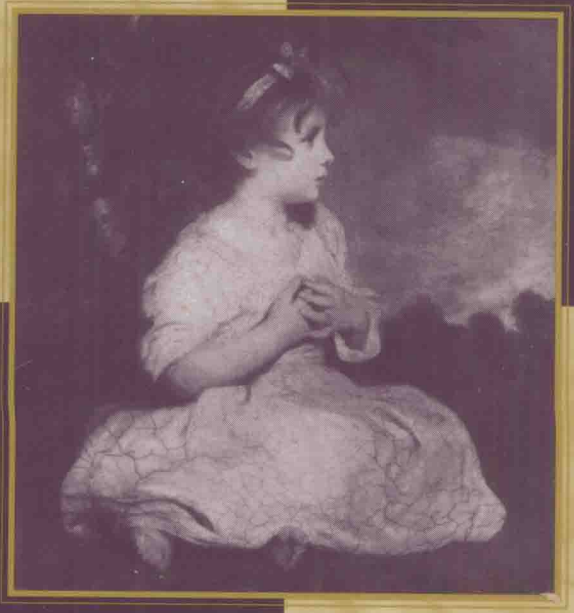
HELEN KILLORAN

EDITH WHARTON



ART AND ALLUSION

EDITH WHARTON

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Helen Killoran

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The picture on the frontispiece shows Edith Wharton in April 1923 as she was being awarded an honorary doctorate by Yale University. AP/ Wide World Photos.

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Preface

THIS BOOK CLAIMS that Edith Wharton's techniques of literary allusion are in large part new and meaningful, its writing having been preceded by a thorough study of known techniques of literary allusion. Possibly the best source for a quick survey is Alex Preminger, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). Allusion studies reached a peak in the mid-1970s, fortified by a thorough compilation of works by Carmela Perri. (See Bibliography.) Thereafter interest lagged, although a few books have since appeared, among them David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Beverly Schlock, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf and the Use of Literary Allusion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979); Edwin Stein, *Wordsworth's Art of Allusion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); and Michael Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1979). In addition, there exist two well-known theoretical studies, Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and John Hollander's *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

A fault in some (but certainly not all) of the various studies is that terms for allusion, such as "subjunctive," "gnomic," "assimilative" or "paradigmatic," convey little information and create unnecessary difficulty. In an attempt to avoid this problem, I have used the most descriptive existing terms for familiar literary allusions and have tried, when inventing designations, to make them as self-explanatory as possible.

A second background source for this book was a study of Edith Wharton's reading and library. My master list of approximately three thousand titles came from direct references by Edith Wharton in her published and unpublished letters and other writing and from the occasionally inaccurate Maggs Brothers booksellers' list of the contents of her library. My information cannot be completely verified, however, for unfortunately the anonymous owner of Edith Wharton's library ignores scholars' requests for permission to examine the books.

Great help and moral support was provided by many friends and colleagues. While acknowledging their indispensability, I feel obliged to confine printed thanks to those who, at some point in the development of the book, read and commented on portions of it: Ross Posnock, Richard J. Dunn, and Mark Patterson of the University of Washington, Seattle; Adeline Tintner of New York City; Alan Price of Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton; Lawrence I. Berkove of Michigan State University, Dearborn; Clare Colquitt of San Diego State University; and Alan Gribben of Auburn University, Montgomery.

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Abbreviations

Standard editions of Wharton's works are indicated as follows:

AI	*The Age of Innocence*
BG	*A Backward Glance*
CC	*The Custom of the Country*
CH	*The Children*
EF	*Ethan Frome*
GS	*Ghosts*
HM	*The House of Mirth*
HRB	*Hudson River Bracketed*
GM	*The Glimpses of the Moon*
GA	*The Gods Arrive*
IB	*Italian Backgrounds*
MC	*In Morocco*
MR	*The Mother's Recompense*
RF	*The Reef*
SR	*Summer*
TW	*Twilight Sleep*
WF	*The Writing of Fiction*

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction
The Sphinx and the Furies

THIS BOOK DESCRIBES how Edith Wharton developed new types of literary allusion that she used as a code, or a cipher containing a message. The following chapters identify the allusions and consider the ways in which allusions to books and art reveal unexpected themes in Wharton's novels. I show how the novels' themes develop into a complex pattern and how that densely woven pattern unveils a personal mythology based on overarching allusions to Greek myths of the Sphinx, the Furies, and the dual-horned "horse," the Dilemma. This mythology in turn reveals personal concerns associated with experiences Edith Wharton preferred not to discuss openly. The messages derive from these concerns.

If Edith Wharton could, she might well react to this study as Nick Lansing of *The Glimpses of the Moon* responds to Susy Lansing's literary critical taste. He "consoled himself by remembering that *Wilhelm Meister* has survived many weighty volumes on aesthetics."[1] Although New Americanists frequently consider studies of literary aesthetics hopelessly unsophisticated in the intricacies of indeterminate discourse, in Edith Wharton's letters, in *A Backward Glance,* and in her novels, she insisted on her aesthetic sensitivity.[2] Aesthetics is a "classic" subject having roots in Aristotle. The topic interests me, and others, and like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister,* Edith Wharton's work will survive our curiosity.

After careful reading of the chapters describing Wharton's layered allusions, an expert who shares my interest in aesthetics suggested in the kindest way that I must be "much cleverer than Wharton," implying that since Wharton couldn't have accomplished such a massive undertaking, some of the ideas must be mine. I wish I could accept such extravagant credit. My formal training, though reputable, made me, like Lily Bart, a bit too much of a specialist—an "Americanist" with little background, as yet, in the vast riches of the continent, ancient and modern. Wharton would probably have said I am a model product of the progressive American education she so severely criticizes in *Hudson River Bracketed.*[3] The multitudes of books and paintings of which I had never heard until Edith Wharton taught me, like Vance Weston, to find a library, read the books, and examine the paintings, would fill a volume—as in fact it does: this one.

While working with Edith Wharton's allusions, I began to notice not only her unmarked, unattributed allusions, such as the phrase "backward glance"[4] taken from Whitman's memoirs for use as a title for her own but also, woven into her prose, what I came to call "one-word clues." These numerous "clues" might—indeed *should*—raise an alert reader's antennae to the possibility of less than rigorous scholarship. Yet formal logic underlies all my work. One premise is that words have meaning; another is that in literary art every word is important. Gradually, I've come to notice single words that are unusual in a novel's individual style, rhythm, and tone. An example of one I have not yet explained occurs in *Ethan Frome,*[5] a novel written in a plain style to reflect the limited vocabulary and educational simplicity of the New England people that it depicts. Suddenly, and just once, the author uses the word "ebullition" to describe Ethan Frome's reaction to Mattie (*EF* 141). The word is too sophisticated for Ethan. A second look shows that the word is spoken by the narrator, a well-educated engineer, but the vocabulary is lofty coming even from him. And what is the function of "astrolabe" in *The Mother's Recompense*?[6] Are these Edith Wharton's errors? Possibly. But so far I have found that such words usually indicate an "intraauthorial" allusion or a "thematic" allusion. The question becomes, for example: when the word "hamlet" occurs, referring to a small New England town in *Summer,*[7] should I suspect an allusion to Shakespeare? In my work on Edith Wharton the answer is "yes" until I can rule it out.

"Ebullition" and "astrolabe" remain in question, but in *The Age of Innocence,*[8] after finding a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe, a theme of live burial, and numerous associated words like "abyss" and "vortex," along with echoes of Gissing's novel *The Whirlpool,* the best explanation of the puzzle dictated that Wharton's unexpected use of the word "maelstrom" was—to adopt another Whartonian word—a "signpost," a one-word clue or allusion, in this case to Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Descent into the Maelstrom," in which the narrator and his ship are sucked into a whirlpool. While I have not paused in my arguments to explain every one-word clue, reasoning similar to that behind Poe lies behind all such single-word hints. The attempt is to follow the inductive and deductive methods of the author who once called herself the "high priestess of reason" and who claims in *A Backward Glance* that she raised herself on her brother's college text, "Coppée's Elements of Logic" (*BG* 71).

In a recent parody, John Hitt, in the persona of "Nicolitto Machiavelli," advises "Lorenzo the Insignificant" that "if you should write a book (you had better not), be sure that it is unreadable; otherwise you will be called 'brilliant' and forfeit all respect."[9] While there is not much chance that he is right, Edith Wharton risks clarity. I attempt to follow where she leads.

Among the many characteristics that make these allusions new is that they

require investigations into the *content* of allusions, not just into their names or designations. Long hours locating the sources of the allusions were followed by even longer periods spent poring over the books themselves, and I have tried to be led only by Edith Wharton's allusions in context. When doubts are possible, I introduce conditionals.

Perhaps the ultimate double twist of irony is that in Edith Wharton's "hieroglyphic world," the "real thing" *is* said and done (*AI* 45) but often goes unrecognized by the characters. The hieroglyphic world appears to allude subtly to Horace Walpole's *Hieroglyphic Tales,* six political satires in the genre of fables that focus on elaborate distortions of logic.[10] According to one such tale, "A New Arabian Nights Entertainment," "naturalists hold that all things are conceived in an egg"; therefore, "the goats of Hirgonqúu might be oviparous" (109). Ellen Olenska's comments on the archaeological fragments in the Cesnola collection contrast with Archer's vision of the "Arabian Night" marvels of future technology (*AI* 284). The second tale, "The King and His Three Daughters," reverberates to "The Three Princesses" in Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* (*AI* 146), the function of which I discuss in Chapter 4, on *The Age of Innocence.* Most of the tales describe children neglected or allowed too much license. In the third tale, "The Dice Box," which recalls the allusion to goddesses playing at dice in *The Reef,* a five-year-old princess is placed on a throne to rule as ruthlessly as Undine does in *The Custom of the Country* and to escape fate in the same type of "fury." Wharton appears to allude to the fourth tale, "The Peach in Brandy" in *The Mother's Recompense,* when Mrs. Minity's daughter in Bridgeport sends her "brandy-peaches" (*MR* 20, 265). In tale 5, "Mi Li: A Chinese Fairy Tale," Mi Li's tutor is deaf and dumb and therefore uses sign language "in recompence" [*sic*]. Tale 6, "A True Love Story," a fable that features a spoiled, neglected "child" who runs sexually wild like a dog while his mother gambles at bridge, recalls the image of Effie Leath "flying down one of the long alleys at the head of her pack."[11] Perhaps these apparent allusions represent only a string of coincidences, but the chances that they are random diminish with each new similarity.

The tale of "Mi Li" also includes a subtle allusion to Oedipus and the Sphinx: "He had been too well educated to put the question to his godmother, for he knew when she uttered an oracle, that it was with intention to perplex, not to inform; which has made people so fond of consulting all those who do not give an explicit answer, such as prophets, lawyers, and any body you meet on the road, who, if you ask the way, reply by desiring to know whence you came" (126).

Some readers may well feel that one or another phrase analyzed here as a literary allusion is a mere cliché. The first question to ask is whether the phrase was a cliché at the time it was written. Even if so, not to begin by assuming that even a cliché is present for a reason badly underestimates the quest

for technical perfection that irritated some of Edith Wharton's editors. My work indicates that Wharton did nothing casually and rarely made mistakes. Consider the possibility that in *A Backward Glance* she becomes Robin Goodfellow, Puck, intending to mislead hapless critics like night wanderers away from her secrets, partly from a need for privacy and partly from a tendency toward pure intellectual mischief. In that case, we do well to note her anecdote about the time she published a short story in French only to have Henry James admonish her witheringly: "I do congratulate you, my dear, on the way in which you've picked up every old worn-out literary phrase that's been lying about the streets of Paris for the last twenty years, and managed to pack them all into those few pages." He later added to a friend, "A very creditable episode in her career. *But she must never do it again*" (*BG* 183–84). The story in question is probably "Les Metteurs en Scène" ("The Stage Managers"), published in 1908 when Wharton was at the height of her allusive creativity, so her "worn-out phrases" may well deserve reexamination as literary allusions.[12]

Many clichés have their source in literature, such as "all's well that ends well" used in *The Mother's Recompense* (*MR* 266). An old joke comes to mind, the gag about the man who refused to read Shakespeare's plays because they are full of clichés. Wharton seems deliberately to have resorted to the appearance of using them in the course of simplifying the surface of her fiction. So whether a reader judges a particular novel a success or a failure, it is mistaken to assume that Wharton's late work, especially, is not literary art but simply the kind of slick magazine fiction in which clichés are common. Still, it *is* possible that Wharton accidentally included some clichés, that I have made unwarranted literary associations after the fact, or that Wharton made unconscious connections. Yet everything about her use of art and allusion seems so well organized that I can only present these ideas in a spirit of openness to the inquiry of others.

The thesis that nearly every allusion is intentional is based on the vast knowledge of books that made it possible for Wharton to become an aesthetic pioneer. She read prolifically and quickly on many subjects in English, French, German, and Italian. In three days in March 1906, for instance, she completed four volumes of history, each between four and five hundred pages long.[13] If Percy Lubbock can be trusted on the subject, she retained what she read.[14] She was not only well read but well educated in all facets of literature, literary criticism, travel, social and natural sciences, history, philosophy, and the fine arts, including painting, sculpture, and music, and applied arts, especially architecture, interior design, and landscape gardening.

Her knowledge of art was remarkable. Wharton constantly traveled Europe, and the purpose of much of her "motoring" was to study art and architecture.[15] Sometimes she traveled with the great but temperamental Italian Ren-

aissance art historian Bernard Berenson, with whom she enjoyed a thirty-year friendship. Like Henry James, in some of his letters Berenson complained that Edith dragged him through art museums all over Europe at a terrible pace. (Like James, Berenson was slow and methodical.)[16] Berenson would swear to his wife, Mary, that he would never venture on such a jaunt again, but he always did. Wharton's unrelenting grilling of "B.B." on painting and related subjects essentially shows her being chased by Furies of aesthetic interests that, according to *A Backward Glance,* began in childhood (*BG* 29).

In an early travel book, *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), Wharton describes discovering a mislabeled group of terra cotta figures of the Della Robbia school. She had photographs taken and sent them to a reputable academic who confirmed her attribution.[17] Her work constituted a genuine contribution to art historical scholarship. The lengthy list of allusions to artists and sculptors in her work also reflects her knowledge and reading in art history. In fact, half her library, some fifteen hundred titles on art and architecture, was lost when, after Wharton's heir, William R. Tyler, had stored them in London, they were destroyed in Hitler's blitz.[18]

The time and place at which Edith Wharton personally viewed a particular painting to which she alludes is mentioned here when possible, but on the basis of her travels and intellectual friendships with Berenson and other artists and art historians, and her constant, active scholarship, I suspect that while most of the time she had seen them in person, some of those now destroyed fifteen hundred volumes might have served her just as well.

Wharton's study of art and literature became the basis for original techniques of literary allusion, some of which function like symbols or flex like the elaborate "conceits" of seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. Most fascinating, they work together to form a code. Using the dilemma of contrasting demands by the Sphinx and the Furies as a centering theme, this book defines Wharton's techniques and discusses how literary allusions usually lead to fresh readings of ten novels. From the themes commonly highlighted, this study infers a social message and a human message.

At first I did not suspect what I am now beginning to believe, that Edith Wharton's writing can be studied not only as a continuing series but as a unit that follows a Balzacian plan formulated perhaps around 1898. If the idea of a lifelong plan had occurred to me initially, I would have omitted nothing. But every book must start and stop somewhere between two covers, so I have decided to examine only full-length, complete novels, beginning with Edith Wharton's first success, *The House of Mirth* (1905), and ending with her last complete work, *The Gods Arrive* (1932). (The only exceptions are *The Fruit of the Tree,* which I intended to study with the shorter "New England" novels, and *A Son at the Front,* which I mentally classed with the war writings.) In

their techniques, themes, and mythology, the novels contain the code to the "hieroglyphic world" at which *The Age of Innocence* hints and a mythological world mentioned in *A Backward Glance.*

When Edith was five or six years old, a certain Mr. Bedlow came to dine every Sunday evening. As a little girl, she says, "I was allowed to perch on his knee while he 'told me mythology'. . . . The domestic dramas of the Olympians roused all my creative energy. . . . I felt more at home with the gods and goddesses of Olympus who behaved so much like the ladies and gentlemen who came to dine . . . and about whom I was forever weaving stories of my own" (*BG* 33).

Wharton's Olympian story world includes, but certainly does not limit itself to, the tales behind the allusions to the Sphinx and the Furies that recur in these novels. A favorite character in Greek mythology was a monster called the Sphinx that had the body of a lion and the head of a woman. Incestuous offspring of the half-serpent Echidna and her dog-son, Orthus, she killed everyone who failed to answer her riddle. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* Oedipus encounters the Sphinx but answers her riddle correctly, so he escapes, though ironically his freedom results in fulfillment of the very Delphic prophecies he was attempting to flee: he kills his father and marries his mother.

Another character, Chronus (Time), wanted to murder his father, Uranus, but could not, since Uranus was immortal. Instead, Chronus castrated him. Uranus's testicular blood dripped onto the earth, where it conceived three daughters, goddesses known as the Eumenides or Furies, whose mission was to avenge familial crimes. (The Furies are sometimes loosely known as Fate, a practice I shall continue, although there are some differences in the background legends.) In Aeschylus's tragedy *The Eumenides* (part of the *Orestia* trilogy), Orestes was pursued by the Furies for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra. He sought protection and justice from the goddess Athena who, among other things, was the inventor of musical instruments, symbols for techniques of poetry and literature. In a trial before Athena, Orestes was vindicated and the Furies pacified.

In Greek legend, any character could be the prey of the Furies, but in Wharton's writing they tend to pursue artists or women (although George Darrow is caught by one in *The Reef*). Lily Bart found that "there were two selves in her, the one she had always known and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained. She had once picked up, in a house where she was staying, a translation of the *Eumenides,* and her imagination had been seized by the high terror of the scene where Orestes, in the cave of the oracle, finds his implacable huntresses asleep and snatches an hour's repose. Yes, the Furies might sometimes sleep, but they were there, always there. . . . " (Wharton's ellipses).[19] In *The Children,* the nanny, Miss Scope, confides to Martin Boyne that she fears to tell him more about the children's luck "for fear of the

Fates overhearing."[20] An interesting variation in *The Custom of the Country* is that rather than being pursued, Undine is the pursuer, a goddess before whose "storms of destructive fury" her timid parents cower (*CC* 357). In *Twilight Sleep* nineteen-year-old Nona feels she is a first aid station for her irresponsible parents: "Fate seemed to have put her, Nona, at the very point where all their lives intersected";[21] at this same point the Wyants and the Manfords misunderstand each other's social codes (*TW* 257, 258, 315). There, between the Fates and the codes, the territories of the Sphinx and the Furies meet. During one dark period for the author Vance Weston of *Hudson River Bracketed,* "old memories of pain fed their parasitic growth on new ones, and dead agonies woke and grew rosy when the Furies called. . . . " (*HRB* 400, Wharton's ellipses). Yet when he must write, he is in a "fury" to begin (*HRB* 409). Like his creator, he makes an art of pain, an idea at the core of Wharton's messages.

Occasionally Edith Wharton drops hints of mysteries symbolized by the Sphinx. In the introduction to *Ethan Frome* she remarks that most of the meaning is beneath the "granite outcroppings" (*EF* v). "The real stuff is way down, not on the surface," says Vance in *Hudson River Bracketed* (*HRB* 320). R. W. B. Lewis noticed Wharton's subterranean puzzle when he mentioned that in her "love diary," "Edith had taken to employing a private literary code—quotations from poetry and fiction—as a way of hinting to herself about her most private feelings."[22]

This code extends to the novels but is less evident in them because as time progressed, even as she was increasing the complexity of her allusive techniques, Wharton was making a conscious effort to simplify her prose. She wanted to keep it accessible to the general public. In "A Cycle of Reviewing" she remarks that years of writing experience "subdued my natural tendency to 'put things' pointedly, and I became conscious—and happily conscious—of having reduced my style to a more even and unnoticeable texture."[23]

Part of the reason was that although she had inherited wealth and used some of her writing income for luxuries, Wharton also depended on it for personal charities, including war orphans and, in later years, pensions for elderly servants and relatives. So even as the Furies nagged her to create "literature," she wished to sell her work to a general readership for both financial and educational reasons, and to do so she needed to write novels easily accessible to the average American.

In spite of her "unnoticeable texture," Wharton says she expects her readers to meet her halfway.[24] She knew that her general audience was not well enough educated to meet her halfway, however, as is clear from her career-long criticism of American reading and education in, for instance, "The Vice of Reading" (1901), "The Recovery" (1908), "The Legend" (1910), "Xingu" (1916), and *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). Consequently, her relation to her audience was a paradox, a dilemma, the explanation of which is part of the