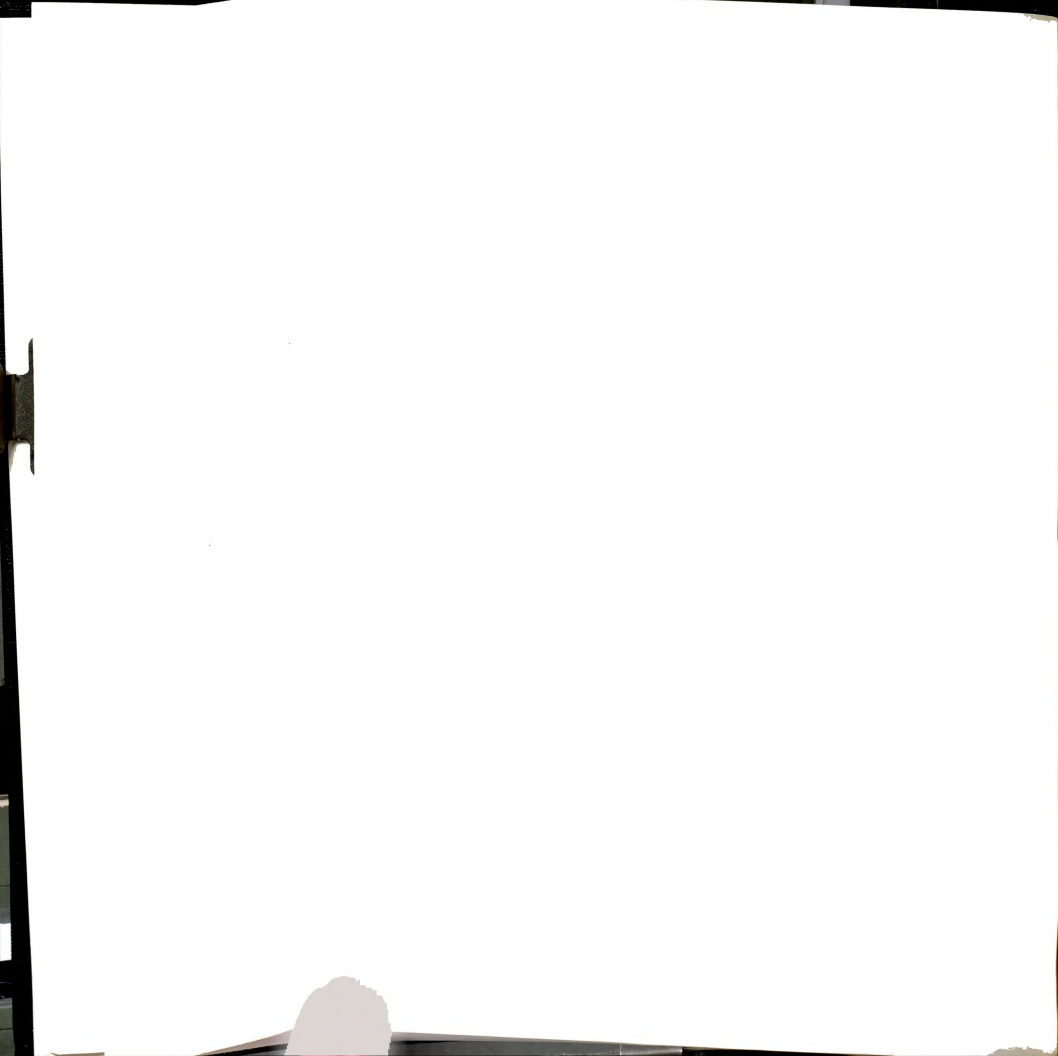


planned. "I may have to go to Washington for a few days" he tells May. She responds, "The change will do you good....and you must be sure to go and see Ellen." The narrator comments, "It was the only word that passed between them on the subject; but in the code in which they had both been trained, it meant..." A long paragraph, presumably of May's thoughts, follows, concluding with:

"I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that, since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval--and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to."
(266)

Wharton shows that such "mute message[s]" are the nearest recourse to communication in what their son Dallas later calls the "deaf-and-dumb asylum" of Newland's and May's life together. Newland himself recognizes at the end of The Age of Innocence that his has been an "inarticulate lifetime" (267, 356).

The pervasive failure of her characters to speak clearly to one another at critical moments complements Wharton's use of untold stories throughout her fiction. Whatever Wharton may lead the reader to infer about the stories of characters such as Ellen Olenska, Sophy Viner, and Anne Clephane, Wharton's narratives illustrate the high cost of her characters' failing to tell the "stories" of their lives and needs to one another--or to themselves.



BIBLIOGRAPHY



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguilar, Grace. The Mother's Recompense. New York: Appleton, 1864.
- Ammons, Elizabeth. "Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art." American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism. Ed. Fritz Fleischmann. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 209-24.
- . Edith Wharton's Argument with America. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980.
- Auchincloss, Louis. Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time. New York: Viking, 1971.
- Bailey, James R. "Wharton's Water Sprite in The Custom of the Country." Sess. titled "Structural Strategies: The Art of Wharton." Wharton conference. Lenox, MA. 9 June 1987.
- Bauer, Dale M. Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community. Albany: State U of New York P, 1988.
- Baym, Nina. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors." American Quarterly. 33.2 (1981): 123-39.
- Beppu, Keiko. "Wharton Questions Motherhood." Leon Edel and Literary Art. Ed. Lyall H. Powers. Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I., 1988. 161-69.
- Blum, Virginia L. "Edith Wharton's Erotic Other-World." Literature and Psychology. 33.1 (1987): 12-29.
- Caserio, Robert L. "Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Public Commentary." Western Humanities Review 40.3: 189-208.
- Chodorow, Nancy. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.
- Collins, Alexandra. "The Noyade of Marriage in Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country." English Studies in Canada 9.2 (1983): 197-212.



- Colquitt, Clare. "Unpacking Her Treasures: Edith Wharton's 'Mysterious Correspondence' with Morton Fullerton." Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin 31 (1985): 73-107.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia. "The Power of Pretense: Images of Women as Actresses and Masqueraders in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction." Studies in American Fiction 11.2 (1983): 217-31.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1985.
- Fryer, Judith. Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986.
- . "Purity and Power in The Age of Innocence." American Literary Realism. 17.2 (1984): 153-68.
- Gibson, Mary Ellis. "Edith Wharton and the Ethnography of Old New York." Studies in American Fiction 13 (1985): 57-69.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. "Life's Empty Pack: Notes toward a Literary Daughteronomy." Critical Inquiry. 11 (March 1985): 355-84.
- Gimbel, Wendy. Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival. Landmark Dissertations in Women's Studies Series. Ed. Annette Baxter. New York: Praeger, 1984.
- Goodwyn, Janet. Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters. London: Macmillan, 1990.
- Howe, Irving. "Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton." Edith Wharton: a Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Irving Howe. Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 1-18.
- Jessup, Josephine Lurie. The Faith of Our Feminists: A Study in the Novels of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather. 1950. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1965.
- Kaplan, Amy. The Social Construction of American Realism. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Kowaleski-Wallace, Beth. "The Reader as Misogynist in The Custom of the Country." Sess. titled "The Limited Vision." Wharton Conference, 9 June 1987.

- Lawson, Richard H. Edith Wharton. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977.
- Lewis, R.W.B. Edith Wharton: A Biography. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Lindberg, Gary H. Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners. Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1975.
- Maynard, Moira. "Moral Integrity in The Reef: Justice to Anna Leath." College Literature Edith Wharton Issue 14.3 (1987): 285-95.
- McDowell, Margaret B. Edith Wharton. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1976.
- McNall, Sally Allen. Who is in the House? A Psychological Study of Two Centuries of Women's Fiction in America, 1795 to the Present. New York: Elsevier, 1981.
- Morrow, Nancy. "Games and Conflict in Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country." American Literary Realism 17 (1984): 32-39.
- Nevius, Blake. Edith Wharton. Berkeley: U of California P, 1953.
- Oxford English Dictionary. New York: Oxford U P, 1989. 2nd ed.
- Price, Alan. "The Composition of Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence." The Yale University Library Gazette. 55 (1981): 22-30.
- Raphael, Lev. "Shame in Edith Wharton's The Mother's Recompense." American Imago. 45.2 (1988): 187-203.
- Saunders, Judith. "The Dynamics of Futility: Repetitive Action in Wharton's Plots." Sess. titled "Structural Strategies." Wharton Conference.
- Schriber, Mary Suzanne. "Convention in the Fiction of Edith Wharton." Studies in American Fiction 11.2 (1983): 189-201.
- . Gender and the Writer's Imagination: From Cooper to Wharton. Lexington: U P of Kentucky, 1987.
- Sensibar, Judith L. "Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type: Her Critique of Modernism's Representative Man." American Literature. 60.4 (December 1988): 575-90.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The World Outside." The Female Imagination. Alfred A. Knopf, 1975. 227-75.

- Stein, Allen F. After the Vows were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism. Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1984.
- Tintner, Adeline. "Mothers, Daughters, and Incest in the Late Novels of Edith Wharton." The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature. Ed. Davidson, Cathy N., and E.M. Broner. New York: Ungar, 1980. 147-56.
- Tuttleton, James W. "Mocking Fate: Romantic Idealism in Edith Wharton's The Reef." Studies in the Novel 19.4 (1987): 459-74.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. The House of Mirth: A Novel of Admonition. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Walton, Geoffrey. Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 1970.
- Wershoven, Carol. The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 1982.
- Wharton, Edith. The Age of Innocence. 1920. New York: Scribner's, 1948.
- . The Children. New York: Appleton, 1928.
- . The Custom of the Country. 1913. New York: Scribner's, 1941.
- . Ethan Frome. 1911. New York: MacMillan, 1986.
- . The House of Mirth. 1905. New York: New American Library, 1964.
- . The Letters of Edith Wharton. Ed. Lewis, R.W.B., and Nancy Lewis. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- . The Mother's Recompense. 1925. New York: Scribner's, 1986.
- . The Reef. 1912. New York: Scribner's, 1965. rep. Macmillan, 1987.
- . Summer. 1917. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Williams, Merryn. "Edith Wharton." Six Women Novelists. London: Macmillan, 1987. 20-41.



Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Behind the Lines: The Search for the Absent Sign in The Mother's Recompense." Wharton Panel. Women's Studies Conference, Michigan State University. 12 April 1990

----. A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton. New York: Oxford U P, 1977.

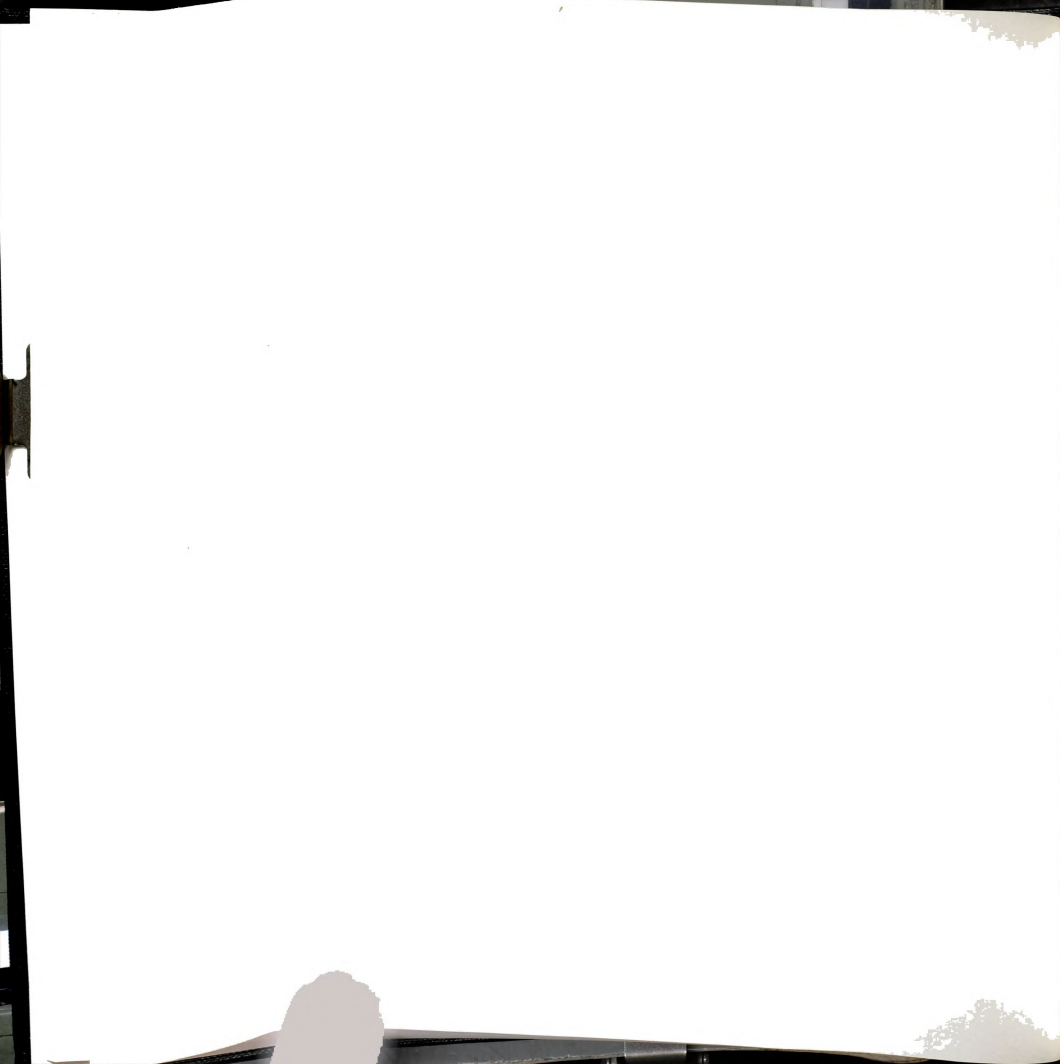
Wolstenholme, Susan. "Edith Wharton's Gibson Girl: The Virgin, the Undine, and the Dynamo." American Literary Realism 18.1-2 (1984): 92-106.

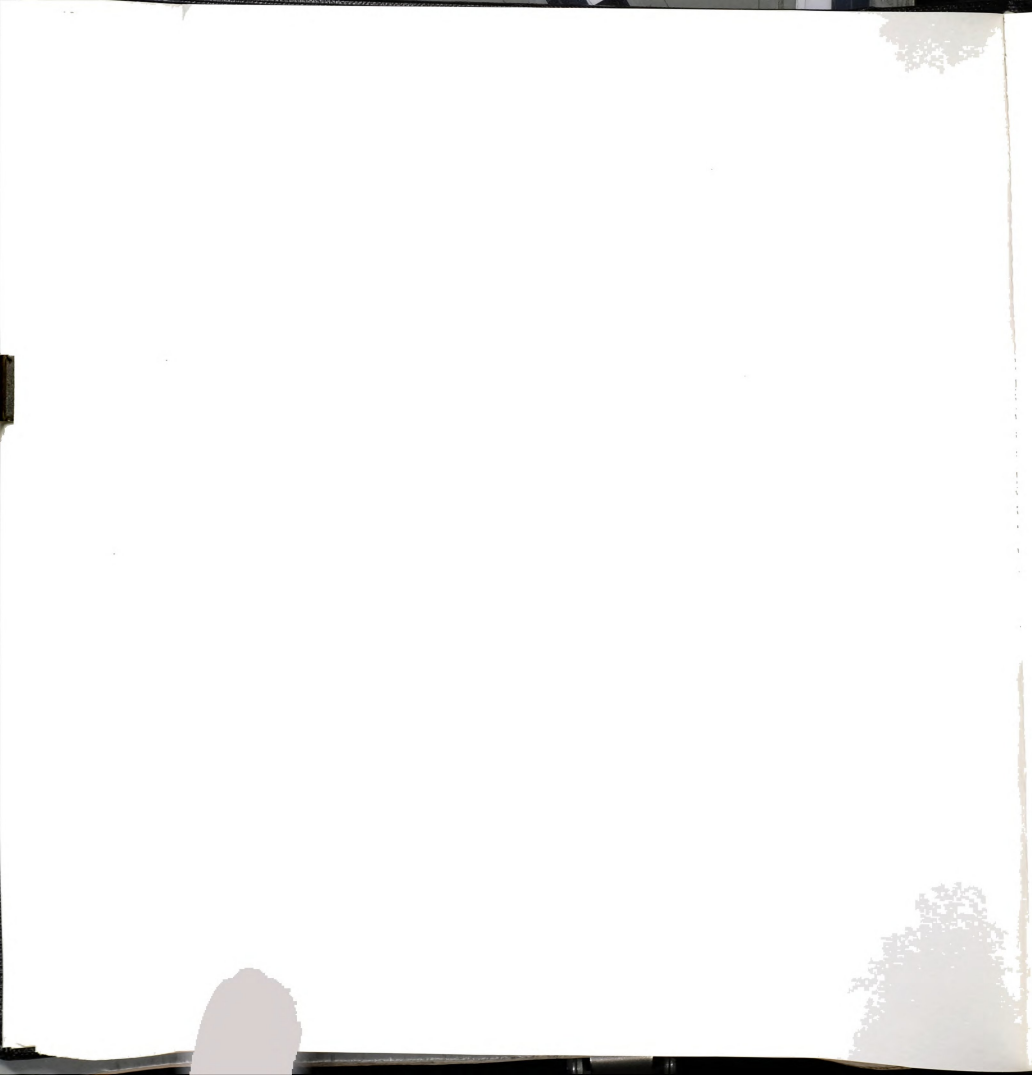
Zilversmit, Annette. "'All Souls': Wharton's Last Haunted House and New Directions for Criticism." Closing speech. Wharton Conference, 10 June 1987.



General References

- Auchincloss, Louis. Edith Wharton. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1961.
- Candido, Joseph. "Edith Wharton's Final Alterations of The Age of Innocence." Studies in American Fiction 6:21-31.
- Dessner, Lawrence Jay. "Edith Wharton and the Problem of Form." Ball State University Forum 24.3 (1983): 54-63.
- Donovan, Josephine. After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow. University Park: Pennsylvania State U P, 1989.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. "Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved." No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 2: Sexchanges. New Haven: Yale U P, 1989. 123-68.
- Kellogg, Grace. The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work. New York: Appleton-Century, 1965.
- O'Neal, Michael J. "Point of View and Narrative Technique in the Fiction of Edith Wharton." Style 17.2 (1983): 270-89.
- Singley, Carol J. "The Depth of the Soul: Faith, Desire, and Despair in Edith Wharton's Fiction." Diss. Brown U, 1986.
- Vita-Finzi, Penelope. Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction. London: Pinter, 1990.
- Wharton, Edith. A Backward Glance. New York: Scribner's, 1934. rep. 1985.





MICHIGAN STATE UNIV. LIBRARIES



31293009173620