

Introduction

I. Edith Wharton's Life and Works

Edith Wharton(1862-1937)is one of the most remarkable woman writers in American literary history. In her life time, Edith Wharton produces a total of twenty-five novels and novellas, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence*. Besides, she also writes eighty-six short stories, three books of poetry, an autobiography, a book on the theory of fiction, eleven books or pamphlets of nonfiction, and scores of articles, reviews, and translations. At one point, her earnings from her writings exceeded that of any other living American writer. She continued to write until her death in 1937, collecting her ghost fiction in a volume the year she died and leaving another novel unfinished. In 1923, she even received an honorary degree from Yale University, the first such honor given to a woman by a major American university.

Born into a wealthy New York family, Wharton was privately educated by governesses and tutors both at home and in Europe. From this upper-class environment, she drew some of her richest fictional characters and situations. Dissatisfied with society life and ill-matched in marriage, Wharton turned to writing for a measure of fulfillment. Against her husband's wishes, she wrote several non-fictional books on architecture and interior decoration, as well as a number of novels and short story collections. *The Great Inclination* and *The House of Mirth* were especially well-received by critics and readers during the earliest years of Wharton's career. With the breakup of her marriage in 1912, Wharton took up permanent residence in France, where she wrote one of her most famous and long-lived books, *Ethan Frome*. In this novella, she chose an uncharacteristic milieu, portraying the frustration and limitations imposed on individuals by poverty and adherence to a strict moral code, revealing her loathing of society's rigid, unpyting standards of decency, propriety, and loyalty. During World War I , Wharton organized relief efforts in France and care for Belgian orphans, work that earned her the French Legion of Honor. However, her war novels *The Marne* and *A Son at the Front* are undistinguished. In 1921, she became the first female recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, awarded to her for *The Age of Innocence*. Like her other long masterpieces, this novel also focuses on the traditional social conventions misused by New York society to maintain its outdated and repressive social order. Wharton's later novels reflect the author's growing

disillusionment with postwar America and the Jazz Age. With few exceptions, Wharton never again achieved the brilliant characterizations and settings which so enlivened her prewar works.

From the start of her professional career and for many years afterward, Wharton was advised and encouraged by her cousin and friend, Walter Berry. Romantic allusions about them have been made by various biographers, and some of Wharton's sympathetic male characters are said to be modeled after either Berry or, as scholars have recently claimed, her lover, Morton Fullerton. The understanding intellectual stimulation, and sexual fulfillment that Wharton belatedly found are transcribed in her fictions as a welcome refuge from the life-smothering deadness of the social values of America's upper class.

II. Critical Reception of Edith Wharton

By any measure, Edith Wharton's career was successful and her life full and adventurous. Yet expressions of longing appear throughout her letters and memoirs. Especially in the early years of her career, Wharton yearned for recognition from the New York aristocracy she so incisively portrayed in her stories and novels. Except for one cousin, however, her family and society treated her as an aberration, completely ignoring her literary achievements. Cynthia Griffin Wolff detects a persistent tone of desolation and loneliness in her letters, noting that their most frequent refrain is "I have no one to *talk to*" (*Feast* 24). Wharton also desired better communication with her readers, wishing them to find deeper meanings in her fiction. For example, in response to the charge that sentimentalists found her work "cynical & depressing," she hoped that "Those who see the 'inferences' recognize my ability to see them too" (*Letters* 39). By the same token, the view of her as a Jamesian disciple and chronicler of narrow, upper-class interests caused no end of consternation: "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James... & the assumption that the people I write about are not 'real' because they are not navvies & charm-women, makes me feel rather hopeless," she confided to her publisher in 1904 (*Letters* 91).

Always in Edith Wharton's writings there is an understanding of dissatisfaction, a sense that the full value of her work was unappreciated and her life-long project incomplete. Writing to Margaret Chanler in 1925, Wharton voiced doubt about her place in American letters: "As my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know... And I wonder, a little desolately, which?" (*Letters* 483, original ellipsis). It is not unusual for writers to complain of slights or seek sympathy from their readers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, after all, had set the tone for novel-writing successors with his plea in "The Custom-House" for understanding by a loyal, select few (6). However, unlike Hawthorne, who struggled for years with barely a nod of recognition, or

Herman Melville, who died believing that *Moby-Dick* had missed its mark, Edith Wharton enjoyed extensive popular and critical acclaim once she committed herself to the pen. Yet despite success, she always felt a lack of recognition and understanding from her readers.

Contributing to this misunderstanding is the early critical view of her as a novelist of manners, a view that persists despite fresh, insightful approaches by feminists, new historicists, and other critics who address the range and complexity of Wharton's themes and narrative techniques. Wharton, I believe, is also a novelist of morals: a writer not only of society but of spirit; a woman who, in life and art, searched for religious, moral, and philosophical meanings. This search for fulfillment is evident in her comments about fiction. For example, she defends its power to transcend the mundane in an article on literary criticism, in which she argues that the "conclusion of the tale" "must be sought, not in the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it, but in... the light it casts on questions beyond its borders" ("Criticism" 210). She similarly argues in another essay: "any serious portrayal of life must be judged not by the incidents it presents but by the author's sense of their significance" ("Vice" 519). Wharton's search for meaning is abundantly clear in her major novels, as this book demonstrates.

Although Edith Wharton was highly respected and well-known in her life time, her works have been largely neglected since her death 69 years ago — only a few of her books remain in print. Few writers of quality have suffered such an eclipse. There have been intermittent efforts, by critics like Edmund Wilson and Irving Howe, to resuscitate her reputation, and there has been increasing interest in Wharton's works recently. But some of the very people who have attempted to revive such interest are responsible for impeding that process, by writing essays tainted with undisguised patronization for this "lady writer," and by approaching her work negatively. That is, critics frequently direct more attention to what Wharton did not do than to what she did do. They have skirted the task of focusing and elucidating which is surely the first business of criticism. For example, although Edmund Wilson admitted on one hand that the critical world did Wharton "something less than justice," he complained on the other hand that her tragic heroines and heroes are "invariably ... locked into a small closed system, either destroying themselves by beating their heads against their prison or suffering a living death in resigning themselves to it" (195-213).

But part of the reason for the long neglect of Edith Wharton may also be that, without a change in certain attitudes, it is difficult to recognize her central concerns. One of the more perceptive critics, Blake Nevius, writing in 1953, pointed out a "lurking feminism" in Wharton (Nevius, *A Study* 53). Feminist concerns do appear in her work, although she did not associate herself with the feminist movement of her time. She wrote frequently of the way in which women were educated to become ornaments, mindless and self-regarding, not people but products. The

double sexual standard chafes some of her female characters. And her works often show constriction linked with the rules governing the lives of women. Whether she writes about lives lived narrowly inside constrictions, or in isolation outside of them, Wharton is subtle, delicate, and precise. According to Marilyn French, the seeming innocence of male critics about the difference between a woman's life and a man's, about the profound effects of learning to adapt the self to a small anteroom in life, has led to an impercipient about Wharton's works (French, "The Emergence" 29). She does not shout: therefore she is not heard. (Had she shouted, she would not have been published.) However, the feminist movement has spurred renewed interest in Wharton's moving and insightful portrayal of the position of women at the turn of the last century. By using Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, Cynthia Griffin Wolff analyzed in *A Feast of Words* how Wharton's personal experiences as a woman affected her writings; Magaret McDowell argued in *Edith Wharton* that Wharton's novels were feminist in that they explored the aspirations and deprivations of women in a male-dominated society; Elizabeth Ammons commented in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* that Wharton's fiction was "both a record of one brilliant and intellectually independent woman's thinking about women and a map of feminism's ferment and failure in America in the decades surrounding the Great War" (97).

Although Edith Wharton thought of herself as a novelist of manners (Singley, *Matters of Mind* 1), she might have chosen a different designation had she foreseen the limitations of the term. To understand this category of realism, I take Lionel Trilling's definition: a novelist of manners writes of society's conventions, including not only etiquette and decorum but principles, rules, and laws that are established by tacit assumption" ("Manners" 200). However useful the label "novelist of manners" may be, it exerts a subtle bias, allowing critics to focus on the social features of a writer's portrayals at the expense of her deeper levels of insight into human nature. In Wharton's case, it implies little or no development of moral problems except in terms of social convention. Thus, Robert Spiller declared that Wharton's commitment to society was "in its narrowest sense" (1209); Ludwig Lewisohn complained that Wharton "could have taken seriously the conventions of a small and unimportant social group" (466); James W. Tuttleton believed that Wharton "argued the necessity of the individual's commitment to the cultural tradition" and "the danger of alienation from it" (564-65); Katherine Joslin remarked that "'the web of customs, manners, culture' lies at the heart of Edith Wharton's fiction" (29). This label shortchanges works like *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, which do not depict wealthy New York society, and it opens Wharton to charges such as those made by Vernon Parrington when he dubbed her "our literary aristocrat": that her upper-class characters are unrepresentative and her poor, rural ones inauthentic.

III. Edith Wharton Rediscovered

A study of Edith Wharton's major works must place Wharton in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American intellectual, social, and religious developments, expanding that context as necessary to include Western traditions and values. Whereas the designation "novelist of manners" excludes Wharton from the mainstream traditions of American literature — "the fact is," Trilling asserts, "that American writers of genius have not turned their minds toward society" ("Manners" 206) — a contextualized approach acknowledges her American roots. Although Wharton seemed to downplay her American connections once she settled in France, Wharton indicated that she wished to be considered in a native tradition when she borrowed the title for her memoir *A Backward Glance* from Walt Whitman's *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads* and thus positioned herself in an honored nineteenth-century tradition. Recent studies have explored her American connections beyond the Jamesian ones. Some critics link her with "moral" writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and New England local colorists and sentimentalists, with whom she also shares a Calvinist legacy. Feminist scholars, in particular, have done much to rescue Wharton from the category "minor writer." However, despite attention to the myriad social, economic, and psychological factors that affected her authorship, Wharton is still inadequately situated in the history of ideas and beliefs. Considered too advanced for the Victorians and too old-fashioned for the modernists, she lacks an intellectual "room of one's own."

Readers and critics have often failed to recognize Wharton's spiritual concerns¹ and declared her central interest to be the manners and mores of the old New York society as they gave way before the onslaught of the nouveau riche, the Vanderbilts, Asters, and Whitneys — vulgar, flamboyant, and obscenely rich. She is often described as exalting the past and condemning the present. However, in my opinion, Wharton was not a woman who could not catch up with the marching pace of history. In fact, she never meant to exalt the old ways although, as she grew older, she came to believe there were some fine things in them. But she was never blinded to the stifling

¹ Although the terms moral, philosophical, religious, and spiritual in this book are interchangeable to the extent that they refer to nonmateriality, I use them in distinctive ways. "Moral" concerns the judgment or principles of right and wrong in relation to human character and behavior, as determined both by external standards and by one's inner sense or conscience. "Philosophical" refers to systems of thought, value, or meaning as well as to the processes of inquiry into such systems. In keeping with Wharton's interests, I focus to a great extent on aesthetics and metaphysics and to a lesser extent on logic, ethics, and epistemology. By "religious," I mean faith in a superhuman power or powers and adherence to the traditions, teachings, and practices associated with that faith. I also take religious to mean an attitude of reverence or devotion that faith inspires. "Spiritual," the broadest of the terms, refers to the sacred and to matters of the soul and its vital energy and nurturance.

quality of the old life; she never forgot being unable to breathe. In any case, the manners and mores of society never provided more than the backgrounds of her novels. They seem emphasized because she describes them so brilliantly. Contrary to most people's belief, I'll argue in this book that Edith Wharton was a woman with modern consciousness because, in many of her novels, she challenged and rejected the outdated traditional religious, social and patriarchal values and assumptions and anticipated the arrival of a more reasonable, tolerant and sexually equal society.

In this book, I'll mainly discuss six of Wharton's most important works, including *The House of the Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Summer and The Reef*. These works were written between 1905, the year *The House of the Mirth* was published, and 1920, when *The Age of Innocence* appeared. This period happened to correspond with the era of the fastest development in modern American history (Bradbury and McFarlane, "The Name" 32). The new discoveries in science and the rapidly changing technology of the late nineteenth century proclaimed the death of God and the ruling power of human reason in the universe. The theories of such nineteenth-century thinkers as Freud, Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche further liberated people's mind and made them attach more importance to individual freedom and sexual equality. Besides, the demographic changes at the turn of the century and the breakout of the First World War accelerated the pace of society's old values toward destruction and meaninglessness and people sifted through the shards of the past looking for what was valuable and what could inspire construction of a new society (Galens, 176). Wharton made great efforts to develop her intelligence and claim a role for herself, as a female, in the world of ideas and art (Singley, *Matters of Mind* 41). Paul Bourget, a friend of Edith Wharton, recorded his impression of her in his 1893 book on the United States, *Outre-Mer*:

[She] has read everything, understood everything, not superficially, but really, with an energy of culture that could put to shame the whole Parisian fraternity of letters... There is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied, not a painter or sculptor of whose works she could not compile a catalogue, not a school of poetry or romance of which she does not know the principles... One would say that she has ordered her intellect somewhere, as we would order a piece of furniture, to measure, and with as many compartments as there are branches of knowledge. She acquires them only that she may put them into these drawers. (53)

An eager learner and a sensitive woman as she was, it was impossible for Wharton to be unaffected by the current development of modern science and philosophy which had been bringing about unprecedented social changes in her time. Actually, Wharton's acquisition of modern knowledge and thoughts provided her with a modern consciousness. In these of her major works,

she hoped to show how a set of slowly evolved cultural values were suddenly threatened or wiped out by a succession of drastic changes in American life beginning in the 1880s. Motivated by her modern consciousness, Wharton tries to foster the predominance of science over religion, individual freedom over social conventions and sexual equality over patriarchal oppression in her works. Wharton hoped to enable the readers to see that the disappearance of these traditional values and assumptions were inevitable because they were outdated and obstructive to social welfare and individual happiness and that the progress of history was inexorable. As, with a view to prove Edith Wharton's modern consciousness, I'll conduct a thematic study of her major works to explore her challenges to the traditional values and assumptions in her time, I think it's proper to use "Challenging Traditional Values and Assumptions — A Thematic Study of Edith Wharton's Six Major Novels" as the title of my book.

After consulting *The Dissertation Abstract International* on the web and almost all the books and articles on Edith Wharton that are available in China, I have not found by now any lengthy book dealing with the same topic as I have chosen. So my book will be the first to comprehensively explore the dimensions of Wharton's challenges to traditional values and assumptions to place her life and writings in the context of American intellectual and religious thought and social upheaval at the turn of the nineteenth century. This book owes debts to many recent feminist readings of Wharton, which have not only illuminated her struggles as a female novelist but have affirmed the extraordinary quality of her mind. I was originally inspired by Carol J. Singley's *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, which analyzes "Wharton's tireless and ultimately unfulfilled quest for spiritual and philosophical answers" in her major works (Preface x). Besides, I was also influenced by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's *Modernism: 1890-1930*, which to some extent describes how the social upheaval and intellectual development in the modern era brought about the "break-up" and "dissolution" of traditional values and helped the formation of people's "modern consciousness," which emphasized the "scientizing, rationalizing, [and] democratizing tendency" in our mind (20-42). This book attempts to correct some critics' myopic observation that Wharton was just an old-fashioned upper-class woman writer who defended the irretrievably dying values of the traditional society and hated the progress of history (Howe 16). Wharton's writings, I argue here, reflect her cool denunciation and rejection of the outdated and repressive old values which the aristocratic upheld although she was sympathetic with the dying old aristocratic class of old New York, of which she was a member. One can no more separate her nostalgic feelings toward some of the good qualities of old New York life from her disgust with its basic restrictiveness on individuals than one can divorce one's love for one's family from one's hatred for the ugly old house which the family inhabit. Besides, the spiritual conditions of the poor, whose search for

happiness was thwarted by limitations imposed on them by poverty and the society's unreasonable moral standards, is also within the scope of her writings. Anyhow, since it is incorrect to negate a thing completely — a new city will have to be built on the ruins of the old one — Wharton adopted a dialectic attitude toward the old society. However, she knew that the disappearance of the old values and assumptions is inevitable and the progressing wheel of history cannot be stopped and that the wise must judge by reason instead of feeling. So, as a woman with modern consciousness, Wharton in her novels firmly challenged and rejected the traditional values and assumptions of the American society at that time and never thought of returning to the past.

IV. The Layout of the Book

This book falls into three chapters, each mainly studying two of Wharton's major novels. Chapter one is entitled "Challenging Traditional Religious Values." In this chapter, I'll mainly study *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*, both of which involve issues of religious faith. In the study of *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's tragedy is explained to be largely due to her faith in Christian doctrines, which causes her to follow the example of Jesus Christ and sacrifice herself. Likewise, in the study of *Ethan Frome*, Ethan Frome's tragedy is attributed to his Calvinist sensibility, which causes him to lose his will when he is about to pursue his personal ideal and abide by the strict moral code of the Calvinist New England at the same time. In both studies, I'll analyze and expose the conflicts between religion and evolutionary science, according to which the society functions, in order to show the inviability of traditional religious values in the modern materialistic age.

Chapter two is entitled "Challenging Traditional Social Conventions." In this chapter, I'll mainly study *The Age of Innocence* and *The Custom of the Country*, both of which involve the rejection of traditional social conventions or customs. In *The Age of Innocence*, I'll use the Platonic philosophy of human happiness which is timeless and universal to challenge the old-fashioned social conventions of old New York, which is based on Puritan aesthetics of form. By exposing the narrowness and static nature of the upper-class social conventions, my study illustrates Darwin's viewpoint that social conventions are often in complete opposition to human happiness and social welfare due to ignorance or weak power of reasoning. Wharton implies in the novel that people should not blindly follow the obsolete social conventions and give up their individual freedom to pursue happiness. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton rejected the practice of preserving permanent marriages in form, which was then still regarded as the norm of marriage in Europe and the eastern cities of the United States, by asserting the inevitable prevalence of divorce as a new

custom in modern America.

Chapter three is entitled “Challenging Traditional Patriarchal Values.” Strictly speaking, traditional patriarchal values can also be considered a part of social conventions. But I’ll deal with them in another separate chapter due to their special significance for Edith Wharton as a woman writer. In this chapter, I’ll mainly study *Summer* and *The Reef* (Of course, almost all of Wharton’s major novels involve the challenges to and rejection of patriarchal values, but, in my opinion, the heroines of these two books demonstrate a more rebellious spirit than the heroines in Wharton’s other major works). In *Summer*, by using psychoanalytic feminist theory to depict Charity Royall’s forced conformation to and subversion of the Father’s Law, my study reveals how women are repressed by the patriarchal society and how they struggle to rebel against it. By letting Charity resist and subvert the Father’s Law, Wharton shows her challenge to the patriarchal society. In *The Reef*, by applying cultural feminist theory, my study demonstrates Wharton’s conscious search for feminine powers in a patriarchal society by giving her free-spirited heroine the name, Sophy, the ancient embodiment of feminine wisdom and creativity, and uses her as a moral touchstone to bring other characters’ false values to light. Wharton shows her rejection of the patriarchal values by exposing how they diminish the feminine spirit and enslave women.

Chapter One

Challenging Traditional Religious Values

Religion has always been a foundation for moral codes. In this chapter, I will mainly study *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*, both of which involve challenges to traditional religious values and assumptions.

I . Questioning Christian Values

Since the late 19th century, many western philosophers have begun to apply Darwin's evolutionary science to the development of society and Wharton also became a follower of social Darwinism (Singley, *Matters of Mind* 58), which holds that the process of social development is essentially evolutionary, embodying a continuous change from incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity. Social Darwinism also affirms that progress results from natural selection and natural selection inevitably involves competition. Herbert Spencer, an important interpreter of social Darwinism and the creator of the phrase "survival of the fittest," believes that those who can best adapt themselves to their environment have the better chance of survival while the physically weak and the mentally unworthy ones are likely to be eliminated by the society (Hofstadter 19-80). Since an individual's intrinsic qualities have been pre-determined and the environment has been assumed as a norm, Spencerian evolutionism suggests determinism. Besides, Darwinian philosophers propose that moral sense also develops from the social instincts of the lower animals, by a process similar to the development of physical characteristics: natural selection. Morality is just a series of accidents that serve a useful purpose and therefore have been preserved (Singley, *Matters of Mind* 58). If one believes this hypothesis, it means a fundamental shift in the focus from divine decree to social practicality — it means that there is no longer an extrinsic, divinely established or eternal law of morality. Morality can therefore become merely relative, dependent upon one's particular environment. Practicality, or mere individual preference, may substitute for absolute values. While science is based on rational inferences from facts, Christianity expresses deep personal conviction and faith which lie at the heart of religions. Obviously, social Darwinism

is in complete contradiction to the Christian doctrines which teach people to base their survival upon a dependence on God's providence and advocate faith, love, and altruism, which all point to absolute moral values.

During the first quarter-century of evolutionary science, theologians attempted to accommodate Darwin's theory. They envisioned an orderly, progressive development from inferior conditions and morals to superior ones, with no need to dispense with the existence of God; they still attributed Creation to divine intervention (Warren 69). But the truce between faith and science could not last; even the most resistant believers saw traditional faith undermined. If humans were mere matter, could a spiritual life be possible? Was there no foreordained design of the universe? Did evolution suggest a random play of forces rather than divine plan, or, worse, a God who still governed but refused to intervene directly in human affairs? Writers of all religious persuasions tried to answer these questions in their fiction. Wharton demonstrates in her novel *The House of Mirth* that the conflict between science and religion can never be solved.

The influence of Darwinian theory — the notions of competition over cooperation, of the strong over the weak, and of events connected by chance rather than divine order — is unmistakable in *The House of the Mirth* (1905). Lily Bart, beautiful and single at the age of twenty-nine, must undo other contenders and strengthen her position in fashionable New York by finding a wealthy husband. However, she seems ill-suited for this kind of life, and a run of bad luck keeps her from realizing the future she seems destined for. In keeping with Darwinian theory, the seeds of Lily's conflict were planted long ago, first by a managerial mother and then by peers who have trained her to be both “ornamental” (480) and calculating.

Wharton constructs her novel in such a way that it is possible — indeed, deceptively easy — to read Lily's story as a failure of means rather than ends; as an inability, as Adeline Tintner writes, “to do the right thing at the right time” (n.p.). But Wharton is interested in more than chance or expediency. Lily dies not only because she fails to escape her fate or vanquish her competition but because she rejects — sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately — the shallow, materialistic values of her society. *The House of Mirth* thus combines a purely deterministic outlook with a more idealistic one. This idealism, as we shall see, derives from the Christian doctrines that are under assault by science.

Within the narrative structure that traces Lily's fall from social prominence to poverty and death, Wharton embeds three ironic allegories about the fragility of spiritual values in a materialistic culture. Each of these allegories draws upon the referent system “Christianity,” and all three work together to express Wharton's skepticism of religious certainty in the twentieth century.

First, Wharton addresses the aimless motion and social mobility that characterize

turn-of-the-century upper-class life by treating Lily's homelessness and eighteen-month wanderings as an inverted spiritual pilgrimage, such as that taken by Christian believers. Second, she ironically describes Lily's search for a rich husband not only in terms of sentimental romance but as an idealized quest for perfect love, such as that found in the biblical text, Song of Songs. Song of Songs serves the novel through its juxtaposition with another biblical text, Ecclesiastes, which is about resignation and despair. A spiritualized as well as erotic love poem in which two lovers joyously unite and celebrate their love, the Song of Songs provides an ironic contrast to Lily and Selden's abortive attempts at romance. Finally, Wharton allegorizes Lily's decision to destroy evidence that will secure her social and material power by evoking the story of Christ's sacrifice. Again, Wharton undercuts the message of redemption that Christ's death holds for believers, for at her death Lily is more a faded flower than an emblem of resurrection. These allegorical structures reveal the novel's religious as well as Darwinian subtexts. Wharton does not write a religious novel *per se* — such an act would have violated her own aesthetic principles. She does, however, use allegory to demonstrate modern materialism's threat to traditional religious values.

The House of Mirth disseminates meaning through contrasts — between the future that the reader expects Lily to have and that which occurs; between her society's material abundance and its spiritual depletion; between ostensible gentility and the actual viciousness with which individuals manipulate events and each other. Wharton contrasts Darwinian theories of chance, change without growth, and relativity with the Christian belief in a divine pattern of existence leading to salvation by God. These material and secular discourses compete for voice and position in the text and ultimately overwhelm the discourses of the spirit. Wharton is thus skeptical, and ruthlessly ironic, about the viability of spiritual values in turn-of-the-century society. The novel fails to affirm the redemption that is so painfully needed and concludes not in marriage but in pointless death in a dilapidated rooming house, a conclusion that, while showing Lily's failure to transcend her society, still demonstrates the need for such transcendence.

1. The Prosaic and the Ideal

Wharton expresses the tension between the real and the ideal throughout the novel, from her choice of a title to her imagery and characterization. She selected a biblical title, from Ecclesiastes 7.4 — “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” Ecclesiastes, a skeptical, pessimistic text, has special relevance for a society engaged in material and spiritual debate at the turn of the 19th century. The speaker does not actually deny God, but he finds attempts to penetrate the secrets of life and divinity useless. The result of all human endeavor, he claims, is vanity and foolishness. To the assertion that God punishes the

wicked and rewards the good, the speaker points to evil, not justice, in the world; to the belief that God tests humans through sufferings, he answers that death is the great leveler of all. With its emphasis on human futility and folly, then, Ecclesiastes parallels the Darwinian view that human beings are essentially helpless before the forces of environment. Its world-weary philosophy leaves little room for individual achievement or transcendence. However, Ecclesiastes is also a sacred text. Its ultimate goal is to express the value of human life and to affirm the existence of a divine plan hidden from human eyes. Thus, despite its blatant despair and obscured faith, Ecclesiastes is a reminder that although worldly pleasures are legitimate, indulgence without acknowledging the Creator who made all possible is mere vanity. Wharton's use of this biblical text emphasizes the tragedy of the novel: the human failure to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic.

Wharton's interest in the religion-science controversy is evident in the novel's imagery as well as its title. Consider the much-quoted description of Lily as "a water-plant in the flux of the tides" (84) and "an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (486). Here Wharton clearly uses the language of science. But we miss the novel's spiritual dimension if we do not also realize the sea anemone's biblical significance. A marine animal with expanded disks and tentacles and a blossomlike appearance, the anemone is named for the flower that scholars believe is the lily mentioned in Matthew 6.28 (Myers 657-58). This double meaning of anemone would be lost on most readers, but Wharton, whose knowledge of biblical and horticultural literature was extensive, exploited it to explain the conflict between religion and science. The text of Matthew is a parable addressed to people without faith, exhorting them not to worry about material well-being but to trust in God's care. The example of the sea anemone, on the other hand, demonstrates that survival depends not on God, but on successful negotiation of external factors. These two diametrically opposed views remain in tension throughout *The House of Mirth* and describes Lily's dilemma as she struggles to answer the competing calls of Christian surrender and Darwinian survival.

Lily's character also embodies the conflict between religion and science. Despite Lawrence Selden's judgment that she is "a victim of the civilization which had produced her" (10), Wharton shows her heroine to be more than the sum total of her biology and environment. Although Lily shares their background, she does not grow up to be like others in her circle. She is not a Bertha Dorset, who stops at nothing to achieve her goals, or a Judy Trenor, who "knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred" for women who gave bigger parties than she (64). Neither does Lily inherit unbridled, maternal greed: "she was secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money" (55). In a society of takers, Lily has a sense of reciprocity. "Long enough in bondage to other people's pleasure," she is "considerate of those who depended on hers" (43). She maintains a

friendship with her impoverished cousin Gerty Farish, gives to charity, and even muses about sharing her winnings with others: "Isn't it possible that, if I had the opportunities of these people, I might make a better use of them?" (113), she asks.

Although Lily is accused of being mercenary and superficial, other characters in the novel are more deserving of these labels. Gus Trenor attempts rape as repayment for his loan to Lily; Julia Peniston disowns her simply because of rumors; and Lawrence Selden abandons her when she most needs a friend. They, not Lily, place primary importance on appearances. Lily is so unfamiliar with bachelor flats like Selden's that she does not realize the risk she takes when she visits one. Although she claims to enjoy money and power, she relinquishes them at every turn. Despite Simon Rosedale's importance, for example, Lily snubs him because she despises social climbing. And when at the end of the novel her aunt's legacy saves her from financial ruin, she promptly writes a check, not to order dress but to settle old debts. In short, Lily has ideas of her own: she wants financial stability *and* a clear conscience; she expects money *and* love. Within the world of the novel, however, such a combination is impossible because Lily's moral principles — even when most flexible — are not relativistic enough. She adheres to standards that others ignore and thus finds herself on the outside of a group that by conditioning, intelligence, and beauty she should handily dominate.

Wharton also lends an "idealizing touch" and "vein of sentiment" to her heroine's "most prosaic purposes" (54). The emblem on Lily's personal stationary — a flying ship and the word "*Beyond*" (249, original emphasis) — suggests her longing for a realm beyond the material one. Lily herself takes exception to the view that she is a pawn in a deterministic world: she "had never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations" (42). Wharton even calls her an "idealist subdued to vulgar necessities" (407), whose extensive reading of sentimental fiction and attraction to "lost causes" (55) reveal a romantic rather than material nature. Although critics fault Lily for moral inconstancy and a childlike narcissism that precludes tragic heroism (Lidoff 538), it is clear that Wharton did intend her novel to have tragic dimensions. As she writes in *A Backward Glance*:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world," any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys.

The "tragic implication" of such a story, Wharton concludes, "lies in its power of debasing people and *ideals*. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart" (*Backward* 207, my emphasis).

Although Lily falls short of tragic heroism, she aspires toward higher values than those in the

world around her. Wharton suggests as much by describing her beauty, grace, good taste, and aversion to dinginess. Elsewhere in her writings, Wharton associates an aesthetic sensibility with a superior moral capacity. In *A Backward Glance*, for example, she contrasts “the intolerable ugliness” of New York with the “immortal beauty and immemorial significance” of Europe (54). Her autobiographical fragment, “Life and I,” similarly equates moral and aesthetic ugliness, describing the “moral tortures” and “suffering” experienced from “certain images — impressions of scenery and more sharply-drawn visions of rooms” — that she encountered during a childhood stay in Europe (1073). In *The House of Mirth*, then, words like “dingy” and “dreary” refer not only to superficial material conditions but to an entire quality of life. Dinginess, “a quality which assumes all manner of disguises, “ is “as latent in the expensive routine of her aunt’s life as in the makeshift existence of a continental pension” (57). In contrast, Lily possesses finer aesthetic and moral sensibilities — however embryonic.

Lily joins a long line of naysayers, from Anne Hutchinson and Emily Dickinson to Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, who say “I prefer not to” to the world. She alone repudiates the values of her society, sometimes unconsciously, when she squanders opportunities to snare Percy Gryce, and sometimes consciously, when she drops Selden’s and Bertha’s love letters into the fire. As Carry Fisher explains, Lily refuses to be false to herself: “sometimes I think [she fails] because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for” (303).

Lily Bart is caught at a cultural intersection of the secular and the sacred. Her hesitation at Grand Central Station in the opening scene — she has missed one train and waits for another — emblemizes her choices throughout the novel between gross materialism and abstract moral values. Wharton’s allegorical structures show that Lily is a dislocated spiritual pilgrim, futilely making her way when such pilgrimages are becoming obsolete. She would like a marriage based on love and trust rather than greed, but society discourages such marriages; and even Lawrence Selden, her would-be lover and mate, betrays her at critical moments. Unfit for a society that requires her to manipulate others through power, or money, or looks, Lily has no alternative but to die. Her death, however, while evoking the nineteenth-century tradition of sentimental sacrifice, results not in redemption but in continued alienation. Through each of the three Christian allegories embedded in her novel, Wharton expresses modernist disillusionment resulting from the clash of the material and the spiritual.

2. Railroads and Pilgrims

Paul Pickrel has noted the satiric similarities between Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, which was itself a parody of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Singley,

Matters of Mind 73). Wharton's novel also evokes another adaptation of Bunyan's work, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad" (1843). The railroad, a popular metaphor in nineteenth-century prose and verse, often represented Christian pilgrims engaged in spiritual voyages (St. Armand 221). Wharton, whose adolescent reading familiarized her with sermons of all kinds, would surely have known of this convention. And she certainly read Nathaniel Hawthorne, who plays a larger part in her fiction than her disparaging comments about him lead us to believe¹.

The similarities between "The Celestial Railroad" and *The House of Mirth* are striking. Both emphasize modern conveyances and selfish pleasures, and both draw on Ecclesiastes to depict vanity and materialism. In Hawthorne's text, a narrator crosses a bridge of "elegant" but "slight" construction over the "Slough of Despond" containing discarded books on morality, philosophy, and religion (10: 186-87). Arriving at a train station, he encounters "parties of the first gentry," including women, "those flowers of fashionable society... so well fitted to adorn the most elevated circles" (10: 188), who patronize the railroad in search of amusement. A few pilgrims still labor in the old-fashioned way, by foot and with burdens on their backs, "excit[ing] great mirth among our wiser brotherhood," who ride nonchalantly in comfort, *their* burdens stowed neatly in the baggage car and "religion... thrown tastefully into the background" (10: 191, 188-89). Bound for the Celestial City, these "comfortably seated" passengers set forth "as cheerfully as if the pilgrimage were merely a summer tour" (10: 191, 188). They seek pleasure and profit at various stops, in particular at Vanity Fair, which is "at the height of prosperity, and exhibits an epitome of whatever is brilliant, gay, and fascinating, beneath the sun." The narrator observes that "such are the charms of the place, that people often affirm it to be the true and only heaven" (10: 197). Travelers on this railroad never reach their actual celestial destination, however: after succumbing to "a singular drowsiness" (10: 204), they board a bellowing steam ferry that they realize too late is bound for hell, not heaven.

Wharton's *The House of Mirth* depicts the same frivolous society and in the same terms. Her allusion to Hawthorne allows her to criticize a vain, materialistic world *and* emphasize her heroine's resistance to such a world. Following Hawthorne's structure, we see Lily as one of the complacent travelers, a "flower[] of fashionable society," "comfortably seated," riding from one pleasure spot to another. However, Lily both craves luxury and relishes breaks from her busy social calendar and pleasure-seeking friends. Significantly, Wharton uses imagery of transportation to

¹ Wharton typically denied authorial influence, especially from American writers. She wrote in 1908 to her publisher William Brownell, about his forthcoming essay on Hawthorne, that she was "counting the minutes till I see the egregious Nathaniel expire without shedding of blood," and she "especially enjoyed" Brownell's "bringing out his lack of poetry and his lukewarmness" (qtd in Lewis' *Edith Wharton* 237).

describe Lily's expected course and its alternative. She establishes these metaphors from the very beginning of the novel. Lily compares her life to "a long white road without dip or turning" and rejoices that "she was to roll over it in a carriage instead of trudging it on foot" (88). Yet when we first meet her, she has missed her train to Bellomont and a weekend of amusement. She stands "apart from the crowd" at Grand Central Station (3); asks, "Why not sit out a train?" (4); and walks to Selden's apartment instead of riding in a cab. Admittedly, Lily has many moments of weakness. For example, at Bellomont, although "she wanted to get away from herself" (26), she rejects "self-communion" (38), gambles extravagantly, sees her friends as "lords of the only world she cared for" (79), and allows the Trenor mansion to gratify "her craving for the external finish of life" (38). Yet as the novel progresses, Lily rides less and walks more.

Wharton uses Hawthorne's contrasting structures of riding and walking to comment on Lily's role as a spiritual pilgrim. Throughout the novel, her self-centered impulsivity is checked by momentary introspection. Despite her taste for luxury, the narrator informs us that she "knew very little of the value of money" (49). Lily also has "fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself" (61). And to her credit, while she hopes to avoid the trials of an arduous path, she knows that the easy route is a misguided one. Increasingly, then, Lily resembles Hawthorne's weary toilers rather than his complacent passengers. At Bellomont, the equivalent of Hawthorne's "Slough of Despond," with its library that was never used for reading" (94), Lily misses the omnibus to church and the chance to impress Gryce with her piety. Instead she walks, taking a path that leads, not to the wealthy, dull bachelor who might "do her the honor of boring her for life" (39), but to Selden and his antimaterialistic "Republic of the Spirit."

Lily's distance from her pleasure-seeking friends widens. Aboard a yacht named the *Sabrina*, Lily is publicly humiliated. The glamorous *Sabrina* — Wharton's version of the belching steamer that ferries its passengers to hell — contrasts with the dejected stroll that Lily next takes with Lawrence Selden. Not long after, when Lily joins the Gormers for a weekend party at the Van Alstyne estate, she is repelled by the garish, "social Coney Island" atmosphere and has "the odd sense of having been caught up into the crowd as carelessly as a passenger is gathered in by an express train" (374, 375). A walk exploring the site of the Gormers' new mansion just before Mrs. Gormer snubs her to gain Bertha Dorset's favor affords Lily "a welcome escape from empty noises of her life" and a momentary release from "being swept passively along a current of pleasure and business in which she had no share" (389). Quiet moments such as this one bring opportunities for reflection and distinguish Lily from others, including her materialistic mother, who after the family