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AFTER INNOCENCE: THE LATER NOVELS OF EDITH WHARTON

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton's reputation as a novelist has not fared well. Blake Nevius begins his study of her work by observing that it "is difficult to think of a twentieth-century American novelist, except possibly Cabell, whose reputation has suffered more from the change of interests and narrowing of emphasis in the literature of the 'thirties than has Edith Wharton's."1 A review of the critical commentary on her work substantiates the point. The reasons for the decline of interest center primarily on two specific areas, social and moral. She was an aristocrat whose view of the common man was marked by little patience and less understanding, and she was the champion of an inflexible moral code that was both out-dated and wholly lacking in compassion. Of her social class and its relation to her writing, Henry Seidel Canby remarks that "Mrs. Wharton did not have America to write about. She had only the soiled egret feathers and false decoration of America for her theme."2 Alfred Kazin sees her failure resulting from her


unwillingness to write the history of her own class. "To tell that story as Edith Wharton might have told it would have involved the creation of a monumental tragicomed y, for was not the aristocracy from which she stemmed as fundamentally middle-class as the rising tide of capitalists out of the West it was prepared to resist?" ³ But she failed to interest herself in the new class, concentrating rather on the atrophy of the old. "Thus she could read in the defeat of her characters the last proud affirmation of the caste quality." ⁴ Vernon L. Parrington states the consensus view on the relation of her social class to her fiction when he remarks, "Her distinction is her limitation." ⁵ Her social heritage, then, is held generally accountable for her preoccupation with a class which was passing from existence during her own childhood and which held only limited interest to anyone outside its narrow confines.

Like the social milieu about which she wrote, the moral code which informs her work has been generally regarded as lacking relevance for the contemporary reader. An extreme view is voiced by Harry Hartwick who remarks that her moralizing "leaves the


⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

advanced reader of today quite cold. To his mind the institutions of marriage and the home no longer exercise an authority that cannot be questioned or set aside if found wanting. More serious than the lack-of-relevance issue is the view that Edith Wharton's moral code is responsible for what can be called her fiction of victimization. Warner Berthoff finds "a grim core of conviction in her work: that life is a prison or a trap or a wasteland; that frustration and abasement are the universal fate; and that persons are contemptible, at best remotely pitiable, in their persistent efforts to keep up appearances." Certainly, the strictness of the morality governing the world through which her characters move leads to the charge that Edith Wharton herself lacked compassion.

In addition to the criticism of the social and moral character of her novels, there is still another reason for the decline of her reputation. It is the prevalent belief that after the publication of The Age of Innocence in 1920, until her death in 1937, Edith Wharton published little that demands serious critical attention. Although Old New York has received favorable commentary, it is in no sense a novel, being comprised of four long stories only

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tenuously related through a chronological treatment of some aspects of old New York Society. It is a backward glance that does not indicate the main direction of her novels after 1920. And it is primarily to these novels that I wish to direct my attention.

No one would contend that Edith Wharton's novels published after 1920 are the artistic equal of her three most distinguished works, *The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country,* and *The Age of Innocence.* But, uneven as they are, they should hold the attention of anyone interested in Edith Wharton, whose literary career spanned a time during which social philosophy and structure changed so radically as to make the world of her youth no longer recognizable. She was herself fully aware of the meaning of those changes for her career. In her autobiography she remarks: "After 'A Son at the Front' I intended to take a long holiday—perhaps to cease from writing altogether. It was growing more and more evident that the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914, and I felt myself incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art." She did, however, continue to write, but her effort to reach some sort of accommodation with the post-war world was not entirely successful. Her last novel, *The Buccaneers,* on which she was working at her death, sees a

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return to an earlier time and society in which she was more at home. But preceding The Buccaneers there are seven full novels published after 1920. Together, they constitute an interesting commentary on the problems confronting a novelist of manners who finds herself in a world which had grown quite alien to her.

In her attempt to write about the post-war world, Edith Wharton did not depart radically from the themes that had come to dominate her fiction by that time. But the later novels do contain new character types and new attitudes on her part. If Twilight Sleep, the novel devoted most specifically to the quality of post-war life in America, shows her to be almost as intolerant as her severest critics charge, Hudson River Bracketed and The Buccaneers reveal that she could be more lenient and warm-blooded than she is generally credited with being.

To understand fully the direction of Edith Wharton's later novels, we should review the characteristic themes and qualities of her work through 1920. To do so, I will concentrate on the four novels--The Valley of Decision, The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence--that provide the clearest illustrations of what was most typical in her work to that time.
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

Few of Edith Wharton's works have received less close attention than her first novel, The Valley of Decision (1902). On several counts, it is true, the novel does not possess great distinction: the characterization is frequently wooden and uncertain; the narrative action is sporadic; and the descriptive passages, often splendid in themselves, are finally self-defeating because too often they appear to exist only for themselves, bearing little relation to the action itself. These failures detract from the work, but they do not substantially affect its importance in an assessment of Edith Wharton's fiction. Far from being "an exception to Mrs. Wharton's usual themes," as F. J. Hoffman has suggested,¹ The Valley of Decision announces with considerable clarity the themes destined to dominate much of her career. The novel also presents the prototype of the Whartonian hero, and it incorporates many of the techniques she was to develop more fully in her later work.

The plot centers in the conflict between social reform and preservation of the existing social order in a fictional Italian duchy, Pianura, during the eighteenth century. Caught in the middle of the divergent claims of the reformers and preservers is Odo Valsecca, the novel's hero. In him we find the prototype of many later heroes: a good-intentioned young man, inclined toward dilettantism, whose greatest flaw in character is a marked indecisiveness at crucial moments. And like many later heroes, Odo's indecisiveness results from his inability to commit himself to the standards of his social class.

The brief portrayal of his childhood spent as a "beggar-noble" at Pontesordo functions to provide a graphic contrast between the poverty-stricken peasants barely subsisting on the edge of a malarial marshland and the irresponsible court nobles concerned with only personal gain and political preferment. The sympathetic concern that Odo is later to show for the peasants gains credibility from the portrayal of his childhood. The introductory sketch of his life with the peasantry also establishes the most constant of Edith Wharton's themes, the importance of the past.

The passages concerning Pontesordo's history suggest a past which embraced both heroic action and splendid art but which now has lost its former significance and awaits rediscovery to give meaning to Pontesordo's shabby present. And the portrayal of
Odo Valsecca's attraction to Pontesordo's past, most particularly of his attraction to the chapel's faded paintings which exert a peculiar power over him, is the first presentation of a theme that is to recur time and again in later novels. The brief sketch of the hero's flirtation with Pontesordo's history sets up determined reverberations. Throughout the novel, we sense that Odo is haunted by the idea that there was once a time when actions had significance and life held meaning. In a large sense, the sketch suggests that whatever the scene, whether in eighteenth-century Italy or nineteenth-century New York, there was for Edith Wharton always a past somehow grander and better than the present, and that a knowledge of the past's values was necessary in order to maintain equilibrium in an ever-unsettled present.

In the first Book of the novel, entitled "The Old Order," the section describing Donnaz is intended to present the old order at its best. Donnaz is a castle in the mountains far removed from the debilitating diversions of the court at Pianura. It is ruled by the Marquess di Donnaz, the novel's only vigorous representative of a dying order. Unlike the other members of his class, he has not abdicated the responsibilities attendant on nobility. He governs his peasants "with a paternal tyranny doubtless less insufferable than the negligence of the great landowners who lived at court."^2

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^2 The Valley of Decision (New York, 1902), p. 46. All references are to this edition.
Close at hand is the half-ruined village of Valdu where Odo gains an insight into the evils of feudalism, "a system which had long outlived its purpose" (p. 56).

Even though Donnaz is held up as a model of enlightened paternalism and is the home for a way of life that possesses both order and dignity, it would be wrong to invest it with far-reaching social implications. It is not the vital center of a society but rather the last outpost of the old order. Its physical isolation is emblematic of its fallen social position and prestige.

In the descriptions of Donnaz and its inhabitant we see for the first time a technique Edith Wharton was to employ repeatedly in her later novels. When one compares Donnaz to Skuytercliffe, the van der Luyden estate in *The Age of Innocence*, he discovers the similarities. And the van der Luydens themselves, though more genteel, are roughly comparable to the inhabitants of Donnaz. An even clearer parallel is found in *Hudson River Bracketed* in which Eaglewood and the Willows are the estates that are the equivalent of Donnaz. There too the dismal village of Paul's Landing is reminiscent of the ruined village of Valdu in *The Valley of Decision*. The function of Donnaz and the Willows offers an even more explicit parallel. Even as Odo recognizes that the feudal way of life has outlived its purpose, he discovers in Donnaz's orderly, dignified, uncomplicated regime a kind of ideal. The Willows will stir the
same awakening in Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed*. Both characters are moved by a past that can be recaptured only imaginatively. In their regard for the past, Odo Valsecca and Vance Weston are only early and late examples; almost every character whom Edith Wharton favors evidences a similar attitude. It becomes the clearest index we have of a character's worth in Edith Wharton's fiction.

Odo's acquaintance with the past is immeasurably deepened by a move to Turin. His acquaintance at the Royal Academy with Count Vittorio Alfieri leads to visits with the latter's uncle, "the illustrious architect Count Benedetto Alfieri" (p. 104). Their growing friendship results in "intimate glimpses of that buried life so marvelously exhumed before him" which "revealed to Odo the beauty of that unmatched moment before grandeur broke into bombast . . . Odo, at the old Count's side, was entering on the great inheritance of the past" (pp. 106-107). Contrasted to the leavening spirit of the past is the atrophy of the regime centered in Turin. "Among the greater Italian cities, Turin was at that period the least open to new influences, the most rigidly bound up in the formulas of the past" (p. 108). Alienated from the religious tradition he had found at Donnaz by Turin's "atmosphere of languishing pietism" (p. 110), and disillusioned by the court's frivolity and indifference, Odo seeks some new way to order his life. Voltaire's writings serve to introduce
him, indirectly, to the underground liberal movement in which he becomes deeply involved.

Before discussing the consequences of his entanglement with the reform group, we should note that in her portrayal of the hero Edith Wharton attempted to present an extremely malleable character. By her own testimony, she "tried to reflect the traditional influences and customs of the day, together with the new ideas, in the mind of a cadet of one of the reigning houses." The attempt to embody in one character the polarities of the age results in a character whose temperament is marked by

. . . a kind of imaginative sympathy, a wondering joy in the mere spectacle of life, that tinged his most personal impressions with a streak of the philosophic temper. If this trait did not save him from sorrow, it at least lifted him above pettiness; if it could not solve the difficulties of life it could arm him to endure them. It was the best gift of the past from which he sprang; but it was blent with another quality, a deep moral curiosity that ennobled his sensous enjoyment of the outward show of life; and these elements were already tending in him, as in countless youths of his generation, to the formation of a new spirit, the spirit that was to destroy one world without surviving to create another. (p. 91)

The ominous note at the end of the passage, along with the author's sardonic observation on the small groups of Italian liberals "who read Voltaire and Hume and wept over the rights of man" (p. 108), indicates Edith Wharton's feelings about the reformers before they

enter the novel itself. It is, however, the characterization of the
hero's temperament, one of many such passages throughout the
novel, that should hold our attention. We see, for example, that
his quality of mind is directly attributable to the past from which
he sprang. The past here I take to encompass not only his personal
experience at Pontesordo and Donnaz but the idea of noble blood as
well. Further, his temperament is characterized as the best gift
of that past, another indication of the past's meaning for the indi-
vidual sensibility. It is clear, though, that the past's greatest gift
is a form of stoicism, a shield against the indignities of the present
and the dangers of the future. The passage, in effect, suggests
that the past's "best gift" somehow unfits one for full participation
in life; that the receiver of this gift must renounce the idea of full
participation in the present. If circumstances should force complete
personal involvement in life, one participates only at the risk of
dulling the finely balanced philosophic temperament and moral
curiosity that are characterized as those qualities that ennoble
"the sensuous enjoyment of the outward show of life."

Here, then, in her first novel is a clear statement of the
Whartonian hero's typical stance. He must, in the words applied to
a later character, be "in the show and yet outside of it."^ Most of

Edith Wharton's heroes share a sense of spectatorship which informs their view of all undertakings, including their own. The point is important because Edith Wharton experienced increasing difficulty in portraying such characters sympathetically. As we shall see, she finally found it necessary to create a hero who could act in an unselfconscious way. But her portrayal of Odo Valsecca provides a firm outline of such later heroes as Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer. The following description of Odo's nature as it relates to society could apply to any one of the three with equal validity: "'None was more open than he to the seducements of luxurious living, the polish of manners, the tacit exclusion of all that is ugly or distressing; but it seemed to him that fine living should be but the flower of fine feeling, and that such external graces, when they adorned a dull and vapid society, were as incongruous as the royal purple on a clown" (p. 150).

When Odo commits himself to the cause of the reformers, who masquerade under the innocuous label of the Honey-Bees, he is embarking on a course clearly inimical to his temperament. After establishing the extent of his commitment to the reform group, Edith Wharton inserts her own bitter commentary. Her remarks serve as a coda to the naiveté of the reformers' ideals and as a prelude to the futility of Odo's attempts to put into practice the theories he has learned: "'in those early days of universal illusion none appeared
to suspect the danger of arming inexperienced hands with untried weapons. Utopia was already in sight; and all the world was setting out for it as for some heavenly picnic ground" (p. 147).

In direct contrast to the revolutionary view of history is the conservatism espoused by the Abate Crescenti. Crescenti's thesis and Odo's reaction to it are crucial to the development not only of the novel but of Edith Wharton's whole career. Crescenti, a scholar, is explaining his pursuits to Odo:

"Such researches into the rude and uncivilized past seem to me as essential to the comprehension of the present as the mastering of the major premise to the understanding of a syllogism; and to those who reproach me for wasting my life over the chronicles of barbarian invasions and the records of monkish litigation, instead of contemplating the illustrious deeds of Greek sages and Roman heroes, I confidently reply that it is more useful to a man to know his own father's character than that of a remote ancestor. Even in this quiet retreat... I hear much talk of abuses and of the need for reform; and I often think that if they who rail so loudly against existing institutions would take the trouble to trace them to their source, and would, for instance, compare this state as it is to-day with its condition five hundred or a thousand years ago, instead of measuring it by the standard of some imaginary Platonic republic, they would find, if not less subject for complaint, yet fuller means of understanding and remedying the abuses they discover."

This view of history was one so new in the Abate Crescenti's day that it surprised Odo with the revelation of unsuspected possibilities. How was it that among the philosophers whose works he had studied, none had thought of tracing in the social and political tendencies of the race the germ of wrongs so confidently ascribed to the cunning of priests and the rapacity of princes? Odo listened with growing interest while Crescenti, encouraged by his questions, pointed out how the abuses of feudalism had arisen from the small landowner's need of protection against the northern invader, as the concentration of royal prerogative had been the outcome of the
King's intervention between his great vassals and the communes. The discouragement which had obscured Odo's outlook since his visit to Pontesordo was cleared away by the discovery that in a sympathetic study of the past might lie the secret of dealing with present evils. His imagination, taking the intervening obstacles at a bound, arrived at once at the general axiom to which such inductions pointed; and if he afterward learned that human development follows no such direct line of advance, but must painfully stumble across the wastes of error, prejudice and ignorance, while the theorizer traverses the same distance with a stroke of his speculative pinions; yet the influence of these teachings tempered his judgments with charity and dignified his very failures by a tragic sense of their inevitableness. (pp. 259-60)

The action of the novel validates the view that Crescenti expounds here, but the significance of his remarks extends beyond The Valley of Decision to include the whole of Edith Wharton's work. Crescenti's view is, in fact, the basis for the conflict in her novels between the individual and his society. Although some of the later novels suggest that she was moving toward a resolution of the conflict, she never fully achieved it. Certainly in those novels through The Age of Innocence the conflict became her major theme, but resolution was impossible because she held so tenaciously to the importance, which Crescenti's thesis illustrates, of traditions and conventions in the social structure.

Odo is the first of many protagonists to be caught in the paradox inherent in Edith Wharton's application of Crescenti's view. The society in which Odo finds himself is devoid of significance. The court is decadent, the clergy corrupt, and the whole of society...
apparently purposeless. "Duty, in that day, to people of quality, meant the observance of certain fixed conventions: the correct stepping of a moral minuet; as an inner obligation . . . it had hardly yet drawn breath" (pp. 120-21). To a person of Odo's temperament, which is characteristic of many later heroes, the aristocracy's life by rote offers nothing. He has no alternative other than to join the reform movement. But his alignment with the reformers constitutes a paradox in itself. Temperamentally unable to join in the round of meaningless activity of the aristocracy, he is forced--by personality, by society, by social injustice--to join a movement in which he is temperamentally unsuited to participate. The social abuses of the system call for widespread reform which inevitably means radical alteration of the established social traditions and conventions. Here, too, we see the paradox. The action that the reformers mean to undertake is diametrically opposed to conservatism that Crescenti presents. No matter that the existing social traditions and conventions hold little meaning for the imaginative sensibility, may in fact operate in such a way as to stifle creativity and perpetuate pain, they should not be overthrown by revolution. Change must come slowly, conservatively, organically--or else all history will fall down about one's head.

Crescenti's views are relevant to Edith Wharton's fiction in another way. It is easy to believe, as many do, that her work
evidences an exaggerated concern with decorative minutiae—the look of houses, the arrangement of furniture, the style of dress, the details of a picture or a dinner party. If only, the lament runs, she had been concerned with character rather than conduct, matter rather than manner, reality rather than appearance, perhaps she would have been a more rewarding writer than she is. But to take such a critical position is to overlook, if not to dismiss, all the ramifications that the conservative view of history had for her fiction. If such a view raised insoluble problems for Odo, and for later protagonists as well, it also provided Edith Wharton a technique admirably suited to the novelist of manners, enabling her to invest place with meaning merely by describing it, to comment on a scene simply by presenting it. Her most successful novels are those in which she allows the representation to carry her intent with a minimum of authorial intrusion. And finally, the conservative view of history explains why those characters who place high value on the past are the ones who possess the greatest potential.

Unfortunately, her strict advocacy of tradition and convention prevents characters with temperaments like Odo's, and there are many of them, from fulfilling their potential. They become examples of what Nevius calls "the trapped sensibility." Quoting from Edith Wharton, Nevius sees the trapped sensibility issuing from "'the immersion of the larger in the smaller nature,'"
he locates its emergence in *The Fruit of the Tree*, published in 1907. 5 Certain Nevius's sensitive study adds much to our understanding of Edith Wharton's fiction, but I would contend that we are able to appreciate the dilemma of the trapped sensibility as early as *The Valley of Decision*. Odo Valsecca is as truly trapped as any other Edith Wharton hero. His commitment to the liberals' vision of the future is, as we have seen, not a free choice; given the tone of his society and the nature of his temperament, he has no other alternative. The simple possession of imagination is usually enough in Edith Wharton's fiction, especially that through *The Age of Innocence*, to insure unhappiness. A person who possesses sensibilities is by definition trapped by them. It is true that unhappiness resulting from "the immersion of the larger in the smaller nature" is frequently present in Edith Wharton's novels, but usually it is a consequence of the larger issues of tradition and convention. And, again, *The Valley of Decision* provides an illustration of this point. Odo is attracted to Fulvia Vivaldi, the daughter of the reform leader. She is a dogmatic liberal whose narrowness of vision proves so restrictive to his larger, more sensitive nature that it results in the shattering of his will. But because Fulvia is so clearly the spokesman of the new age, it would be misleading to see her as the

ensnaring smaller nature. By the end of the novel, she herself regrets having been "the embodiment of a single thought--a formula, rather than a woman" (p. 566). The characterization of Fulvia is instructive precisely because it is so wooden and unfeeling. If she were a woman rather than a formula we might cast her in the role of the ensnaring smaller nature, and we would be wrong to do so.

When Odo finally assumes the dukedom, he falls prey to the "moral lassitude" (p. 501) that is to infect many later heroes. Under his generally ineffectual rule popular dissent grows. He draws up a new constitution designed to benefit the people, but on the day of its proclamation, Fulvia is shot and killed by an angry crowd incited to riot by resentful nobility. His tenuous control is quickly overthrown, and he leaves Pianura.

The final Book, ironically entitled "The Reward," is clearly the novel's most important section because it brings into direct confrontation the conflicting forces of reform and tradition. Here we see the contending sides in what Edith Wharton would have us accept as their true colors: the reformers become anarchists and the traditionalists emerge as the only hope for true reform. She warms to her task when she sketches in the historical background and the consequences of the revolutionary movement:

... in France, Europe was trying to solve at a stroke the problems of a thousand years. All the repressed passions which civilization had sought, however imperfectly, to curb, stalked abroad destructive as flood and fire. (p. 643)
The new year rose in blood and mounted to a bloodier noon. All the old defences were falling. Religion, monarchy, law, were sucked down into the whirlpool of liberated passions. Across that sanguinary scene passed, like a mocking ghost, the philosophers' vision of the perfectibility of man. Man was free at last—freer than his would-be liberators had ever dreamed of making him—and he used his freedom like a beast. (p. 647)

This scene of civilization in chaos forces Odo to drop his cultural dualism and turn against the cause he had attempted to forward. Before he is overthrown, his view of himself as monarch is that of a puppet acting out the inevitable. "The ideas he had striven for had triumphed at last, and his surest hold on authority was to share openly in their triumph. A profound horror dragged him back. The new principles were not those for which he had striven. The goddess of the new worship was but a bloody Maenad who had borrowed the attributes of freedom" (p. 649). The course of events has demonstrated to Odo the validity of Crescenti's conservative view of history and social change, for it embodies what the novel proclaims as an immutable truth of human experience.

He was beginning to feel the social and political significance of those old restrictions and barriers against which his early zeal had tilted. Certainly in the ideal state the rights and obligations of the different classes would be more evenly adjusted. But the ideal state was a figment of the brain. The real one, as Crescenti had long ago pointed out, was the gradual and heterogeneous product of remote social conditions, wherein every seeming inconsistency had its roots in some bygone need, and the character of each class, with its special passions, ignorances and prejudices, was the sum total of influences so ingrown and inveterate that they had become a law of thought. (p. 636)
Odo's reflections on the necessity of tradition and convention anticipate those of other characters who follow him; they also corroborate Nevius's statement that "it is impossible not to define the 'atmosphere' of The Valley of Decision as one of disillusionment with the possibilities of human nature freed from the discipline of a stable social hierarchy and the manners of an established culture."^6

The novel concludes on a curiously ambiguous note. After leaving Pianura, Odo stops at the chapel of Pontesordo where he is stirred by "a reaching out, obscure and inarticulate, toward all that had survived of his early hopes and faiths, a loosening of old founts of pity, a longing to be somehow, somewhere reunited to his old belief in life. . . . He went forth into the daybreak and rode away toward Piedmont" (pp. 655-56). And with this, the novel concludes. Although his emergence into the new day has hopeful overtones, as does his movement toward Piedmont, one cannot believe that his future holds much hope. The uncertain world which he sets out to meet—and for which, Edith Wharton wants us to understand, he is partially responsible—has only one refuge for him. We have only a glimpse of it in the description of Sir William Hamilton's circle in Naples. Here Odo is freed from the present and caught up in

^6Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 50.
the researches into the past. In that "small circle of chosen spirits gathered at the villa Hamilton" (p. 358), Odo Valsecca finds his proper milieu. In this respect he again anticipates many later protagonists whose spiritual home is the drawing-room. Odo is different only in that society supplies him, briefly, with the genuine article—Hamilton's salon. Later characters living in less cultured societies, whose "chosen spirits" are less discriminating and more provincial than those surrounding Hamilton, must create for themselves some kind of imaginative equivalent: Selden's "republic of the spirit," Marvell's attraction to art, Archer's library.

That Edith Wharton was forty by the time The Valley of Decision was published may explain why her first novel incorporates the concerns and establishes the prototype of the heroes characteristic of her best-known work. She was later to deny its status as a novel, describing it rather as "only a romantic chronicle, unrolling its episodes like the frescoed legends on the palace-walls which formed its background."7 That is probably as good a description as any, but whatever the case, novel or "romantic chronicle," The Valley of Decision does indeed set the tone for what was to follow.

With The House of Mirth (1905) Edith Wharton begins her exploration of New York society. She recounts her difficulty in getting

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7A Backward Glance, p. 205.
her subject in perspective. She feared that New York society might prove to be one of those

... subjects too shallow to yield anything to the most searching gaze. I had always felt this, and now my problem was how to make use of a subject--fashionable New York--which, of all others, seemed most completely to fall within the condemned category. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility. ...

The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. 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. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. 8

The power with which she depicts Lily Bart's downward drift from her precarious place among the very rich to her solitary death in a shabby boarding-house completely justifies both choice and treatment of the subject.

Like Odo, Lily is superior to her society, but she differs from him in that there is no clear reason for her superiority. In this respect, she is Edith Wharton's first example of a protagonist who by some innate goodness of character rises above both background and circumstance. Typically, her finer sensibilities insure her tragedy. The child of a domineering mother whose only pleasure is a frenetic and expensive social life and a "neutral-tinted father"

8 Ibid., pp. 206-7.
who "filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks," Lily completely lacks any sense of tradition. The only wisdom she has gained from her homelife is summarized in her mother's "last adjuration to her daughter . . . to escape dinginess if she could" (p. 55).

With the deaths of her father and then her mother, Lily is taken by her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, whose role in the novel is two-fold. As long as she lives, she offers haven for Lily and, more importantly, by her mere presence holds the prospect of real wealth for Lily who, it is generally assumed, will be the chief beneficiary of her aunt's estate. Technically, then, her presence is necessary to preserve the hope that Lily will be able to gain the money she increasingly needs to prevent destruction at the hands of her predatory friends. Additionally, Mrs. Peniston serves a cultural role in the novel's alignment of social classes. Older than the other characters of equal social eminence, she displays little knowledge and less liking of the behavior that characterizes their conduct. "She belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else; and to these inherited obligations Mrs. Peniston faithfully conformed. She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one of those little mirrors

9 The House of Mirth (New York, 1905), p. 45. All references are to this edition.
which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening on the street" (p. 58). Lily learns that attempting to bring her aunt "into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture which had been screwed to the floor" (p. 59). As the portrayal of Mrs. Peniston suggests, the old New York culture is quite outmoded by the turn of the century, the approximate time of the novel's setting. But in her dull, narrow, and unrelenting regard for correctness we see a prefiguration of the fuller treatment that Edith Wharton was to accord to such individuals in future novels.

Lily's hope for deliverance from Mrs. Peniston's dour haven is dependent on her ability to marry into the moneyed society of her friends. She is prevented from doing so for two reasons. Because she instinctively possesses finer moral sensibilities than do the other members of her set, she cannot bring the resolve to her purpose that she must if she is to succeed. In her effort to attract a wealthy husband she must be willing to accept and act on the standards of her morally inferior friends if she is to gain the sanctuary that money and position will grant. In this respect she is another example of the trapped protagonist, trapped by her own sensibilities. A second reason for her failure to achieve success is found in the person of Lawrence Selden. Not wealthy enough to
offer the luxurious life she has been taught is hers by right, Selden, by his mere presence, serves to remind Lily of the unacceptability of the eligible members of her own set. His appearances in the novel inevitably foreshadow a reversal in Lily's fortunes.

The trajectory of Lily's social decline is traceable through her alignment with the various families and individuals the novel presents. The Trenors are the most prestigious of the lot. Lily's dependence on them is repaid by her acting, when needed, as Judy Trenor's social secretary, a role, though never explicitly dictated, that she expected to fill in return for favors received. Lily complies readily, for in her "utilitarian classification of her friends, Mrs. Trenor ranked as the woman who was least likely to 'go back' on her" (p. 64). Gus Trenor is a wealthy boor whose money derives from his dealings in the stock market. Both his personal coarseness and his market maneuvers are indicative of the distance, if not in time at least in spirit, that separates his society from that of old New York from which he is descended. The occasion that evokes the single manifestation of his old New York inheritance serves only to indicate how far removed from it he is. Lily has unwisely asked him for advice on the market; he invests for her in return for which he wants to engage Lily in an affair, "to pay up" (p. 235) as he puts it. He is restrained from forcing his will only by "Old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order" (p. 237).
The Dorsets follow the Trenors in social importance and constitute a kind of counterpoint to them. In Judy Trenor "success had developed . . . an unscrupulous good nature toward the rest of her sex" (p. 64), but success has not worked any such amelioration in Bertha Dorset's nature. She "delights in making people miserable" (p. 70). Gus Trenor and George Dorset are likewise contrasting figures. Gruff, loud, and vulgar, Trenor is at least an imposing physical presence. Dorset is a mere cipher, the attendant shadow to his wife's brilliance. Mrs. Dorset especially dislikes Lily because she recognizes the attraction Lily holds for Selden who has only recently ended an affair with Mrs. Dorset. She invites Lily to join her and her husband on a Mediterranean cruise, intending to use Lily to divert her bland husband's attention while she herself pursues affairs with other men. When the recklessness of her behavior offends even Mr. Dorset, she deftly shifts all blame to Lily, implying that Lily has designs on Mr. Dorset. Her actions and allegations against Lily result in Mrs. Peniston's cutting her inheritance drastically and in Judy Trenor's dropping her.

Expelled from the upper reaches of society, Lily catches on first with the Brys and then the Gormers, both parvenu families. She is unable to stay long with either family because their social pretensions make it expedient for them to drop her. She then becomes the social secretary of Norma Hatch, a wealthy divorcee
from the West, who hopes to further her social aspirations in New York. Each move—from the Brys to the Gormers and finally to Mrs. Hatch—places Lily farther down the social scale.

After a visit from Selden, she leaves Mrs. Hatch to sink into the impoverished life of a hat-trimmer. Her condition is now the distillation of the dinginess she has tried so ineffectually to escape. Poverty itself is not so great a threat to her as the disintegrating loneliness she experiences. Her final days are marked by a sense "of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence" (p. 515). Edith Wharton makes clear that this feeling is simply the culmination of her traditionless past:

\[\ldots\] as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any personal existence to shelter them from its shifting gusts. She herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (p. 516)

Little more than two years after enjoying the security she thought she had found in Judy Trenor's favor, Lily Bart dies alone in her room, an accidental suicide from an overdose of a sleeping drug.
Of the individuals not distinctly aligned with the novel’s social groupings, none plays a more important part in Lily’s life than Lawrence Selden. One of Edith Wharton’s most interesting characters, Selden deserves close attention as the first fully realized example of a type whose importance to Edith Wharton’s novels can hardly be overestimated. Handsome, sensitive, and imaginative, he is so clearly the intellectual superior of the other characters that the reader wants to believe in him, to see him as the novel’s moral center. But to place any faith in Selden is a monumental mistake. He suffers from the inaction syndrome characteristics of many Whartonian heroes. Its first manifestation is the “moral lassitude” that overcame Odo Valsecca when he could least afford it. But Odo had at least acted. With Selden the affliction is in its more advanced stages, and he preserves himself from the consequences of action by declining to act at all. The best one can say of him is that he lacks a society commensurate with his sensibilities. His spiritual home is clearly old New York where his chronic inaction and dilettantism could have attained to the style characteristic of the society itself. The point is important because he foreshadows Edith Wharton’s other hypersensitive American males whose fate it is to live after the age of innocence. Those who follow bear the deficiencies embodied in Selden and suggested in Odo. Selden is inadequate to his times; he is no match for the novel’s more vital characters whose
very crassness is a sign of their energy. Although he can move
on the periphery of their society, can have an affair with Bertha
Dorset (but who could not?), he is in no way fitted to compete on
their terms. He lies to leeward of the crowd, watching, judging,
but never acting.

Selden tells Lily that his idea of success is "personal
freedom," an all-inclusive freedom from "everything—from money,
from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents.
To keep a kind of republic of the spirit—that's what I call success"
(p. 108). But Selden's republic is a private preserve that admits
no one but himself. Even his attitude of superiority toward Lily's
friends is unearned, for when independent judgment is crucial he
depends on that of her society. When he doubts the propriety of her
conduct with Trenor and then again with Dorset, he in fact is swayed
by the majority view. His affair with Bertha Dorset, though ended,
likewise casts doubt on the validity of his assumed superiority.
Finally, however, it is his failure to act that is most condemning.

In one of the novel's central scenes—the Brys' party—we
discover the relation between art and inaction manifested in Selden
and every future character like him. In a move to establish themselves
socially, the Brys had decided to give a general entertainment with
all the money at their disposal, and "had decided that tableaux vivants
and expensive music were the two baits most likely to attract the
desired prey" (p. 210). Selden is there; "he enjoyed spectacular
effects, and was not insensible to the part money plays in their pro-
duction; all he asked was that the very rich should live up to their
calling as stage-managers, and not spend their money in a dull way"
(p. 212). Selden is equipped as no one else in the audience to
appreciate the spectacle that money can produce:

Tableaux vivants depend for their effect not only on the happy
disposal of lights and the delusive interposition of layers of
gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision.
To unfurnished minds they remain, in spite of every enhance-
ment of art, only a superior kind of wax-works; but to the
responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary
world between fact and imagination. Selden's mind was of this
order: he could yield to vision-making influences as com-
pletely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale. Mrs. Bry's
tableaux wanted none of the qualities which go to the producing
of such illusions. . . . (pp. 214-15)

Lily's tableau of Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd" genuinely moves Selden.
"The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace,
revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt
in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her.
Its expression was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed
to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of
her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal
harmony of which her beauty was a part." But Ned Van Alstyne,
"whose scented white moustache had brushed Selden's shoulder when-
ever the parting of the curtains presented any exceptional opportunity
for the study of the female outline," voices society's view when he
remarks, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gadj, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" The observation wakes in Selden . . . only a motion of indignant contempt. This was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured! Does one go to Caliban for a judgment on Miranda? In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again. (pp. 217-18)

But when the artistic moment passes, Selden's longings are no longer overmastering, and he reverts to the emotional isolation of his republic of the spirit. In this reversion Selden sets the pattern. As long as human situations can be transmuted to art, the Whartonian hero is aquiver with expansive sympathies, but when unmasked life confronts him he retreats to the safety of his books, his pictures, his wine—anything in short, that will demand no more than his appreciative attention. So true is this, that whenever one finds metaphors drawn from art to characterize relationships between individuals, he can be certain that trouble is in the offing.

Odo Valsecca shows us that action for such a temperament as both he and Selden share leads to disaster; Selden shows us that inaction can produce a similar result. By the time he can bring himself to resolve his doubts and marry Lily, she is dead.
The House of Mirth represents a great advance over The Valley of Decision primarily because Edith Wharton manages to personalize the issues leading to Lily's entrapment; for Odo such issues as reform or preservation of the social order remain on such a large scale as to appear as little more than abstractions.

The Custom of the Country (1913) continues the investigation of New York society, but in this novel Edith Wharton approaches her subject from a different angle. In The House of Mirth her depiction of such parvenu families as the Brys and the Gormers was condescendingly tolerant because the society they longed to enter was, in her view, already thoroughly degenerate. She can afford them lenient treatment because there is nothing of worth left for them to destroy. The Trenors and Dorsets have attended to that. The Custom of the Country presents a far different picture of her treatment of the parvenu. Undine Spragg of Apex City, the newcomer to New York, is clearly the enemy. She constitutes a greater threat than the Brys and the Gormers ever could because in The Custom of the Country there is greater evidence of old New York society than is the case in The House of Mirth. There is, then, more of value in the society for Undine to destroy than there was for the Brys and the Gormers. The latter could evoke in Edith Wharton the amused superiority that characterizes her treatment of them, but Undine is not so much an object for her creator's amusement as she is for her fear. The
Brys and Gormers are merely comic in their elaborate imitation of the Trenors' and Dorsets' frivolities. But there is nothing funny about Undine; in a quite literal sense she is all business, bringing to her conquest of the social world the same shrewd and ruthless tactics that her male counterparts have employed to gain dominance in the business world.10

Undine's social ascent finds its parallel in Elmer Moffatt's rise to power in Wall Street. Like Undine, Moffatt comes from Apex. Because their separate careers are really one, from their early and secret marriage to their remarriage at the end of the novel, they represent Edith Wharton's parable of what had happened to the United States. (That Undine's initials equate her with the country itself, is, I think, hardly accidental.) They embody the American spirit. As such, they represent Edith Wharton's blanket condemnation on the custom of the country that produced them.

Undine's marriage to Ralph Marvell, her first for the public record, is on the surface of it, as unlikely as it is ill-fated. Their marriage is the first presentation attendant on the commingling of the two "blood lines," pioneer and old New York, used to distinguish many of Edith Wharton's characters. Pioneer blood—and apparently

10For a discussion of the way in which the business morality corrupts the entire fabric of society in Edith Wharton's novels, especially The Custom of the Country, see Michael Millgate, American Social Fiction (New York, 1964), pp. 54-66, 115-16.
it was Edith Wharton's view that anyone from west of the Hudson possessed it--fits one for boldness of action, but renders its possessor incapable of taste, discrimination, sensibility--in short, of all the ameliorating influences of civilization. Old New York blood provides just the opposite characteristics, a quick sense of nicety and nuance coupled with an incapacity to act firmly. Although there are exceptions, the deficiencies of pioneer blood are almost always found in the female, while those of old New York blood are most evident in the male line. When the two blood lines are mixed, the result is disastrous for the old New York type, provided it is found in the male character. The "pioneer blood in Undine would not let her rest."\(^\text{11}\) Ralph's old New York blood will permit him to do scarcely anything else.

Until his meeting with Undine, Ralph Marvell's life has been prosaically typical. Educated at the best schools, he has taken the European tour expected of young men of similar class and circumstance. He joins "the respectable firm in whose charge the Dagonet estate had mouldered for several generations. But his profession was the least real thing in his life" (pp. 74-75). He wants to be a writer, but his attempts at writing are all unfinished. He lacks the creative energy to bring his projects to completion.

\(^\text{11}\)The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), p. 56. All references are to this edition.
His dilettantism and appreciation of art combined with his inability to complete what he undertakes strongly suggest that he is cut from the same cloth as Selden. Naturally, he is attracted to Undine, finding in her blunt manner the vigor that his own low-keyed milieu lacks. He feels Undine is different from the other "Invaders" because neither she nor her parents make "retrospective pretense of an opulent past, such as the other Invaders were given to parading before the bland but undeceived subject race" (p. 81). He believes that he will be able to lead her to an acceptance of the values he himself holds. He also wants to save her from the seductions of Peter Van Degen, a millionaire whose wealth is exceeded only by his vulgarity. In her newness, Undine has mistaken the Van Degen set for the pinnacle of New York society, an understandable lapse in a young woman who has been named after "a hair-waver [her] father put on the market the week she was born" (p. 80). In saving her, he believes he will be saving himself from the limitations of his own class. Until the appearance of Undine, his own marriage prospects had been limited to Harriet Ray, an old New York type, whose most firmly held principle is never, upon her own marriage, to receive a divorced woman in her home. Although Ralph recognizes Undine's "crudity and her limitations," he sees them as signs "of a quicker response to the world's manifold appeal" than Miss Ray is ever likely to evince. "There was Harriet Ray, sealed up tight in
the vacuum of inherited opinion, where not a breath of fresh
sensation could get at her: there could be no call to rescue young
ladies so secured from the perils of reality!" (p. 83). In contrast,
he sees Undine as "a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the de-
vouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her;
and himself whirling down on his winged horse--just Pegasus
turned Rosinante for the nonce--to cut her bonds, snatch her up,
and whirl her back into the blue" (p. 84). Typically, the metaphor
used to characterize his rescue of Undine from Van Degenism
signals future trouble for the would-be rescuer.

Ralph Marvell's major difficulty is clearly that experienced
by his predecessors; he too lacks a proper society. He cannot bring
himself to accept his own class completely because he recognizes
that it does not, as he believes Undine does, respond to the "world's
manifold appeal." But at the same time, he cannot dismiss the
values of his class because he finds them preferable to the frivolity
and vulgarity of the Van Degen set who have replaced the Dagonets
and the Marvells as the arbiters of social taste. Nowhere in Edith
Wharton's fiction is the ethos of old New York society more clearly
evoked than in Ralph Marvell's realization of the "rightness" of his
class. Returning to his grandfather's home after spending an evening
with society's favorite portrait painter, Popple, who tailors his art
to the prevailing vulgarities, Ralph
looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar human face.

"They're right,—after all, in some ways they're right," he murmured, slipping his key into the door.

"They" were his mother and old Mr. Urban Dagonet, both, from Ralph's earliest memories, so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form; and the question as to which the house now seemed to affirm their intrinsic rightness was that of the social disintegration expressed by widely-different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue.

Ralph sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race. He was fond of describing Washington Square as the "Reservation," and of prophesying that before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries.

Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up its modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be "modern," had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what there was to be said on the other side—his side, as he now felt it to be. (pp. 72-74)

The elegiac tone of the passage suggests that, however admirable its values and coherent its style, the class itself is irretrievably gone. Throughout the novel, allusions to the Dagonet-Marvell way of life underscore its anachronistic quality. His marriage to Undine provides Ralph a perspective from which he can view the limitations of the old New Yorkers who have outlived their time. While Undine sports in the luxury hotels of Europe, he stays in
New York, working in a futile attempt to meet her financial demands. During this interval

... now and then Miss Ray came to dine, and Ralph, seated beneath the family portraits and opposite the desiccated Harriet, who had already faded to the semblance of one of her own great-aunts, listened languidly to the kind of talk that the originals might have exchanged about the same table when New York gentility centred in the Battery and the Bowling Green. Mr. Dagonet was always pleasant to see and hear, but his sarcasms were growing faint and recondite: they had as little bearing on life as the humours of a Restoration comedy. As for Mrs. Marvell and Miss Ray, they seemed to the young man even more spectrally remote: hardly anything that mattered to him existed for them, and their prejudices reminded him of sign-posts warning off trespassers who have long since ceased to intrude. (pp. 311-12)

When the family learn of Undine's desire for a divorce, their reaction is the epitome of the old New Yorkers' desire to avoid the "unpleasant." "There was no provision for such emergencies in the moral order of Washington Square. The affair was a 'scandal,' and it was not in the Dagonet tradition to acknowledge the existence of scandals" (p. 336). Mr. Dagonet reacts with a quixotic romanticism that prefigures Arthur Wyant's behavior in *Twilight Sleep*. All that Mr. Dagonet asked "was that his grandson should 'thrash' somebody, and he could not be made to understand that the modern drama of divorce is sometimes cast without a Lovelace" (p. 337).

Ralph allows the suit to go uncontested, thinking that Undine will not want to be burdened with their child, Paul. But when it suits her purpose, Undine insists that the boy be returned
to her, and Ralph realizes the error in not contesting the divorce out of deference to "the old family catchwords, the full and elaborate vocabulary of evasion: 'delicacy,' 'pride,' 'personal dignity,' 'preferring not to know about such things!'" (p. 436). But as his anger "against the influences that had reduced him to such weakness" subsides, "he saw that the weakness was innate in him. He had been eloquent enough, in his free youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came to show his contempt for them they had mysteriously mastered him, deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing" (p. 437). When he learns from Moffatt of Undine's first, secret marriage, his outrage cannot find expression. It "died out and left him face to face with the uselessness, the irrelevance of all the old attitudes of appropriation and defiance. He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in mediaeval armour . . . the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him!" (p. 469). His fatal attraction to pioneer blood ends in his suicide.

Undine's marriage to Raymond de Chelles, a French nobleman, provides a contrast to her marriage to Marvell. Chelles is no better equipped financially to meet her extravagant demands than was Marvell, but, instead of bowing to her every whim, Chelles manages to retain control. His ability to do so results from his nationality. The Custom of the Country is the first of Edith Wharton's
novels to hold up French ways as the epitome of a civilized style.
The traditions and conventions that Chelles adheres to are both more open and more practical than those of old New York which Marvell can neither enforce nor dismiss. Above all, the French style that Chelles embodies is not vitiated by a refusal to deal with the unpleasant or the "scandalous," the existence of which the old New Yorkers steadfastly decline to acknowledge.

The remarriage of Undine and Elmer Moffat at the end of the novel is simply the logical culmination of both their careers and the triumph of passionless vulgarism on a grand scale. It functions as the ironic justification of the spirit that gives the novel its name. Charles Bowen, an intimate of the Marvells and Dagonets, at one point declares that the trouble with American marriages is "the fact that the average American looks down on his wife" (p. 205). His doing so results from his business mentality; he works hard to lavish increasingly expensive gifts on her, but he never takes her into his confidence. The average wife responds with aggrieved boredom when confronted by details of business because any other response is "against the custom of the country" (p. 206). European women, Bowen continues, escape the same fate because they share in their husbands' interests. But in America "the real crime passionnel is a 'big steal'--there's more excitement in wrecking railways than homes" (p. 207). Moffatt's willingness to watch, with
apparently no more passion than one would expect of a detached bystander, Undine's successive marriages and intermittent affairs while he amasses a fortune in railroads fully supports Bowen's observations. And Undine's expectation that her husbands will content themselves with supplying her with everything their money can buy underscores Bowen's judgment that "she's a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph" (p. 208).

Another measure of the social degeneration Edith Wharton is portraying in the novel is found in the dismal state of art. Diana Trilling sees in The House of Mirth a "parallel . . . between Lily's defeat and the inevitable defeat of art in a crass culture."\(^{12}\) The same thesis is even more demonstrably true in The Custom of the Country. Claud Walsingham Popple, the first person to catch Undine's attention, is the artist for the tasteless rich. He owes his reputation to the fact that one of his wealthy patrons, "who returning from an excursion into other fields of portraiture, had given it as the final fruit of his experience that Popple was the only man who could 'do pearls!'" (p. 187). Popple's success is a sure sign of the low level of public taste.

Ralph Marvell serves as a contrast to Popple. Marvell, we are led to believe, possesses real potential as a writer, but, as we have seen, he lacks the ability to complete any of his literary efforts. He is given to lying "in wait for adjectives" (p. 146). His old New York blood denies him the necessary energies to sustain his creative impulses. Marvell's failure as a writer necessitates Edith Wharton's choice of Vance Weston as the character to whom she entrusts the role of the novelist in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*.

The novel's most ironic commentary on the relationship between the fallen state of the arts and the corresponding social disintegration is reserved for the career of Elmer Moffatt. After gaining a fortune, Moffatt accumulates a great art collection. To his credit, Moffatt can respond to art, but generally his collecting is simply another aspect of his business affairs. At any given moment he can thrust "his aesthetic emotions . . . back into their own compartment of the great steel strong-box of his mind" (p. 564). His collection is simply one of many possessions whereby he validates his position and power; it has little meaning beyond this.

In *The Custom of the Country* Edith Wharton makes clear that old New York society, though middle-class in origin and aspiration, had adopted a feudal structure to express its sense of exclusiveness and to preserve itself from the vulgarity it invariably
associated with great wealth. It fails in both its aims. Its exclusiveness is by the time of the novel's action merely pathetic, and the society is easy prey for the determined assault of such people as Undine Spragg. Its exclusiveness and its downfall are related. Undine realizes that her error in marrying Marvell

... had been based on the myth of "old families" ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But experience had long since proved the delusiveness of the simile. Mrs. Marvell's classification of the world into the visited and the unvisited was as obsolete as a mediaeval cosmogony. Some of those whom Washington Square left unvisited were the centre of social systems far outside its ken, and as indifferent to its opinions as the constellations to the reckonings of the astronomers... (p. 193)

What *The Custom of the Country* poses concerning old New York society and the one that replaced it forms the central dilemma of Edith Wharton's fiction. We have earlier seen in Ralph Marvell's recognition of the "rightness" of the Marvell-Dagonet way of life what is unquestionably Edith Wharton's own view. Likewise, there can be no doubt that the various indications of old New York's failures, which hasten its conquest by the likes of Undine and Elmer, are also expressive of Edith Wharton's view. The paradox lies in the fact that inherent in the "rightness" of old New York's social code are the weaknesses and limitations that hastened its downfall. Edith Wharton was never able to resolve the paradox that gains its first full expression in this novel.
Although a far more successful work than *The Valley of Decision*, *The Custom of the Country* barely escapes one of the first novel's most serious faults. Just as the issues that engage Odo become little more than abstract generalizations concerning human conduct, *The Custom of the Country*'s panorama of the rise of one class and the fall of another verges dangerously close to the perils of generality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the characterization of Undine. What was said of Fulvia Vivaldi's being a formula rather than a woman might also be said, with near equal appropriateness, of Undine. As the novel progresses she becomes so clearly a force rather than a person that her credibility is in every way diminished.

*The Age of Innocence* (1920) provides an illustration of Edith Wharton's capabilities when they were brought to bear on the limited society of old New York. A study in social cohesion rather than disintegration, the novel presents a clearer focus on the issues that have engaged her previously. Certainly, the characterization of the dilettantish protagonist, Newland Archer, his relation to society, and his sense of entrapment are familiar enough. What,

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13R. B. Dooley, "A Footnote to Edith Wharton," *American Literature*, XXVI (1954-5.), 78-85. Dooley argues that the authenticity of *The Age of Innocence* results from Edith Wharton's drawing some of the characters from life, and he suggests identities for several of them.
in addition to its more limited scope, distinguishes *The Age of Innocence* from the earlier work is that, for once, the hero does not lack a proper society.

The opening scene at the old Academy of Music during the early 1870's establishes the tone of the society and Edith Wharton's satiric treatment of it. The society's most apparent characteristics are its smug complacency and its lively regard for correctness. And in all things Archer is, at the outset of the novel, at one with his society. Its assumptions and conventions are his. That the "unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences . . . seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded" gives an adequate understanding of how thoroughly Archer has been shaped by convention. Although he considers himself on matters intellectual and artistic the superior of others in his set, he respects them because "grouped together they represented 'New York,' and the habit of masculine solidarity made him accept their doctrines on all the issues called moral" (p. 6). His attempt to break away from the accepted social conventions provides the novel's conflict.

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14 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York, 1950), p. 3. All references are to this edition.
His placid love for May Welland represents his acceptance of the prevailing social ethos, for she is as much a product of her own society as Undine Spragg is of her own. The sight of May at the opera fills Archer with the anticipated pleasures he believes marriage to her would bring. "'We'll read Faust together... by the Italian lakes..." he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honey-moon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride" (p. 5). Drawing as it does on literary allusion the image of Archer's expectations indicates that he is subject to the same limitation and vacillation typical of those characters we have earlier seen who view life through the veil of art. Similarly, the image signals trouble awaiting Archer.

Seated with May is Ellen Olenska, her cousin who has escaped, under vague but suspicious circumstances, from an unhappy marriage with a Polish nobleman. She has returned to the shelter of New York propriety. Her appearance in itself suggests that she embodies the experience that May so clearly lacks. Together, the two present a tableau of innocence and experience. Her unexpected reappearance in New York leads to Archer's gradual examination and rejection of all his former assumptions, especially the wisdom of his projected marriage to May. But, like Ralph Marvell, Archer is so bound by the old New York "ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant'"
(p. 23) that he continues to profess his love for May long after he has ceased to feel it. Even when she offers to free him from the obligation to marry her, an indication that she is no more bound by the social code than is he, he insists on an early marriage. The marriage only confirms that May, like Harriet Ray in The Custom of the Country, is hermetically sealed against any broader view of life than that with which her society has provided her. Archer resolves to leave her, hoping to join Ellen, who has returned to Europe. At a strategic moment May announces her pregnancy, and Archer resigns himself to a life of adherence to duty, convention, and innocence.

His attempted revolt takes place against a detailed presentation of the society he successively admires, rejects, and finally accepts. "The New York of Newland Archer's day was a small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained. At its base was a firm foundation of what Mrs. Archer called 'plain people'; an honourable but obscure majority of respectable families who . . . had been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans" (p. 46). Even though the social pyramid may appear strong enough, its fragility is apparent in the families who form its apex: the Dagonets, the Lannings, now reduced to only two old maids "who lived cheerfully and reminiscently among family portraits and Chippendale," and the van der Luydens who "had faded into a kind of super-terrestrial
twilight" (p. 47). With the exception of the Dagonets, whose sad fate we know from The Custom of the Country, the ruling families are old and childless. Henry and Louisa van der Luydens' lifelessness presents a telling commentary on the society over which they preside. Mrs. van der Luyden "struck Newland Archer as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years a rosy life-in-death" (p. 50). Mr. van der Luyden's patronship of their estate, Skuytercliff, is put in its perspective when we see his "bloodless hand weighed down by the Patroon's great signet-ring" (p. 88). The role that these two "faded figures" must serve as the "mouth-pieces of some remote ancestral authority which fate compelled them to wield" (p. 52) again indicates the insufficiency of old New York's feudal structure.

Although the twilight of its social gods, such as the van der Luydens, is the clearest evidence of the society's imminent demise, there are other signs of its weakness in the presence of such widely varied figures as Sillerton Jackson and Julius Beaufort. Jackson, old New York's authority on "Family," has made a fine art of gossip. His mere existence is testimony of the society's inbred nature. Its focus is turned intently inward, but because it is collectively too genteel to examine itself openly it must avert its glance even from its own workings, content to rely on Sillerton Jackson's account
of itself. The society's combination of intense curiosity and polite
aversion necessitates the presence of such a character. In this sense,
he is both society's diagnostician and a symptom of its disease. At
the other extreme is Julius Beaufort, a banker whose mysterious
antecedents and shadowy financial practices tinge society's acceptance
of him with nervous regard. But he is nonetheless accepted. He
openly parades his extra-marital relationship with Fanny Ring before
society which, in its desire to avoid the unpleasant, obligingly looks
the other way. Not until he is indisputably involved in financial
scandal does society ostracize him, for "New York was inexorable
in its condemnation of business irregularities." But even in its
expulsion of the Beauforts, Fifth Avenue reveals its growing depen-
dence on Wall Street: "to be obliged to offer them up would be not
only painful but inconvenient. The disappearance of the Beauforts
would leave a considerable void in their compact little circle; and
those who were too ignorant or too careless to shudder at the moral
catastrophe bewailed in advance the loss of the best ball-room in
New York" (p. 271).

Ned Winsett, Archer's journalist friend, locates the weak-
ness of old New York society in its lack of interest in anything but
itself. "Winsett was not a journalist by choice. He was a pure man
of letters, untimely born in a world that had no need of letters"(p. 122).
He upbraids Archer as a representative gentleman of old New York
for not involving himself in the vital functionings of society, and he suggests that Archer and those like him should go into politics. When Archer indicates that the day for "decent people" in politics has long passed and that their only resort was "to fall back on sport or culture," Winsett exclaims.

"Culture! Yes—if we had it! But there are just a few little local patches, dying out here and there for lack of—well, hoeing and cross-fertilising: the last remnants of the old European tradition that your forebears brought with them. But you're in a pitiful little minority: you've got no centre, no competition, no audience. You're like the pictures on the walls of a deserted house: 'The Portrait of a Gentleman.' You'll never amount to anything, any of you, till you roll up your sleeves and get right down into the muck. . . ." (p. 124)

The truth of Winsett's remarks evidences itself repeatedly in the later novels in the characterizations of such figures as Arthur Wyant, Stanley Heuston, and Lewis Tarrant.

Although signs of its disintegration are much in evidence, the society is still capable of concerted action when it deems it necessary. In addition to the expulsion of Beaufort, there are two other clear examples of the society's ability to form a united front. Appropriately for a society given over to staid entertainment, both occasions are formal dinner parties. Together, they provide a frame for Archer's relationship with Ellen Olenska. The social upstarts who had refused an invitation to a Mingott dinner for Ellen are brought to heel by the van der Luydens, who sponsor a dinner
that validates Ellen's re-entry into old New York. Archer's attraction to Ellen has its beginning at the van der Luyden dinner. It is effectively terminated at May's farewell dinner for Ellen, which "in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (p. 337). It is not until the midst of the dinner itself that Archer realizes the purpose of the dinner is to teach him the lesson he had earlier seen the van der Luydens give to would-be nonconformists: "It was the old New York way of taking life 'without effusion of blood': the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes,' except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them" (p. 338).

Its ability to act in concert to enforce its values distinguishes Archer's society from that of the earlier protagonists we have seen. Although he feels the entrapment common to his kind, his final acceptance of society's dictates is not entirely bitter. The society is, to be sure, confiningly narrow, but it is decent, and, above all, it avoids the moral chaos that Edith Wharton saw as the condition of modern life. Newland Archer is incomparably better situated than either Lily Bart or Ralph Marvell, for example.

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15 For a view that equates the destructive power of New York in The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and The
The novel's final chapter serves as a coda to the action. It takes place after a time lapse of nearly thirty years. Archer's children are grown, and he is alone, May having died some time before. His life, we learn, has been useful if undistinguished.

"His days were full, and they were filled decently," and his marriage has kept "the dignity of a duty." He reflects that "there was good in the old ways" (p. 350). A review of the shape his children's lives are taking assures him that there is "good in the new order too" (p. 352). His son Dallas, whose profession as an architect is a symbol of the greater openness of the new society, contrives to have Archer join him on a trip to Paris, where he intends to effect a reunion between his father and Ellen Olenska. When Dallas springs his surprise, Archer is dumbfounded that Dallas even knows about Ellen Olenska. Dallas replies blandly that his mother, May, told him "the day before she died. . . . She said she knew we were safe with you. . . . because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted." Archer responds simply, "She never

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Age of Innocence see Blanche Housman Gelfant, The American City Novel (Norman, Oklahoma, 1954), pp. 107-118. Here the author argues that "Edith Wharton decided that her emphasis must be upon what New York society destroys; and this emphasis places her novels of New York in the tradition of the main stream of city fiction. Her fictional city is . . . special, circumscribed, and unique . . . and its action is ultimately destructive." p. 107. I believe that this view overstates the case, especially in relation to Newland Archer. If Lily Bart and Ralph Marvell had lived in Archer's society, their lives would certainly have been different and, I believe, happier.
asked me" (p. 359). That such intelligence can be so delivered and so received is a commentary on both men, ironic beyond comment. When the time for the staged meeting arrives, Archer remains behind. Dallas presses him for some excuse that he can offer to explain his father's absence. "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough" (p. 364) Archer responds and the novel ends appropriately with a Jamesian fade-out. The issues that had been so clearly drawn are conveniently blurred by the lapse of time between Archer's early resolve and his final resignation, which has about it an air of transcendence freeing his reluctance from defeat and retaining the nostalgic atmosphere that Edith Wharton has evoked throughout the novel.

The effect of the final chapter is to call into question the validity of the new generation's confidence and freedom personified by Dallas. If old New York's strictures have limited Newland Archer's experience, they have helped sharpen his discrimination. If his society has denied him that which he most wants, it has, through such denial, made him all the more keenly aware of the value that exists beyond its own confines. One doubts that the openness of the new society has served Dallas Archer in the same way.  

16Louis O. Coxe, "What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence," Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 155-161. Coxe argues that Dallas Archer is incapable of understanding his father: "Can Dallas Archer or anyone like him begin to understand the
A review of the four novels reveals a remarkable consistency in the social concern each embodies. The social conservatism espoused in *The Valley of Decision* informs the other novels as well. In the first work, however, the conservative doctrine appears in such theoretical application that the novel seems to exist only to validate the doctrine. The result is the tract-like quality of *The Valley of Decision*. Convention and tradition are no less honored in the novels dealing with New York, but they are more vividly personalized. When Edith Wharton presents convention and tradition in personal terms as pervasive influences in the actual day-to-day lives of her characters she is altogether more convincing than when convention and tradition appear as impersonal abstractions shaping the lives of her characters like so many pawns, as is the case in *The Valley of Decision* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Custom of the Country*. A compact society with a firm sense of its own style and limitations clearly offers the best opportunity for displaying an inextricable relationship between the lives of her characters and their conventions and traditions. For this reason, *The Age of Innocence* is the most successful of the New York novels.

meaning of the kind of feelings Archer has known? Have they the time? the imagination? the passion? What can the notion of the buried life mean to one who can conceive only of surface? "p. 158. This point of view is entirely in keeping with Edith Wharton's own estimate of the younger generation in *The Mother's Recompense*. 
The four novels illustrate that her talents were best employed in the portrayal of the small, cautious virtues that Ralph Marvell too late recognized as the flower of New York life. When she attempted to present sweeping social change, which she equated with social disintegration, she was apt to intrude her own abrasive commentary, as is the case in *The Valley of Decision*. By the time she wrote *The Custom of the Country*, she was fully in command of novelistic technique, and she channeled her bitter observations through such spokesmen as Raymond de Chelles and Charles Bowen, but the bitterness is there all the same. Both novels suggest what the later novels confirm: her ability to deal effectively with her subject was directly related to the restraint of her own bitterness.

In addition to the general social concern shared by the four novels, we also see that the society Edith Wharton found most agreeable, and most amenable to her own novelistic talents and techniques, was based on a feudal structure. Paradoxically, feudalism is precisely the system that as early as *The Valley of Decision* is described as "a system which had long outlived its purpose," even though the feudally ordered life at Donnaz is the best Odo is to know. Again, in *The Custom of the Country* feudalism is invoked. At one point Raymond de Chelles and Charles Bowen are observing the life of the Nouveau Luxe hotel where "unbounded
material power had devised . . . a phantom 'society,' with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice" (p. 273). Bowen regards the sham society of the Nouveau Luxe as "the direct creation of feudalism, like all the great social upheavals!" (p. 274). The description evoking the ethos of the Nouveau Luxe should be compared to Ralph Marvell's reflections on the old Dagonet house in Washington Square. Such a comparison reveals that, as Marvell himself concludes, the Dagonet style is "right" because it is expressive of continuity and choice. Finally, The Age of Innocence again presents what is essentially a feudal social structure, headed by the van der Luydens, the last of the Patroons. In each instance that such a social structure is presented in these early novels, there is always the attendant implication that, though outworn, it is incomparably better than what is replacing it.

The novels that follow The Age of Innocence contain many of the same characteristics of the earlier novels we have been discussing, but they also illustrate some significant changes.

17 Whatever their names--the "Palace," the "Emporium," the "Nouveau Luxe"--luxury hotels play a large role in Edith Wharton's fiction beginning with The House of Mirth. Inevitably, they are held up to scorn because the society that inhabits them is seen to be traditionless, rootless and tasteless.
Collectively, they testify to the difficulty Edith Wharton experienced in discovering a congenial theme in the post-war world.
CHAPTER II

REWORKINGS

Before she turned to an examination of the post-war United States in The Mother's Recompense, Edith Wharton published The Glimpses of the Moon (1922) and A Son at the Front (1923). Both novels represent reworking of earlier material; the former has overtones of The House of Mirth and the latter is an attempt to transmute the experience of World War I into a full-length novel. Because both are weak novels and because they come shortly after The Age of Innocence, they doubtless contribute greatly to the idea that Edith Wharton had little worthwhile to say after 1920.¹

The Glimpses of the Moon returns to the frivolous modernity of the American International set which had earlier engaged her imagination in The House of Mirth.² The novel relates...

¹Willard Thorp, in American Writing in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 19. Thorp pinpoints the Glimpses of the Moon as the turning point of her career. Thorp's judgment in this respect is representative of general critical opinion.

²Edith Wharton herself characterizes The Glimpses of the Moon as "a still further flight from the last grim [war] years, though its setting and situation were ultra-modern." A Backward Glance, p. 369.
the story of Nick and Susy Lansing, two penniless hangers-on in the world of the vulgar rich. The action opens with Nick and Susy on their honeymoon at Lake Como, and the treacly prose that vitiates the style immediately asserts itself: "they hung over the inevitable marble balustrade and watched their tutelary orb roll its magic carpet across the waters to their feet." We learn that the motive for their marriage is as meretricious as the prose that celebrates it. Theirs is a marriage of convenience, founded on the belief that by pooling their parasitic talents they can better exploit the careless generosity of their friends and based on an agreement to part should the opportunity for advancement present itself to either of them. Such an arrangement was in perfect accord with the spirit of the times, for the "law of their country facilitated such exchanges, and society was beginning to view them as indulgently as the law" (p. 21). And, indeed, the apparently unlikely match is aided by society. Because the rich value Nick and Susy as lively additions to their gatherings, they willingly underwrite the matrimonial experiment.

The major part of the novel details the consequences of the match. In the process, Edith Wharton draws upon several themes common to her fiction. The leading characters, for

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3The Glimpses of the Moon (New York, 1922), p. 1. All references are to this edition.
example, again exhibit the familiar dichotomy—the weak man and
the strong woman. Although Lansing has devised "for his own
guidance a rough-and-ready code" of conduct designed to protect him
from the enticements of society, he is neither a morally stable nor
a consistent character. "There were things a fellow put up with
for the sake of certain definite and otherwise unattainable advan-
tages; there were other things he wouldn't traffic with at any price"
(p. 26). As laudable as this code may appear, one must wonder
what falls outside the pale when his marriage and the circumstances
surrounding it apparently fall well within the limits of his accom-
modiation with society. He broods over the moral instability of his
wife's character, finding it intolerable to imagine "that a spirit as
fine as hers should be ever so little dulled or diminished by the
kind of compromises out of which their wretched lives were made"
(p. 25). But he leaves to Susy the complete management of their
affairs, even while recoiling in incipient disgust at her ability to
"manage."

An altogether stronger and more perceptive character
than her husband, Susy Lansing is entirely capable of managing
their affairs. Her past has been such that she has found it necessary

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4 For a discussion of Edith Wharton as feminist writer see
Josephine Lurie Jessup, The Faith of our Feminists: A Study in the
Novels of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather (New York,
to curry the favor of the wealthy. Like Lily Bart, whom she slightly resembles, she both envies and dislikes her moneyed friends, "and judged them with the contemptuous lucidity of nearly twenty years of dependence" (p. 5). But her past has also conditioned her to accept the inevitability of compromising her principles when they are in conflict with the desires of the rich on whom she depends.

When they move to Venice to stay at the "palace" loaned to them by the Nelson Vanderlyns, Nick, a dabbler in art, begins a book, a philosophic romance to be called The Pageant of Alexander. His approach to writing is typical of all his undertakings. "His imagination had been enchanted by the idea of picturing the young conqueror's advance through the fabulous landscapes of Asia: he liked writing descriptions, and vaguely felt that under the guise of fiction he could develop his theory of Oriental influences in Western art at the expense of less learning than if he had tried to put his ideas into an essay. He knew enough of his subject to know that he did not know enough to write about it" (p. 63). Susy, eager to promote any promise of useful activity on his part, complies with the wishes of her absent hostess, Ellie Vanderlyn, who is off pursuing one of her habitual love affairs, by mailing Ellie's pre-written letters to Mr. Vanderlyn assuring him that she is faithfully awaiting his return from a business engagement.
During the time she manages to keep secret the matter of the letters, both she and Nick discover the pleasures of an ordered life. When they find themselves "slowly waking to a sense of the beauty of habit" (p. 48), the reader familiar with Edith Wharton's valuation of order and habit knows that their eventual salvation is assured, but he also realizes that it cannot be attained without their first atoning for the sins of the past. And with the Lansings there is much for which to atone. The arrival of their old set signals the beginning of complications. The values Nick formerly honored now seem tawdry in comparison with the purpose and order that his marriage and work have imposed on his life. "For the first time communal dawdling had lost its charm for him; not because his fellow dawdlers were less congenial than of old, but because in the interval he had known something so immeasurably better" (pp. 67-68).

Of their friends, Charles Strefford alone appears to avoid classification as an utter wastrel. He is different from the others because he does have roots. Even though he "had his home in this world" of cosmopolitan frivolity, he also has another:

The other, the one he spoke of, and probably thought of, least often, was a great dull English country-house in a northern county, where a life as monotonous and self-contained as his own was chequered and dispersed had gone on for generation after generation; and it was the sense of that house, and of all it typified even to his vagrancy and irreverence, which, coming out now and then in his talk, or in his attitude toward something or somebody, gave him a firmer outline and a steadier footing than the other marionettes in the dance.
Superficially so like them all, and so eager to outdo them in detachment and adaptability, ridiculing the prejudices he had shaken off, and the people to whom he belonged, he still kept, under his easy pliancy, the skeleton of old faiths and old fashions. "He talks every language as well as the rest of us," Susy had once said of him, "but at least he talks one language better than . . . the others." (p. 47)

From this brief passage we are to understand that the distance between Strefford and his set results from the pervasive influence of the dull country-house. Strefford's failure to fulfill the role so portentously hinted at in this passage is in itself a measure of the novel's jerry-built structure. But for the present it is enough to recognize that Strefford provides a direct contrast with the Hickses. As that name not too gently suggests, they are a parvenu family whose wealth is equalled only by their overawed regard for culture. They are disliked by the cosmopolitan set because the Hickses are, by the set's standards, ridiculous failures. And it is true that socially they are inadequate; intellectually they are woefully lacking; and culturally they are enthusiastically naïve. But for all their limitations, the Hickses possess the saving qualities of honesty and purpose. Nick finds himself attracted to them in a way that previously would have been impossible for him:

Hitherto it was in contrast to his own friends that the Hickses has seemed most insufferable; now it was as an escape from these same friends that they had become not only sympathetic but even interesting. It was something, after all, to be with people who did not regard Venice simply as affording exceptional opportunities for bathing and adultery, but who were reverently if confusedly aware that they were in the
presence of something unique and ineffable, and determined
to make the utmost of their privilege.
"After all . . . they've got a religion. . . ." The phrase
struck him, in the moment of using it, as indicating a new
element in his own state of mind, and as being, in fact, the
key to his new feeling about the Hickses. Their muddled
ardour for great things was related to his own new view of
the universe: the people who felt, however dimly, the wonder
and weight of life must ever after be nearer to him than those
to whom it was estimated solely by one's balance at the bank.
He supposed, on reflection, that that was what he meant when
he thought of the Hickses as having "a religion." (pp. 70-71)

His growing attachment for the Hickses and his increasing
disenchantment with his friends set into motion contradictory forces
that he does not fully understand. Susy becomes the focus for the
confusion and discontent that the change of heart fosters in him.
When he learns of her complicity in Ellie Vanderlyn's cuckolding of
her husband, he decides they should part. She protests his charac-
terization of themselves as "born parasites," and suggests that
the publication of his book will enable them to dispense with their
necessity for dependence on others. He replies that the book is
"all part of the humbug. We both know that my sort of writing will
never pay. And what's the alternative--except more of the same
kind of baseness? And getting more and more blunted to it?"
(p. 111). If he sees that their present course can lead only to ruin,
he completely overlooks the revolutionary alternative of supporting
his wife. Instead he leaves and accepts the Hickses' invitation to join
them for a Mediterranean cruise. Before leaving, he writes to
Susy, recommending that she marry Strefford, who has, in the meantime, come into full possession of the old country-house and all the prestige and wealth that goes with his new position as the Duke of Altringham.

The movement of the novel from the point of Lansing's departure to its last few pages suggests that Edith Wharton staged his exit simply because she did not know what to do with him. After he leaves, the parallels with The House of Mirth, only general to this point—the tone of the two societies, for example, is much the same if one allows for the difference in setting—become quite explicit. Like Lily, Susy is left to fend for herself in a predatory society. Susy welcomes "the subtle influences of her old life . . . stealing into her" (p. 151) because they help to relieve the solitude which she, like the other members of her set and like Lily Bart, dreads above all else. When Strefford reappears, he seems to hold promise of deliverance, just as Selden also seemed to offer that possibility to Lily. But Strefford, Susy fears, is so changed by his new position that he will not seriously consider marrying her. She recognizes that "already, in his brief sojourn among his people and among the great possessions . . . old instincts had awakened, forgotten associations had spoken in him. Susy listened to him wistfully, silenced by her imaginative perception of the distance that these things had put between them" (p. 157). The change is illustrated by the
uncharacteristic wisdom he patronizingly dispenses when she tells him of the break with Nick. She would, she vows, have been willing, if Nick had but asked her, "to try to live differently, go off somewhere with him and live like work-people, in two rooms, without a servant" (p. 159). Speaking from his newly gained knowledge of tradition and responsibility, he informs her that the break was inevitable because she and Nick had placed their faith in false values. He lectures her, saying it was simply a matter of time before she would have tired of Nick. He tells her to put her faith in those things that last: "Habits--they outstand the Pyramids" (p. 160). Clearly, Strefford is here serving as a barely masked spokesman for the author's point of view. Susy's avowal that she would have gladly gone to "live like work-people" is as laughable as Strefford's rejection of it is chilling. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, perhaps more than in any other of her novels, Edith Wharton appears all too willing to condemn the majority of humanity to the bleak limbo of "two rooms, without a servant."

Strefford's remarks further the plot, for he is now in a position to offer the tradition and wealth that his title ensures. He proposes marriage, and she recognizes it as an attractive alternative to her present situation. But she is in a position similar to Lily's. The only way she can escape the cruel patronizing of her set is to marry into its upper echelons. And as with Lily, Susy recognizes
the possibilities of the "moral freedom" that wealth could bring. But it is only by marrying according to the standards of the world she hopes to escape that she would be able to avoid the judgment of that world.

Fuller acquaintance with Strefford convinces her that marrying him would not ensure the moral freedom she had earlier envisaged, and she parts from him a free agent. Reminiscent of Lily, she momentarily considers becoming a hat-trimmer, but turns instead to Grace Fulmer, a former friend of folksy wisdom. She takes up residence at the Fulmers' where she serves as nursemaid to the children. The Fulmers represent the novel's ideal of family life. As such, they bear some resemblance to George and Nettie Crane Struther in *The House of Mirth*. Only Nettie appears briefly in that novel—in Edith Wharton's fiction the husbands of happy marriages rarely make an appearance; we are simply assured that they exist—to afford Lily a glimpse of the humble happiness she will never know. And to some extent, the characterization of Grace Fulmer anticipates that of Grandma Scrimser in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*; both women have a large supply of home truths which they dispense to all those wise enough to listen.

The nursemaid episode confirms the belief that *The Glimpses of the Moon* is by far the weakest of Edith Wharton's novels. The characterization of the young Fulmers is so
sentimentally unrealistic that they must rank high among literature's idealized but unappealing children. But there is a serious purpose behind the episode. We are intended to see the Fulmer children as a contrast to Clarissa Vanderlyn, who at the age of eight seems to embody the "complete ripeness of feminine experience" (p. 40). We are left in little doubt that Clarissa's future will be a carbon copy of her mother's irresponsible existence. In contrast, the Fulmer children, living in an environment that excluded "mean envies, vulgar admirations, shabby discontents" (p. 298), have been prepared to avoid the type of life for which Clarissa Vanderlyn is destined.

It is only fitting that such a scene of domestic felicity as the Fulmers' "little house in Passy," a phrase that turns up with unctuous regularity, should prove the place for Nick and Susy's reunion. But it is not accomplished without predictable complications. Nick's return to Paris to institute divorce proceedings triggers a full complement of chance meetings, misinterpreted motives, and mutual recriminations before the two are finally reunited. The simpering dialogue mirrors the emotional content of the reunion. "I've behaved like a brute," he laments, "a cursed arrogant ass" (p. 348).

"... Grace Fulmer says you can't separate two people who've been through a lot of things."

"Ah, been through them together--it's not the things,
you see, it's the togetherness."
"The togetherness—that's it!" He seized on the word as if it had just been coined to express their case, and his mind could rest on it without farther labour. (pp. 348, 350)

Characteristically, The Glimpses of the Moon ends on a tasteless, sentimental note. Packing the Fulmer children with them, they travel to Fontainebleau. The trip is marred only by her doubts concerning the expense of such an undertaking. He assuages her fears with the announcement that he has received a "cheque" for "a couple of articles on Crete--oh, just travel-impressions, of course; they couldn't be more" (p. 360).

The Glimpses of the Moon suffers from several crippling weaknesses. To begin with, Edith Wharton does not play fairly with her material. The improbable initial situation, for instance, seems to exist only for its shock value, but it is deprived of even this seriousness by the cleverness with which she chooses to deal with it. Nor is the improbability limited to the donnée; throughout the novel, highly unlikely circumstances intrude at crucial times to shape the action. The style, too, leaves much to be desired. It alternates between a wooden rigidity (witness the ludicrous accent mark of Lansing's self-accusation, "a cursed arrogant ass") and a vitiating sentimentality. Much of the characterization is lifeless and inconsistent.

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One might extend such a listing of the novel's failings, for they are many. But its greatest failure is its dishonesty. On the one hand, Edith Wharton attempts to sit in moral judgment, showing, in effect, what the world is coming to; on the other, she affirms for her audience the old belief that love conquers all. Presumably, these two purposes are supposed to coalesce in the novel's conclusion. The tension generated by the two aims is resolved very neatly—and cheaply—with Lansing's announcement of a "cheque" at the end. But earlier, we recall, he has himself declared that his literary efforts are "all part of the humbug," that his writing "will never pay" (p. 111). Although "humbug" is transmuted into the more respectable "cheque," no one can accept the fictional alchemy that has brought this about. Edith Wharton's failure to achieve the novel's pretense at moral seriousness suggests that Lansing's is not the only "humbug" about The Glimpses of the Moon.

The failure of the novel should force us to reassess its similarities with The House of Mirth in order to understand the reasons for the later work's failings. We can distinguish three areas in which the novels are significantly different: the role of society in each of the novels, the consistency of characterization,

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6 The novel was first serialized in the Pictorial Review, leading numerous critics to speculate that the nature of the audience exercised a harmful effect on Edith Wharton's writing after 1920.
and Edith Wharton's own authorial participation in the novels. So
to categorize them is to oversimplify because all three are closely
related.

In *The Glimpses of the Moon* there is no societal point of
reference to guide either of the principals. In this respect they are
like many other characters of Edith Wharton's later novels. Nona
Manford in *Twilight Sleep* in the closest counterpart. Both Nick
and Susy feel the inadequacy of the cosmopolitan set's life style and
are capable of recognizing—Nick in the Hickses' regard for culture
and Susy in Strefford's lecture on habit and tradition—a better life
than they have. But it can only be an imaginative recognition.
Neither the Hickses nor Strefford can bring that life to them because
neither embodies it. They can serve only to open imaginative
possibilities to those more sensitive, less corrupted than them-
selves. The Fulmers also point the way to domestic felicity. But
none of these people constitutes a society. The Fulmers are, in
fact, an anomaly in the society that swirls around them. We have
earlier seen that part of Lily Bart's tragedy is that she lacks a
society, but there are enough evidences in *The House of Mirth* of
the vestigial remains of a former society that the reader is aware
of them. Gus Trenor, we recall, is held back from the ultimate
indiscretion with Lily by "old habits, old restraints, the hand of
inherited order." The characters in *The Glimpses of the Moon*
must act without benefit of such restraints. Thus Nick must guide his actions according to the "rough-and-ready code" of his own devising. And Susy, "thrown on the world at seventeen, with only a weak wastrel of a father to define that treacherous line [between right and wrong] for her, and with every circumstance soliciting her to overstep it" (p. 26), lacks the dour haven of a Mrs. Peniston who, whatever her faults, had few doubts about the rules guiding the propriety of conduct.

The second major distinction is found in the characterization. For all her weaknesses, Lily Bart never holds the view attributed to Susy who seems to have "accepted in advance the necessity of ruining one's self for something, but was resolved to discriminate firmly between what was worth it and what wasn't" (p. 26). Her apparent fatality in this regard is as much a commentary on her society as it is herself.  

But with Lansing we have a clear case of inconsistency in characterization. There is scarcely any preparation for his sudden conversion to righteousness. He has accepted with unquestioning equanimity the terms of his

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7Marilyn Jones Lyde, *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959), p. 170. Mrs. Lyde observes that "Character, even superior character, must reflect some of the usages of the society from which it springs, and in proportion as society has increased in superficiality since 1905, so, too, have the characters of Susy Branch and Nick Lansing over those of Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden."
marriage and is carrying on in the tradition of Edith Wharton's typical dilettante hero with his writing of a novel that he knows he should not be attempting to write. This is hardly convincing preparation for the stance he is to assume when he learns how, in effect, the bills are being paid. And, finally, when he does mount his moral high-horse, Edith Wharton clearly does not know what to do with him, so she dispenses with him altogether in a move which any reader would have been willing to grant pages earlier.

Louis Auchincloss questions "how Mrs. Wharton could have picked such a man as the hero of a romance unless she seriously believed that he represented what a gentleman had sunk to in the seventeen years which had elapsed since the publication of *The House of Mirth*. But could even Lawrence Selden have degenerated to a Nick Lansing?" It is a good question, but it is, I think, asked about the wrong character. It should be asked about Strefford, the novel's prime example of inconsistent characterization. We have seen that Edith Wharton has been at some pains to distinguish him from the international drifters who populate the novel. She validates him as her spokesman to extol habit and tradition by endowing him with a country-house and eventually a dukedom. How then can we account

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for the reversal in characterization found in the following passage?

It is typical of the novel's carelessness that we learn of Strefford's inadequacies through Susy who was the first to set him above the other members of his set. As she listens to him holding forth on "the humours and ironies of the human comedy, as presented by his own particular group," she becomes aware that he is simply boring.

His malicious commentary on life had always amused Susy because of the shrewd flashes of philosophy he shed on the social antics they had so often watched together. He was in fact the one person she knew (excepting Nick) who was in the show and yet outside of it; and she was surprised, as the talk proceeded, to find herself so little interested in his scraps of gossip, and so little amused by his comments on them.

With an inward shrug of discouragement she said to herself that probably nothing would ever really amuse her again; then, as she listened, she began to understand that her disappointment arose from the fact that Strefford, in reality, could not live without these people whom he saw through and satirized, and that the rather commonplace scandals he narrated interested him as much as his own racy considerations on them; and she was filled with terror at the thought that the inmost core of the richly-decorated life of the Countess of Altringham would be just as poor and low-ceiled a place as the little room in which he and she now sat, elbow to elbow yet so unapproachably apart. (pp. 219-20)

Nevius sees in Strefford "a later edition of Lawrence Selden. Functioning in contrast to Nick Lansing, he supplies the touchstone, the alternative, for like his predecessor Selden he is 'in the show yet outside of it.'" But we already have Susy's

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9Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 197.
judgment, and it is the one which Nevius accepts, that both Strefford and Lansing share the characteristic of being "in the show and yet outside of it." How, then, can Strefford be said to represent an alternative to Lansing? Strefford is certainly not the admirable character Nevius paints. The foregoing passage makes clear that Strefford fails to offer an acceptable alternative. If he is a later edition of Selden—as I think one would have to agree he is—it is not to Strefford's credit but rather to Selden's condemnation.

I think it more profitable to see Strefford as the embodiment of the worst tendencies of the type he represents. His characterization reaffirms what we have previously seen in the portrayals of Selden and Marvell: being out of the show may result from serious limitations rather than from superiority. We are made increasingly aware of his defects. Like many another of Edith Wharton's men, Strefford is able to suggest more than he can deliver. He is at his best only when he remains "outside the show." As a reworked portrait of Selden he is a sad commentary indeed. In the characterization of Strefford we see that Selden's "republic of the spirit" has become an even greater fantasy than it was in The House of Mirth. Further, the characterization anticipates later, more degenerate portraits of the type that finds its feeble best in Lawrence Selden.
Finally, The House of Mirth and The Glimpses of the Moon differ markedly in Edith Wharton's own participation in each novel. In The House of Mirth she retained an artistic distance from her material, content to allow the reader to draw his own conclusions concerning the worth of the society that crushed Lily Bart. Such is not the case in the later novel. She wishes the reader to understand and share her contempt for a society that would condone the kind of trial marriage the Lansings undertake. There are many instances of her active participation in the novel; they succeed only in further weakening it.

In A Son at the Front Edith Wharton returns to World War I, a subject which had earlier concerned her in "Coming Home" and The Marne. But unlike these earlier works, A Son at the Front is a full-length novel, intended, one supposes, to stand as her major statement on the war. If it is not a more successful novel than The Glimpses of the Moon, it is at least more honest. From the outset she deals seriously with her material. It does, however, have one point in common with The Glimpses of the Moon in that we again find her intruding her own commentary. The excess of moral fervor behind such intrusions combines with a weakness in the narrative technique to detract greatly from the serious intent.

The novel relates the war's effect on the lives of John Campton, an American portrait painter living in Paris, and his son,
George. John Campton's life has only two points of reference, his son and his art. The coming of the war deprives him of his son, who joins the French Army, and, at least from the elder Campton's point of view, renders his own artistic endeavors futile. Campton's response to the war is outraged bewilderment; he sees it as a totally European affair and contrives to keep his son from taking any part in it. He is unable to understand the attitude of the young Americans who feel shame over their country's failure to enter the war immediately. Nor does Campton understand the younger men's passionate desire to be in the conflict. Throughout the novel, Campton's attitude toward the war is pictured in personal terms; he rarely takes anything approaching a broad view of the conflict. Although he never becomes a complete advocate of the French cause, he does resign himself to his son's involvement in the war, gradually sensing that the war especially for the young represents a personal crisis so far beyond his own experience that he can only dimly understand the significance it holds for them.

Unlike many war novels, A Son at the Front presents no scenes of actual combat. Clearly its intent is to project a sense of the way by detailing its impact on the day-to-day lives of a small group of characters most of whom are far removed from the front. 10

10 Edith Wharton intended the novel to "live as a picture of that strange war-world of the rear, with its unnatural sharpness of outline and over-heightening of colour." A Backward Glance, p. 369.
George Campton is the only major character who actually participates in the war as a combatant. Although the intent of the novel is clear enough, *A Son at the Front* fails badly for a variety of reasons. Perhaps more than any of Edith Wharton's other fiction, it suffers from her inability to keep her likes and dislikes subservient to the intent. The failure of the United States to declare war on Germany at the outset is a case in point. The supposed tardiness of American commitment becomes an obsessive refrain. Right-minded Americans can view their nationality only as a badge of shame. The sinking of the *Lusitania* affords Edith Wharton a moment of vengeful rejoicing over the national humiliation. "Now, indeed, America was 'in it': the gross tangible proof for which her government had forced her to wait was there in all its unimagined horror. Cant and cowardice in high places had drugged and stupefied her into the strange belief that she was too proud to fight for others; and here she was brutally forced to fight for herself."

But a tardy redemption of national honor is better than none at all. Accordingly, American "Preparedness" is celebrated in the most blatant Fourth of July rhetoric. "Preparedness! America, it appeared, had caught it up from east to west, in that sudden incalculable way she had of flinging herself on a new idea; from a little group of discerning spirits the contagion

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11Edith Wharton, *A Son at the Front* (New York, 1923), pp. 254-55. All references are to this edition.
had spread like a prairie fire, . . . for the idea was spreading
through the West, and the torch kindled beside the Atlantic seaboard
already flashed its light on the Pacific" (pp. 314-15).

That the United States should remain so long blind to its
duty to save France seems incredible to most of the characters.
Even John Campton is early afflicted with an uneasy sense of obli-
gation toward France. When he tells Louis Dastrey, his closest
French friend, that he will do all he can to keep George out of the
war, Dastrey's reply—"I perfectly understand a foreigner's taking
that view" (p. 13)—plays on Campton's conscience. "But was he a
foreigner, Campton asked himself? And what was the criterion of
citizenship, if he, who owed to France everything that had made
life worth while, could regard himself as owing her nothing?" (p. 19).
A later passage validates Campton's doubts. The entire western
world is revealed in France's debt. France itself emerges as the
real hero when Campton asks Dastrey, whose son has recently been
killed at the front, what France will become if all its sons are
sacrificed in the war. Dastrey replies that France is "an Idea."
What follows his characterization illustrates fully Edith Wharton's
sympathies and helps to explain the vehemence of her remarks
concerning the war.

An Idea: they must cling to that. If Dastrey, from the
depths of his destitution, could still feel it and live by it, why
did it not help Campton more? An Idea: that was what France,
ever since she had existed, had always been in the story of civilization; a luminous point about which striving visions and purposes could rally. And in that sense she had been as much Campton's spiritual home as Dastrey's; to thinkers, artists, to all creators, she had always been a second country. If France went, western civilization went with her; and then all they had believed in and been guided by would perish. (p. 366)

Nations are not alone in being judged according to their role in the war or their attitude toward it. The majority of the characters are judged on the same basis. Of course the French, of whom we see surprisingly few, considering that the novel's action is confined exclusively to France, are, without exception, totally admirable.

The remaining characters generally fall into two groups. The younger ones see their duty and resolve to do it; they want to be "in it." The older ones, with few exceptions, soon tire of the war; they wish to return to a business-as-usual existence. The worst of them use the opportunities the war affords to secure financial gain and personal advancement. The case of Benny Upsher and his uncle, Harvey Mayhew, illustrates perfectly the general distinction between the attitudes of young and old. Benny, a Harvard student, comes to Europe expressly to join the French Army as soon as the war begins. He states his case simply: "I want to be in this" (p. 105). He forthwith enlists to fight for France long before the United States enters the war. Mr. Mayhew, on the other hand, is a comically self-important delegate to the Hague Peace Conference. Captured by
the Germans and detained for four months in a prison, Mr. Mayhew casts himself in the role of the first and greatest victim of German atrocity. His "pink face and silvery hair gave him an apostolic air, and circles to which America had hitherto been a mere speck in space suddenly discovered that he represented that legendary character, the Typical American" (p. 174). He indefatigably searches for German atrocities with which to regale audiences, but when the market for atrocities falls he turns toward a take-over of "The Friends of French Art," a charity to which Campton has lent his name. When Mayhew succeeds in displacing the heads of the charity, who are Campton's friends, with his protégés who expect to use "The Friends of French Art" to advance their own personal careers, Campton darkly—and a little comically—sees the action as "an ugly little allegory of Germany's manoeuvring the world into war" (p. 371). Mr. Mayhew is simply one of the many characters who have turned Paris into a "hideous world that was dancing and flirting and money-making on the great red mounds of dead" (p. 334).

The defects in characterization of both nations and individuals seriously mar the novel, but even more damaging is the secrecy surrounding George Campton's sojourn at the front. Knowing that both his divorced parents fear for his safety, George Campton with the aid of a few confidants manages to convince his
father and mother that he is really at a desk job comfortably re-
moved from the fighting. This, of course, is not the case; he is at
the front, a fact that the reader is aware of long before Campton is.
But Edith Wharton does not allow a play of irony to develop in the
situation. Instead she presents Campton's ignorance of his son's
actual role in such a way that the war is reduced to an elaborate
parlor game conducted for Campton's edification and carried off only
by incredible coincidence and collusive coyness on the part of those
who have known from the beginning that George is indeed at the
front. When the techniques employed to keep George's whereabouts
a mystery are combined with the moral earnestness of the passages
picturing the war as the emergence of total barbarism the resulting
incongruity robs the novel of its serious intent.

Through George Campton she tries to suggest the moti-
vation for the young people's desire to make the war a personal
cause. Early in the novel he sounds the note when he meets his
father's objections to his going should the war really begin. He
invokes the temper of his generation to justify his individual action.
For the young, Edith Wharton implies, the war has smashed forever
the way of life that their parents had known, and she is in no mood
to chide the young for their idealism; instead she is sympathetic.

Everything about A Son at the Front supports F. J. Hoffman's
observation that for "Mrs. Wharton the war served as a form of
education in ultimate responsibility."¹¹ The issues for her were clearly defined: art and civilization on the French side against barbarism on the German. That anyone could fail to take sides in such a conflict was unthinkable for her. ¹² Several times throughout the novel she attempts to illustrate the war's purifying effect by describing the look on the faces of the young combat veterans, but she is never so successful in the novel as she is in her nonfiction account of the war: "They are calm, meditative, strangely purified and matured. It is as though their great experience had purged them of pettiness, meanness and frivolity, burning them down to the bare bones of character, the fundamental substance of the soul, and shaping that substance into something so strong and finely tempered that for a long time to come Paris will not care to wear any look unworthy of the look on their faces."¹³


That not only Paris but the whole of western society was soon to wear a look that she deemed unworthy must certainly have motivated her investigation of that society. But the quality of both *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *A Son at the Front* augurs ill for the success of such an investigation.
CHAPTER III

THE NEW ORDER

Near the conclusion of *The Age of Innocence* we recall that Newland Archer, who has found "good in the old ways," reflects that is "good in the new order too." The novels given over to an examination of the new order fail to substantiate Archer's sentiment. Edith Wharton was able to discover few redeeming qualities in post-war society. *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), and *The Children* (1928) constitute her inquiry into the quality of post-war life.

The plot of *The Mother's Recompense* centers in the consequences of Kate Clephane's revolt against old New York respectability almost twenty years prior to the opening of the action. We learn that she has abandoned her infant daughter and her husband, a member of a powerful, prosaic family, to escape from the stifling conventions of New York society. She is reduced to eighteen years of aimless drifting among cheap European resorts. The major event of her life during this time was a love affair with Chris Fenno, a man eleven years younger than herself. Although the affair has
long since ended, she is, at the opening of the novel, still deeply
in love with him.

Alone and bored, she eagerly accepts the invitation of her
daughter, Anne, to return to New York to live with her. The
society she returns to is far different from the one she escaped.
Old New York is dead and with it the suffocating social climate that
had prompted Kate Clephane to abandon her husband and daughter.
She soon realizes that no one has learned of her liaison with Chris
Fenno, and, in the general acceptance accorded her, she too forgets
her past. As her daughter introduces her to the new customs, Kate
Clephane begins to understand that the "new tolerance . . . applied
to everything; or, if it didn't, she had not yet discovered the new
prohibitions, and during all that first glittering day seemed to move
through a millennium where the lamb of pleasure lay down with the
lion of propriety."¹ Anne Clepane's passing notice that divorce is
an established fact of life among the upper classes illustrates for
Kate the pervasiveness of the change. Although she recognizes and
is "thankful that her own case was so evidently included in the new
range of . . . indulgence" (p. 67), she feels concern over the dis­
regard for discrimination that the new social mores have fostered.
She had had her share of suffering under the dispensation of old

¹The Mother's Recompense (New York, 1925), pp. 62-63.
All references are to this edition.
New York society, but "she felt a slight recoil from the indifference that had succeeded it" (p. 62). She is struck by the uniformity of the younger generation. She sees in Joe Tresselton, an innocuous young man from a socially prominent family, the face of the new America. Wherever she has seen young Americans, she has seen him:

... he was so hopelessly like his cousin Alan Drover, and like all the young American officers ... on leave on the Riviera, and all the young men who showed off collars or fountain-pens or golf-clubs in the backs of American magazines. But ... the few people she had seen were always on the point of being merged into a collective American Face. She wondered if Anne would marry an American Face, and hoped, before that, to learn to differentiate them; meanwhile, she would begin by practising on Joe, who, seating himself beside her with the collective smile, seemed about to remark: "See that Arrow?" (p. 65)

Her remarks on the American Face and her observation that all the "young men of Anne's generation ... seemed curiously undifferentiated and immature" (p. 79) provide a direct contrast with the descriptions of the young combat veterans in *A Son at the Front* and *Fighting France*. The young Americans that Kate sees look as though they have "been kept too long in some pure and enlightened school, eternally preparing for a life into which their parents and professors could never decide to let them plunge" (p. 79). In brief, they lack the great experience that revealed itself in the faces of the soldiers earlier described. In this contrast we see Edith Wharton moving toward the examination of pain as a positive
value that occupies her later in *The Mother's Recompense* and even more fully in *Twilight Sleep*. We also see the reasons for her choice of Kate Clephane as the novel's protagonist. Because Kate sees the present generation through the double lens of old New York and Europe, she is able to make judgments and draw conclusions denied the other characters. Increasingly in her later novels Edith Wharton found it necessary to provide her major characters an observation point "outside the show." Because the character type embodied in Strefford was an inadequate observer, Edith Wharton was forced to create a new kind of character for her fiction. This need was especially acute in those novels dealing with the new order, for, as we have seen in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, lacking a qualified observer, she did not hesitate to take upon herself the role of commentator.

The American Face is not the only manifestation of the new society that engages Kate Clephane's attention. Lilla Gates, Edith Wharton's first portrayal of the jazz-age woman, also attracts Kate's notice. With her "dyed hair, dyed lashes, drugged eyes and unintelligible dialect" (p. 64), Lilla interests Kate only as a symptom of the general malaise: "as a matter of curiosity, and a possible light on the new America, Kate would have liked to know why her husband's niece—surprising offshoot of the prudent Clephanes and stolid Drovers—had been singled out, in this new easy-going society,
to be at once reproved and countenanced. Lilla in herself was too uninteresting to stimulate curiosity; but as a symptom she might prove enlightening" (p. 93). Although there is little explicit commentary on Lilla's symptomatic significance, she is clearly intended as the prophetic fulfillment of the worst tendencies found in the young generation. We remember that Kate Clephane has recoiled from the indifference she detects in the present society, and Lilla preeminently embodies this characteristic quality of the new dispensation. We see then that indifference is not simply a manifestation of the new order; it is its cornerstone. Although Lilla is accepted with amused condescension, she is nonetheless accepted. Edith Wharton wishes us to understand that any society which accepts Lilla Gates is in deep trouble with itself, for Lilla's mere presence is a flashing danger signal that society can ignore only at its own peril.

The appearance in New York of Chris Fenno brings the novel to its major complication. He bears the telltale signs of moral decay: Kate Clephane sees "that he had reddened, thickened, hardened—as if the old Chris had been walled into this new one" (p. 112). She finds she no longer loves him, but she feels she must account for his presence in New York. From the slightest circumstantial evidence she concludes that he and Lilla are lovers, and envisions the impossibility of tolerating him as a member of the family should he marry Lilla. She sees it as her duty, a concept
that evokes the vestigial residue of old New York attitudes, to pre-
vent such a marriage, even if she must reveal her own past involve-
ment with him. Even when Lilla announces her engagement to
Horace Maclew, a wealthy Baltimore gentleman and Chris's em-
ployer, Kate remains persuaded that the two are lovers, viewing
the impending marriage as Lilla's stratagem for being close to
Chris. Theoretically, one can say that Kate Clephane is over-
dramatizing her difficulties concerning the supposed liaison between
Chris and Lilla. She recognizes, however, that the lack of standards
in the alluvial landscape of the new order's manners and morals
serves only to complicate rather than alleviate her own situation.
That the Drovers, among her severest critics at the time of her
own deviation from respectability, are delighted with the prospective
marriage of their already divorced errant daughter illustrates the
extent of the social change that has taken place since Kate's flight
from New York. Mrs. Clephane, and the reader with her, begins
to sense the futility of such a revelation as she might make.

But Edith Wharton will not allow Kate Clephane's disil-
lusionment with the present to lead her to adopt a sentimentally
righteous attitude toward the dear old days when the earlier regime
could have been expected to present a solid front against such an
interloper as Chris. Kate had, after all, rejected the restrictions of
old New York, and her reaction to the few of its customs still extant
indicates that she does not regret her earlier choice. Her attitude is nowhere more clearly evident than in the description of a dinner in celebration of Lilla's engagement. The gathering's . . . social significance was immeasurable. Mrs. Lanfrey was one of the hostesses who had dropped Lilla from their lists after the divorce, and Mrs. Lanfrey's yea or nay was almost the last survival of the old social code in New York. Those she invited, at any rate, said that hers was the only house where there was a "tradition" left . . . the Lanfrey house was "tradition" made visible, and even the menu was exactly what a previous transmitter of the faith had thought a menu ought to be when Mrs. Lanfrey gave her first dinner.

For a moment Kate Clephane felt herself in the faint bewildered world between waking and sleeping. There they all were, the faces that had walled in her youth; she was not sure, at first, if they belonged to the same persons, or had been handed on, as a part of the tradition, to a new generation. It even occurred to her that, by the mere act of entering Mrs. Lanfrey's drawing-room, the latter's guests acquired a facial conformity that belonged to the Lanfrey plan as much as the fat prima-donna islanded in a sea of Aubusson who warbled an air from La Tosca exactly as a previous fat prima-donna had warbled it on the same spot years before. . . . "This is what I ran away from," she thought; and found more reasons than ever for her flight. (pp. 153-55)

But the engagement dinner does nothing to dissuade her from the view that Lilla and Chris are lovers. Even though Fred Landers, who had been Anne's guardian, suggests that Fenno's interest centers on Anne, Kate cannot accept such a possibility until Anne tells her of her intention to marry Chris Fenno. Kate's attempts to break the engagement--including her persuading Fenno to make some excuse and disappear, which he does do for a time--leads to a breach between mother and daughter. Finally Kate
consents to the wedding, privately convinced that Chris will eventually suffer a failure of nerve. Failing that, she thinks that she can tell Fred Landers of her past relationship with Chris and rely on him to stop the marriage. But Chris predictably does not fulfill her expectations, and Fred Landers, for whom she feels real affection, balks the alternative by proposing marriage to her.

During the narrative, Kate's reluctance to speak of her past with Fenno has moved from the stage of simple self-interest to what has become for her the paramount issue, Anne's happiness. At a loss over what course to take, she turns to Dr. Arklow, an Episcopal rector. On her first meeting with him she had been struck with the thought that "behind the scrupulous social puppet, there might be a simple-hearted man, familiar with the humble realities of pain and perplexity" (p. 245). When she goes to him for moral guidance, she presents her problem under the pretext that it is the "case" of a friend whom she is trying to help. He accepts her explanation, but he is not deceived. When he has heard her out, he proclaims in no uncertain terms that it is "her duty to tell her daughter." And then, "with rising vehemence," he repeats: "Such a shocking situation must be avoided at all costs" (p. 265). But as she readies herself to leave, he qualifies his injunction.
"Unless," the Rector continued uncertainly, his eyes upon her, "she is absolutely convinced that less harm will come to all concerned if she has the courage to keep silent—always." There was a pause. "As far as I can see into the blackness of it," he went on, gaining firmness, "the whole problem turns on that. I may be mistaken; perhaps I am. But when a man has looked for thirty or forty years into pretty nearly every phase of human suffering and error, as men of my cloth have to do, he comes to see that there must be adjustments... adjustments in the balance of evil. Compromises, politicians would call them. Well, I'm not afraid of the word." He stood leaning against the jamb of the door; her hand was on the doorknob, and she listened with lowered head.

"The thing in the world I'm most afraid of is sterile pain," he said after a moment. "I should never want any one to be the cause of that." (pp. 265-66)

Following the talk with Dr. Arklow, the action moves swiftly to its conclusion. With one exception, she remains silent; Anne marries, and following the ceremony, Kate talks with Fred Landers. From earlier conversations, he has been led to believe that she will accept his proposal and that, Anne's marriage past, they may make their own plans. She has not deceived him on this point, but now a sense of honesty moves her to tell him of her own relationship with Chris Fenno. He is profoundly shocked, but he renews his offer of marriage. She agrees to see him the following day, but they never meet; she leaves at once for the Riviera where the "sense of unsubstantiality... helped her to sink back almost unaware into her old way of life" (p. 330).

The Mother's Recompense, despite its occasional lapses into sheer melodramatics, holds considerable interest. In his
discussion of the novel, Nevius criticizes what he thinks is its fundamental weakness:

One can admire the thoroughness with which Mrs. Wharton has canvassed the issues involved in Kate's dilemma without being convinced that she has discovered the basic one. It appears, rather, that she has left it to the reader to disentangle it from the secondary issues and the vagaries of the point of view. Throughout the story we are necessarily seated at the window of Kate's consciousness. Our natural willingness to accept her judgments is reinforced by the immediate and constant assurance that she is reliable, that she can perform the function of the "fine central intelligence" in such a way that, unlike in James, no excess of caution is demanded from the reader in order to get the point. It never occurs to Kate, however, that morally her stand is untenable. She has deserted her husband and daughter; Chris Fenno has deserted her. His disappointment and suffering when she interferes with his marriage to Anne are at least a pale reflection of her own under earlier circumstances. Yet she will grant him no quarter. There is nothing in the novel which prepares us for this irony. Quite legitimately, it might have been the final, logical, supreme touch in the characterization of Kate Clephane; but I am persuaded that it is unintentional and that we have another occasion... where a certain temporizing with the fundamental issue is present. There would be no problem if we could say with confidence that the ultimate failure of Kate Clephane's moral intelligence is the whole point of her story, but the rest of the evidence points away from this conclusion.²

It is certainly true that she grants him no quarter, but it is incorrect to say that she never questions the validity of her objection to him.

Kate's view of the problem is more perceptive than Nevius is willing to grant. After her interview with Dr. Arklow, she mulls over what has become her major concern: "To destroy Anne's happiness

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²Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, pp. 201-2.
seemed an act of murderous cruelty. What did it matter—as the chances of life went—as of what elements such happiness was made?" (p. 274). This questioning leads her to review her own attitude toward the marriage. "Legally, technically, there was nothing wrong, nothing socially punishable, in the case. And what was there on the higher, the more private grounds where she pretended to take her stand and deliver judgment?" (p. 275). In this mood she can exonerate Chris: "She herself had been the witness of his resistance, of his loyal efforts to escape. The vehemence of Anne's passion had thwarted him, had baffled them both" (p. 276). So we see that she can and does examine her own position; it is true that she remains opposed to the marriage, but that fact does not support the charge of temporizing with the fundamental issue. Certainly no one would quarrel with the validity of her emotional opposition to the marriage; indeed, the irony would arise if she should suddenly accept it as calmly as do the other members of society. Finally, if one is willing to grant that a daughter's marriage to her mother's former lover is normally to be avoided, I am far from certain that her stand is so morally obtuse as Nevius claims it to be.

It appears that behind Nevius's consideration of Kate's moral dilemma is the assumption that Marilyn Lyde flatly states when she says that The Mother's Recompense "is the only novel with a contemporary setting in which the moral dilemma is completely
independent of the social milieu. This view is totally misleading. To see the relationship between moral dilemma and social milieu, we need not rely entirely on an event prior to the action of the novel proper, but we would do well to recall that the moral dilemma has its roots in Kate Clephane's original revolt from society. We should note here that this action possesses thematic significance for two reasons. It reasserts the importance of the revolt theme in Edith Wharton's novels, and the consequences of the revolt add striking proof of the inability of an Edith Wharton character to escape his past. In the case of Kate Clephane, "One betrayal of trust had led inexorably to the other" (p. 304). Because of her previous knowledge of Chris, she is able to see him as the other members of society are not. Of the New Yorkers only Fred Landers instinctively draws back from "That Fenno fellow," as he calls him. "The fact is," says Landers, "I don't fancy him--never did" (p. 145). His remark possesses importance because throughout the novel he is characterized as a paragon of reliability. He is not an intolerant, narrow-minded representative of old New York, but his perceptions and discriminations are of the old order and should not be lightly dismissed. Viewing the moral problem in its social context, then, we discover the irony is not that Kate Clephane grants Chris no

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3Lyde, Edith Wharton, p. 162.
quarter, but rather that she is called upon to do so. That Anne Clephane, who is characterized as possessing a "memorial manner" (p. 76) and who is the antithesis of Lilla's party-going mentality, should ever have fallen in love with this "reddened, thickened, hardened" Chris is indisputable evidence that even the best of the new order can be affected by the influences embodied in Lilla, the most advanced representative of the new order. "The old days of introspections and explanations were over; the era of taking things for granted was the only one that Anne's generation knew, and in that respect Anne was of her day" (p. 259). The taking of things for granted is one of the major points of the novel and the crux of Kate's problem. We have previously seen that Lilla is taken for granted by the very society whose most serious fault, its lack of concern, she most glaringly embodies. Thus whenever Kate and Lilla are brought face to face, we witness the clash of diametrically opposed social attitudes. Lilla's harsh knowledgeability convinces Kate that there is "nothing socially punishable" in Anne's marriage. This realization indicates the impossibility of viewing her moral stance divorced from all social considerations. Further, the relationship between moral and social values gives us some insight into the motives for her precipitate flight from New York at the end of the novel.
Are we to view her return to Europe as an avoidance of sterile pain, which Nevius claims "is the paramount wisdom that the novel has to communicate,"\(^4\) or is he electing sterile pain for herself, having spared Anne from it? Either view is supportable, but I believe we are meant to see her return as a renunciation which transcends either avoidance or election of sterile pain.

Louis Auchincloss's commentary brings into focus the relationship of the moral and social concerns leading to her renunciation:

Anne is caught in the situation of marrying her mother's lover because her mother has had a lover, and for that there must be expiation on the mother's part, alone in her shabby Riviera village, without the comfort of her old admirer. For Kate to go from the litter of fallen rose petals and grains of rice of her daughter's wedding to her own would be joining forces with the noisy thoughtless world of vacuous toasts in which all delicacy of feeling has vanished. Those who believe in the old, harder standards must be willing to suffer alone, without sympathy or even comprehension. But this, evidently, is not sterile pain. Kate Clephane is intended to inhale a finer aroma from the bouquet of her loneliness than her daughter will ever know.\(^5\)

The "recompense" of the novel's title, then, is positive as well as negative. It is more than an ironic comment on the way in which Kate's past exacts its toll; it also indicates a transcendent value in her renunciation.

The Mother's Recompense suffers not from Kate's moral

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\(^4\)Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, p. 204.

\(^5\)Auchincloss, *Edith Wharton*, p. 36.
blindness, as Nevius suggests, but rather from her inadequate psychological insight into herself. The major instance of this lack is the novel's failure to convey the sense of jealousy that the reader has every reason to believe the central situation would generate. Throughout the entire work only one scene deals directly with the possibilities of sexual jealousy. Coming upon her daughter and former lover embracing, she questions whether the real reason she felt an "incestuous horror" (p. 279) is not simple physical jealousy. The scene is prepared for to some extent by her earlier attitude toward Lilla when she believes that Lilla and Chris are lovers. When she first hits on this idea, she is physically nauseated. She reviews her life since the break with Chris and realizes that for years "she had been sustained by her belief in that 'other woman'; only, that she should take shape in Lilla was unbelievably humiliating" (p. 137). How much more humiliating, then, must be the knowledge that her own daughter, not Lilla, is the "other woman." But there is scarcely any indication of the purely physical jealousy such a love-triangle might be expected to arouse. Certainly it would be ludicrous to expect Edith Wharton to treat this aspect of her subject with the fullness characteristic of many contemporary writers, but the reticence concerning the possibility (and the novel never presents it as more than a possibility) of sexual jealousy constitutes a major obstacle to the novel's success.
We are, in effect, asked to reject a society which has grown so lax that even were the full background of the relationship public knowledge, the society would presumably condone the marriage. But we are asked to accept this judgment on society from one whose recognition of "incestuous horror" is mentioned only once in the entire novel.  

The refusal to explore for more than a paragraph the sexual jealousy inherent in the circumstances surrounding the novel's major characters points toward the central weakness not only in The Mother's Recompense but in Edith Wharton's entire treatment of the new order. Her selection of the quasi-incestuous relationship as the situation on which the plot depends continues the pattern we saw emerging in The Glimpses of the Moon with the terms of the Lansings' marriage agreement. Her intent is clear: she hopes to shock her audience into agreeing with her view of the new order's baseness. But she fails to achieve her intent because she will not carry through to conclusion the shock value inherent in the central

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6Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (New York, 1965), p. 298. Professor Bell sees the quasi-incest theme, which had previously appeared in The Reef and was later to appear in Twilight Sleep, as evidence that in "her interest in such unacknowledged feelings Mrs. Wharton became bolder rather than more timid as time went on." It seems to me that real boldness in such a matter would have motivated a fuller examination of the quasi-incest theme than Edith Wharton is willing to grant to its emotional and psychological dimensions.
situation of either novel. We have seen how the cleverness of her treatment destroys *The Glimpses of the Moon*'s pretense at seriousness. *The Mother's Recompense* suffers not from a lack of seriousness but rather from her unwillingness to address herself to the very situation which she has chosen to illuminate the moral laxity of society. Our response to the situation's "incestuous horror" can hardly be expected to exceed that of the central character who scarcely acknowledges its possibility. The moral issues of the case receive full examination, but the psychological issues remain shrouded in a Victorian reluctance to recognize, much less discuss them. The result is a failure to establish a fully convincing relationship between the general social commentary and the situation that gives rise to such commentary. The frontal attack on the American Face, for example, is as hollow as it is shrill. The American Face, after all, is not the villain of the piece, but only a bland accomplice after the fact.

In *Twilight Sleep*, her next novel, Edith Wharton takes arms against the new America, determined to vent her spleen on every aspect of society that had escaped her notice in *The Mother's Recompense*. Her weapon is a bludgeoning satire the intent of which is apparent from the outset. The reader has no more than opened the novel when he is confronted with a recital of Pauline Manford's schedule of activities.
7.30 Mental uplift. 7.45 Breakfast. 8. Psycho-analysis. 8.15 See cook. 8.30 Silent Meditation. 8.45 Facial massage. 9. Man with Persian miniatures. 9.15 Correspondence. 9.30 Manicure. 9.45 Eurythmic exercises. 10. Hair waved. 10.15 Sit for bust. 10.30 Receive Mother's Day deputation. 11. Dancing lesson. 11.30 Birth Control Committee.

Pauline Manford, the center of this frenzied activity, is the heir of an automotive manufacturing fortune amassed in the factories of Exploit, one of those frightening Midwestern cities which Edith Wharton disdains to more than name. She has married and divorced Arthur Wyant, a member of an aristocratic old New York family; she then marries Dexter Manford, a successful, methodical lawyer. She has had a son, Jim, by her first marriage and a daughter, Nona, by her second. The marriage with Wyant provides one of the novel's most interesting focal points. We learn, for example, that to "the inexperienced Pauline of thirty years ago, fresh from the factory smoke of Exploit, Arthur Wyant had symbolized the tempting contrast between a city absorbed in making money and a society bent on enjoying it" (p. 23). To her, he was a "brilliant figure," but his brilliance is, as her father shrewdly notes, only ornamental. "His father-in-law at Exploit had seen at a glance that it was no use taking him into the motor-business, and had remarked philosophically to Pauline: 'Better just regard him as a piece of

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7Twilight Sleep (New York, 1927), pp. 3-4. All references are to this edition.
jewellery: I guess we can afford it'" (p. 24). But even his brilliance is not long in fading. Pauline "had hoped he might play a part in state politics . . . but he shrugged that away as contemptuously as what he called 'trade.'" At Cedarledge, her country estate, "he farmed a little, fussed over the accounts, and muddled away her money till she replaced him by a trained superintendent; and in town he spent hours playing bridge at his club, took an intermittent interest in racing, and went and sat every afternoon with his mother, old Mrs. Wyant, in the dreary house near Stuyvesant Square which had never been 'done over,' and was still lit by Carcel lamps" (p. 24).

Pauline had been prepared to bear with "his inadequacy, his resultless planning, dreaming and dawdling, even his growing tendency to drink" until she discovered that "he had drifted into a furtive love affair with the dependent cousin who lived with his mother" (pp. 24, 25).

Pauline then, understandably, demands and gets a divorce, which, Edith Wharton gratuitously adds, had in "the early days of the new century . . . not become a social institution in New York" (p. 25).

A marriage between two partners such as Pauline and Wyant is naturally doomed. The whole course of their marriage is brilliantly illuminated by the affair that ends it. We learn that to Pauline intimacy "meant the tireless discussion of facts, not necessarily of a domestic order, but definite and palpable facts" (p. 199). Faced with such a wife, it is pathetically humorous but entirely in
keeping with his personality that Arthur Wyant should turn to a
"dependent cousin" for his furtive love affair. And that it should
take place while Pauline is sternly addressing herself to relaxation
on a rest-cure in California provides the ironically appropriate
coda for the unhappy union of Exploit and old New York.

In consequence of the divorce, a great blow to Wyant's
pride, he "lived in complete retirement at his mother's . . . and
sank into a sort of premature old age which contrasted painfully--
even to Pauline herself--with her own recovered youth and elasticity"
(p. 25). After a time Pauline "came to regard poor Arthur not as a
grievance but as a responsibility" (p. 25). She even manages to find
time for periodic visits with him. An appointment with him is sig-
nified by an "A" on her schedule, a practice that has led her children
to refer to Wyant as "Exhibit A." There can be no mistaking Edith
Wharton's intention here. Wyant, now degenerated to the level of a
querulous gossip, is, in a very literal sense, on exhibit. This "son
of the age of innocence," as Louis Auchincloss calls him, is all that
is left of the old New York tradition. His purely ornamental value in
his youth and his contempt for anything that smacks of the vigorously
common remind us of Ned Winsett's admonition to Newland Archer.
Wyant is the worst possible fulfillment of Winsett's prophecy. One

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8Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, p. 36.
of the most telling strokes in the portrait of Wyant is his decline into premature old age. His anachronistic existence is without meaning. He does not serve the purpose we have come to expect of Edith Wharton's old New Yorkers: he does not embody a standard of reference by which the Pauline Manfords of society may be judged. He can, it is true, observe that Pauline "would like to teach the whole world how to say its prayers and brush its teeth" (p. 6), but it hardly takes a Wyant to tell us that. He serves not as a commentator on the vulgarity of those outside the pale of old New York customs, but rather as a commentary on the futility of his own class whose pitiable representative he is.

In addition to Arthur Wyant, his son Jim and daughter-in-law Lita also play important secondary roles. But the major interest centers around Pauline Manford and her daughter Nona and, to a lesser extent, Dexter Manford. By reason of her vast though pointless energy, Pauline is easily the novel's dominant character. She lives in a patently fraudulent world peopled by faith healers and "bright elderly women . . . all inexorably earnest, aimlessly kind and fathomlessly pure" (p. 5). Her guiding principle is the complete avoidance of pain, and she strives toward a denial of its existence altogether. In her zeal to banish pain and promote good works, she quite overlooks the affairs and problems of her family except when she sees an opportunity to eradicate pain on her own threshold.
The birth of Lita Wyant's child provides just such an opportunity.

All lita

. . . asked was that nothing should "hurt" her: she had the blind dread of physical pain common also to most of the young women of her set. But all that was so easily managed nowadays: Mrs. Manford . . . of course knew the most perfect "Twilight Sleep" establishment in the country, installed Lita in its most luxurious suite . . . and Lita drifted into motherhood as lightly and unperceivingly as if the wax doll which suddenly appeared in the cradle at her bedside had been brought there in one of the big bunches of hot-house roses that she found every morning on her pillow.

"Of course there ought to be no Pain . . . nothing but Beauty. . . . It ought to be one of the loveliest, most poetic things in the world to have a baby," Mrs. Manford declared, in that bright efficient voice which made loveliness and poetry sound like the attributes of an advanced industrialism, and babies something to be turned out in series like Fords. (pp. 14-15)

Mrs. Manford continues her attempts to convert the world into a vast twilight sleep establishment, quite unaware that Jim and Lita's marriage verges on disaster. Like Lilla Gates before, Lita is the modern woman, who between "hours of lolling, and smoking amber-scented cigarettes," crams her life with "dancing, riding, or games" (p. 13). Her husband, to whom she has been married for nearly two years, no longer interests her; he has lost his novelty. Jim Wyant is his father's son. His major weakness, characteristic of his Wyant heritage, "had chiefly consisted in his not being able to make up his mind what to do with his life" (p. 28).

What we see in the marriage of Jim and Lita is a disastrous union of the outworn heritage of old New York sensibilities with the
moral chaos of modern society. There is a cruel logic at work in the dissolution of their marriage, for it can be viewed as a second-generation version of Arthur Wyant's marriage to Pauline. This is not to say that Pauline is a hard, promiscuous flirt like Lita or that Jim Wyant is as foolish as his father, but rather that the failure of the second-generation marriage focuses our attention on the disorder of the times, a disorder which first manifested itself thirty years earlier in the marriage of Arthur and Pauline. In this sense, Lita appears as the inheritor of the leveling process that Pauline begins. Mere chance does not dictate that Lita is an orphan, her only family ties being with Kitty Landish, the completely irresponsible aunt who reared her. Just as Lita is an actual orphan, so Pauline is a spiritual one. Her real roots, Edith Wharton repeatedly reminds us, are in her Exploit background. She cannot begin to understand the few vestiges of tradition embodied in Arthur Wyant, and several times throughout the novel dismisses the Wyant niceties as "feudal" or "medieval." When Lita justifies her desire for a divorce by flatly stating, "we've all got a right to self-expression" (p. 129), she is only affirming Pauline's own creed. Pauline views Lita's desire for a divorce as "a clear case of frustration. She says she wants to express her personality? Well, everyone has the right to do that--I should think it wrong of me to interfere. . . . What Lita needs is to have her frustrations removed" (p. 150). But
Pauline's command of cocktail-party Freudianism does not equip her to deal with Lita. They are in fundamental disagreement on the best way to relieve frustration; Pauline favors the rest-cure while Lita prefers to "dance and laugh and be hopelessly low-lived and irresponsible" (p. 300). But even in this matter there is a curious kinship between the two.

The Mahatma's Dawnside "School of Oriental Thought" has attracted both of them. Pauline has taken rest-cures there; she recalls "with gratitude that it was certainly those eurythmic exercises of the Mahatma's ('holy ecstasy,' he called them) which had reduced her hips after everything else had failed. And this gratitude . . . was exactly on the same plane . . . with her enthusiastic faith in his wonderful mystical teachings about Self-Annihilation, Anterior Existence and Astral Affinities" (p. 20). Lita's Dawnside activities are less mystical. She has appeared in a photograph in a sensational tabloid which pictures nudes dancing while the Mahatma himself looks on. After the first shock of recognizing Lita in the photograph, Pauline attempts to rationalize.

She had never seen anything of the kind herself at Dawnside--heaven forbid!--but whenever she had gone there for a lecture, or a new course of exercises, she had suspected that the bare whitewashed room, with its throned Buddha, which received her and other like-minded ladies of her age, all active, earnest and eager for self-improvement, had not let them very far into the mystery. Beyond, perhaps, were other rites, other settings: why not? Wasn't everybody talking about "the return to Nature," and ridiculing the American
prudery in which the minds and bodies of her generation had been swaddled? The Mahatma was one of the leaders of the new movement: The Return to Purity, he called it. He was always celebrating the nobility of the human body, and praising the ease of the loose Oriental dress compared with the constricting western garb; but Pauline had supposed the draperies he advocated to be longer and less transparent; above all, she had not expected familiar faces above those insufficient scarves. (pp. 110-11)

Pauline's rationalization is more perceptive than she knows. There are indeed other rites that go beyond, but follow from, those which she herself practices. It is ironically appropriate that beyond the bare whitewashed room where Pauline is reducing her hips with eurythmic exercises Lita should be dancing in all too insufficient scarves.

The characterization of Dexter Manford adds another dimension to the novel. Like Pauline, he has "pioneer blood in him" (p. 57)--which is to say that he too is from the Midwest--but unlike her, he feels discontent with his present life. His dissatisfaction results in a brief affair with Lita that brings the novel's action to its climax. More interesting than the affair itself is the background that leads up to it. Although Manford "lived among people who regarded golf as a universal panacea, and in a world which believed in panaceas" (p. 55), he cannot accept the prevailing social remedies with the same ease as his wife. A more sensitive, intelligent person than Pauline, he views the value in both his personal and professional life with profound scepticism. His awareness of the "perpetual
evasion, moral, mental, physical, which he heard preached, and saw practised, everywhere about him" (p. 56) clearly sets him apart from his wife's self-imposed blindness. Even though he is at times "still a little awed by her presence—the beautiful Mrs. Wyant who had deigned to marry him" (p. 60), he has begun "to detect something obtuse in that unflattering competence" (p. 66). The reference to the "beautiful Mrs. Wyant" suggests that Manford thought he was marrying into the Wyant, not the Exploit, tradition, but it does not take him long to realize that his faith in Pauline as a paragon of cultivation has been entirely misplaced.

A mounting attraction for Lita parallels his increasing discontent with Pauline. He falls into the habit of stopping to visit Lita on his way home, finding her house "without its fixed hours, engagements, obligations" more appealing than his own "where all the clocks struck simultaneously, and the week's engagements . . . jumped out at him as he entered his study" (pp. 120-21). He convinces himself that his solicitude for Lita results from his desire to keep Jim's marriage on an even keel, but to the reader quite different motives become increasingly evident. Lita's Dawnside escapade momentarily restores him to his senses, but he soon rationalizes his continued visits, refusing to recognize his attraction to her for what it is. If he succeeds in deceiving himself for a
time, he fails to fool Lita, who, unfortunately for him, has never learned to distinguish between salvation and seduction.

Edith Wharton invests Manford's resolve with a double-edged irony. Manford thinks he will effect Lita's salvation by inviting her to Cedarledge for a vacation with Pauline, Nona, and himself. He reasons that Lita once separated from the artificiality of her New York activities will see the error of her ways and return a reformed woman and perfect wife. His plan obviously smacks of the evasion that he recognizes and dislikes in others, especially his wife. We see him in the position of subscribing to one of Pauline's favorite practices, the rest-cure. Nor is the Cedarledge plan the only aspect of his relation with Lita that mirrors Pauline's theories. He has come to regard her not as a "baleful siren" but rather as a "misguided child" who should be "helped and pitied" (p. 191). Even as Manford is unconsciously accepting Pauline's ideas and methods, he simultaneously begins to cast himself in the role of the upholder of tradition. In his new frame of mind, he feels that "he had found a way out, an escape. The relief of being quiet, of avoiding conflict, of settling everything without effusion of blood, stole over him" (p. 191). He ends his reflections, thinking that "he was the head of his family--in some degree even of Wyant's family" (p. 196). What we see here is Manford's attempt to uphold the Wyant tradition which, in a broad sense, is, or ought to be, the tradition of old New
York. One phrase used to characterize his satisfaction with his plan tells the story: he will achieve his ends "without effusion of blood." We recall that in the New York of Ralph Marvell and Newland Archer the "unpleasant" was to be avoided at all costs, life was to be lived "without effusion of blood." The phrase is synonymous with the age of innocence. But Manford is not a van der Luyden; he is attempting the impossible—to uphold the old New York traditions, presuming to play the head of the Wyant line, by employing the very methods instrumental in destroying old New York. Arthur Wyant's remarks to Manford make it clear that he should not meddle with a social code he does not, cannot, understand. Wyant tells Manford, "I'm old-fashioned, of course, ... all the musty old traditions have been superseded. You and your set have seen to that--introduced the breezy code of the prairies. ... But my son's my son; he wasn't brought up the new way, and, damn it all, Manford, you understand; well, no--I suppose there are some things you never will understand, no matter how devilish clever you are, and how many millions you've made" (pp. 257-58). Although his whole speech is described as "exaggerated, over-emphasized, lacking the Wyant touch" (p. 257), we must, because of the social disintegration portrayed in the novel, accept it as true, always remembering that Wyant also shares the blame for society's plight. Had his remarks exhibited "the Wyant touch," they would, presumably, have been more palatable,
but none the less true. The "old traditions have been superseded," the times are out of joint, and Dexter Manford is not the man to set them right.

Perhaps there may be some things that Manford will never understand, but there are few that his daughter does not painfully comprehend. Nona is the only character with the proper blend of sense and sensibility to graph fully the emptiness of her parents' lives. She "belonged to another generation: to the bewildered disenchanted young people who had grown up since the Great War, whose energies were more spasmodic and less definitely directed, and who, above all, wanted a more personal outlet for them" (pp. 6-7). She admired her mother's altruistic zeal, though she sometimes wondered if it were not a little too promiscuous, but like the other members of her generation she herself "felt no corresponding desire to set the houses of others in order" (p. 7). Although she may feel guilty for being uninterested in Pauline's various projects of societal house-cleaning, she cares for individuals in a personal way that Pauline finds positively alarming. Significantly, it is through Nona that we get the most extended statement of Pauline's attitude toward pain.

She knew that nothing frightened and disorganized Pauline as much as direct contact with physical or moral suffering--especially physical. Her whole life (if one chose to look at it from a certain angle) had been a long uninterrupted struggle against the encroachment of every form of pain. The first step, always, was to conjure it, bribe it away, by every possible expenditure--except of one's self. Cheques,
surgeons, nurses, private rooms in hospitals, X-rays, radium, whatever was most costly and up-to-date. . . . was her first and strongest line of protection; behind it came such lesser works as rest-cures, changes of air, a seaside holiday, a whole new set of teeth, pink silk bedspreads. . . . Behind these again were the final, the verbal defenses, made of such phrases as: "If I thought I could do the least good"--"If I didn't feel it might simply upset her"--"Some doctors still consider it contagious"--with the inevitable summing-up: "The fewer people she sees the better. . . ."

Nona knew that this attitude was not caused by lack of physical courage. Had Pauline been a pioneer's wife, and seen her family stricken down by disease in the wilderness, she would have nursed them fearlessly; but all her life she had been used to buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words, and her moral muscles had become so atrophied that only some great shock would restore their natural strength. (pp. 306-7)

For her part, Pauline is most grateful to Nona for relieving her of the odious task of visiting the sick. But Nona knows that her mother's gratitude is tinged with concern. Pauline can view Nona's offer to lend comfort to Maisie and Mrs. Bruss only as the symptom of an unhealthy mind. Behind the praise of Nona's generosity "lurked the unformulated apprehension: 'All this running after sick people and unhappy people—is it going to turn into a vocation?' Nothing could have been more distasteful to Mrs. Manford than the idea that her only daughter should be not only good, but merely good. . . . Nona could hear her mother murmuring: 'I can't imagine where on earth she got it from,' as if alluding to some physical defect unaccountable in the offspring of two superbly sound progenitors" (p. 308).
Nona's disenchantment is not confined to her parents' generation; it extends to her own as well. She understands that Lita, the most advanced representative of her own time, wants only "to practise new dance-steps... to startle or shock... to keep on finding herself, immeasurably magnified, in every pair of eyes she met" (p. 285). Nona stands in relation to Lita just as Anne Clephane does to Lilla Gates, and, as Nevius observes, like Anne, Nona possesses "the memorial manner." It is not strange, then, that Nona should be attracted to Arthur Wyant, who suggests a sense of tradition which she finds lacking in both her own friends and her parents. From the time we first see the two together we recognize the reason for Nona's attraction to him. She goes to his house, "a faded derelict habitation in a street past which fashion and business had long since flowed" (p. 40), only to find him gout-ridden, feeding on the scraps of scandal which so delight him. She is not blind to the shamble he has become, but she is more acutely aware of the man he once was.

While he sat there, deep in his armchair, with bent shoulders, sunk head and clumsy bandaged foot, Nona saw him, as she always did, as taller, slimmer, more handsomely upstanding than any man she had ever known. He stooped now, even when he was on his feet; he was prematurely aged; and the fact perhaps helped connect him with vanished institutions to which only his first youth could have belonged.

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To Nona, at any rate, he would always be the Arthur Wyant of the race-meeting group in the yellowing photograph on his mantelpiece: clad in the gray frock-coat and topper of the early 'eighties, and tallest in a tall line of the similarly garbed, behind ladies with puffed sleeves and little hats tilting forward on elaborate hair. How peaceful, smiling and unhurried they all seemed! Nona never looked at them without a pang of regret that she had not been born in those spacious days of dog-carts, victorias, leisurely tennis and afternoon calls...

Wyant's face, even more than his figure, related him to that past: the small shapely head, the crisp hair grown thin on a narrow slanting forehead, the eyes in which a twinkle still lingered, eyes probably blue when the hair was brown, but now faded with the rest, and the slight fair moustache above an uncertain ironic mouth.

A romantic figure; or rather the faded photograph of one. Yes; perhaps Arthur Wyant had always been faded—like a charming reflection in a sallow mirror. And all that length of limb and beauty of port had been meant for some other man, a man to whom the things had really happened which Wyant had only dreamed. (pp. 42-44)

We see here that Nona suffers from one of the complaints common to many Edith Wharton characters: she has been born out of her time. The only way she can recapture the past is through an imaginative rehabilitation of Exhibit A, a recreation of Wyant in the image of his times. In this respect, Nona's relation with Wyant is similar to that between Susy Lansing and Strefford in The Glimpses of the Moon. Like Strefford, Wyant provides the stimulus to the imaginative sensibility, but he can do nothing more because he does not embody what he—or in this case his photograph—is able to suggest. Wyant and Strefford are also alike in their mutually shared zest for gossip and scandal. Wyant's reading is an index
of his degeneration. His books give evidence of his former habits; he "had apparently once cared for them, and his talk was still coloured by traces of early cultivation, especially when visitors like Nona . . . were with him. But the range of his allusions suggested that he must have stopped reading years ago. . . . As far back as None could remember he had fared only on the popular magazines, picture-papers and the weekly purveyors of social scandal. He took an intense interest in the private affairs of the world he had ceased to frequent, though he always ridiculed this interest in talking to Nona" (p. 42). But he so relishes the details and pictures of Dawn-side's dancing nudes that even Pauline can see Wyant "had lost all sense of the impropriety and folly of the affair in his famished enjoyment of its spicy details" (pp. 106–7). The present Arthur Wyant, then, can be of little help in the reconstruction of the past; Nona's only preceptor must remain a romantic figure in the yellowing photograph.

The only possibility of a satisfying human relationship for Nona rests with Stanley Heuston, but he is married to a frigidly pious woman, "a sort of lay nun, absorbed in High Church practices

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10 When we recall that Selden, Marvell, and Archer were bibliophiles, we gain greater insight into the degeneracy of the tradition embodied in Wyant. His attraction to gossip columns places him on the same level as the vulgar Mrs. Heeny in The Custom of the Country.
and the exercise of a bleak but efficient philanthropy" (p. 53).

Heuston is related to the Wyants and exhibits all the weaknesses as well as the sensitivities of the family line. The trajectory of his career bears a marked resemblance to that already established by Arthur Wyant. "Everyone agreed that there was nothing such a clever sensitive fellow as Stanley Heuston mightn't have made of his life if he'd married a different kind of woman. As it was, he had just drifted: tried the law, dabbled in literary reviewing, taken a turn at municipal politics, another at scientific farming, and dropped one experiment after another to sink, at thirty-five, into a disillusioned idler who killed time with cards and drink and motor-speeding" (pp. 210-11). Heuston's life confirms Pauline's attribution of the various Wyant relationship's failures and follies to their "'old New York Blood'—she spoke of them with mingled contempt and pride, as if they were the last of the Capetians, exhausted by a thousand years of sovereignty" (p. 11).

The characterization of Aggie Heuston dispels the notion that the past which Arthur Wyant's photograph evokes was really superior to the present. She brings to the novel a code of manners as hopelessly outworn as her house, itself a reliquary of a past age. "She had accepted the house as it came to her from her parents, who in turn had taken it over, in all its dreary frivolity, from their father and mother. It embodied the New York luxury of the 'seventies in
every ponderous detail, from the huge cabbage roses of the Aubusson carpet to the triple layer of curtains designed to protect the aristocracy of the brown-stone age from the plebeian intrusion of light and air" (p. 236). Heuston has reacted to the stifling atmosphere that the house embodies in much the same way that Kate Clephane reacted to the old New York customs in The Mother's Recompense. Frustrated by his wife's refusal to grant him a divorce and by Nona's refusal to become his mistress, Heuston leaves New York with Cleo Merrick, a disreputable married woman. In an attempt to save him from the low-lived Mrs. Merrick, Aggie calls Nona to explain that she will divorce Heuston on the condition that Nona will marry him. When Nona rejects the offer, thus effectively destroying her last remaining change for happiness, Aggie is primly innocent enough to be honestly bewildered by the refusal.

The novel moves to its tragicomic climax when Dexter Manford puts into effect his plan of rehabilitating Jim and Lita's marriage by exposing Lita to the serenity of Cedarledge. But she quickly reaches her boring point and escapes to a neighboring country club where she is free to follow her own inclinations. Manford follows, hoping to correct her erratic behavior; she responds by upbraiding him for his self-deceiption, and the love affair is on. It is cut short, however, by Arthur Wyant's quixotic behavior. Jim has earlier told Nona that his father is chafing under his own
apparent laxity regarding Lita's conduct. At a loss to explain adequately his father's feelings, Jim can only observe: "It's the old New York blood that's so clogged with taboos. Poor father always wants me to behave like a Night of the Round Table? (p. 214).

Resolved to redress the dishonor he feels his son's behavior has brought to the family name, Wyant visits Cedarledge, where he begins "to hint at some particular man" who has figured too prominently in Lita's life. He lingers around the estate, enters the house at night, and attempting to shoot Lita's lover, Manford, manages instead to wound Nona. In the ensuing confusion, "Wyant still stood motionless . . . a broken word that sounded like 'honour' stumbling from his bedraggled lips" (p. 355).

With the exception of Nona, confined to a hospital, the others "could escape by flight--by perpetual evasion" (p. 362), the Manfords on a world tour, the younger Wyants to Europe. Arthur Wyant's destination is more shadowy: "to Canada, it was said, with cousin Eleanor in attendance. Some insinuated that a private inebriate asylum in Maine was the goal of his journey; but no one really knew, and few cared. . . . He had long since lost his place in the scheme of things" (p. 361). The novel ends by Nona shaking her mother, as resolutely two-dimensional as ever, by threatening to join a convent "where nobody believes in anything" (p. 373).
Although a consequence of Edith Wharton's examination of pain, the portrayal of Nona's victimization is one of the novel's most memorable aspects. We are repeatedly told that "Life was a confusing business to Nona Manford" (p. 50). She is the victim of the social change reflected by the main characters. Wyant, with "his tradition of reticence and decency" (p. 165), has completely gone to seed; Pauline, "her moral muscles . . . atrophied" through "buying off suffering with money, or denying its existence with words" (p. 307), has become nothing more than a hard, unfeeling surface against which grief and failure break to no avail; Dexter Manford is simply a misplaced person unable to enforce values he only dimly understands. Jim and Lita's marriage, a reworking of Wyant's marriage to Pauline, brings together the progressive degeneration of the two lines, illustrated by Jim's lassitude and Lita's licentiousness. The attempts to save the marriage likewise demonstrate that Wyant's foolish concept of honor and Pauline's unearned optimism cannot preserve what they helped to foster. When the world is destroyed, Edith Wharton says in *Twilight Sleep*, someone must expiate the sins of the destroyers.

*Twilight Sleep* extends the examination of the role of pain undertaken in *The Mother's Recompense*. What the later novel has most clearly to convey is that pain must be accepted as an inevitable and essential part of life. In her portrayal of Pauline, Edith Wharton's
message is unmistakable: Pauline's life is a ludicrous failure precisely because she devotes it to the avoidance of pain. But, as the end of the novel suggests, pain cannot be forever evaded; the "pain that Pauline Manford has tried to avoid has been exacted with compound interest from her family." Pauline, however, can serve only as the starting point in the examination of pain. Consistency of characterization demands that she remain forever blind to the consequences of her life style because the portrayal of Pauline and her various committees is informed by a burlesque spirit from the outset: "Whatever the question dealt with, these ladies always seemed to be the same, and always advocated with equal zeal Birth Control and unlimited maternity, free love or the return to the traditions of the American home; and neither they nor Mrs. Manford seemed aware that there was anything contradictory in these doctrines" (pp. 5-6). Because such broad caricature as this makes no provision for individual growth or self-doubt, Edith Wharton must shift the focus to someone more intelligent than Pauline. Nona is aware of her own victimization, even though she is too young to isolate the reasons for it.

\[\text{11Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 211.}\]

\[\text{12For a different view see E. K. Brown, "Edith Wharton: The Art of the Novel" in Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 98. "The novel would lose little and gain much if it were direct narrative."}\]
There were moments when Nona felt oppressed by responsibilities and anxieties not of her age, apprehensions that she could not shake off and yet had not enough experience of life to know how to meet. One or two of her girl friends—in the brief intervals between whirls and thrills—had confessed to the same vague disquietude. It was as if, in the beaming determination of the middle-aged, one and all of them, to ignore sorrow and evil, "think them away" as superannuated bogies, survivals of some obsolete European superstition unworthy of enlightened Americans, to whom plumbing and dentistry had given higher standards, and bi-focal glasses a clearer view of the universe—as if the demons the elder generation ignored, baulked of their natural prey, had cast their hungry shadow over the young. After all, somebody in every family had to remember now and then that such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not yet been banished from the earth; and with all those bright-complexioned white-haired mothers mailed in massage and optimism, and behaving as if they had never heard of anything but the Good and the Beautiful, perhaps their children had to serve as vicarious sacrifices. There were hours when Nona Manford, bewildered little Iphigenia, uneasily argued in this way: others when youth and inexperience reasserted themselves, and the load slipped away from her, and she wondered why she didn't always believe, like her elders, that one had only to be brisk, benevolent and fond to prevail against the powers of darkness. (pp. 47-48)

Nona's bleak view, clearly reaffirmed by Edith Wharton,
is based on what she knows of society. In a society characterized by
the meaninglessness of Wyant at one end of the spectrum and of
Pauline at the other the only refuge is disenchantment. Nona's pain
is "sterile" because she lives in a society incapable of giving meaning
to pain. At one point she is characterized as "weighed down with half-
comprehended misery" (p. 220), and at another Jim Wyant is described
as marked with "uncomprehended pain" (p. 216). Neither Nona nor
Jim nor any of the younger generation can fully comprehend their
suffering or "vague disquietude" because it springs from social disorder, but theirs is the only society they have ever known. They lack a social frame of reference by which they can judge their own society. Nona's suffering is above all accidental; her accidental wounding is, therefore, a singularly appropriate touch. If one compares her to Newland Archer, he immediately sees the difference. Archer's suffering results from conscious social pressure directed specifically at him; Nona's suffering is simply a by-product of the times. Although she believes that the "only honourable thing about suffering was that it should not abdicate before indifference" (p. 220), her own experience shows us that when suffering is inflicted by an unmindful society and the sufferer is surrounded by indifference, he can only retreat more deeply into cynicism and disenchantment. The quality of Nona Manford's society denies her any recompense.

Although the attack on the modern spirit continues in The Children, the novel's European setting and Edith Wharton's treatment of her material suggest that she was herself aware of the dead end the examination of the new order reached in Twilight Sleep. Again, as in The Mother's Recompense, the commentary on society is not
entirely convincing.\textsuperscript{13} The treatment of Pauline Manford fails to inspire credibility; she is amusing but not believable. To cast Pauline as the personification of the new order's moral laxity can lead only to a self-defeating exaggeration of the very society Edith Wharton wishes to hold up to scorn. As a result, \textit{Twilight Sleep} is, in Auchincloss's words, "a formidable battering ram used on a straw woman."\textsuperscript{14}

The novel illustrates the difficulty Edith Wharton faced as she grew older. She was able to approach post-war American society only through caricature and heavy-handed satire. But both \textit{The Mother's Recompense} and \textit{Twilight Sleep} find her rejecting old New York society more fully than ever before. Kate Clephane discovers in the evocation of the former society which Mrs. Lanfrey's dinner provides confirmation of her earlier decision to desert husband and daughter and escape from New York. And nothing in the characterizations of Arthur Wyant and Aggie Heuston suggests a relaxation in Edith Wharton's attitude toward "the aristocracy of the brown-stone age" (p. 236) which Aggie's house evokes. The

\textsuperscript{13} For a different view see Bell, \textit{Edith Wharton and Henry James}, p. 298. "With \textit{The Mother's Recompense}, \textit{Twilight Sleep}, and \textit{The Children} . . . she reached the full maturity of her powers as a social satirist. These novels are too little appreciated today . . . they are unsentimental, even austere stories of personal passion, deftly placed in a medium of ironic social observation."

\textsuperscript{14} Auchincloss, \textit{Edith Wharton}, p. 37.
The direction of the novels published after *Twilight Sleep* indicates that she was herself aware of the need for a new approach and new materials if she were to continue writing viable fiction.

*The Children* marks the transition from the examination of the new order to the views that inform her last three novels. The novel focuses on the victimization of the young resulting from the breakdown of marital standards and the failure of parental responsibility. In the opening pages, Edith Wharton sketches out the main elements of the plot. She quickly establishes the major character, Martin Boyne, as a man from the familiar mold. As Boyne is departing Algiers, he scans the faces of his fellow passengers and remarks, "Not a soul I shall want to speak to— as usual." While he bemoans his luck, he thinks of his great-uncle whose travels were famed for the unusual people he accidentally met and failed to appreciate. Like many of his predecessors in other novels, Boyne, we are assured, would have had the requisite sensitivity to savor the "adventures" that his prosaic great-uncle failed to recognize.

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15 *Nevius, Edith Wharton*, p. 211. Nevius sees "an absolute continuity of emphasis from *Twilight Sleep* to *The Children.*" Certainly there is continuity in the concern over the way in which the innocent young are victimized by adult irresponsibility in both novels. Martin Boyne's groping after "life" is, I believe, a more significant aspect of *The Children* than is the victimization theme.

16 *The Children* (New York, 1928), p. 1. All references are to this edition.
No tremor of thought or emotion would, in similar situations, have escaped Martin Boyne: he would have burst all the grapes against his palate. But though he was given to travel, and though he had travelled much, and his profession as a civil engineer had taken him to interesting and out-of-the-way parts of the world, and though he was always on the alert for agreeable encounters, it was never at such times that they came to him. He would have loved adventure, but adventure worthy of the name perpetually eluded him; and when it has eluded a man till he is over forty it is not likely to seek him out later. (p. 2)

Having established Boyne as "a critical cautious man of forty-six, whom nobody could possible associate with the romantic or the unexpected" (p. 3), Edith Wharton proceeds to add a second element to the plot. Boyne is on his way to a rendezvous with an as yet unnamed lady who, we later learn, is Rose Sellars, a recently widowed friend of long standing. Although Boyne has not seen her for five years, his intentions, it is roundly hinted, are most serious.

When the children themselves appear—as they do immediately after Boyne laments his typical lack of luck in drawing traveling companions—the major elements of the plot are present. Boyne is at once struck by the beauty of Judith Wheater, the oldest of the children, whom he mistakenly assumes to be the mother of the six young children in her charge. His attraction to Judith is both immediate and forceful: "Jove," murmurs Boyne, "if a fellow was younger!" His spontaneous tribute is underscored by Edith Wharton's observation that "men of forty-six do not gasp as frequently at the sight of a charming face as they did at twenty; but when the sight
strikes them it hits harder" (pp. 3, 4). How much harder be-
comes evident as the novel continues, for Judith Wheater is to
become Martin Boyne's one great adventure in life.

Boyne's attraction to Judith's physical beauty is tinged by
concern for her extreme youth. Edith Wharton's purpose is clear
from the repeated allusions to Judith as a sort of girl-woman. Her
first appearance, for example, calls the reader's as well as Boyne's
notice to this quality. "His attention had been drawn to a young
woman—a slip of a girl, rather" (p. 3). By characterizing Boyne's
response to Judith as a compound of admiration and concern, Edith
Wharton accomplishes two purposes. Out of the concern Boyne
feels for the children, especially Judith, arises the major compli-
cation of the novel. The stating of it is as simple as the solving of
it is complex: what is to be done with the children? The second
purpose is more subtle. As Edith Wharton develops Boyne and
Judith's relationship, she convincingly shows the coalescing of the
two emotions which Judith's appearance awakens in Boyne. Boyne
continues throughout the novel to protest his concern in an attempt
to conceal—even from himself—his hopeless love for Judith.

Although she is not the much-put-upon mother he first
suspects, she and the other children are fitting objects for solicitude.
The mixed offspring of Cliffe and Joyce Wheater, Americans of the
international set, they have been shunted across the face of Europe
at the whim of their parents' casual love affairs. As the novel opens they are on their way to Venice to join their parents during one of the latters' infrequent periods of domestic felicity.

The elder Wheaters are of a familiar type in Edith Wharton's fiction. Embodying the decadence attendant on the breakdown in manners and morality, they are the objects of the disdain Edith Wharton felt for people of their ilk. Boyne, by a coincidence likewise familiar in her fiction, recalls that he had known Cliffe and Joyce Wheater from college days. He remembers him as "the big red-faced Chicagoan who was at Harvard with him, and who had since become one of the showiest of New York millionaires" (p. 5). In the flesh Wheater is even more blatantly imposing than in memory. When they later meet, Boyne "instantly recognized Cliffe Wheater in the florid figure which seemed to fill the half-empty resonant place with its own exuberance. Cliffe Wheater had been just like that at Harvard. The only difference was that he and his cigar had both grown bigger" (p. 48). Clearly, Wheater's degeneracy is portrayed in terms of his gross physical presence. The description of Joyce Wheater indicates that her selfish vacuity is the equal of her husband's. That she is of the Pauline Manford cast is evidenced in the comparison between Boyne's recollection of her and the woman he now sees. "Of the Joyce Mervin of Boyne's youth, the young Joyce Wheater of her early married days, nothing, apparently, was left
in the slim figure leaning over the balcony at Boyne's elbow. Then she had been large, firm and rosy, with a core of artless sensibility; now she seemed to have gone through some process of dematerialization (no doubt there were specialists for this too) which had left a translucent and imponderable body about a hard little kernel of spirit" (pp. 52-53). One suspects eurythmic exercises.

Boyne's confrontation with the elder Wheaters arises from the knowledge he gains from Judith while on the ship. For one thing, he learns the parentage of the children, not an inconsiderable achievement when one considers the marriage miscellany that they represent. The three older children, Judith, fifteen, and the twins, Terry and Blanca, eleven, are offspring of the Wheaters' original marriage. Zinnie, four, is the daughter of Cliffe Wheater's marriage to Zinnia Lacrosse, a film star. "Ben" and "Beechy," stepchildren often referred to with suffocating sweetness as "the steps," have been picked up by Joyce Wheater through her brief marriage to Buon-delmonte, an impoverished Italian nobleman. Chipstone, the youngest at a year and a half, is the son of Wheaters' remarriage. In attendance also is a maid, Miss Scope. From her Boyne learns that the wilderness to which his engineering jobs have taken him is not the equal of the moral wilderness that the children have been forced into as a result of their parents' marital misadventures. He is forced to agree with her when she exclaims that the "real wilderness is the
world we live in; packing up our tents every few weeks for another move. . . . And the marriages just like tents—folded up and thrown away when you've done with them" (p. 23).

The truth of Miss Scope's observation is made manifest for Boyne by the way in which the older children "frequently referred to their parents by their surname. The habit of doing so . . . rose from the fact that, in the case of most of the playmates of their wandering life, the names 'father' and 'mother' had to be applied, successively or simultaneously, to so many different persons; indeed one surprising little girl with black curls and large pearl earrings, whom they had met the year before at Biarritz, had the habit of handing to each new playmate a typed table of her parents' various marriages and her own successive adoptions" (p. 41). The children's predicament moves Boyne to compassion, especially when he compares their chaotic existence with the security which had characterized his own childhood. He recalls "the warm cocoon of habit in which his own nursery and school years had been enveloped, giving time for a screen of familiar scenes and faces to form itself about him before he was thrust upon the world. What had struck Boyne first about the little tribe generically known as the Wheaters was that they were so exposed, so bared to the blast—as if they had missed some stage of hidden growth for which Palace Hotels and Riviera Expresses afforded no sufficient shelter" (p. 44.) Feeling
as he does, Boyne hopes for the success of Judith's efforts to keep
the children together.

Boyne's shipboard acquaintance with the children produces
several related results: he agrees to stop in Venice to talk with the
elder Wheaters; he develops a deeper attachment to Judith; and he
examines his motives for his proposed rendezvous at Cortina with
Rose Sellars. Ostensibly, his stop in Venice is to try to impress
upon the elder Wheaters the importance of retaining a tutor for Terry,
but he does have another motive. The appeal to plead Terry's case
"anticipated a secret yearning of his own; a yearning not so much to
postpone his arrival at Cortina (to that he would not confess) as to
defer the parting from his new friends, and especially from Judith"
(p. 45). The necessity to reject consciously the possibility of wanting
to defer his arrival at Cortina suggests that his attachment to Judith
extends beyond mere friendship and concern, a conclusion he is not
consciously willing to accept. The ambivalence of his response to
her becomes apparent when, during a stop in Sicily, he conducts a
tour of Monreale especially for her edification. Her failure to respond
to the past embodied in the cathedral disappoints him: "it had been
stupid of him to expect that a child of fifteen or sixteen . . . should
feel anything in Monreale but the oppression of its awful unreality.
And yet he was 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." His own reflections pull him up short. "'Woman—but she's not a woman! She's a child.' His thinking of her as anything else was the crowning absurdity of the whole business" (p. 35). He addresses her as "child," a practice he pursues to a tiresome extent throughout the novel, in order to reassure himself that she really is a child, but he feels surprise when her childishness shows through. After Boyne pulls himself back to the view that she is a child and not a woman, a transformation he finds increasingly difficult to effect, he feels "obscurely irritated with himself and her" (p. 35). Although cloudy to him, the reason for his irritation is clear to the reader.

If obscurely irritated by the response Judith provokes in him, Boyne is obscurely puzzled by his changed attitude at the thought of Rose Sellar. Before she appears in the novel the outline of her personality is well established. Even a brief account of her history is enough to show that she is the exact antithesis of Judith:

... if Mrs. Sellar excelled in one special art it was undoubtedly that of preparation. ... All her life had been a series of adaptations, arrangements, shifting of lights, lowering of veils, pulling about of screens and curtains. No one could arrange a room half so well; and she had arranged herself and her life just as skilfully. The material she had had to deal with was poor enough ... she had managed, out of mediocre means, a mediocre husband, an ugly New York house, and a dull New York set, to make something distinguished, personal, almost exciting—so that, in her little world, people were accustomed to say "Rose Sellar" as a synonym for cleverness and originality.
Yes; she had had the art to do that, and to do it quietly, ... without ever reaching out beyond her domestic and social frame-work. Her originality, in the present day, lay in this consistency and continuity. It was what had drawn Boyne to her in the days of his big wanderings, when, returning from an arduous engineering job ... he would find, in his ever-shifting New York, the one fixed pole of Mrs. Sellar's front door, always the same front door at the same number of the same street, with the same Whistler etchings and Sargent water-colours on the drawing-room walls, and the same quiet welcome to the same fireside. (pp. 38-39)

She is intelligent and resourceful, sensitive and perceptive. She is one of those rare Edith Wharton characters who embody permanence unalloyed by persecution, stability without the usual concomitant stolidity. The mention of her ability at arrangements suggests her kinship with Ellen Olenska, and her constancy in the unpredictable arena of modern manners places her in the best tradition of old New York. She is, in brief, precisely the sort of woman whom the typical Edith Wharton hero imagines as the perfect companion. But that is exactly the problem; true to his type, Boyne finds anticipation more desirable than fulfillment. When the consummation of his quest begins to appear as a distinct possibility, Boyne questions the wisdom of his intentions. "It was a new Rose Sellars whom he was to meet. When they had parted she was still a wife--resigned, exemplary, and faithful in spite of his pleadings; now she was a widow. The word was full of disturbing implications, and Boyne had already begun to wonder how much of her attraction had been due to the fact that she was unattainable" (p. 40). We later see that Boyne discovers
more compelling reasons for not marrying Rose Sellarz, reasons related to a basic flaw in her character rather than in his.

Like others of his kind, Boyne is endowed with a strong sense of duty. Although tempted to stay in Venice with the children, he continues on to meet Mrs. Sellarz. "In a world grown clockless and conscienceless, Boyne was still punctual and conscientious; and in this case he had schooled himself to think that what he most wanted was to see Rose Sellarz again" (p. 81). He can, in short comply with the outward forms of the code of gentlemanly behavior that dictates his actions, but he cannot, after having known Judith, make himself believe fully in such a code:

Life had since given him hints of other things he might want equally, want even more; his reluctance to leave Venice and his newly-acquired friends showed that his inclinations were divided. But he belonged to a generation which could not bear to admit that naught may abide but mutability. He wanted the moral support of believing that the woman who had once seemed to fill his needs could do so still. She belonged to a world so much nearer to his than the Wheaters and their flock that he could not imagine how he could waver between the two. Rose Sellarz's world had always been the pole-star of his whirling skies, the fixed point on which his need for permanence could build. He could only conclude, now, that he combined with the wanderer's desire for rest the wanderer's dread of immobility. "Hang it all, you can't have it both ways," he rebuked himself; but secretly he knew that that was how the heart of man had always craved it. (pp. 81-82)

As clearly as anything in Edith Wharton's fiction, this passage spells out the conflict that informs so much of her work. The claims of "life"--dangerous because unstructured by traditions
and manners, here represented by Judith—are weighed against the claims of a safe, secure existence, the type of life which makes avoidance of "effusion of blood" one of its major goals. It is, as Boyne concludes, an irreconcilable conflict: "you can't have it both ways." The danger for a man of Boyne's character rests in the realization that there is more than one way. Without the recent brush with "life," Boyne should have had an uncomplicated future: marriage to Rose Sellars, happiness ever after. But once having recognized the conflicting claims of the two modes of life personified by Judith and Rose, Boyne cannot have it either way.

The reunion with Mrs. Sellars at first appears so successful as to disprove the dangers attendant on his recent encounter with life. But the images used to characterize the reunion alert the reader familiar with Edith Wharton's fiction. The idea of life through art lurks behind the figure chosen to illustrate Boyne's response to their walks through the imposing landscape. "Boyne, always alive to great landscape, had hitherto been too busy or preoccupied to note its particulars. . . . It was like being led through the flowered borders of an illuminated missal of which he had hitherto noticed only the central picture" (pp. 85-86). Closely related to this figure is the one that pictures Boyne's attraction to Rose Sellars's library. "And then her books! She always managed to have just the ones he wanted to get hold of--to a homeless wandering man it was not the least of
her attractions" (p. 86). But even in the midst of such allurements as her ordered life provides he cannot dispel the memory of Judith.

Boyne's marriage proposal to Rose has overtones of Archer's insistence to May that they should proceed with all haste to fulfill their marriage plans. For Boyne, marriage presents itself as a way to solve problems and lay to rest doubts. Rose responds that they must wait five months. An earlier marriage date would break the custom of a twelve-month mourning period and displease a well-fixed aunt whose heir she is. Boyne is properly impatient but quickly amenable. He recognizes that she is still a captive of the conventions that he believes he has thrown off.

The better part of the action depicts Boyne's attempt to resolve the conflicting claims of his attraction to Judith and his sense of duty to Mrs. Sellar's. Sensing that Boyne is in love with Judith, Rose agrees to the quick marriage Boyne had earlier urged. He refuses, insisting that his responsibility is to the children until he can see them properly settled. When he rejects her sensible plan for the children's disposition, she breaks the engagement. Even then Boyne refuses to let the separation appear complete. His motives for prolonging the appearance of affection for her are, he realizes, founded in his old New York upbringing. "He knew that he was merely using an old formula . . . and he longed to get away from it, to be spontaneous, honest, himself. But as he wrote it became
clear to him that he was terribly sorry for Rose Sellars, terribly sorry for having disappointed her; and that such phrases—the kind he had been brought up on—were the devices of decent people who hated to give pain, and were even capable of self-sacrifice to avoid it. 'After all, they were a lot better than we are,' he thought'' (p. 270).

His reflections on those who were a lot better are cut short by the arrival of one who is a lot worse. A "Princess Buondelmonte" presents herself to claim her husband's children, the "steps" Bun and Beechy. In her brief appearance the poor Princess is made the mouthpiece for what Edith Wharton took to be the ills of the modern world. The Princess, holder of a degree from "Lohengrin College, Texas," addresses herself to the elimination of evil: "Telling a child that an older person will kill . . . seems to me so unspeakably wicked. . . . 'Kill' is one of the words we have entirely eliminated at Lohengrin"; to the large family, on learning that Miss Scope was one of fourteen children: "It's incredible . . . But I suppose that at that time— . . . In the United States such matters will soon be regulated by legislation"; to obedience: "At Lohengrin co-operation has superseded every other method. . . . We think the idea of obedience is debasing"; and to education for life: "the game . . . 'Ambition' . . . had been introduced into the Vocational Department of Juvenile Psychology at Lohengrin in order to direct children's
minds as early as possible to the choice of a career" (pp. 282, 290-91, 293-94, 294-95).

Shortly after the Princess departs, Boyne remarks, "fate's too much for us. It didn't need the Princess Buondelmonte to teach me that" (p. 306). Precisely--Boyne might well be speaking for the reader, too. The characterization of the Princess again finds Edith Wharton revealing her distaste for the modern to her own disadvantage. The portrayal illustrates her deficiency as a satirist of the new order. She is able to sever the victim's head from her body, but it is not a deft operation. In the process the victim is so bludgeoned as to become unrecognizable. This is the case with the Princess. She bears no resemblance to a living character, but exists merely as a pair of quotation marks around several wide-of-the-mark clichés. That she is dismissed, never to be heard from again, to the limbo out of which she has been summoned bears out her insubstantiality. Edith Wharton would have done well to have left the Princess happy and harmless at Lohengrin. One chimera deserves the other.

The inevitable break-up begins when Mrs. Wheater summons Judith to Paris with orders to bring Chipstone with her. Boyne tells Judith there may yet be a way to keep them all together, and follows this with a pathetically circumspect proposal of marriage. Judith, who "so subtly had . . . changed from the child of his familiar
endearments to the woman he passionately longed for" (pp. 308-9),
completely misunderstands his meaning; she thinks he means to
adopt her and the rest of the children. He again tries to propose,
and again she fails to grasp his meaning.

The entire colony removes to Paris where Boyne's meeting
with Rose Sellars only reminds him how much he loves Judith. After
a short and unlooked-for meeting with Judith, from whom he learns
that the children are going separate ways, he leaves for an engineering
job in South America.

The final chapter serves as a coda to the action. After a
lapse of nearly three years, Boyne goes directly to Europe rather
than risk a meeting with Rose Sellars by returning to New York.
The Boyne who returns is not the same man who had left: "The
tropics seemed fairly to have burnt him out" (p. 335). He does not
want "to come in contact with life again" (p. 336). He travels to
Biarritz where he learns that Judith is in Biarritz. Later he catches
a glimpse of her through a window, watching her at a dance for young
people. The novel ends with Boyne's return to Brazil on the same
ship that had brought him to Europe. "On her deck stood Boyne, a
lonely man" (p. 347).

One of Edith Wharton's favorites among her own work,
The Children is an interesting novel. But the elements that make up
its plot result in a cumbersome treatment of the children themselves.
Certainly Edith Wharton wanted to show the chaos that results in the lives of innocent children when adults abdicate their responsibilities. One may speculate that she thought it necessary to populate the novel with a number of children, but not so large a number as to violate the possibility of staying together. And seven children do, after all, serve as a better illustration of the Wheaters' marital adventures than would, say, two or three. Further, one can perhaps gauge more accurately the extent of the Wheaters' reprehensibility in their willingness to ignore seven children rather than two or three. From the standpoint of the morality involved, this view may appear simple-minded, but in terms of fictional technique it is, I think, valid. The children must be numerous enough to testify to real chaos and to present real complications.

But the presence of the children likewise necessitates taking them all into account. Especially is this true of Boyne's concern for their welfare is to amount to anything more than a fraudulent disguising of his love for Judith. Therefore, at periodic intervals, Edith Wharton finds it necessary to employ what might be termed a meanwhile-back-at-the-nursery technique. The need to take into account the activities of the various children, not to mention the supplying each with a separate personality and set of characteristics, grows tiresome once the major interest is established.
Although the victimization of the children is important, the delineation of Boyne's relationship with Rose and Judith generates far greater interest because it draws together several of Edith Wharton's recurrent themes. Nowhere is this better reflected than in an episode concerning Judith's theft of her father's money. The language used to characterize the code that Boyne brings to bear on the situation is in itself revealing. The code is "relentless" and "unconditional" something to be "imposed on others, at no matter what cost of individual suffering." Feeling as he does, Boyne must keep the code, but he does so only to salve his conscience. He finds himself in a dilemma that one suspects is Edith Wharton's as well. The difficulty is that Boyne's inherited code is no longer entirely adequate to the situation. It has little real meaning because that which gave it meaning—a society like that of old New York—no longer exists. And Boyne knows it. This knowledge contributes to his undoing.

We have earlier remarked that Boyne displays many characteristics of the typical Edith Wharton hero, but he also manifests one significant difference. His work as an engineer (his profession, like that of Dallas Archer, is no doubt intended to be symbolic) has taken him to all parts of the world; his perspective is not limited solely by Fifth Avenue and Central Park. Although he has not, by his own admission, experienced the fullness of life when we meet him at the
opening of the novel, he has at least seen it. Rose Sellars, on the other hand, has not, as Boyne becomes aware when he tries to explain the Lido set's life style. "Her exquisite aloofness had kept her in genuine ignorance of the compromises and promiscuities of modern life, and left on her hands the picture of a vanished world wherein you didn't speak to people who were discredited, or admit rivals or enemies to your confidence; and she punctuated Boyne's narrative with murmurs of dismay and incredulity" (p. 174). For all her charm and tact, Rose Sellars is wanting in experience. She is a daughter of the age of innocence, but the age is irretrievably gone. Boyne gropes for life and discovers in the children a life-giving milieu. Exquisite though she is, Rose lacks the kind of life Boyne finds embodied in the children, especially Judith. When the love that Boyne thinks he feels for Rose begins to be illustrated by his attraction to her library and by metaphors drawn from art—the borders of an illuminated missal and the beautiful picture, for example—we see that he is in the same cul-de-sac as those pathetic and maimed heroes who have preceded him. Life through art is all very well; it requires but one thing—life. From this standpoint, Rose Sellars does not offer life. Marriage to her would be but a sleep and a forgetting.

As we have seen, Boyne's unsuccessful brush with life wounds him, leaving him afraid to experience more. But we should not conclude, as Nevius does, that Boyne is left in precisely the same
situation as that of Newland Archer cherishing the memory of a love that never was, of Kate Clephane exiled to sterile pain, and of Nona Manford wounded and withdrawn: "By resorting to the same poignant effect, each questions the wisdom of altruism and self-sacrifice." 17 Although these characters are indisputably related, important differences must be taken into account before grouping them under the same heading. What both relates and differentiates them is their experience with pain. They all suffer, and the reason for their suffering—a reaching out for life that is denied them—is also fairly constant. What differentiates them is the nature of the society in which each lives because the society radically affects the meaning of pain and suffering. Auchincloss remarks that in "Autre Temps," a short story relating an experience of Mrs. Lidcote which parallels that of Kate Clephane, Edith Wharton expresses "nostalgia for the very brand that did the burning!" 18 The implication that her examination of the new order led her to wish for a return of the old is not true, but the observation is pertinent to the role of suffering in Edith Wharton's fiction. Newland Archer's suffering possesses meaning because it is underwritten by his society. Kate Clephane returns to a society

17 Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 217.

18 Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, p. 28.
that has changed greatly during her absence: it is freer, more open, less painful. Compared to the society of her youth, the one she returns to lacks the confining air that was responsible for her pain and subsequent revolt, but it has lost the corresponding quality that lent dignity to duty and meaning to manners. If old New York society was mean enough to inflict pain, it was also decent enough to invest it with dignity and meaning. Failing to find these qualities in the changed New York, Kate Clephane returns to Europe and her "recompense." Nona Manford has no such recompense because she has known no such society—only that which she can imaginatively reconstruct from that wreck of the past, Arthur Wyant. In a society that devotes itself to pleasure and rejects pain, Nona's knowledge that the "only honourable thing about suffering was that it should not abdicate before indifference" (p. 220) is cold comfort. But at least suffering is preferable to the indifference she finds all around her. Boyne's case is slightly different. Society, as such, does not play a prominent role in the novel; it is simply suggested by its two extremes, Rose Sellars and the elder Wheaters, each unacceptable to Boyne. To characterize Rose Sellars as an extreme of society is, of course, to exaggerate, for she no more constitutes a society than does Arthur Wyant. Like him, she is simply a holdover from an earlier age; she possesses almost no knowledge of the times in which she lives. Her innocence underscores the difference between
Archer and Boyne. There is, after all, literally a world of difference between the two men. Archer can see good in the new order because he speaks out of the social context of the old order, but Boyne can only view the world as "relapsing into a kind of bloodless savagery" (p. 175). Archer can find real solace in being, as he says, "old-fashioned"; but it is no comfort for Boyne, thinking of the old New Yorkers, to recognize that "they were a lot better than we are."

Edith Wharton's examination of pain, which emerges as one of the major interests in her assessment of the new order, leads to only one conclusion: to suffer is to live—provided that one lives in the right kind of society. She sees the new order characterized by indifference and by the rise to dominance of the anti-pain cult of whom Pauline Manford is the most fully realized example. To deny pain its place in life is to rob life of its meaning. The major paradox in Edith Wharton's investigation of pain is her attitude toward self-expression, one of the main targets of her satire. The portrayal of such characters as Lilla Gates, Lita Wyant, Pauline Manford, Cliffe and Joyce Wheater, and the Princess Buondelmonte is intended to illustrate the excesses and absurdities proceeding from self-expression. But it is the inability of an Archer or a Kate Clephane to achieve self-expression in the confining strictures of old New York society that leads to revolt and subsequent suffering. Generally,
then, the argument is this: the individual must be more sensitive than the society which crushes him for the revolt his sensitivity has prompted; however, in the act of cutting off his attempt at self-expression, society lends substance to his sensitivity. Although Nona Manford happens to be referring to household furnishings, she expresses an analogous point of view when she considers Aggie Heuston's insensitivity to the ugliness that surrounds her. "'Funny,' Nona thought again—'that all this ugliness should prick me like nettles, and matter no more to Aggie than if it were in the next street. She's a saint, I know. But what I want to find is a saint who hates ugly furniture, and yet lives among it with a smile. What's the merit, if you never see it?" (pp. 236-37). The relationship between an individual's suffering and the society in which he lives is simply an extension of Nona's view. The sensitive person who lives in a strict, ordered society insistent on a particular code of conduct gains dignity through his final acceptance of the code precisely because he is superior to the society that forces his allegiance. But if, like Nona, the individual lives in a permissive society, his sensitivity has no place to go. Such a society does not provide for self-sacrifice, and self-expression becomes equated with the excesses of a Lilla Gates or a Lita Wyant. We can now see the need to broaden Auchincloss's remark concerning Edith Wharton's regard for old New York. She does not feel nostalgia
for the former society, the "brand that did the burning," but rather for the sort of character who submits to and survives the ordeal by fire. There is, after all, more to Archer than charred remains. By Nona Manford's definition, he qualifies for sainthood. He must be counted among the "they" who, in Boyne's view, "were a lot better than" his own generation. But we should not be too lulled by Boyne's elegiac mood. If they were better, it was only because the narrowness of their society provided those who recognized its limitations an opportunity for self-sacrifice through which they gained a kind of transcendence. Boyne's blanket "they" suggests multitudes, but in Edith Wharton's novels such characters are in a pitiful minority. Finally, while recognizing the value of self-sacrifice, we should consider that at best it is a most inverted form of self-expression. But even self-sacrifice is denied by the new order's permissiveness.

The novels devoted to the new order amply illustrate that Edith Wharton was not entirely at home with either her subject or her technique for dealing with it. The former lacks the authenticity of first-hand observation. That she desperately disliked what she thought was the temper of post-war American society is clear, but her delineation of it shows how seriously out of touch she was. Auchincloss's observation on her characterization of Pauline Manford—"If Mrs. Wharton had only stayed in America, how
quickly she would have comprehended such a woman!"—might be extended to encompass the whole of the milieu she was trying to pass off as the real thing. Much of the social commentary in *The Mother's Recompense* and *Twilight Sleep* comes dangerously close to fulfilling the indictment of Nick Lansing's novelistic efforts in *The Glimpses of the Moon*: "He knew enough of his subject to know that he did not know enough to write about it." Edith Wharton should have had the same knowledge concerning her own attempt to write about a society that she had not seen since her removal to France in 1910. Percy Lubbock suggests that she not only missed New York but also that her lack of knowledge about it since her removal to France hurt her fiction:

She had all too summarily cut her own roots, and wouldn't admit that you can't do that and continue to draw the sap of sound experience. And yet for that too she hankered—she missed that natural sustenance. After all it was still there in its place, the home of her past, firm on its feet if its head was topped by newer growth; and she might excuse her neglect of it by declaring that it had ceased to be—in her heart she knew that it wasn't her home that had ceased, it was her intimacy, her community with it that had languished... as a novelist of New York, where was she now?—in the air, more and more, it must be confessed, with scanty means of replenishing her native store. Very little of the stuff of experience is needed, she always maintained, still the doubt remained: how long may a novelist hope to nourish his book on an impression, a sensation, a feather-weight caught

in the air, and nothing more? It was an uneasy question on all sides, this of her American bearings.²⁰

The Mother's Recompense and Twilight Sleep are not the works to lay to rest such uneasiness as Lubbock mentions.

Whatever the reason, lack of close observation of her subject or simple hatred of it, her technique for dealing with the new order amounts to little more than a furious travesty of her former style. She had possessed an unerring command of satire aimed against the old order. The depiction of a Sillerton Jackson or a Janey Archer, or any of a hundred characters, major and minor, constitutes a gently ironic but wholly devastating commentary on a kind of society, a way of life. But in the novels presently under consideration satire is replaced by invective lacking both grace and accuracy and aimed at caricatures not important enough to draw such thunder. These works support H. Wayne Morgan's observation: "It was as though she decided to show how bad the new standards were by showing what they had done to her writing."²¹ She clearly needed a new subject.

She also needed to create a new type of character. She regarded Lilla Gates, Lita Wyant, and Pauline Manford as symptoms of the general malaise, not as characters. But the holdovers from


the past offer no possibility for future development. Even the best of them, Rose Sellars, is bound by sterile convention and wanting in experience. The others, all worse, run the gamut from the woodenly unfeeling—the Drovers, Tresseltons, and Aggie Heuston—to the frankly degenerate—Arthur Wyant and Stanley Heuston. Fred Landers is the only character of even minor importance who has stayed in New York and emerged with honor and vitality. The problem is further illuminated by the case of Nona Manford. Although she is a member of the disenchanted generation, she is "except for superficial differences, . . . in all respects a typical Edith Wharton heroine." But because she lacks a society which would make self-sacrifice a meaningful possibility, she ends in a cynical withdrawal from life. Her fate is instructive because it illustrates the fate of the typical heroine without the typical society—or at least what has come to be regarded as typical Edith Wharton society. The unacceptable alternatives offered by the lifeless old order and the life-denying new forced Edith Wharton to draw her new character type from a milieu altogether different from the kind that had previously supplied her heroes and heroines. Above all, the new character


\[23\] Millicent Bell sees a relation between Kate Clephane, Nona Manford, and Judith Wheater, the latter's "sense of virtue springing from some depth of heart rather from conscious tradition." Edith Wharton and Henry James, p. 300. For a view of Judith
must possess life. Judith Wheater is the prototype. Marilyn Lyde observes that

... Mrs. Wharton's endorsement of Judith Wheater is most surprising. ... Judith ... represents everything Mrs. Wharton was supposed to deprecate; yet she comes off much better than Mrs. Sellars, who is the type of woman we expect Mrs. Wharton, as a matter of course, to give a position of pre-eminence. It is even stranger that Judith should win the reader's affection for the very reasons which, according to the usual critical view, seem most un-Whartonian: she has no respect for forms, she accepts the corruption of her class with tolerance, and she is impulsive and tactless. Once again, all this is very difficult to fit into a pattern of growing nostalgia. 24

Although I agree with this judgment, I do not think the endorsement of Judith is surprising. It was, as we have seen, necessary for Edith Wharton to create a new character. Judith is merely the first of a kind; the final novels are concerned with characters who exhibit many of the same traits.

The characterization of Judith is the most important manifestation of The Children's transitional status, but it is not the only one. Boyne's acceptance of Judith in preference to Rose is also of considerable significance. To see, as Nevius does, the relationship between Boyne and Rose as another unhappy episode in a series which includes Archer and Kate Clephane and Nona Manford seems


to me to miss the point. Nor do I think it very rewarding to their relationship as a chapter of personal history. Coming from one who notes with equal detachment Edith Wharton's occasional lapses of taste and her failures of compassion, Auchincloss's speculation is incredible: "The novel was published in the year that followed Walter Berry's death, and the relationship between the two characters seems analogous to what may have existed between their creator and Berry. . . . It is tempting to speculate that Martin Boyne's fate is the author's revenge on his deceased counterpart."25

Both Auchincloss and Nevius assume that Boyne has acted foolishly, that his attraction to Judith is attributable primarily to middle-aged infatuation. This is misleading. His fate is not intended to illustrate the futility of self-sacrifice. He is not immolating himself on the altar of an outworn code; were that the case he would marry Rose Sellars and be done with it. In choosing to cast his lot with Judith, Boyne is wounded. But this does not make his choice wrong. He seeks life, and Judith, not Rose, embodies life.

Although The Children condemns the new order as roundly as ever, the development, tentative though it is, of characters able to respond to and embody life marks it as a transitional work. The novels that follow find Edith Wharton continuing in the pattern which had begun to emerge in The Children.

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CHAPTER IV

WRITER IN SEARCH OF A THEME

_Hudson River Bracketed_, published in 1929 after serialization in _The Delineator_, is the chronicle of a young writer's rise to literary prominence. Millicent Bell suggests that it represents, in substantially altered form, Edith Wharton's reworking of her unfinished _Literature_, a novel which was to re-late "the adventures of a writer in the modern jungle of publishing, magazines, and literary cliquism. Its subject is the making of a literary reputation--such as Mrs. Wharton herself had gained."¹

Certainly _Hudson River Bracketed_ holds to the main outline that Millicent Bell suggests, but what may cause surprise is Edith Wharton's choice of Vance Weston as the novel's protagonist. He is a Midwesterner, and we recall that other characters of the same origin, notably Undine Spragg and Pauline Manford, received less than sympathetic treatment from their creator. We should recall, too, Arthur Wyant's sneer at Dexter Manford's "breezy code

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of the prairies." Wyant intimates, apparently with Edith Wharton's approval, that Manford's background, although it fits him for action, renders him incapable of appreciating life's finer points. Implicit in his remark is the suggestion that such an appreciation is given only to those schooled in the ways of old New York. Why, then, should Edith Wharton entrust the role of the writer to one who shares Manford's "breezy code of the prairies"?

The question becomes all the more pressing when we realize that the hero of the projected Literature was not Vance Weston but a character named Dick Thaxter.² It would be difficult to imagine two characters with more dissimilar backgrounds. Dick Thaxter "is the only son of an intellectually troubled clergyman and a woman who is socially superior to her husband. The Thaxters live in the rectory at Tryan on the Hudson . . . Dick attends a private academy for boys and later goes to Harvard. When Dick is twelve years old, his father dies. On his deathbed Mr. Thaxter warns Dick to keep intellectually free."³ Dick Thaxter's background and educational experience clearly distinguish him from Vance Weston, who possesses none of the cultural advantages that have been a part of Dick Thaxter's inheritance. Dick Thaxter's background puts him firmly in the camp


³Ibid., p. 336.
of the usual Whartonian hero, a kindred spirit of Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell, and Newland Archer. Despite their differing social and cultural circumstances, Miss Leach sees Dick Thaxter and Vance Weston as basically the same character, and she sees Edith Wharton's transformation of Dick Thaxter into Vance Weston resulting from the social change that occurred from the inception of Literature, around 1918, to the publication of Hudson River Bracketed in 1929. It "seems probable that it was the dissolution of Dick Thaxter's society and the increasing importance of Vance Weston's that explains her abandonment of the earlier novel Literature for the later ones, Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive."\(^4\)

We can find an additional clue, I think, if we look at the personal traits which mark Vance Weston as a new type of hero cast in much the same mold as Judith Wheater. He is the very antithesis of the usual Whartonian hero. He possesses neither the tact nor the culture we have come to expect. Direct and decisive, he totally lacks the caution and vacillation which have plagued his literary forebears. He is alive, capable of choice and action in a way that is impossible for most Edith Wharton heroes. Louis Auchincloss puts the difference clearly when he says, "Here at last in Edith

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 352.
Wharton's fiction is a picture of a man. " One wonders whether the same judgment could be made if Dick Thaxter had remained the protagonist.

The greatest problem that the selection of Vance as protagonist poses for Edith Wharton—and the reader—is one of credibility. The opening lines of the novel portray Vance as the product of a rootless, tasteless way of life that Edith Wharton scorns:

By the time he was nineteen Vance Weston had graduated from the College of Euphoria, Illinois, where his parents then lived, had spent a week in Chicago, invented a new religion, and edited for a few months a college magazine called "Getting There", to which he had contributed several love poems and a series of iconoclastic essays. He also had been engaged for a whole week to the inspirer of the poems . . . Floss Delaney. Having soared to these heights, and plumbed these depths, it now remained to young Weston to fix upon the uses to which his varied aptitudes and experiences could most advantageously be put.

The verbal irony of the passage expresses an attitude that hovers somewhere between malicious sportiveness and downright contempt. Although her intention in the opening pages is to depict the cultural vacuum that is Vance's inheritance, she nearly sacrifices her hero to her own satire, so strong is her revulsion from the stifling atmosphere of Euphoria. As it is, Vance appears as a bumpkin Alexander with no more provinces to capture.

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6 Hudon River Bracketed (New York, 1929), p. 3. All references are to this edition.
Although the first impression of Vance may raise problems for some readers when they are later asked to accept him as a sensitive novelist of manners, the early portrait does have a logic of its own. If his Euphoria background initially blunts him to the nuances and niceties of the society he is soon to be introduced into, it does equip him to view experience directly because it has offered him no cultural or artistic perspective. This is an important consideration, for in the characterization of Vance Weston we see the reversal of the formula often applied to other Whartonian heroes. Rather than seeing events through a veil of art and living, through art, at a remove from experience, he transmutes experience into art.

After noting that Vance fulfills a long-overdue need of a man in Edith Wharton's fiction, Louis Auchincloss adds that it "may have all kinds of personal significance that he is neither a New Yorker nor a gentleman." The full significance is surely found in her view of the degeneracy of her own class which had found its fullest expression in the characterization of Arthur Wyant. Vance Weston, like Judith Wheater before him, is the new kind of character she so clearly needed to discover. Although he comes from a milieu which she rejects as strongly as ever, he is able, again like Judith Wheater, by some individual goodness or talent to separate himself from those

7Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, p. 40.
aspects of the milieu that would destroy his character. In the post-war world Edith Wharton may have been able to view more leniently those individuals whom she would earlier have been quick to condemn. In brief, Vance Weston offers the new look so badly needed to revitalize her fiction.

The opening sketch of life in Euphoria is mercifully brief. Lacking intimate knowledge of her material, Edith Wharton attempts to satirize Euphoria in the vein of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. But her portrait of small-town life has none of the realistic details that lend Gopher Prairie the authenticity that Euphoria entirely lacks. The result is a broad and uneven caricature of vulgarity as a way of life. She employs the familiar standard of decoration to cast sneering judgment on the level of taste by observing that the Westons' "sun-parlour with palms and a pink gramophone... was the envy of the neighbourhood" (p. 9). The trouble with Euphoria, Edith Wharton is convinced, is its lack of tradition. Everything is subordinated to "getting there": "the real business of life was to keep going, to get there—and 'There' was where money was, always and exclusively" (p. 15).

Vance is drawn by "grandma Scrimser's soaring talk and grandpa's racy commentaries" (p. 11). Edith Wharton wants to show grandma Scrimser's chaotic evangelism as part of the Euphoria scene "where other-worldliness and 'pep' lay down together in amity" (p. 5).
By endowing her with a religious bent, Edith Wharton also provides a ready audience for Vance's ruminations, which are intended to suggest his inchoate artistic yearnings and his awareness of something lacking in Euphoria's "getting there" spirit. When he speaks of his religious feeling, he sounds like a budding Emerson. He wants to release the god within him "into the Infinite, way beyond creeds and formulas, and try to relate him to all the other . . . the other currents . . . that seem to be circling round you, . . . so that you get caught up in them yourself" (p. 18). This is Vance's first attempt to express what he is later to feel is the most important aspect of the artistic sensibility, an awareness that there are other currents—a point of view that marks the serious artist and is closely related to the rather shadowy concept of Fate in Edith Wharton's own work.

Edith Wharton carefully stages the climactic event of the Euphoria section of the novel. She adopts a mocking tone towards her hero's feelings for Floss Delaney, whose easy promiscuity and hard beauty relate her to Undine Spragg. Vance, for example, thinks of Floss, supposedly removed to Chicago, as his inspiration: "He'd never looked at a girl since Floss—never meant to. Taken it out in writing poetry instead." And he strikes a man-of-the-world attitude, thinking "big manly thoughts about her, and about Woman in general" (pp. 20, 21). His sentimental posing is destroyed when he sees
Floss hurrying to a liaison with his lecherous grandfather in the
exact spot where he himself had formerly met her. The shock of the
experience produces a critical illness and leads him to near suicide.
Recovery comes through his objectification of the event in a story,
"One Day": "at last he had found out a way of reconciling his soul
to its experiences" (p. 32).

The illness results in Vance's trip to New York to stay with
distant cousins, the Tracys, for the period of recuperation that the
doctor prescribes. The shift of scene to the East allows Edith Wharton
to return to more familiar ground and provides her with a pattern
for portraying Vance's development as a writer. When we recall
that as early as her first novel, Edith Wharton had measured her
hero's maturation by his growing awareness of the past, we recognize
the familiarity of the design in Hudson River Bracketed. To become
a writer of consequence, Vance must be exposed to more than the
raw experience that Euphoria offers him. As a writer, he has gone
as far as he can go with Euphoria in his first story, "One Day."
The paradox is clear. His Midwestern background equips him with
the native vitality which serves him so well in his struggle to become
a serious writer, but it cannot give him the abundance of varied
experience that the writer needs. Above all, it cannot give a sense
of history to a person who "had been born into a world in which
everything had been, or was being, renovated" (p. 3).
If the sunny sameness of the Midwest provided little nourishment for Vance's artistic appetite, the storied East is quite a different matter. His fascination with his new surroundings focuses on an old house, "The Willows." It has fallen into disuse but is kept dusted and aired, in a desultory way, by the Tracys into whose care it has been entrusted by the Lorburns, an old family whose decline parallels that of the house itself. His response to the Willows suggests its symbolic value. For Vance, who brings to the East all the standards implicit in Euphoria's motto for World War I—"Me for the Front Row"—the Willows evokes a sense of religious awe. The house is a mystery to him because the past is a mystery, "a past so remote from anything in Vance Weston's experience that it took its place in the pages of history anywhere in the dark Unknown before Euphoria was." Of this "incomprehensible past . . . so full of elusive mystery," Vance can only ask, "Why wasn't I ever told about the Past before?" (pp. 61–62).

The answer, of course, is Euphoria. But a more important question is, who is going to tell him about the past now? The difficulty with present keepers of the past is that they lack the creative energies to act as anything more than caretakers. The Tracys, with whom Vance is staying at Paul's Landing, a ramshackle community on the Hudson above New York, represent the caretakers on the most literal level. The son, Upton, is "spindly," the daughter, Laura Lou,
"drawn and thin," and Mrs. Tracy "fluctuant and shadowy." Little wonder that Vance should sense a "mysterious lack of vitality" about them. Remembering his first impression of the town itself, he concludes that the Tracys and their shabby house "were not an isolated phenomenon but part of some huge geological accident" (pp. 37-44). Clearly, the Tracys cannot tell Vance about the past; to them the Willows is simply an old house. There is only one person in the novel capable of acting as guide to the past, and Edith Wharton supplies her in the person of Halo Spear.

Just as Floss Delaney has introduced Vance to previously unknown experience, so too does Halo. From her first appearance, Halo is distinctly different from the other Easterners Vance encounters. She is an unabashed holdover from an earlier age. Her appearance, for example, is strikingly similar to that of Emily Lorburn, her distant ancestor whose portrait in the library of the Willows serves as a reminder that the Lorburns were once an august family. Vance immediately notices "something about her . . . that fitted into the scene, seemed to mark her as a part of it, though he was instantly aware of her being so young, not much older than himself" (p. 64). Indeed, Halo, "who might have been old Miss Lorburn's reincarnation" (p. 94), fits better into the neglected past of the Willows than she does into the chaotic present of Eaglewood, the family home.
Built in 1680, Eaglewood antedates the Willows by 150 years. As befits the original seat of the Lorburns, it is "throned" on a mountain side high above Paul's Landing and overlooks a magnificent view of the Hudson. Eaglewood serves the same purpose as the Willows. We know by Vance's response to the Willows that he is, in Edith Wharton's classification, a worthwhile person. "The view from Eaglewood was famous—yet visible, Heloise Spear reflected, to none of those who habitually lived with it except herself" (p. 72). Her mother, a more cultivated version of Pauline Manford, busies herself with inconsequential literary and humanitarian preoccupations. Her father is a parvenu popinjay, self-important and comic. And her brother, Lorry, is a degenerate fool given to cultivating ugliness and borrowing money. Their failure to share Halo's appreciation of the view suggests that Eaglewood has fallen on sad days. The Lorburns, who in Upton Tracy's words, "owned pretty near the whole place before the Revolution" (p. 53), have been reduced to Mrs. Spear, Tom Lorburn, the absentee owner of the Willows, and "old infirm Miss Lorburn," who inherits the Willows on Tom Lorburn's death. The Lorburns even own a "far-off cousinship" with the Tracys thanks to a "foolish (and elderly) Lorburn virgin" who had run away with a Tracy. "Nowadays all this would have signified much less, as far as the family's social situation went; but in the compact life of sixty years ago it was a hopeless fall to lapse from the height of Eaglewood
to the depth in which the small shop-keepers and farmers of Paul's Landing had their being" (p. 85). Although not as socially damaging as a Lorburn's elopement with a Tracy, the Lorburn–Spear marriage provides another measure of the family's declining fortunes. Mr. Spear's father "had married a distant cousin of the Van der Luydens, thus paving the way for his son's more brilliant alliance," but when "he married the beautiful Miss Lorburn, New York said: 'He's very clever, of course; but still, who would have expected to see a Spear at Eaglewood?" Halo is egalitarian enough to fret herself for failing to see the Tracys no more often than is required, but she is Lorburn enough to see the appropriateness of old New York's judgment of her father. "After all, those dull old Lorburns and their clan must have had a nice sense of nuances: her father, whom she loved and laughed at, was exactly that--he was merely clever" (p. 78).

Although Edith Wharton does not fully develop any of the Lorburns or Spears, with the exception of Halo, she does describe them adequately enough for us to see them as believable characters. They are intended to be viewed in much the same way that the Scrimzers and Westons are. What the latter are to Euphoria, the former are to New York; both are significant segments of their respective societies. The decline of the Lorburn family, which is paralleled by the rise of the Westons, is more than a tangential social history. The
mysterious lack of vitality that Vance feels in the Tracys has its
counterpart in the Lorburn decline. What are the Lorburns—or what
is left of them—if not caretakers? And not very good ones at that.
The elder Lorburns are so feeble that they are not physically
capable of occupying the Willows, and every one of the younger
Lorburn-Spear relationship, with the exception of Halo, would
have been secretly happy to have been able to sell Eaglewood. "To
the last two generations of Lorburns Eaglewood had embodied all
the things they could not do because of it" (p. 77). The Lorburns
are clearly included in that "huge geological accident" through
which Vance accounts for the Tracy lifelessness.

Edith Wharton gives an insight into the nature of that
accident when she sketches the history of the Lorburn occupancy of
Eaglewood, dating from 1680. "It was too long, perhaps, for
Americans to live in any one place; and the worst of it was that,
when they had, it became a sort of tribal obligation to go on doing
so. . . . When Pittsburgh and Chicago fell upon the feudal Hudson,
and one old property after another was bartered for a mess of pot-
tage, the Lorburns sat apart with lifted brows, and grimly thanked
Providence that Paul's Landing was too far from New York to
attract the millionaires" (pp. 77-78). The characterization of the
decline of the "feudal" society of the Hudson is interesting, for the
degeneration of the Lorburn fief bears close resemblance to the
decadent feudal system described in *The Valley of Decision*. With the degeneracy of the line and the influx of new wealth, the feudal aspects of the Hudson aristocracy are destroyed, the decay reaching the life at Eaglewood. When Upton tells Vance that the Lorburns "just got poorer and poorer and died off," Vance is genuinely puzzled. He thinks that the Lorburns should have worked up a real-estate boom and "unloaded the stuff on somebody." But he then remembers "his grandmother's caustic comments on old families that have run to seed. He was glad that no aristocratic blood clogged his own lively circulation" (p. 53). Although Vance at this point is very naïve, and unable to see the irony of his remark about a real-estate boom, he certainly has a point. The old New York blood still carries its defects into *Hudson River Bracketed*.

Of the New Yorkers there is only one other than Halo who is presented in a favorable light. George Frenside is a literary critic in whom "the critical faculty outweighed all others"; he possessed a "decomposing mind" (pp. 75-76). Halo herself shares in Frenside's critical bent; she too possesses an "incurable mania for taking everything to pieces" (p. 106). We should not overlook the implication in the characterizations of the two worthwhile New Yorkers that the novel has to offer. By endowing both Halo and Frenside with critical temperaments, Edith Wharton seems to be suggesting that creative capability is no longer possible for the New
Yorkers. Their creativity lies in their criticism; each independently recognizes Vance's potential. Frenside's laconic remarks often guide Vance's efforts. Halo is even more instrumental in Vance's development as a writer, which is in good measure dependent on her ability to open the past for him and to serve as the critical intelligence that he himself lacks.

When Lorry Spears steals some rare volumes of Americana from the Willows, Vance is blamed. Forced to leave the Tracys', he travels to New York where he finally sees Frenside who discourages further attempts at poetry. But in his capacity as critic for the little magazine The Hour, he accepts "One Day" for publication and advises Vance to go home and write more stories like it. Vance does return to Euphoria where he spends three dispiriting years working on the town newspaper. He is recalled to New York by Lewis Tarrant whom Halo has married. He has taken over the editorship of the magazine and rechristened it The New Hour. In looking over old issues, Tarrant has come across "One Day" and feels that Vance might be a valuable writer for the magazine to promote. Unsure of the story's merit, he gives it to Halo whose enthusiastic judgment prompts Tarrant's decision.

It is characteristic that Tarrant should rely on Halo's judgment because he is too unsure of himself to be capable of forming an independent judgment. Louis Auchincloss, who links the portrait
of Tarrant with Walter Berry, finds it "significant that the novel contains the coldest, yet most pathetic of all her dilettante characters, and that for once he is not the hero." It is certainly true that Tarrant does embody the essential qualities we have come to associate with the usual Edith Wharton protagonist. The difference between Tarrant and his literary forebears is that Edith Wharton withholds all sympathy from him. Indeed, the cold characterization lends considerable support to the view that Edith Wharton deliberately sought to create a new type of hero. Whether he is Walter Berry's fictional counterpart must remain conjecture; what is clear is that Edith Wharton conceived Vance Weston and Lewis Tarrant as opposites. Vance is a doer, Tarrant a dabbler; Vance is creative, Tarrant destructive. While Vance is open, warm, and generous, Tarrant is isolated, cold, and calculating. Their respective relationships with Halo further point up the contrast. Vance and Halo's acquaintance is marked by mutual respect and dependence; the Tarrant marriage fails because Tarrant will not permit Halo to enter into his life. His egotism is such that it permits Halo to exist only as a tribute to his impeccable taste in selecting a wife. Although trapped into marrying Tarrant, Halo believes they have enough in common to live happily, but the "very tie she had most

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counted on in the early days of their marriage—a community of ideas and interests—had been the first to fail her. She knew now that the myth of his intellectual isolation was necessary to Tarrant's pride" (p. 219). The collapse of the community of ideas and interests dooms their marriage. It was bound to collapse, of course, because her belief in Tarrant's ability to share anything is ill-founded. Halo only thinks she can share such a community with Tarrant. But, like Selden's "republic of the spirit," it is a never-never land that admits no one. Tarrant has it in him to suggest the inexhaustible possibilities of such a community, but he is completely incapable of making good his suggestion because his mythical intellectual isolation (this of one who cannot even make up his mind on the worth of a story) is necessary to his pride. He appears so gifted that even Halo can momentarily indulge herself by thinking that all he needs "is to have real things to do" (p. 230). But it is only the familiar deception, as Halo herself well knows. His "various unsuccessful experiments, first in architecture, then in painting" (p. 191), and his deficiencies as a human being present a compelling argument against his ability ever to engage in "real things." Tarrant is, in brief, the end of the line, the culminating portrait of the type first fully embodied in Lawrence Selden.

Halo's marriage to Tarrant is paralleled by a match that is on the surface as disastrous as that unhappy union. It is easy to
characterize Vance's marriage to Laura Lou Tracy as a regrettable mistake born of his impulsive nature. Although Laura Lou is scarcely as imposing as either Halo or Floss, there can be little doubt that, like them, she is intended to be seen as a significant aspect of Vance's life. It is, however, difficult to know precisely what to make of her. Vance's attraction to her is conveyed in portentous terms. When, for example, he is returning to New York at Tarrant's request, he is "rocked by the rhythm of the train as if the great Atlantic rollers were sweeping him forward to his fate" (p. 202). Laura Lou seems a part of that fate, for no sooner is he in New York than he is so struck by the beauty of a girl that he forgets his literary aspirations and makes his way to her, "a tide . . . sweeping him forward" (p. 203). Nevius sees the three women as the . . . necessary many selves of the novelist which are struggling for expression and dominance. Laura Lou, with her obvious prettiness, her fretfulness and inadequacy, and her devouring possessiveness, is the kind of partner Vance might have lived comfortably with had he never outgrown Euphoria and his job on "The Free Speaker." She represents an ideal of womanhood easily satisfied by the standards of Euphoria, and her influence on the budding novelist is therefore regressive. Halo, on the other hand, calls forth the most permanent and reliable, if not the deepest impulses of his creative imagination. . . . The attraction exerted by Floss Delaney is wholly irrational . . . and for that reason powerful and dangerous. . . . If Laura Lou projects the most banal and underdeveloped aspect of his talent and personality, Halo represents the solid basis on which they must grow or perish.9

9Nevius, Edith Wharton, pp. 233-34.
To this neat categorization in which Laura Lou comes off a poor third, I would add that the three women also represent the fragmentation that Edith Wharton saw in post-war society. It is indisputably true that Laura Lou has extremely pedestrian tastes. When, for instance, Vance takes her to a deserted seaside bungalow for their honeymoon, he sees her disappointment and realizes his mistake, "wondering that he had not guessed the place to take her would have been a hotel with an imitation marble restaurant, and a good movie next door where she could read her own romance into the screen heroine's" (p. 246). But for all her crushing dependence and want of cultivation, it is not at all clear that she exerts the regressive influence Nevius sees. Although she lacks the intelligence necessary to share Vance's artistic purposes, he does discover in her "a new quality which not only enchanted his senses but fed his imagination" (p. 337).

To be sure, he writes his most successful work, *Instead*, under Halo's tutelage, but *Instead* presents special problems of its own which we can deal with later. It is, in fact, when Vance is most tied to Laura Lou that he comes closest to creating a major work that really reflects himself. *Magic*, the name of the intended novel, is to be "about a fellow like himself; about two or three people whose spiritual lives were starved as his own had been" (p. 511). Presumably, it will celebrate the magic of creativity leavening those
lives. He never finishes it because Laura Lou dies of tuberculosis during the writing. Vance is then free to return to Halo who conveniently appears shortly after Laura Lou's death; their life together will be the subject of Edith Wharton's *The Gods Arrive*. We may note here that Vance never fulfills the promise that Magic seems to hold. This being so, it appears that Laura Lou is not a regressive influence. If she exerts any influence, it is positive, though indirect. Since she does not understand Vance's work, she cannot help directly to shape it as does Halo. But by her presence alone she exerts a positive influence on both his writing and his personality precisely because she limits his freedom and imposes responsibilities on him. This point, which is implicit in *Hudson River Bracketed*, becomes one of the major themes of *The Gods Arrive*.

After his marriage Vance begins work for Tarrant. His relationship with *The New Hour* provides Edith Wharton the opportunity to entrust to Vance some of her own ideas on the creative process, the nature of fiction, and the kind of fiction needed in the post-war world. It is not difficult, for example, to discern in the comments surrounding "Unclaimed" Edith Wharton's own voice. This story, Vance's first contribution to *The New Hour*, represents a marked advance over "One Day": "The new tale was different; less vehement, less emotional, above all less personal" (p. 231). In it Vance is more the objective artist, able to see his subject
from several different angles. Again Tarrant is unsure of its worth, afraid that it is too old-fashioned and humdrum to be included in the first issue under his editorship. But Halo calms his fears and forms his opinions by pointing out the advantage of publishing "Something quiet, logical, Jane Austen-y . . . . At the very moment when even 'Home and Mother' is feeding its million readers with a novel called 'Jerks and Jazzes', it strikes me that the newest note to sound might be the very quiet" (p. 235). Provided with an opinion, Tarrant explains to Frenside that "Unclaimed" strikes an entirely new note."

To this announcement, Frenside, weary of new notes, can only groan, "Another?" But Tarrant goes on to clarify the novelty of Vance's story: "Yes, the phrase is overworked. But I don't use it in the blurb sense. This boy has had the nerve to go back to a quiet, almost old-fashioned style: no jerks, no paradoxes--not even afraid of lingering over his transitions" (p. 236). The enthusiastic reception of the first issue of The New Hour bears out Halo's judgment. The "crown of its success was 'Unclaimed' . . . every one agreed that it sounded a new note. The public was fed up with new notes, yet dared not praise anything without applying that epithet to it (so Frenside explained)" (pp. 282-83).

In the repeated claims for the unique quality of Vance's work, Nevius notes an "overtone of self-defense on Mrs. Wharton's part. The Vance Weston of Hudson River Bracketed . . . is the virgin soil
in which Mrs. Wharton's ideas triumphantly survive transplan-
ting. This judgment is further underscored in scenes depicting
gatherings of the literary world. That world in *Hudson River
Bracketed* is populated by foppish poseurs, shallow women, and
deceitful publishers. Literary reputations rise and fall with
meteoric speed; last year's lion is this year's goat. And Edith
Wharton implies that by and large the authors deserve the treatment
they receive, for their works further contribute to the brutalization
of the dehumanized world they treat. Faddists obsessed with big-
ness and newness, they appear only as foils to Vance's sense of life
as continuity. Vance is as isolated among the literati of New York
as he ever was in *Euphoria*. The theme of Vance's need for con-
tinuity and his resulting dissatisfaction with the prevailing literary
mode is stressed throughout the Novel. His sense of continuity is
the stimulus for *Instead*, the short novel that establishes his reputa-
tion. The Willows had first fully roused his imagination and it is
the life of the old house that is the subject of *Instead*. Since *Instead*
is important to the meaning of *Hudson River Bracketed*, it deserves
close attention.

First, Vance's conception of *Instead* and the early stages

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10 Nevius, *Edith Wharton*, pp. 224-25. For fuller sub-
stantiation of this point see Alexander M. Buchan, "Edith Wharton
and 'The Elusive Bright-Winged Thing,'" *New England Quarterly,
XXXVII* (1964), 343-62.
of its writing focus on the nature of the creative process itself.

Returning to the Willows for the first time since the stolen-books episode three years earlier, he again falls under its influence.

"This is the Past," he thinks, "if only I could get back into it."

His creative energies obligingly coalesce; "secret forces move within him. Whenever he could surrender to his creative fervour it always ended by carrying him to the mysterious point where effort ceased, and he seemed just to have to hold his breath and watch" (pp. 333-34).

Throughout Hudson River Bracketed, Edith Wharton insists on the essential mystery of the creative process. A work like Instead, for example, is implicit from the time that Vance first sees the Willows, but the artistic imagination cannot be rushed; it must be allowed to accumulate experience in a state of wise passiveness until the creative forces suddenly assert themselves, at which time the writer becomes their shaping instrument. The same point is made in the account of Magic. Before beginning that novel, he has been in a state of apparently unproductive turmoil for weeks. "But all the while he was rebuilding his soul; he found no other term for the return of the inner stability which was like a landing-field for his wide-pinioned dreams. And then one day he looked out of the window and saw the apple-bough, and his new book hanging on it. He held his breath and watched" (p. 511). Although the heightened perception described here is, for Vance, the only fully intelligible human
experience, it is entirely inexplicable and, Edith Wharton implies, not lacking its dark side, for the period of greatest creative activity is also the time of the artist's greatest isolation from all else around him. When the idea for *Instead* seizes Vance, "a subtle transposition had situated his only reality in that silent room among the books" (p. 335). These periods of illumination and the consequent isolation are extreme examples, but they are, after all, only an intensifying of the artist's usual condition. Witness Vance's response to Halo's distraught behavior on learning of Laura Lou's death: "... he wondered if at crucial moments the same veil of unreality would always fall between himself and the soul nearest him; if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones" (p. 560). Much has been made of the way loneliness threatened Edith Wharton's personal life, especially her later years. Now to see loneliness as the condition of the artist helps to clarify further Edith Wharton's ability to convey so forcefully the threat of loneliness to her most moving characters' lives.

If the writing of *Instead* helps to clarify his dissatisfaction with contemporary novelists in whom he finds no sense of continuity, it also reminds him of the "meagreness of his inherited experience," (p. 338). The subject of his novel is to be Emily Lorburn's life at the Willows and "the mysterious substitution of one value for another in a soul which had somehow found peace" (pp. 337-38). But no
sooner is Vance into it than he is brought up short by his own lack of knowledge. He is reminded of the Fourth of July orators at Euphoria who "had been much given to dilating on the priceless qualities the pioneers had brought with them into the wilderness. To Vance is sometimes seemed that they had left the rarest of all behind" (p. 338). At the propitious moment Halo arrives and acts as Vance's guide to the past that the Willows embodies. She understands Emily Lorburn, fictionalized as Alida Thorpe, and supplies Vance the necessary novelistic details. "Don't forget that Alida . . . would have always had her handkerchief in her hand. . . . It's important, because it makes them use their hands differently. . . . And their minds too, perhaps . . . like the old gentlemen I remember when I was a child, who always carried their hat and gloves into the drawing room when they called. . . . Emily really was an epitome of six or seven generations--the last chapter of a long slowly-moving story" (pp. 357-58). The store line of Instead has a familiar ring, as well it might, for it is quite similar to Edith Wharton's own work. The heroine is "a creature apt for love, but somehow caught in the cruel taboos and inhibitions of her day, and breaking through them too late to find compensation except under another guise" (p. 359).

Instead is an immediate success, but success, Vance learns, carries its problems. His faith in himself is shaken by the various "perplexing contradictory theories" of fiction that rule the New York
literati. The idea of "theme" especially bothers him. "It had never before occurred to him that the artist needed any, except that to which his invisible roots struck down, in the depths ruled by The Mothers" (p. 391). He talks with Frenside who explains that "it's a bad time for a creator of any sort to be born, in this after-war welter, with its new recipe for immortality every morning" (p. 392). Frenside tells him that Instead, though exquisite, "leads nowhere. An evocation— an emanation— something you wrought with enchantments," lacking Vance's own "tissue" (pp. 393-94). Its success is attributable to its difference; readers "unconsciously tired of incoherence and brutality" (p. 394) had been charmed by its delicacy and sense of continuity. Frenside advises him to "take hold of life as it lies around you," and concludes that "Manners are your true material, after all" (p. 394).

What emerges from the conversation with Frenside illuminates the weakness at the center of Hudson River Bracketed, for Instead causes problems not only for Vance Weston but for Edith Wharton as well. It is the vehicle intended to demonstrate Vance's superiority to the other novelists of the day, and, as its plot clearly suggests, it is also a justification for the kind of fiction that Edith Wharton herself wrote. But Frenside, on whom we can rely as the novel's most qualified critic, has characterized it as only an "emanation," not a "reality." For all its superiority, then, Instead
backs Vance Weston into the same corner from which Edith Wharton hoped to extricate herself. The irony comes full circle when we realize that Vance—who whose shadowy outline we have seen developing in Judith Wheater—is the character through whom Edith Wharton hoped to effect her own deliverance. That is, in *Hudson River Bracketed* she was herself trying to strike a new note. The selection of Vance as protagonist and the unsympathetic portrayal of Tarrant suggest that *Hudson River Bracketed* represents Edith Wharton's determined effort to come to some sort of terms with the present. Paradoxically, the novel stands as a testament to her inability to find a congenial theme in the new ways which had risen to dominance since the age of innocence. It takes *The Gods Arrive* to clarify how fully her experiment of writing in the present failed.

Vance leaves his conversation with Frenside determined to revive his novel *Loot*. Ever since first arriving in New York, he had been taken with the idea of presenting a large canvas of the city's life. But when he reads the opening chapters to Halo, she detects a note of imitation in them. Later, in a dispute with Tarrant, Vance destroys the manuscript of *Loot*. We are to view this action with approval, for it signals his refusal to become just another of the many celebrants of bigness and brutality: "... he felt as if he had torn the claws of an incubus out of his flesh" (p. 480). At the same time, however, we must recognize that the destruction of *Loot* closes another subject for
him. And it is hardly mere coincidence that Loot projects the kind of subject that never interested Edith Wharton.

_Hudson River Bracketed_ makes it clear that Vance's difficulty with finding a theme stems from the composition of society rather than with Vance himself. The trouble that society poses for the writer whose proper subject is manners is illustrated by the career of Bunty Hayes. One of the novel's minor figures, Hayes begins as a newspaper reporter at Paul's Landing. By the end of the novel he has become the successful owner of Storecraft, a business which prospers through Hayes' shrewd ability to satisfy the public's desire for whatever is fashionably smart. He is a complete vulgarian who makes vulgarity pay. His rise parallels the decline of public taste.

In Hayes's success we see evidence that Euphoria's "getting there" spirit has infected the whole country. Grandma Scrimser, for example, has enjoyed sudden fame as an evangelist and exhorts fashionable New York to "Meet God!" Hayes promotes her evangelical efforts because Storecraft, Hayes explains, "aims to handle all the human interests. We can't leave out religion, any more'n we could art or plumbing" (p. 460). Another evidence of the general decline of taste is evident in Vance's determination to write fiction that strikes below the surface or "chuck it, and try real estate or reporting" (p. 335). The alternatives imply that the Euphoria spirit already
dominates the literary world, a view further supported by the caricatures of the other novelists as crass boors.

The problem for Vance—and one imagines for his creator as well—is to find continuity, the relatedness of things, in a society that has put aside the conventions which provide the theme for Instead. How does a writer attracted to the style of Hudson River Bracketed find a subject in a society dominated by the Storecraft style? This is the question that The Gods Arrive presumably will answer.

The sequel, continuing the story of Vance and Halo, opens a few months after Laura Lou’s death. In the interim Vance has returned to Euphoria, but, finding it impossible to continue Magic, he returns to New York and entreats Halo to join him on a trip to Europe. Although separated, Halo is still married to Tarrant, but she accepts Vance’s pleading, fully confident that she will have a divorce within a month or two. At the outset of the novel they are ready to sail from New York. It is to be a journey away from the past as well as into it. If the past embodied in the Willows moved Vance’s imagination to creativity, the richer European spectacle should supply him with material for more novels. But the historical past is not the only one involved. The trip to Europe is also an attempt to escape from the personal past and from the consequences of their unconventional behavior. Halo rationalizes her action by viewing it
as a commitment to "life at last," in the face of which "the old-fashioned discretion and deliberation" of the usual divorce proceedings "seemed quaint and out-of-date."\(^{11}\) This is not the first time that such a note has been struck in Edith Wharton's fiction, and it always sounded the ring of doom. *The Gods Arrive* is no exception.

The novel is dedicated to the proposition that governs much of Edith Wharton's fiction: no one can escape from his past and the social conventions that govern human behavior.

The difficulty with *The Gods Arrive* is that it goes off on a dozen different tacks before finally declaring itself. The opening chapters suggest that Edith Wharton had the advocacy of convention in mind from the beginning of the novel, as the remark on divorce indicates. It is the plan for developing her subject that proves cumbersome. The germ of that plan is contained in a passage which finds Vance surveying the night sea as the ship leaves New York.

"On those pursuing waves he saw the outstretched arms of his youth, his parents, his grandmother, Floss Delaney, Mrs. Pulsifer, the girls who had flitted across his path, and the little white vision of Laura Lou springing like spray from wave to wave. He pictured a man suddenly falling over the ship's side, and seized and torn to pieces by the pack of his memories" (p. 19).

\(^{11}\) *The Gods Arrive* (New York, 1932), p. 5. All references are to this edition.
A convincing presentation of the claims of the past would pose formidable problems for any writer. Edith Wharton avoids the issue by declining any attempt to be convincing. She depends heavily on the use of improbable coincidences to achieve her ends. In this respect *The Gods Arrive* bears a marked resemblance to *The Glimpses of the Moon*. Nor is this the only aspect of the novel that wakens echoes of the earlier work. It is not unfair to say, I think, that the extent of Edith Wharton's failure in *The Gods Arrive* may be measured by the similarity between the two novels. Although not a perfect parallel, the basic situation of *The Gods Arrive* is clearly reminiscent of *The Glimpses of the Moon*. For Nick and Susy's experimental marriage, we have Vance and Halo masquerading as man and wife. Halo becomes as efficient a manager as Susy, and Vance verges dangerously close to being as unproductive a writer as Nick. Nick has his flirtation with the coarse Coral Hicks, Vance his with Floss Delaney. Both Susy and Halo learn of their errant husbands' misadventures through accidentally happening upon newspaper accounts. Strefford offers Susy haven from social exploitation by proposing a marriage which would elevate her to nobility; Tarrant reappears to ask Halo to return, an offer which would save her from complete social ostracism. And, finally, Grandma Scrimser functions in the same role as Grace Fulmer did in the earlier novel, dispensing folksy wisdom which points the way to responsibility and happiness. Whether this reworking of
similar elements was completely conscious on Edith Wharton's part is, of course, open to question. I suspect that it was not, and that the design reasserts itself because Edith Wharton had by the time she wrote *The Gods Arrive* despaired of discovering in the post-war world a theme that would answer Vance's needs—and her own.

To compound the weaknesses of *The Gods Arrive*, Edith Wharton's primary interest has shifted away from Vance to Halo. Her estimate of Vance has apparently undergone considerable revision; consequently, the characterization grows blurred. A single page often contains inexplicable divergences in characterization. At one moment he is the serious novelist; at another he is a poseur full of the jargon he has picked up from the artistic coterie. At times we find him speaking in tones of Nick Lansing's affected ennui: "Vance gave a chuckle of satiety. 'I don't believe I could bear it if there was a moon!'" At others he speaks a dialect formerly reserved for Tarrant types: "The other day I was haranguing you about the difference between plastic expression and interpreting things in words. Utter rubbish, of course. Why the deuce didn't you tell me so?" (pp. 26, 38). But he can revert to his *Hudson River Bracketed* use of loutish and tiresome expletives that were supposed to make his sincerity and strength in the thin-blooded society of New York.

The wavering portrayal of Vance involves more than Edith Wharton's frequent failing of "sudden and unexpected shifts
of sympathy toward or away from her characters. We should not overlook the importance of two related points: Vance's inability to find a theme and the flouting of convention inherent in his relationship with Halo. We recall that his potentially best work, Magic, was begun under the difficulties imposed upon him by Laura Lou's sickness. With her death those conditions are removed and with them his ability to continue the novel. The meaning is clear, but lest anyone fails to get the message, Edith Wharton produces Frenside, improbably serving as Tarrant's ambassador to Halo. The following exchange explicitly states the lesson implicit in Vance's failure to finish Magic or produce anything worthwhile in its stead. Halo protests to Frenside that she wants Vance "to feel as free as air," and he replies:

"I'm--free as air. The untrammelled artist. Well, I don't believe it's the ideal state for the artist, any more than it is for the retail grocer. We all of us seem to need chains--and wings."

"... All right--only in Vance's case I'd rather be the wing-giver."

"How do you know you're not chaining him up all the fighter? The defenceless woman, and all that. If you were his wife, you and he'd be on a level." (pp. 312-13)

Frenside's remarks bear directly on Vance's inability to find a subject suitable to his talents. And in agreeing to come with Vance, Halo forfeits what she most wants, to be the "muse" of the unfettered

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12 Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 229.
artist. Vance no longer takes her into his confidence, and his work shows the result. His first novel produced under the influence of Europe, The Puritan in Spain, is merely a clever reworking of Instead in a different setting. It is an immediate bestseller, but he finds no satisfaction in it. Both he and Halo know that it is only "a 'costume piece' which drew its chief effects from a tricky use of local colour" without "an ounce of flesh-and-blood in it, not a breath of real air." One of their intimates, Savignac, a cultivated French critic, wonders aloud to Halo "what business had a man of Weston's quality to be doing novels like ladies' fancy-work or an expensive perfume? He ought to be tackling new difficulties, not warming up old successes" (p. 85).

Just as he had previously turned to Loot after Instead, he again attempts a "big" novel. Earlier, however, he had Halo's judgment to guide his efforts. Now he turns to the group surrounding Lorry Spear, who has settled in Paris and is making a name for himself in avant-garde circles as a promising theatrical designer. They "said that fiction, as the art of narrative and the portrayal of social groups, had reached its climax, and could produce no more . . . that unless the arts were renewed they were doomed, and that in fiction the only hope of renewal was in the exploration of the subliminal." Vance is both attracted and repelled by their theories; the result is self-distrust. He concedes that the techniques they advocate may
hold promise, but he does not intend to become one of the "fishers in the turbid stream-of-consciousness" who reduce "their fictitious characters to a bundle of loosely tied instinct and habits, borne along blindly on the current of existence." Vance questions why he should not write a novel that will

... reverse the process, reduce the universe to its component dust, and set man whole and dominant above the ruins? What landmarks were there in the wilderness of history but the great men rising here and there above the herd? And was not even the average man great, if you pictured him as pitted against a hostile universe, and surviving, and binding it to his uses? It was that average man whom Vance wanted to depict in his weakness and his power. "Colossus"—the name was not wholly ironic; it symbolized the new vision, the great firm outline, that he wanted to project against ... petty chaos. (pp. 112-13)

For one who has so recently been worshiping at the shrine of the past, these are strange resolves indeed. Edith Wharton insists that we should not regard modernism as anything less than a disease. And Vance is infected with it. He fails to see that his proposed novel is simply the other side of the same coin that Lorry proposes to offer to the public in the form of Factories, "a great musical spectacle, to be expressed entirely in terms of modern industrialism, with racing motors, aeroplanes and sub-marines as the protagonists" (p. 86).

Excluded from Vance's work, Halo learns of Colossus from Savignac who pinpoints the projected novel's weakness.
It's the scale of the pattern. It's all part of a pattern, subject and characters. It's to be an attempt to deal microscopically, with the infinitely little of human experience, incalculably magnified, like those horrid close-ups of fever microbes, when you don't know whether you're looking at a streptococcus or the villain of a Chinese drama. Till I can find a reason why the meanest physical reflexes should have an aesthetic value equal to the windows of Chartres, or the final scenes of Faust, I shall refuse to believe that they may be legitimately treated as if they had.

Savignac's judgment is important because it is a French judgment.

Vance is "afflicted with giantism, as they say in French" (p. 98).

Colossus also marks an even fuller break with his style than did The Puritan in Spain. In the Puritan he had been imitating his own success in Instead. With Colossus he begins to imitate others. When he finally reads passages of the novel to Halo, she detects in them echoes of his reading and his talk with the members of Lorry's circle. This is a far remove from the use of experience that had characterized his earlier work. Although he rejects her opinion as amateurish, her judgment is later borne out by the critical reception of the novel.

Colossus does more than illustrate Vance's repeated failure to find a theme; it indicates that he has literally turned his back on the possibilities existing around him. Ultimately, too, it casts considerable doubt on his ability ever to discover a theme. He responds to the "vast orchestration" (p. 76) of beauty and intelligence he finds in Paris, but turns instead to Colossus. Although Edith Wharton
does not attempt to clarify the issues that this decision involves, it certainly does raise problems. With its celebration of the "average man" and its concomitant disregard of history, tradition, and manners, Colossus is clearly a reversion to the values of Euphoria. Vance intends his new work to embody the raw power that, for Edith Wharton at least, is one of the most distinguishing—and distasteful—attributes of that society. And on this count, it is no accident that Vance becomes involved with Floss Delaney during the time he is engrossed with the writing of Colessus. The comments of Savignac and Halo serve as counterpoint; what they say is important because their judgments spring from a sense of tradition and continuity, qualities, which we have previously been led to believe, Vance himself has come to understand and value. Are we to conclude that although Vance can respond to French ways he can never fully appreciate their meaning? Edith Wharton does not say, and the fact that the question remains unresolved is perhaps the clearest indication of her uncertain view of her own protagonist.

When Floss Delaney appears on the scene, Vance promptly falls again under her spell. Edith Wharton tries in various ways to characterize the attraction she holds for Vance; the point of each attempt is to show that it operates on the subconscious level. "Vance knew that there were selves under selves in him, and that one of the undermost belonged to Floss Delaney" (p. 260). "Certain obscure
fibres in both their natures seemed inextricably entangled. There was a dumb subterranean power in her that corresponded with his own sense of the forces by which his inventive faculty was fed" (p. 378). Here we should note that the influence Floss exerts can be compared with the new theory of fiction—"the exploration of the subliminal"—that has misled Vance to the writing of *Colossus*. The attraction to Floss is as dangerous as it is powerful. Like Undine Spragg, she is incapable of love, possessing an eye only for the main chance. Edith Wharton wants us to understand that to become involved with Floss is to risk death: "She seemed to distil a poison such as no other woman secreted" (p. 238); "to hold Floss Delaney was to plunge into a dark night, a hurrying river" (p. 296).

Nevius takes Edith Wharton to task for her characterization of Floss. He suggests that her treatment of Floss represents her "attitude toward the material of her art; it reflects her cautious avoidance of the abyss of the subconscious. . . . Her unwillingness to explore the primitive levels of consciousness is too easily justified by making Floss a disagreeable and wholly immoral character, in the image of Undine Spragg." But if one views Floss as the incarnation of the worst aspects of the modern spirit, the harshness of the characterization is understandable. We have seen that Ralph

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13 Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 234.
Marvell is a victim of that spirit embodied in Undine. Vance escapes the same fate only because he is made of tougher fibre than his predecessor. If Floss could exact the same sacrifice from Vance that Undine does from Marvell, the very reason for which Edith Wharton has created Vance would be negated. Although Edith Wharton cannot fully forgive Vance his Midwestern origins, she is not willing to sacrifice him entirely to modernism. To do so would constitute a complete reversal of *Hudson River Bracketed* where Vance's great virtue is his capacity for life. Floss must be exorcised not merely to return Vance safely to Halo, although this return will come, but to preserve the reason for his existence.

Floss represents the major evil in the novel, embodying as she does forces which Edith Wharton both dislikes and fears. But Floss is not the only character afforded rough treatment. At the other end of the spectrum is Mrs. Glaisher, a latter-day member of the old order. Halo remembers her "as one of the chief ornaments of the old expensive New York group which her parents had belonged to and broken away from. Mrs. Glaisher was a necessary evil. Once in the winter one had to hear Tristan or the Rosenkavalier from her opera box, and once to dine off gold plate in her Gothic refectory" (p. 93). She unhesitatingly snubs Halo for her break from Tarrant, but with elephantine coyness she questions Vance about the extent to which his writing reflects his personal life. But when she learns
that Vance is living with Halo, she reverts to the double-standard:

"Such a pity, young man, with your talent" (p. 132).

The portrayal of Mrs. Glaisher, no more subtle than the name she bears, is pervaded with a "that it should come to this" tone regarding her status as the representative of the old New York gone modern. Floss's easy intimacy with the Glaisher party is the fullest measure of modernism's triumph, but Edith Wharton intends that we see Floss's conquest of the group as the natural consequence of its too willing acceptance of the modern world: "After a long life devoted to the standardized entertaining of the wealthy, Mrs. Glaisher had suddenly discovered that Grand Opera, pâte de foie gras, terrapin and Rolls-Royces were no longer the crowning attributes of her class; and undismayed and unperplexed she had begun to buy Picassos and Modiglianis, to invite her friends to hear Stravinsky and Darius Milhaud, to patronize exotic dancers, and labour privately (it was the hardest part of her task) over the pages of 'Ulysses'" (pp. 124-25).

The interesting aspect of all this is that it is radically out of place. Although Edith Wharton has updated her references to illustrate Mrs. Glaisher's culpability, the characterization of Mrs. Glaisher and her retinue is otherwise in keeping with the spirit of The House of Mirth. Her presence in the novel is further testimony of its lack of focus.
With Vance led astray by the siren song of modernism in both Floss and Colossus, Halo has plenty of time and more reason to rethink her position. "Paris had cured her of artistic Bohemia, and as soon as she was alone she felt how deeply rooted in her were the old instincts of order and continuity" (p. 306). With the reassertion of the old values Halo returns to Eaglewood and directs the refurbishment of the Willows which she plans to move into before the birth of her child.

The scene is set for Vance's return. All that need be effected is his expiation. His break from Floss is followed immediately by his grandmother's death. He is called to her deathbed to receive her final message: "May we haven't made enough of pain--been too afraid of it. Don't be afraid of it" (p. 402). The familiar words are to function as a refrain for Vance during the next several months. Sensing in them "the clue to his labyrinth" (p. 404), he retires to the woods of northern Wisconsin where solitude and work effect a catharsis. He begins a new book which, like his first story, results from a "deep spiritual ardour" and gives him "his first understanding of the magic power of continuity" (p. 409). His complete return to acceptability is signaled by his desire to see again "the old house where his real life had begun" (p. 416). He goes to Paul's Landing where less than three years before he had come "to implore Halo Tarrant to go away with him, instead of waiting to
obtain her divorce; but on that feverish day he had not given the
Willows a thought, and his last sight of the fantastic old house and
the abandoned garden, though not remote in years, seemed to belong
to his embryonic stage" (p. 416). Now he knows better. The re-
ligious awe that the Willows awoke in him in *Hudson River Bracketed*
is justified in the sequel. When the gods arrive the half gods go.
And who are the deities of the novel?—order, tradition, continuity.
The Willows is their shrine.

Edith Wharton commemorates Vance's return to the
Willows by indulging in a highly romantic rendering of its significance:

He stood for a long time on the lawn, remembering how,
when he had first come there, fresh from the mediocrity and
uniformity of Euphoria, the house had seemed as vast as a
Roman villa and as venerable as a feudal castle. Through its
modest doorway he had entered into a legendary past; its
shingled tower was Sister Anne's outlook, its bracketed bal-
conies overhung the perilous foam on which his imagination
had voyaged ever since. The old house had been his fairy
godmother, and it was only now, as he looked at it again, that
he understood. (p. 418)

The memories awakened by the Willows and the claims of the life it
embodies are too much for his resolve not to see Halo. He continues
on to Eaglewood where the novel ends with their reunion. Presumably
Halo and Vance, now purged of Floss Delaney, will continue life at
the Willows.

*The Gods Arrive* fails badly as a novel, but as a document of
Edith Wharton's inability to find in the post-war world a congenial
theme for either herself or Vance it is an interesting work. Although it is true that Vance has started a promising novel during his stay in the Wisconsin woods, it is significant that Edith Wharton gives us no indication—as she has for each of his previous books—of the new work's theme. The fullest treatment of theme is accorded instead, for it is most like Edith Wharton's own work. The Puritan in Spain is merely a reworking of the former tale. Colossus is mentioned fairly extensively but always scornfully because it is modern. Of Magic precious little is said not simply because it was not finished but because its theme turns in on the creative process itself, a subject which would hardly seem fruitful for one whose proper subject is manners. There is, however, one scene in The Gods Arrive that apparently gains Edith Wharton's approval, for it catches Vance's artistic eye. He attends a party given by Mrs. Glaisher which

... recalled the evening parties to which the Tarrants used to take him, when he was planning a novel called "Loot", and absorbed in the faces and fashions of successful worldlings. But here the background supplied the element of poetry for lack of which the theme had ceased to interest him. The same trivial, over-dressed and over-fed people acquired a sort of Titianesque value from the sheer loveliness of their setting; grouped about the table with its fruit and flowers, framed in the pink marble shafts of the loggia, above the gardens sloping away to the illuminated curve of the shore, they became as pictorial as their background. (p. 215)

Now here, Edith Wharton seems to be saying, is a theme at last.

And so it had been for her more than a quarter of a century earlier
when she wrote *The House of Mirth*. But it is not a subject for Vance. Mrs. Glaisher, to repeat, belongs to an earlier day, belongs to *The House of Mirth* with its brilliantly managed scenes of just such people as Mrs. Glaisher whose primary value is decorative.

If the theme inherent in the pictorial value of the decorative were really any longer a possibility for Edith Wharton's examination of American society, there would be no problem for either her or Vance Weston. And, in all probability, there would be no Vance Weston. She would not have found it necessary to create him. But if we consider the novels written after *The Age of Innocence*, we realize how rarely Edith Wharton has employed such a theme. Only a few passages, most notably in *The Mother's Recompense*, incorporate scenes which carry their meaning solely through pictorial arrangement. But the earlier novels, especially *The House of Mirth*, achieve their power through Edith Wharton's ability to arrange her elements in a series of telling scenes. And she was willing, in the main at least, to let the scene embody the meaning without imposing her own commentary. The novels after *The Age of Innocence* are comparatively devoid of this technique, and it is this lack as much as any other single quality which accounts for the stylistic falling off that mars these works. In place of arrangement we find direct, increasingly abrasive commentary. And when she does arrange scenes in the later novels, she is often bent on satirizing the modern
spirit, the new ways, which she saw as the disintegrating forces of society. Usually such attempts fail because they are so overdone that they destroy credibility. If we relate all this to The Gods Arrive, the evidence speaks for itself: Vance is a writer fated never to find a theme.

The failure to supply a theme for Vance is the fatal flaw in The Gods Arrive. The evidence from the other novels after The Age of Innocence and from the appearance of Mrs. Glaisher suggests that Edith Wharton found modern society either so lacking in the pictorial or so inimical to her taste--or both--that she lost interest in searching for the decorative in a society bent on "getting there."

The fact that The Buccaneers, which returns to an earlier, and for Edith Wharton happier, day, sees a return to her former style supports this conclusion. Auchincloss speculates that the portrayal of Vance in Hudson River Bracketed "is an extension of Mrs. Wharton's vision of herself, freed of the impediments of her sex, generation, and background, and, perhaps more importantly, freed of her own preoccupation with the details of decorating the physical world."14 But, as we have seen, it is precisely for the want of these details that Vance is without a theme. It is for this reason that The Gods Arrive presents actually the reverse of Auchincloss's thesis.

The conclusion of *The Gods Arrive* is meant to crystallize three related lessons that Vance must learn before he can gain Edith Wharton's approval and return to Halo and respectability.

Two of these are pronounced by his grandmother. In addition to her dying words on the efficacy of pain, she tells him the same thing that Grace Fulmer told Susy Lansing in *The Glimpses of the Moon*. Chiding him on his broken relationship with Halo, she declares that anything short of marriage is an inadequate measure of love. "All the rest's child-play, jokes; the only test is getting married. It's the daily wear and tear, and the knowing—it's-got-to-be-made-to-do, that keeps people together... I'd almost say it's the worries that make married folks sacred to each other" (p. 367). The third lesson is provided by Halo, whose conduct in the face of repeated snubs is in keeping with the best old New York tradition. He realizes:

... that nothing could be more distasteful to her than to seem aware that she was the subject of gossip and criticism.

Vance himself had no feelings of the sort. He resented furiously any slight to Halo, but saw no reason for appearing to ignore such slights. He supposed it was what he called the "Tarrant pride" in her; the attitude of all her clan... It all seemed an obsolete superstition, as dead as duelling; yet there were moments when Vance admired the stoicism... "All those old institutions—I suppose there was something in them, a sort of scaffolding, an armour," he thought. He felt how often his own undisciplined impulses needed the support of some principle that would not have to be thought out each time. (pp. 265-66)

Pain, social responsibility, the code—all point toward the necessity of individual responsibility operating within a framework of reason
and order. The Willows, as Vance finally understands, is to be seen as the magic open-sesame to this sort of life.

This conclusion is implicit at the outset when the lovers, turning their backs on convention, look out "to where the sea spread before them in limitless freedom" (p. 8). In *Hudson RiverBracketed* the sea was the symbol of the creative forces that fed Vance's imagination. But now, "brooding over the mystery of the waters," he becomes aware of a "curious inability to feel their vastness as he had once felt it from a lonely beach on Long Island. It was as if the sea shrank when no land was visible—as if the absence of the familiar shore made it too remote, too abstract, to reach his imagination" (p. 17). In other words, the apparently "limitless freedom" is a snare and a delusion. Art, like life, is best realized through the restriction of convention and form rather than through meaningless, formless expansion.

Although the conclusion if implicit from the beginning, when it finally comes it appears, in Nevius' words, "hastily contrived," providing only a "semblance of unity, largely retrospective, to Vance's story."¹⁵ The reason for this is that Vance has been made to behave so irresponsibly we lose belief in him; "we may not be entirely

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convinced that Vance's experiments are ended.\textsuperscript{16} He is so often and so thoroughly a "Yahoo"—he uses the word to characterize himself at one point—in \textit{The Gods Arrive} that we may doubt the permanence of his sudden understanding at the end of the novel. Obviously, his conversion to the old values in \textit{Hudson River Bracketed} was more apparent than real. What is there to assure us that his position at the conclusion of \textit{The Gods Arrive} will prove any more lasting? Indeed, we may be tempted to echo Wyant's taunt of Manford: "I suppose there are some things you never will understand." If that is the case, we are back exactly where we started in \textit{Twilight Sleep}, with the important exception that the old New York tradition, so pitifully gone to seed in Wyant, has been restored in Halo and reaffirmed by Edith Wharton.

We may, of course, accept the alternative—that Vance and Halo will live at the Willows where Vance, fully imbued with its meaning, will produce his best work. Certainly this is the conclusion that Edith Wharton wants us to accept. But if we do—and it seems to me the better choice—we must also accept the implications of such a conclusion: Vance will return to the mode of \textit{Instead}, for if \textit{The Gods Arrive} illustrates anything it is that modern society, as far as Edith Wharton is concerned, has nothing to offer the writer who

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 234.
needs a sense of continuity. Is Vance then doomed to producing emanations? The probable answer is yes. The most optimistic view one can take of his future is that Instead was an "emanation—something wrought with . . . enchantments" only because at the time of its writing Vance did not fully understand the meaning of the Willows. But what is the Willows itself if not an enchantment? The acceptance of this conclusion finally forces upon us a recognition of how thoroughly The Gods Arrive reverses the brave new world of Hudson River Bracketed. The high price for the traditions and conventions that Edith Wharton insists on is nothing less than the abandonment of the present as a fictional possibility.

Auchincloss notes that in Hudson River Bracketed Edith Wharton intends Vance "to be a great novelist, or at least to have the makings of one. He is to be an American Tolstoy, and she was far too clear-sighted to have believed for a minute that she would ever occupy such a role." He continues by drawing a comparison between Vance and Thomas Wolfe. "It is astonishing," he concludes, "that a woman who had turned her face as resolutely and for as many years away from the land of her birth as Mrs. Wharton, should, in her late sixties, have so accurately conceived a career and personality so innately American."17 Certainly it is true that Edith

Wharton projects Vance as a potentially great novelist, just as

_Hudson River Bracketed_ appears to begin as a determined effort
to come to terms with the present. What would really be "astonish-
ing," however, would be her ability to make good Auchincloss's ex-
travagant claims. The real crux of Vance's problem appears in a
remark about a fellow novelist in_Hudson River Bracketed_. He is
Gratz Blemer, whose novel _This Globe_ takes "three hundred thousand
words to tell the story of a streetwalker and a bootblack" (p. 415),
and Edith Wharton clearly dislikes him. She characterizes him as
a "short, heavily built young man with a head cropped like a German
_Bursche" who "spoke with a slight German accent, oiled by Jewish
gutturals, and Vance, while attracted by his good-nature and
simplicity, wondered for the thousandth time why American novels
were so seldom written by Americans" (p. 417). What a revealing
remark it is. No comment concerning its tone would be entirely
adequate, but of its meaning two distinct possibilities suggest them-
selves. Does it signal Edith Wharton's awareness that to produce
"American" novels post-war writers must apply Ned Winsett's advice
to Newland Archer to their own profession? That is, must the
novelist roll up his sleeves and get down in the muck of streetwalkers
and bootblacks? If so, she declines. She could extend her tolerance
to the Midwest only if its inhabitants had the grace to stay there, but
bootblacks and streetwalkers, one suspects, are too much. Since
there is no convincing evidence that Edith Wharton ever could con-
ceive of such people as Americans proper, much less proper Americans,
the other possibility seems more likely: Vance's wonder reflects
her own. After all, she had not seen her native country for many
years. With her own social class gone, she simply no longer knew
what her homeland looked like. It is little wonder then that Vance
is incapable of following Frenside's advice to grasp hold of the life
around him. Whatever the case, the remark points the way to Vance's
unrestrained embrace of the past at the conclusion of The Gods Arrive.

The Blemer episode has a pathetically amusing sequel in
The Gods Arrive. Blemer, we learn, has married Jet Pulsifer, an
eminently silly society woman whose awarding of the "Pulsifer Prize"
for the best novel of the year is entirely dependent on the various
candidates' marital eligibility. Blemer has carried off the prize
and Jet and her yacht. Thus all parties are put in what is for Edith
Wharton their proper perspective. While conducting Vance to the
past, she arranges for him to meet Blemer, who carries the telltale
marks of decay. "He had always been thick-set, but now he was fat
and almost flabby" (p. 390). His only existence consists of the end-
less social rounds befitting Jet's husband. "I can't write anywhere
any more. Not a page or a line. That's the trouble with me. . . .
Not that it matters much, as far as the shekels go. I guess my old
age is provided for. . . . Only--God, the days are long. " (p. 391).
This coda to the Blemer affair provides a lamentably funny commentary on Edith Wharton's notion of what should constitute "American" literature. Apparently, it should be kept pure from foreigners, scarcely more than immigrants who, by her own definition, could not possibly understand "society." Shaping Vance's unlikely clay to the approved mold provides difficulty enough without having to contend with Blemer. The literature of Edith Wharton's America admits no one with such dubious credentials, even if it means a return to the past—which it does. That Blemer can arouse her to such petulance only indicates how deeply his existence troubles her and how incapable she was of dealing with post-war American society. The treatment of Blemer affords an irony as unmistakable as it is unintentional: it is not Blemer who is the foreign interloper in that society; it is Edith Wharton herself.

_Hudson River Bracketed_ and _The Gods Arrive_ are not the complete failures they have often been called. It is true that Edith Wharton does not come to terms with the present, cannot find in it a congenial theme for her hero to pursue. And, paradoxically, this failure results from her inability to accept the disillusioning wisdom she has thrust on one after another of her characters. How often we hear them voice the dreary refrain most recently echoed of Halo: "She had wanted the absolute—and life had handed her one of its usual shabby compromises, and she had not known what to do with it" (p. 316).
But the novels do demonstrate a change in Edith Wharton's attitude. Although her wholesale rejection of the present is terribly narrow, she manifests a relaxation of attitude in two respects. First, her former treatment of characters with Vance's dubious background had been unrelenting. But in *Hudson River Bracketed* she warms to her hero; she can even like him. *The Gods Arrive* sees a reversal in the characterization because he becomes involved in things modern, but at the conclusion she reinstates him to humanity as a member in good standing—good enough, in fact, to return to Halo. It is in the treatment of Halo that we see the second change of attitude. Even though she has transgressed mightily on the approved code of conduct, Halo retains Edith Wharton's sympathy. We know from *The Mother's Recompense* that Edith Wharton can feel sympathy for a transgressor, but it is finally necessary to return Kate to Europe and her recompense—and expiation for her lapse from propriety. In the novels in which Vance and Halo play major roles, we see something new. She may return them to the past, but at least she does not cast them into the outer darkness of lonely, isolated suffering. Their expiation has an end. Although Edith Wharton insists on the necessity of convention, she is here not willing to sacrifice the personal happiness of her characters to those conventions. The contradictions involved in the situation are not easily laid to rest; perhaps they cannot be. Formerly, the conventions that made life meaningful ended all too
often by making it impossible. Here we are to have both happiness and convention. The price is the present. The return to the past which Vance and Halo will have to reconstruct for themselves points the way for Edith Wharton's own return to the past in The Buccaneers.
CHAPTER V

THE BUCCANEERS: AN END AND A BEGINNING

Edith Wharton did not live to complete The Buccaneers, but Gaillard Lapsley, her literary executor, brought the unfinished work to publication in 1938. In his essay published with the novel, he observes that, although unfinished, it "may properly be called a torso, since the moral problem which gives the book its unity has been stated and its solution foreshadowed."¹ One need not regret the decision to publish The Buccaneers, for its publication is not, as Elizabeth Monroe suggests, "a great disservice" to Edith Wharton's reputation.² In addition to possessing real merit on its own, the novel allows us to see the direction Edith Wharton was taking to solve the moral problem Gaillard Lapsley alludes to as the unifying element. It is the same problem that had engaged Edith Wharton from the outset of her career and was always close

¹Gaillard Lapsley, "A Note on The Buccaneers," The Buccaneers (New York, 1938), p. 361. All references to The Buccaneers are to this edition.

to the center of her work. The problem is how to resolve the conflict between individual fulfillment and social convention.

The first step in such a resolution was a return to the past, a move foreshadowed by the conclusion of *The Gods Arrive*. The past provided her with the congenial theme that eluded her when she attempted to write of post-war society. She was, as Percy Lubbock says, "safe with the past, and it was safe with her; she wouldn't suffer it to be mocked by anything but the tenderness that understood. The past . . . had its room in her books, away from the clatter of the 'Hotel Nouveau Luxe'--a better room for good work, when all is said."³ In *The Buccaneers* Edith Wharton returns to the age of innocence, but her material and her point of view have altered considerably since she first portrayed that period. Nothing more clearly illustrates the change than a comparison of the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence* with that of *The Buccaneers*. The opera house, cherished for being "small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the 'new people,'" gives way to "the height of the racing-season at Saratoga" (p. 3), and at once we are in a freer, more fluid society than Newland Archer ever knew. Eclipsed by Newport as the fashionable resort, Saratoga is now populated only by the "new people" that the aboriginal brownstoners were so anxious to keep

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out. In *The Buccaneers* Edith Wharton is concerned with the parvenus. Certainly she had treated the newcomers before, most extensively in *The Custom of the Country*, but previously her attitude toward them fluctuated from ironic condescension to utter abhorrence. In her last novel, however, we witness a changed attitude toward the "new people." It is more really than a mere softening of her former position; it is a near-complete change of heart. She unmistakably aligns herself with the aspirations of the St. George and Elmsworth girls, the buccaneers named in the title, but she retains reservations concerning the girls' parents.

Colonel St. George, a handsomely showy man, appears only briefly in the novel. His business, like his background, is vague. He is "in the market," on to a "good thing," and after a "big rake-off." His business affairs smack of the unsavory, and his personal life, it is broadly hinted, is far from spotless. But Edith Wharton forgives him all this, for he possesses a finer sense of social perspective than does his wife, who understands "that a gentleman's financial situation might at any moment necessitate compromises and concessions" (p. 28), but who nonetheless deplores such compromises when they force her to associate with people whom she deems socially inferior. The Colonel, however, possesses a better memory than his wife. When she questions the social origins of any of their set, asking where the Elmsworths or the Clossons
"come from," he "invariably replied: 'If you were to begin by telling me where we do!'" (p. 5). Edith Wharton rewards the Colonel's disarming personal honesty by supplying him with a "far-off smattering of college culture" and "handsome ironic eyebrows" (p. 22), the latter being a special endowment because "ironic" is an adjective most often reserved for old New York types.

Although Mrs. St. George fares somewhat less well than her husband, Edith Wharton's portrayal of her is not dominated by real animosity. Mrs. St. George poses no threat to the old New York set she longs to enter. Lacking both the wit and the determination to realize her social pretensions, she appears as a pathetically comic character, too dim to succeed but sensitive enough to be acutely aware of her social inadequacy. She is spiritually akin to Undine Spragg's mother and an easy target for Edith Wharton's satire. But it is gentle satire intended to puncture rather than impale, to deflate rather than destroy.

The major satiric thrusts are reserved for Mrs. Parmore, the novel's only representative of old New York society. Mrs. St. George's impenetrable dimness is more than matched by Mrs. Parmore's condescending manner. She is "a cousin of the Eglintons and the van der Luydens—the best, in short, that New York had to offer" (p. 37). Edith Wharton's technique for portraying her results in
making New York's best appear very poor indeed. Our view of Mrs. Parmore comes primarily through the eyes of Laura Testvalley, an English governess who, needing money, has quit the households of the English aristocracy for the greater financial rewards of the United States. Thinking that a recommendation from a socially powerful family will give her entry anywhere, she takes a position with the Parmores. Miss Testvalley's background permits her a social perspective denied to the old New York hierarchy. The governess's resulting view of her new employer affords an ironic commentary on all that Mrs. Parmore represents. "Mrs. Russell Parmore was certainly very distinguished, and so were her pallid daughter and her utterly rubbed-out husband; and how could they know that to Miss Testvalley they represented at best a milieu of retired Colonials at Cheltenham, or the household of a minor canon in a cathedral town? Miss Testvalley had been used to a more vivid setting, and accustomed to social dramas and emotions which Mrs. Parmore had only seen hinted at in fiction" (pp. 38-39).

Although the major action takes place in England, the early emphasis on the relationship among the St. Georges, the Parmores, and Laura Testvalley is important because it sets the tone for the entire novel. Edith Wharton's handling of the relationship testifies to her command of the material. Mrs. Parmore appears only often enough to establish her status and character. Laura
Testvalley serves as the author's spokesman to suggest that of Mrs. St. George's many failings none is more lamentable than her choice of Mrs. Parmore as the embodiment of all that is socially worthwhile. Mrs. St. George's far-off worship of Mrs. Parmore is, in fact, nothing less than a failure of social taste. With her pallid daughter and rubbed-out husband, Mrs. Parmore suggests the lack of vitality in the old order. That Miss Testvalley's letters home describing life in the Parmore set should be described as "droll" only underscores the governess's failure to be impressed with the quality of that life. Miss Testvalley "had suspected from the first that the real America was elsewhere, and had been tempted and amused by the idea that among the Wall Street parvenus she might discover it" (p. 41).

After signing on as governess for Nan St. George, Miss Testvalley has ample opportunity to discover the "real America," for the St. Georges, Elmsworths, and Clossons certainly qualify as parvenus. Their daughters are more real than the Parmore set by any standard except the very one they wish most to conform to, that of old New York. The frequent mention of the older girls' beauty and vitality emphasizes the contrast with the pale Parmores and also serves to distinguish Nan St. George, the youngest and least physically attractive of the girls, from her more dazzling sister and friends. But it is to Nan that Laura Testvalley is drawn not merely because
Nan is her specific charge but, more importantly, because Nan evidences greater intelligence and sensitivity than the others. What Laura Testvalley finds so attractive in Nan readers familiar with Edith Wharton's heroines recognize as the "memorial manner" of Kate Clephane, the indefinable "style" of Nona Manford or Judith Wheater or Halo Spear.

Laura Testvalley views Mrs. St. George's request, as fervent as it is vague, that her daughters be taught "to behave like ladies" (p. 51) with the irony it deserves, but she decides that the St. George girls should have their chance with New York society. Her determination is crystallized through a conversation with her former employer. Mrs. Parmore is discussing the engagement of Conchita Clossen to Lord Richard Marble. Their impending marriage has New York astir, for an English lord is regarded as a prize catch for Conchita, a Saratoga friend of the St. George girls and of even more socially suspect parentage. Their engagement has been too short by New York standards:

In good society it was usual for a betrothal to last at least a year; and among the Glintons and Parmores even that time-allowance was thought to betray an undue haste. . . . Mrs. Parmore told Miss Testvalley . . . that she for her part hoped her daughter would never consent to an engagement of less than two years. "But I supposed, dear Miss Testvalley, that among the people you're with now there are no social traditions."

"None except those they are making for themselves," Miss Testvalley was tempted to rejoin. (pp. 65-66)
Mrs. Parmore's Olympian condescension converts Miss Testvalley to the St. George position; after that visit, she "felt that she had cast in her lot once and for all with the usurpers and the adventurers" (p. 68). Thinking that a successful London season would enhance their chances, Miss Testvalley proposes a trip to England and Colonel St. George, flushed with financial success, cheerfully underwrites the plan.

Although change of scene in a novel is hardly unique with The Buccaneers, it does have special significance for that work. It again focuses our attention on certain problems we have noted in Edith Wharton's later fiction. One of her major themes in the novels after The Age of Innocence has been her examination of the new ways. Her view of American life, especially as she thought of it in the post World War I world, leads finally to her wholesale rejection of it. But her characterization of the holdovers from old New York does not suggest any mellowing of attitude toward their essential lifelessness. Her search for a new type of hero culminates in Vance Weston, but we must also remember that her distaste for modern America, or what she took for it, results, at the conclusion of The Gods Arrive, in his return to the past embodied in the Willows. The Buccaneers continues the preoccupation with the past. But into that past there is now injected a new element in the person of Nan St. George who is the type of character Edith Wharton has found it necessary to create,
and to whom is entrusted the burden of the later fiction, the vital, sensitive outsider. The whole scheme of the novel, the successful assault of newcomers on established society, is put in jeopardy, for if Edith Wharton's fiction, early or late, illustrates two things, they are that those who put old New York to flight must possess the animal-like vitality (and morality) of an Undine Spragg, and that the sensitive are crushed by the weight of old New York decorum. Nan St. George, then, cannot retain the distinctive virtues that make her a worthwhile person and still be successful as one of the "buccaneers." Clearly, a change of scene is the only solution; it will permit her to keep her characteristic "style," and it will leave old New York, unruffled, to concern itself with the proper length of the engagement and like issues of equal import.

The necessity for a change of scene is also bound up with the characterization of Laura Testvalley. As a governess she has impressive credentials indeed. Her "grandfather was the illustrious patriot, Gennaro Testavaglia of Modena, fomenter of insurrections, hero of the Risorgimento . . . whose fame lingered in England chiefly because he was the cousin of the old Gabriele Rossetti, father of the decried and illustrious Dante Gabriel" (p. 40). Throughout the novel much is made of her status as an exile and potential revolutionary. These traits inform her sympathy with the St. Georges' social aspirations. More than mere dislike for Mrs. Parmore
dictates her casting her lot with the buccaneers. She is, in large mea-
sure, so motivated "because she herself had been born in exile,
her sympathies were with the social as well as the political outcasts--
with the weepers by the waters of Babylon rather than those who
barred the doors of the Assembly against them" (p. 68).

The insistence on Laura Testvalley as exile inevitably
gives rise to speculation. The role of the exile applies equally well
to Edith Wharton herself, and it may be that Edith Wharton closely
identified herself with her character. In any event I am persuaded
that Laura Testvalley as exile can make observations on New York
that could not be granted to anyone else. In *The Buccaneers* New
York appears without one redeeming quality. Her remark that "the
real America" exists somewhere other than with the Parmore set,
for example, must be viewed as Edith Wharton's own judgment.
Although we can recognize the sentiment as Edith Wharton's own,
it is clear that she cannot write a novel about that "real America"
and retain her sympathy for it. As long as the elder St. Georges and
Elmsworths remain shadowy figures in the background Edith Wharton
can tolerate them. But were they to project their Wall Street realities
into the forefront (as would be inevitable if the novel were to take
place entirely in New York) one suspects that her sympathies with
old New York would have been evoked. Such a shift in attitude, not
unknown in Edith Wharton's fiction, would endanger the characterization
of the major figures, especially Laura Testvalley's role as the
author's spokesman. In addition to the consistency of charac-
terization, then, we can see that the change of scene provides a
greater freedom of treatment than she would have been able to
achieve had the locale remained New York. The Buccaneers might
with justification have been called The Exiles, by one of them.

The previous considerations of the setting's importance
to The Buccaneers raise another point related to the development of
the later fiction. James's remark that Edith Wharton "must be
tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a back-yard
in New York"⁴ is often quoted with unqualified approval, but we
should recall that the remark was made early in her career. The
later fiction presents persuasive evidence to the contrary. With
the dismissal of post-war society as too chaotic to grant meaning
to individual characters from Kate Clephane to Vance Weston, and
of old New York society as too provincial to tolerate those not on the
social register, Edith Wharton was clearly in need of a new social
scene to explore. The English setting is far more congenial to the
working out of her intention than old New York would have been. The
English aristocracy receive generous treatment throughout. Their
manner, "the careless unself-consciousness of the elect" (pp. 190–91),

⁴Henry James, The Letters of Henry James, ed. Percy
Lubbock (New Yor, 1920), I, 396.
bespeaks a largeness of character that contrasts favorably with
the spiritual parsimony of the Parmore set. Because they are
more certain of their position, they need not concern themselves
so greatly as their New York counterparts with the privileges of
rank. The order itself is stable enough to permit exchange among
its members of different social levels without being shaken to its
foundations. In brief, the aristocracy is secure in its tradition, and,
because it is, social distinction are blurred rather than accentuated
as is the case in Edith Wharton's New York. The structure of the
society can accommodate the buccaneers without needing to fear
for its continued existence. That the girls need such a society to
achieve success in their undertaking is clear. But this consideration
is, I think, secondary to the meaning that the English aristocratic
society holds for Edith Wharton's development. Here finally is a
society neither hopelessly chaotic nor stiflingly restrictive, a society,
though ordered and mannered, capable of giving scope to the growing
expansiveness evident in her last three or four novels.

Perhaps it overstates the case to say that social distinctions
among the aristocracy portrayed in the novel are blurred; the society
is, after all, almost exclusively aristocratic. But it is certainly
true that less distinction exists among the aristocracy than exists
among the members of the old New York social hierarchy. I take
this difference to be a reflection not merely of tradition but of a sense
of place operating in the novel. R. W. B. Lewis, commenting on The House of Mirth, remarks that the "drama" of that novel "can be detected working itself out in the intricate play of 'contexts,'" a technique illustrating "Mrs. Wharton's grasp of . . . the drama of houses, or more simply the drama of place."\(^5\) It is unquestionably true that Edith Wharton's ability to integrate place, whether broad panoramic landscapes or detailed descriptions of houses, was one of her prime assets throughout her career. The Valley of Decision, for example, is altogether more remarkable for its descriptive passages than for its characterization; the rendering of the Italian background is its outstanding achievement. The Buccaneers illustrates that she retained to the end of her life the ability to invest the scene with thematic significance. Here it is not only English society that is congenial to the plan of the novel, it is the totality of the landscape, both social and physical. What characterizes the English scene is its blend of tonal hues; no single features dominates. The effect is caught in the word "merging," used several times through the novel. In the following passage we see the effect and its influence on the responsive imagination. "For two hours they drove through the tawny winter landscape bounded by hills veiled in blue mist. . . . The dark green of rhododendron plantations made autumn linger under the bare

woods. . . . This merging of the seasons, so unlike the harsh break between summer and winter in America, had often touched Nan's imagination; but she had never felt as now the mild loveliness of certain winter days in England" (p. 343). The countryside itself, then, contributes to the sense of totality and continuity that Nan St. George discovers in England.

The indistinct, merging quality that informs the landscape appears also in the descriptions of the most agreeable of the nobility. Lord and Lady Brightlingsea provide the best examples of the technique. She is a "large and rather shabby though undeniably impressive" (p. 95) figure whose view of the world extends only to her family and the family estate, Allfriars. Her "idea of the continent," for instance, "was one enormous fog from which two places called Paris and Rome indistinctly emerged; while the whole western hemisphere was little more clear to her than to the forerunners of Columbus" (pp. 91-92). Lord Brightlingsea's view is even more circumscribed. "His universe was a brilliantly illuminated circle extending from himself at its center to the exact limit of his occupations and interests . . . persons ministering to these pursuits were necessarily in the foreground, and the local clergy and magistracy in the middle distance, while his family clung in a precarious half-light on the periphery, and all beyond was blackness" (p. 125). Although the self-imposed dimness apparent here and in their other character traits suggests the
familiar treatment of the stock English eccentric, there is a logic in the portrayal. Through such figures as the Brightlingseas Edith Wharton achieves several things. One, of course, is the humor inherent in their lack of knowledge about America. Though fuzzy and naive, their observations on what they suppose to be the reality of American life reflect their social self-sufficiency. The implication is that the Brightlingseas can afford the grand dimness of social perception which, were it practised by their New York counterparts, would result in opening the Assembly's door to all, or something equally unthinkable. Another aspect of their characterization evoking comparison with the social elect of New York is simply their imposing physical appearance. Descriptions convey the impression of large, vague physical presences, but presences to be dealt with nonetheless. It is, in fact, their enveloping vagueness that contrasts so favorably with the pallid Parmores; for all of the Brightlingseas' dimness they are certainly not so negligible as to be "rubbed out."

This particular comparison extends beyond the confines of The Buccaneers. The shambling physical appearance suggested by the Brightlingseas lacks entirely the cautious precision reflected in the characterization of the proper New Yorkers who people Edith Wharton's novels. To compare them is to recall how generally uniform are the portraits of the New Yorkers: the older women given to drooping
elegance, the younger to tightly girdled innocence; while the men favor slender, small-boned correctness.

We should note, though, that the positive characterization of the Brightlingseas and others is limited primarily to the older aristocrats. There are exceptions certainly, most notably Guy Thwarte, but as a group the younger aristocrats are not treated with the gentle good humor accorded their elders. Lord Marble and Lord Seadown, both sons of Lord and Lady Brightlingsea, illustrate the point. Lord Marble, Conchita's husband, is an aimless ne'er-do-well, and Lord Seadown, who marries Virginia St. George, is a cipher. The most ludicrous example is the young Duke of Tintagel, the highest of the nobility presented in the novel. Narrow-minded and dim-witted, the duke is obsessed with winding and repairing clocks. He is by temperament and ability much better suited to be a tradesman than a duke. This divergence in characterization between the generations is no accident; it is dictated by the dichotomy of past and present so often evident in Edith Wharton's novels. Lord and Lady Brightlingsea are literally of a size that suggests their capacity to fill Allfriars. The younger nobility, however, are dwarfed by the past manifested in the hereditary estates. This diminution is especially true of the Duke of Tintagel. This situation parallels exactly Eaglewood and the Willows in *Hudson River Bracketed*. 
In each instance the past appears to have held a largeness that the present lacks.

The descriptions of the houses even more than those of the landscape or the Brightlingseas manifest the importance of place to the theme. Though familiar, the technique is effective: the houses embody the past; the various characters' responses to them serve as an index of their imaginative sensibilities. The St. George sisters' reactions to their first exposure to Allfriars illustrates the point.

The St. George girls had never seen anything as big as the house at Allfriars except a public building, and as they drove toward it down the long avenue, and had their first glimpse of Inigo Jones's most triumphant expression of the Palladian dream, Virginia said with a little shiver: "Mercy--it's just like a gaol."

"Oh, no--a palace," Nan corrected. (p. 119)

Virginia, whose "survey of the world was limited to people, the clothes they wore, and the carriages they drove in" (p. 132), complains of the dullness of life at Allfriars and bemoans the lack of convenience in their quarters there, but Nan discovers

... that the decaying majesty of Allfriars moved her strangely. Splendour neither frightened her, nor made her self-assertive as it did Virginia; she never felt herself matched against things greater than herself, but softly merged in them... She lay for a long time listening to the mysterious sounds given forth by old houses at night, the indefinable creakings rustlings and sighings which would have frightened Virginia had she remained awake, but which sounded to Nan like the murmur of the past breaking on the shores of a sleeping world. (pp. 133-34)

The note sounded here is far from new in Edith Wharton's fiction; the concern with the past as a positive value in itself as well as a
measure of an individual's sensitivity is evident as early as *The Valley of Decision*. What is new is the combination of person, place, and time that hints at the possible fulfillment of Nan's romantic dreams. We have in her a person capable of responding to the past; we have in the English scene a local that allows a person to merge softly into it (old New York is too narrowly angular to permit such merging); and a time, the 1870's, that Edith Wharton was capable of viewing with some favor.

Because the novel is unfinished, we cannot know, or even guess, whether Nan's romantic dreams are ever realized. It is clear from the completed sections of the novel that the possibility at least exists, and it is likewise clear from an early outline, provided by Gaillard Lapsley in his analysis, that Edith Wharton's intention was to deliver her heroine to "deep and abiding love" (p. 358). Guy Thwarte is the character on whom the realization finally depends. In most outward particulars he conforms to the familiar mold. The description of him as "tall and lean, and full of the balanced energy of the hard rider and quick thinker" (p. 107) might, with only minimal alterations, be applied to several of the elegant failures Edith Wharton has earlier portrayed. But he is quickly distinguished from the Selden-Tarrant axis by his profession, civil engineering. The choice of career is significant for two reasons. We have previously seen Edith Wharton validate Martin Boyne's credentials as
a man of the world by making him an engineer whose work takes
him to the exotic areas of the earth. The same motive seems to be
again functioning in the characterization of Guy Thwarte, for, like
Boyne, he practices his profession offstage, far removed from the
center of action, during an approximately three-year sojourn in
Brazil. This removal is intended to invest him with the experience
that many of his predecessors have lacked. It also distinguishes
him from such young aristocrats as Lord Seadown whose lassitude
accelerates the decline of his class. The distinction between Guy
Thwarte and the other young men portrayed in the novel is under-
scored by the reason prompting his choice of career. Trained as
a career diplomat, he turns to engineering because he wants to gain
the money he will need to save Honourslove, the family estate brought
to near ruin by the unspecified excesses of his improvident father,
Sir Helmsley Thwarte. That Guy Thwarte is willing to work to save
the estate differentiates him from several other characters whose
financial hopes are vaguely pinned to a transfusion of Wall Street
money from the "rich Americans." Finally, we should not fail to
notice that just as Guy Thwarte's active endeavor to save his
hereditary estate separates him from Seadown and others, it also
distinguishes him from Martin Boyne with whom he shares, as we
have noted, several striking similarities. The importance of time
and place to the novel is again evident. Boyne can only look back to
a society that he has briefly known and declare with conviction that its members "were a lot better than we are." Compared with what he remembers from his youth, Boyne views the present society as "bloodless savagery," but Guy Thwarte, living in an earlier time, has in Honourslove the focus for the ancestral pieties that Boyne lacks.

Honourslove serves the same function in The Buccaneers as the Willows in Hudson River Bracketed. And as in the earlier novel, the roles of the principals are similar, Nan's paralleling Vance's and Guy Thwarte's paralleling Halo's. Vance discovers in Halo a teacher whose attachment to the old house opens its meaning to him. Nan detects in Guy Thwarte "a latent passion for every tree and stone of the beautiful old place—a sentiment new to her experience, as a dweller in houses without histories, but exquisitely familiar to her imagination" (p. 136). Even the characterization of the imaginative sensibilities evidence in Vance and Nan takes the shape of similar metaphors. Vance is early aware of what he calls "other currents," which may be translated as the power of the creative imagination. For him the Willows seems to embody those "other currents" and thus provides the focus for his creative talent. At Honourslove Nan senses an equivalent "beyondness of things" (p. 137). Honourslove exerts the same influence on Guy Thwarte, who immediately affirms Nan's sense of "beyondness." But the mysterious
bond that they share leads nowhere because he must act to save Honourslove from financial ruin.

He disappears to Brazil, and she falls in love with another romantic scene, Tintagel. She marries the dull, unimaginative Duke without admitting to herself "that her first sight of the ruins of the ancient Tintagel had played a large part in her wooing; that if the Duke had been only the dullest among the amiable but dull young men who came to the bungalow at Runnymede she would hardly have given him a second thought. But the idea of living in that magic castle by the sad western sea had tinged her vision of the castle's owner" (p. 249).

After the marriage, the action of the novel moves swiftly to the point at which it breaks off. The marriage itself is an inevitable failure. Instead of the romance she hopes for, it brings only the numbing presence of a husband who shares none of the mystery she feels in "the beyondness of things." The castle, which speaks to her "with that rich low murmur of the past" (p. 149), is to him only a "costly folly." An unbridgeable gap is opened between them when she attempts to better the lot of his tenants. She acts out of a pure humanitarian impulse to help people who need help. Like Nona Manford before her, Nan "had always been what she called 'sorry for people'" (p. 251), and in the lot of her husband's tenants she finds a large arena for her sympathy. When he forbids her to
continue, her defiance results in a miscarriage; he feels robbed of an heir, and the break between them, though not formal, is complete. The return of Guy Thwarte from Brazil sets the scene for an affair with Nan that is just beginning to emerge when the novel breaks off. The outline indicates the two lovers, with the help of Laura Test-valley, were to elope, leave England for South Africa, and presumably live happily ever after.

It is, of course, difficult to assess any unfinished work, but The Buccaneers presents a unique obstacle, for a mere summary of its action reveals its affinity with the soap-operas of the 'forties. I suspect that these qualities, which are more apparent than real, have led to the general disregard the novel has suffered. Auchincloss remarks, for example, that one cannot feel "any keen regret that the story was never finished."^6 I could scarcely disagree more strongly, for I believe it shows further development of the themes and attitudes informing Edith Wharton's later fiction. Relevant here is a commentary by Richard Poirier on her view of society. "She is a novelist of manners in a peculiarly American way: she cannot imagine a society . . . in which her values are brought into play at the center of dramatic conflict. Instead of being an aggregate of human relationships, subject to modification in the best interests of its members,

society for her as for a majority of American writers becomes an expression of impersonal power, even when that power is being manipulated by some of its victims." Although I generally agree with Poirier's view, I think it needs qualification. It applies most fully to the novels up to and including *The Age of Innocence* and most clearly to those characters who are of the society—typically old New York—that is crushing them. When we take an outsider, whether it be Judith Wheater or Vance Weston or Nan St. George, and put him in a society foreign to him, especially one that permits "merging," we find that Poirier's view is more restrictive than the later novels allow. Certainly Edith Wharton's treatment of society in *The Buccaneers* evidences a broader view than Poirier suggests she was capable of attaining.

*The Buccaneers* contains additional elements not often associated with Edith Wharton. The confrontation between Nan and Ushant on the living conditions of the tenants provides one such example. The entire scene is closely related to the need for reform that plays such an important role in *The Valley of Decision*. In that novel, as we have seen, Edith Wharton declared in favor of the conservative position, departure from the status quo being equated with revolt and chaos. In *The Buccaneers* she reverses her former position and

displays no sympathy for the conservatism she had earlier championed. Ushant's unyielding position is attributed to "manifold inhibition, some inherited, some peculiar to his own character, which made it impossible for him to act promptly and spontaneously" (p. 254). He is the captive of conventions he does not understand but doggedly obeys. Nan, more open because less fettered by convention, is capable of responding to the tenants' problems.

Nevius observes that at the outset of Edith Wharton's career "conventions were simply a means to an end, which was some kind of compromise with one's environment; later they tended to become an end in themselves." The development of attitudes manifested in her later novels and culminating in *The Buccaneers* suggests that the opposite is true. As the tenant episode illustrates, tradition and convention are not ends in themselves. Guy Thwarte's response to his father's insistence that he stand for Parliament also casts doubt on the inherent value of tradition. "His father's challenge, calling him back suddenly to his old life, the traditional life of a Thwarte of Honourslove, had shown him for the first time how far from it all he had travelled in the last years, how remote had become the old sense of inherited obligations which had once seemed the very marrow of his bones. . . . Strive as he would he

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could not yet fit himself into his place in the old scheme of things"
(p. 266). But it is true that the "accumulated associations (p. 267)
of life at Honourslove soon exert their power over him. He visits
the chapel where the graves of his ancestors remind him "how
faithfully hand had joined hand in the endless work of enlarging and
defending the family acres! . . . and all these graves belonged to
him, all were linked to the same soil and to one another in an old
community of land and blood" (p. 268). And Nan, too, though she
chafes under the rules and observances attendant to her position,
"was beginning to see the use of having one's whims and rages sub-
mitted to some kind of control. . . . In spite of her anger, in spite
of her desperate sense of being trapped, Annabel felt in a confused
way that the business of living was perhaps conducted more wisely
at Longlands" (p. 296) than in America. The point, then, is that
although both Nan and Guy appreciate the values of tradition and con-
vention, they are not bound by them. Their willingness to turn away
from the convention and tradition they honor indicates that in The
Buccaneers at least personal values transcend broader social and
cultural ones. And Edith Wharton's characterization of the projected
action as the triumph of "deep and abiding love" evidences her
approval and agreement.

The idea of personal fulfillment is not in itself a new note
in Edith Wharton's fiction, but the handling of it in The Buccaneers
is new. Previously, personal fulfillment, at its worst embodied in such characters as Lilla Gates and Lita Wyant, was the object of Edith Wharton's moral indignation. Even at its best in such characters as Kate Clephane and Halo Spear, it always exacted a stiff penalty. But The Buccaneers finds Edith Wharton's leniency extending to include even Conchita Closson, a character much closer to the Lilla Gateses than to the type Nan represents. Her marriage, too, is a failure and she takes a lover. Of Conchita's situation Nan wonders, "might one perhaps not feel less lonely with such a sin on one's conscience than in the blameless isolation of an uninhabited heart?" (p. 301). And she follows Conchita's admonition not to judge her until she herself knows what happiness is. Clearly, Edith Wharton is using Conchita's affair to prepare for Nan's and Guy's. But her choice of Conchita is in itself surprising as is her avoidance of condemning her action. The episode with Conchita also underscores happiness as the ultimate test of all else. Nan later remarks that "life seems like a match between one's self and one's gaolers. The gaolers, of course, are one's mistakes; and the question is, who'll hold out longest" (p. 346). The Buccaneers unmistakably indicates that if the jailors include conventions and traditions they must be put aside for happiness, and that if the world is love for love, it is well lost.
Two qualifications need to be made concerning the projected triumph of romantic love in *The Buccaneers*. The first is more generalized, having application beyond that specific novel. Judging from her earlier treatment of Vance and Halo, Edith Wharton was apparently moving toward the view that certain individuals could, if necessary, live beyond the conventions that irretrievably bound her earlier characters to duty at the expense of happiness. But only select characters can afford the luxury of happiness beyond convention. Paradoxically, they are distinguished by their ability to recognize the necessity of convention and by their sensitivity to tradition. Those failing this recognition live beyond the conventions they spurn only at their own peril because they create and perpetuate the chaos Edith Wharton saw as the distinguishing aspect of modern society. At the extreme of this type is Lita Wyant whose promiscuity masks itself under self-expression. Also in this category are characters like Conchita Closson whose undisciplined style creates the unhappiness they wish to avoid. Love, then, does not conquer all, only the favored few.

The other qualifications concern Laura Testvalley. In the unfinished novel we glimpse the beginnings of a tentative love affair between Laura and Sir Helmsley Thwarte. The outline indicates that, suspecting her role in Nan and Guy's elopement, "he breaks with her, and the great old adventuress, seeing love, deep and
abiding love, triumph for the first time in her career, ... goes back alone to old age and poverty" (pp. 358-59). Auchincloss sees in the projected conclusion the characteristic retribution: "she was still enough of a Yankee puritan to stipulate that such a love had to be paid for. If Nan and Guy are to have happiness, Laura Testvalley must lose hers."9 The remark may be justified, but I do not find it particularly compelling. Everything would turn on Edith Wharton's handling of the situation. Indeed, there are persuasive reasons for believing that she might have avoided the neat tit-for-tat justice Auchincloss views as an accomplished fact. Her earlier treatment of Vance and Halo offers evidence of her changing attitude toward transgressors. The Buccaneers shows a further development of this attitude not only in the projected triumph of Nan and Guy's escape from convention into "deep and abiding love" but also in an incident concerning the governess herself. We learn that she has had a short, secretive affair with Lord Richard Marble, ten years her junior, during the time she had been his younger sister's governess. "She had paid its cost in some brief fears and joys, and one night of agonizing tears; but perhaps her Italian blood had saved her from ever, then or after, regarding it as a moral issue" (p. 75). That a casual love affair can ever be "paid for," let alone in the brief

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9Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, p. 41.
period of one night, is a new note in Edith Wharton's fiction; so, too, is the ability to dismiss as nonexistent the moral significance of such a furtive liaison. The two points are related in that her fiction is strewn with characters whose lives have been maimed as the result of some ill-considered affair the moral significance of which exists only in the characters' inability ever to "pay for" their momentary lapses from propriety. These various instances support the belief that Edith Wharton might well have avoided the tribunal Auchincloss sees her holding for Laura Testvalley. Further, the novel as it stands is remarkably faithful to the outline and nothing in it suggests that crushing unhappiness should attend Laura Testvalley's fate for aiding in the elopement. In fact, quite the opposite view may be upheld. It is as possible to view her projected withdrawal as imparting a Nunc Dimittis quality to the action as it is to view her the victim of Edith Wharton's earlier morality-play manner.

One more episode in The Buccaneers deserves notice, for it provides a commentary on the whole of Edith Wharton's long career. The one place in her husband's estate where Nan finds sanctuary is the Correggio room, so named for the famous originals it displays. There among the bric-a-brac and mementoes of the dull life that holds her captive "hung the famous Correggios; in the half-dusk of an English November they were like rents in the clouds, tunnels of radiance reaching to pure sapphire distances. Annabel looked at the
golden limbs, the parted lips gleaming with laughter, the abandonment of young bodies under shimmering foliage. On dark days—and there were many—these were her sunlight" (p. 246). The room again plays a role when it serves as the place of reunion between Nan and Guy on his return from Brazil. He remarks on the magical qualities of the Correggios, and she replies, "I often come here when it's getting dark, and sit among them without making a sound. Perhaps someday, if I'm very patient, I'll tame them, and they'll come down to me" (p. 284). The remark suggests that what Edith Wharton finally wanted was some world unto itself, governed not by the gods of derision who so often carried the day in the world where her characters drew breath, but by some Olympian morality of the gods beyond both innocence and experience.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

When Savignac, the French critic in *The Gods Arrive*, notes the imitative quality of Vance Weston's second novel, he observes that Vance "should be tackling new difficulties, not warming up old successes." The remark might be taken as the clue to Edith Wharton's own career after the war. In her attempt to write about post-war society, she was tackling new difficulties when, one judges, it would have been easier for her to continue writing period pieces along the lines of *Old New York*. But she chose not to, trying instead to piece together, from such scraps of information and reports as she could receive, a picture of post-war America.¹ Too often her portrait of the new society bore only a passing resemblance to the real thing. Inveigh as she would against such bogies as "The American Face" or the committee woman mentality, she could not quite get her subject in focus. Perhaps the reason

¹Lubbock, *Portrait*, pp. 150-51. He notes her delight with reports of the latest outrage perpetrated by the "intruders," a subject which, Lubbock indicates, she could neither do with nor without.
for her failure to present a convincing picture of the society is found in Willard Thorp's contention that the new order "was too much for her." But it is just as reasonable to believe that the lack of authenticity in her portrayal of post-war America results from her dependence on second-hand reports of it. In either case, *The Mother's Recompense* and *Twilight Sleep* testify to Edith Wharton's rejection of the new order as socially chaotic and morally reprehensible. Although the novels following *The Age of Innocence* fall short of the standard established in her earlier work, they do illustrate a continued development of thought and attitude.

Her portrayal of New York in the later novels is remarkable for its increasing rejection of the former society celebrated in *The Age of Innocence*. Her rejection is quite sweeping, from the kind of social conventions embodied in the Lanfrey dinner in *The Mother's Recompense* to the characterization of the holdovers from old New York society. We can chart the degeneration of the New York characters in such figures as Arthur Wyant, Aggie and Stanley Heuston, Lewis Tarrant, Mrs. Glaisher, and finally Mrs. Parmore. They are, to be sure, exceptions--Halo Spear is the most conspicuous example--but, in the main, her portrayal of the old New Yorkers grows increasingly unsympathetic. By the time she

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wrote *The Buccaneers* her rejection of the earlier society is complete.

This rejection finds its parallel, indeed seems dictated by it, in her increasing interest in characters whose origins are outside of New York. It may be objected that her interest in such characters far pre-dates the later novels, appearing full-blown as early as *The Custom of the Country*. The difference is that in the later novels Edith Wharton's interest in such characters is warmed by a sympathy that was missing in the early work. Thus we have Nona Manford, Judith Wheater, Vance Weston, and Nan St. George presented as admirable characters, evidencing none of the qualities that distinguished Undine Spragg as a vicious predator. The interest in such characters is surely related to the degeneration of those with "old New York blood." I believe we find an important clue for Edith Wharton's lively interest in the new type of character in Laura Testvalley's speculation that the "real America" does not exist in the Parmore set but rather among the Wall Street parvenus. Her remark makes explicit what was implicit as early as *The Custom of the Country*. Ralph Marvell realizes that Undine has been the most real thing in his life. The divorce, "his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by . . . inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had had about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his
life but the foolish passion he had been trying so hard to think out of existence" (p. 437). Edith Wharton could not at this time bring herself to suggest that the Dagonet style of life was anything other than "right," as the elegiac description of the Dagonet house implies. But she knew even then that being "right" did not necessarily make that style real. The "real America" was elsewhere with the likes of Elmer and Undine, even though she portrayed them with what can only be described as a cherished hatred. In the passage of years between The Custom of the Country and The Buccaneers, however, her view toward the principals--the established New Yorkers and the parvenus--underwent a complete reversal. The characterization of Mrs. Parmore is untouched by the slightest inkling of sympathy, while Nan St. George is drawn with warmth and approval.

The development of the character type embodied in Nan does not appear until the later novels and is one of their most remarkable features. I believe that their development was necessitated by the difficulties Edith Wharton experienced in her attempt to picture post-war society. Through these characters, especially Vance Weston, I believe she hoped to gain a vantage point on the times she was trying to portray. Clearly, the old New Yorkers, even the best of them like Rose Sellars, could not supply the proper perspective from which to view the social scene because their perception is
limited by the inherited code of behavior and by the disabilities attendant to "old New York blood."

We can see their failures as observers most clearly when we consider the role assigned to duty in the later works. Duty is an important word in Edith Wharton's vocabulary, and nowhere more important than in *The Age of Innocence*. Archer's reflection on the good he found in the old ways includes an observation on duty when he thinks of his life with May: "Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty" (p. 350). Duty can attain to dignity in Archer's society which first dictated and then supported his marriage to May. Social cohesiveness cannot prevent duty from being dull, but the society can invest it with dignity. When society disintegrates, as Edith Wharton believed it did after the war, duty loses whatever dignity it formerly possessed because society no longer recognizes it as a virtue. Thus in *The Mother's Recompense* when we find Kate Clephane's sense of duty awakened by her speculation that Chris is to marry Lilla, we know that to invoke duty would be futile. In the changed society she returns to no one any longer recognizes the claims of duty. Martin Boyne's situation presents a further weakening in the role of duty. His initial acquaintance with Judith Wheater convinces him that life may hold more exciting possibilities than he is likely to discover with Rose Sellars. But
he continues on his way to meet Rose, an action motivated entirely by a sense of duty.

As the effigacy of duty as a guide to personal conduct diminishes, the emphasis changes to happiness as the highest personal value. Although she cannot gain happiness herself, Kate Clephane's unbroken silence on her former relationship with Chris is maintained in order to preserve her daughter's happiness. Both morality and convention must give way to happiness. Martin Boyne presents another case that validates the increasing importance of happiness as a standard in Edith Wharton's later novels. In the episode that finds Boyne upbraiding Judith for taking her father's money, we see him imposing his inherited code of conduct, a code that is described as relentless and unconditional no matter what individual suffering it produces. When she questions the importance of the money, he is "cut . . . adrift from his argument." His code is no longer adequate to the changed conditions, and his adherence to it, not just in this episode but in all his undertakings, costs him the happiness and life he sees embodied in Judith. The plan of The Buccaneers suggests that, for once, happiness was to be gained and pain avoided. Significantly, in that novel duty does not appear as a virtue but as a limitation. Ushant and his mother are the only characters bound by duty, characterized at last as "that pale garb."
We have previously noted that pain can possess cathartic value under certain conditions. *The Age of Innocence* comes closest to presenting the necessary social conditions. When Archer's milieu gives way to that of Ralph Marvell or Lily Bart, the societal conditions capable of investing duty with dignity and pain with meaning are no longer present. The war momentarily restores them, not as social conditions but rather as moral ones. After the war, society appeared to Edith Wharton to be incapable of anything other than gratuitous pain. In such a society the outworn code of a Martin Boyne is no longer sufficient, and it becomes necessary for Edith Wharton to create a new character type, one not tied to a meaningless code. More unfettered than previous characters, the new type is more capable of responding to life. Paradoxically, such characters must be brought to an understanding of the necessity for a code of behavior and of the beauty of tradition and convention.

The projected plan of *The Buccaneers* suggests that the demands of personal happiness transcend all other considerations. Whether the romantic resolution of the conflicting claims of social responsibility and individual fulfillment would have been realized in the completed novel is a moot question. Certainly the developing attitudes we see taking shape in the later novels—the rejection of old New York society, the advocacy of happiness rather than duty as the standard of human conduct, and the creation of the new
character type to act as protagonist—point to the conclusion that Edith Wharton was moving toward a more romantic view rather than becoming more firmly entrenched in her conservatism.
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