THE AGE OF EXPERIENCE: THE MORAL AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

IN THE FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

by

Patrick Moore

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"Reverence may be the wasteful fear of an old taboo; but it is also the sense of the preciousness of long accumulations of experience. The quintessential is precious because whatever survives the close filtering of time is likely to answer to some deep racial need, moral or aesthetic."

Edith Wharton
*French Ways and Their Meaning*,
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Edith Wharton was an American novelist deeply concerned with the relationship between beauty and morality. She believed that a person sensitive to beauty would necessarily be morally perceptive. She wrote almost exclusively about those whose life is closest to the beautiful — artists, members of the leisured classes and those unique people in impoverished circumstances who were keenly alive to aesthetic values. Since she herself found beauty in nature and art, she reverenced those societies that exercised creative stewardship over their environment and art treasures.

She was deeply pained that her native America seemed to exploit and destroy its natural resources for profit, despoiling the cultural heritage left by its parent European civilization. In her personal experience of travelling between the two continents (which had begun when she was a young child) she came to identify the beautiful with the good and the ugly with evil. Since Europe was rich with a tradition which valued and preserved painting, architecture, great gardens and literature it came to embody (in her imagination) beauty and morality. The cultural impoverishment of America, on the other hand, was abhorrent to her and she gradually came to identify it with ugliness.

After identifying her stand on questions of aesthetic morality, we see the influence of Henry James on her. It was only natural that she should admire and wish to imitate him; he was the novelist who had left their mutual native land to live in a denser and richer society. He was the conscious artist, and she saw in him one who celebrated the beautiful in the older culture while analysing moral awareness in his fictional characters. He had come to believe that
the ultimate Western civilization must span the Atlantic, because
the moral ardour and aesthetic hunger of the American comes to
fruition as it comes in contact with the traditions of the old world.
But Europe, equally, was in deep need of this contact: the Puritan
conscience nurtured in American soil for two hundred years was
necessary if Western tradition was not to be eaten away by the
inevitable decay characteristic of old (and tired) cultures.

After identifying James's influence her relationship to
Walter Pater's and Vernon Lee's must be seen in context. Vernon
Lee introduced Edith Wharton to the richness of eighteenth-century
Italy and to the world of Italian gardening. This eccentric English
writer was Pater's closest female friend (besides his sisters) and
was engaged by his celebration of beauty. Possessed by a strong
moral earnestness she shared, in her own particular way, the not
uncommon Victorian conviction that art must and would, somehow, replace
a vanishing Christianity. Pater believed that the intense personal
experience of beauty through art, nature, or friendship is the essence
of human experience, and Vernon Lee popularized this belief throughout
her voluminous writing. Some attention must similarly be paid to
those views of Bernard Berenson's, derived from Pater, which were, in
turn, passed on to Edith Wharton.

The second portion of this work (Chapters IV through XI) is
concerned with tracing the relationship between the aesthetic and
the moral in her fiction from *The Greater Inclination* (1899) to the
posthumously published novel *The Buccaneers* (1937). This relation­
ship is the informing ideal of her work - early, middle and late.
Although the mastery of her material declined after the Great War
(with some notable exceptions such as *The Age of Innocence*), there are
usually passages in the later fiction where she rises to her former
brilliance. Although she felt alienated from younger writers towards the end of her life, such significant American authors as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald never hesitated to express their admiration for her work. She was not so much out of sympathy with the young as unable to appreciate any serious experimentation in literature, such as D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce practiced in the novel or T.S. Eliot in poetry. She could not read even the late James novels with either pleasure or appreciation. She was passionately conservative in her reverence for and unyielding adherence to the achieved values of the past. This is as true of the art of fiction as it is of painting, sculpture, music — and, of course, morality.

The work here confines itself to a detailed examination of the moral and aesthetic sensibility in Edith Wharton's fiction, but the same concerns may be traced in her books about travel, architecture, gardening, and general cultural questions, but to deal with this body of her writing would be a full-length study in itself.

Only a modest use is made of either Percy Lubbock's Portrait of Edith Wharton or her autobiography A Backward Glance. The former, unfortunately, is often inaccurate in its assessment and description of Mrs Wharton — Lubbock had been estranged from her for the last portion of her life, and his view is lamentably distorted. Her own account of her life is written with her accustomed grace and wit, but as she never reveals anything of a personal nature in print, it is more of description of the worlds in which she had lived and an anecdotal account of her friends than a statement about those ideals and convictions which formed her view of literature and life.

More useful in an attempt to understand her conception of beauty and morality are those original documents which she wrote but
never intended for publication, such as the incomplete autobiographical manuscript "Life and I" discovered only recently in the Yale Papers¹ and her correspondence stored in public and private collections on both sides of the Atlantic.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following for permission to consult manuscripts and documents in their respective holdings:
The Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale; the Houghton Library of Manuscripts and Rare Books, Harvard; the Berenson Library of the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies at Villa I Tatti, Settignano, Florence; the Louis Auchincloss Wharton Collection, New York; the Berg Collection, Carnegie Collection, Century Collection, Elizabeth Jordan Papers, MacMillan Collection, Annie Russell Papers, Spingarn Collection and Albert Steiner Papers, New York Public Library; the Macmillan Collection, British Museum; the Library of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the Burgess Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.²

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¹ Vide Appendix 3 where this matter is treated more fully.
² The author of this study had the good fortune to be able to work in each of these libraries except that of the Library of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
Manchester University, for bibliographical help; to Dr Paris Leary of American Studies, Leicester University, for general advice; to Dr Mary Pitlick for information about all Edith Wharton correspondence; to Louis Auchincloss for biographical details about Mrs Wharton; to Robert Speight for information concerning Charles du Bos; and to Mr and Mrs William R. Tyler for their personal recollections of Edith Wharton and their informative help.
CHAPTER 1

Edith Wharton was an author who strove to reconcile two diverse tendencies in her writing and in her life — the need for moral stability and aesthetic sensibility. She was very much like the character Odo Valsecca in her first novel *The Valley of Decision*: 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.

The critic Blake Nevius who wrote the first critical survey of all her fiction noted the similarity between the aspirations of Odo and the novelist herself:

> It remains to ask whether there are any personal and contemporary meanings to be drawn from *The Valley of Decision* — whether Edith Wharton was attracted to her subject by any other motives than her love of Italy and her desire to do justice to a period largely overlooked in English historical fiction. Like her hero Odo, she possessed "a deep moral curiosity that ennobled (her) sensuous enjoyment of the outward show of life."2

For Mrs Wharton the two spheres were intimately related, and she sought an organic unity between the quality of the internal life and its manifestation in diction, action and environment. Whenever there was impoverishment on one side it had immediate effect on the other. When Sinclair Lewis dedicated *Babbitt* to her she wrote him to praise his ability to portray both elements:

> If I've waited as long as this to have a book dedicated to me Providence was certainly waiting to find just the Right book. All my thanks for it. And what next? Oh, do ... come over and have a talk about it! It kept me reading till the a.m. the other night, and started me again at 5 — and at every page I found something to delight in, and something to talk

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about. — The prevailing impression, when one has finished, is of an extraordinary vitality and vivacity, an ever-bubbling spring of visual and moral sensibility — and this kind of "liveness" is one of the most important qualities in any work of fiction — or of any other art.3

For her the "visual and moral sensibility" flow from the same source and unless both live the work of art is incomplete.

Nevius observed that Mrs Wharton "was endowed with an extraordinary visual memory and a sensibility which responded to the finer gradation in the moral and aesthetic spectra",4 but she found difficulty in reconciling the two in her own life. From her earliest childhood she lived in two entirely separate worlds which emphasized the dichotomy between the interior and exterior. In an extraordinary essay entitled "Life and I" which she never intended for publication Mrs Wharton reflected on this split between these two realms:

So I lived my two lives, the one of physical exercise & healthy natural "fun", & the other parallel with it but known to none but myself — a life of dreams & visions, set to the rhythm of the poets and peopled with thronging images of beauty.5

The dilemma with which she had to deal — and which led to a nervous breakdown when she was a teenager — was need to harmonize the demands of internal morality with its manifestation in daily life. Her aesthetic sensibility served as a consolation for the suffering which came from this difficulty:

The picture I have drawn of myself in these last pages is that of a morbid, self-scrutinizing & unhappy child. I was that — & yet I was also, at the same, a creature of ... laughter, of ceaseless physical activity ... And I was also — & this most of all — the rapt creature who had heard the choiring of the spheres; & trembled with a sensuous ecstasy at the sight of beautiful objects, or the sound of noble verse.6

3. Edith Wharton to Sinclair Lewis, 27 August, 1922 (Yale Papers).
Although she had always felt the need for moral imperatives, her family and social world failed to provide her with any coherent principles capable of guiding behaviour. The family did attend services at the Episcopal church, but neither parent seems to have been in the least religious. Church-going for them was merely an aspect of society. In "Life and I" Mrs Wharton writes,

I had been brought up in an atmosphere of truthfulness, of moral verite, but I had never been subjected to any severe moral discipline, or even to the religious instruction which develops self-scrutiny in many children.  

Nevertheless, the young Edith Jones had a passionate desire for moral guidance. Her parents saw right and wrong only in terms of what was socially correct or incorrect, lacking the motivation provided by either religious or secular moral principles, so their daughter's strongest conceptions of the nature of good and evil were illuminated only by social convention:

... my parents were profoundly indifferent to the subtler problems of conscience. They had what might be called the code of worldly probity, but the Christian sense of an abstract law of conduct of any religious counsel of perfection was completely absent from their talk, & probably from their consciousness. My mother's rule of behaviour was that one should be "polite" - my father's that we should be kind. Ill-breeding - any departure from the social rules of conduct - was the only form of wrong-doing I can remember hearing condemned! I had never, as far as I know, been told that it was "naughty" to lie ... but I had often been told that it was naughty to scratch, to interrupt, not to "shake hands nicely", & to tear the lace ruffles out of my bonnets ... I had, nevertheless, worked out of my inner mind a rigid rule of absolute, unmitigated truth-telling, the least imperceptible deviation from which would inevitably be punished by the dark Power I knew as "God".

This private moral code was too inflexible to deal adequately with the situations in her daily experience. It became necessary to find a more adequate guide to right and wrong. Since beautiful objects - rooms, poems or landscapes - were what most

attracted and exhilarated her, anything ugly seemed to be not only abhorrent but bad:

Of the first two or three years of our life abroad I remember chiefly vague pictures of travel – for my visual sensibility seems to me, as I look back, to have been as intense then as it is now – and the most excruciating moral tortures ... I recall certain images – impressions of scenery, & more sharply drawn visions of rooms – which must belong to the primitive period. I think my suffering from ugliness developed earlier than my sense of beauty, though it would seem that one being the complement of the other, they must have coincided in my consciousness. At any rate, the ugliness stamped itself more deeply on my brain, & I remember hating certain rooms in a London house of my aunt's, & feeling for ugly people an abhorrence, a kind of cold cruel hate, that I have never been able to overcome.

One of the first results of this detestation of physical ugliness was an incident which will explain what I meant just now in saying that I suffered moral tortures in my childhood.9

This incident occurred in Paris when she was six or seven years old. It represented her dilemma in much the same way as the theft of apples did to St Augustine in his Confessions. She was sent to a small dancing-class taught by a former dancer in the Paris Opera Company, the teacher had an elderly and somewhat disfigured mother with a small beard on whom young Edith "could not look without disgust".10 The child told her young dancing partner that the woman looked like "an old goat".11 When he responded with laughter she was acutely conscious of guilt and felt that she must confess to the class how she had insulted the old woman. Although she did this, she recognized that she had offended against her mother's single moral code, "the conventional obligation to be 'polite' & not to hurt any one's feelings";12

My distress was increased by the conviction that my mother would have disapproved of the whole thing – & of the act

10. Wharton, "Life and I," p.3.
of confessing more than the thought leading up to it; & I believe my first sense of moral bewilderment - of the seeming impossibility of reconciling an ideal of conduct with the unexpectedness of human experience - dates from this unhappy incident. At any rate, for years afterward I was never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please - God & my mother - who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behaviour, differed totally as to their application. And my mother was the most inscrutable of the two.13

Her mother represented the standard of behaviour required by polite society, and "God" was closer to her own passionate desire for a clear moral code.

But while this conflict continued, the terror aroused by the ugly continued to affect her. In her autobiography A Backward Glance she describes how she began to identify the ugliness of architecture and decoration with repulsive persons:

The effect of terror produced by the house of Rhinecliff was no doubt partly due to what seemed to me its intolerable ugliness. My visual sensibility must always have been too keen for middling pleasures; my photographic memory of rooms and houses - even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals - was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness. I can still remember hating everything at Rhinecliff, which, as I saw, on rediscovering it some years later, was an expensive but dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic; and from the first I was obscurely conscious of a queer resemblance between the granitic exterior of Aunt Elizabeth and her grimly comfortable home, between her battlemented caps and the turrets of Rhinecliff.14

Besides identifying people with their repulsive physical surroundings, her conception of America was not of persons or ideals which represented the national spirit, but of streets, houses and their furnishings. She reflected:

One of the most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery. How could I understand that people who had seen Rome and Seville, Paris and London, could come back to live contentedly between Washington Square and the Central Park.15

15. Wharton, A Backward Glance, p.54.
Just as ugliness expressed for her the spirit of America, so Europe with its works of art, graceful domestic architecture and cultivated landscapes had come to be the embodiment of the beautiful. Her later ideas were formed by these early impressions; she was attracted to Europe, repelled by America.

I shall never forget the bitter disappointment produced by the first impressions of my native country. I was only ten years old, but I had been fed on beauty since my babyhood, & my first thought was: "How ugly it is!" I have never since thought or felt otherwise than as an exile in America; and that this is no retrospective delusion is proved by the fact that I used to dream at frequent intervals that we were going back to Europe, & to wake from this dream in a state of exhilaration which the reality turned to deep depression.

These two difficulties which faced her, the lack of a moral standard and the oppressive presence of the ugly, were resolved when she discovered that beauty could overcome both. Beautiful objects — paintings, statues, gardens, landscapes or poems — had the power not only to banish the repulsive but also to teach right action. In the 1890's Mrs Wharton delivered a paper to the teachers of the public schools of Newport, Rhode Island, in which she outlined her aesthetic theory:

I wish to point out the fact that beauty, as a means of education, performs a double office. True beauty teaches not only love of itself but hatred of ugliness; and not only of positive ugliness but of the negative kind which is less perceptible to the untrained eye, but really just as harmful and deteriorating.

Beauty also can affect moral action as well. "Beautiful pictures and statues may influence conduct as well as taste," she stated.

The only critic who has attempted to analyse Mrs Wharton's aesthetic theory is Marilyn Jones Lyde who correctly sees that beauty fulfills Mrs Wharton's need for a stable moral order.


17. Edith Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes," The News ... Newport (Yale Papers - n.d.).

18. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
Mrs Wharton answered all these requisites by introducing beauty as a chemical agent to bring together and reconcile the two values which were pulling her in opposite directions. Working with the changing materials presented by critical intelligence, beauty fulfilled the need for belief by creating from this material permanence and perfection. The result was a fusion of all three into a single supreme good - a unity in which belief (the moral sense), beauty (taste), and truth (intelligence) were one. This concept was the foundation of Mrs Wharton's theory or morality.19

Beauty is the regulating principle by which all action can be judged. Miss Lyde cites Mrs Wharton's essay "French Ways and Their Meaning" in explaining this all-encompassing role that beauty plays in life:

Taste as the criterion for morality determines the rightness of an act by judging it aesthetically: the right thing is the beautiful thing, the thing in good taste. On one occasion Mrs Wharton refers to taste as "the regulating principle of all art, the art of dress and of manners, and of living in general, as well as of sculpture or music," thus rather explicitly stating the supreme validity of beauty: life, in all its aspects, morality no less than manners, is to be regulated by the principles of aesthetics. Renunciation, self-sacrifice, control of the passions are moral attributes not because of the unconditional command of conscience, but because they represent the classical standard of beauty - form, balance, and discipline. At the same time the sense of beauty as inner judge of right and wrong has more than a little in common with the traditional idea of conscience, just as, in some ways, it resembles the Kantian categorical imperative: its validity depends not upon an end but rather upon an absolute quality of will.20

However, Miss Lyde also states that Mrs Wharton "almost never represents morality as serving any utilitarian purpose":21 Beauty and morality are obligatory not because they contribute to any practical or material results, but because by their very nature they represent the highest fulfillment of the human spirit.22

But Miss Lyde is wrong in this case. In the Newport speech Mrs Wharton sees beauty as performing a very utilitarian function.

21. Lyde, p.64.
22. Lyde, p.64.
In our country the conditions are unfavorable to the development of taste. We must teach our children to care for beauty before great monuments and noble buildings arise. There are signs of improvement; the desire for beauty is increasing and people are beginning to understand the immense educational value of good architecture and art. Our object is to advance this development of taste by surrounding our school children with an atmosphere of beauty, by putting in the rooms representations of the best works of art. If with your aid we can prove to the fathers and mothers that in surrounding the children with beauty we are also protecting them from ugliness—the ugliness of indifference, the ugliness of disorder, the ugliness of evil; having done this our cause is gained.25

Beauty is able to counteract not only physical ugliness but that of the moral order as well—indifference, disorder, evil itself:

I want your help ... in making your pupils and their parents understand the purpose of our undertaking: in making the people feel that to put some beauty into the bare rooms of Newport is not only a good thing but a necessary thing, and necessary not only on artistic grounds but on moral grounds as well.24

For Mrs Wharton the moral standard of judgment as well as the stimulation to do good are contained in her aesthetic theory. Beautiful objects inspire not only a contemplative response but indicate the type of action which is necessary for happiness:

... distractions will not be met by a bare expanse of dreary, white-washed wall, but rather by some object which will instantly present to the child's mind an image of beauty, heroism, wisdom or virtue.25

When she reflects that "beauty fosters the civic virtues",26 her aesthetic orientation provides the framework for a total vision of life and gives meaning to day-to-day living. Just as the citizen must eradicate evil tendencies within himself, society must be organized so that the whole body politic is guided by respect for the beautiful. This is her practical programme:

23. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
24. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
25. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
26. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
... the citizen must educate the city; we must prove our readiness to be taxed for beautiful as well as for useful things, or rather we must prove that beauty is useful. Thrift, order, refinement, ambition and the countless daily pleasures of the observant eye are qualities which are kept alive by the miraculous influence of beauty.27

The religious tone indicates the manner in which Mrs Wharton's aesthetics fulfill her needs for a spiritual dimension in her life:

Every woman who knows the truth of what I have been saying, takes pains to surround her children with beautiful things. They teach them to love and reverence beauty, as they love and reverence goodness.28

Although Mrs Wharton never defined beauty precisely, it represented to her a balanced ideal of moderation and harmony that avoided any form of depravity. This view of beauty answered her needs for a stable moral code and rationalized her overwhelming fear of ugly objects. Her search for the beautiful encompassed every aspect of her experience; whether it was in music, painting, gardening, interior decoration or religious rites this aesthetic dimension became paramount. When she was only a child she began to improve the visual world around her:

... I may truly say that my first conscious sensations were produced by the two deepest-seated instincts of my nature - the desire to love and to look pretty.

I say "to look pretty" instead of "to be admired", because I really believe it has always been an aesthetic desire, rather than a form of vanity. I always saw the visible world as a series of pictures, more or less harmoniously compressed and the wish to make the picture prettier was, as nearly as I can define it, the form my feminine instinct of pleasing took.29

When she returned to Europe in her late teens she immediately sought out works of art to satisfy the desire for the beautiful frustrated by her earlier return to America. Paintings in particular had a deep influence on her:

27. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
28. Wharton, "Education Through the Eyes."
I remember, as distinctly as if it were all happening to me now, the emotions with which I found myself standing in the Salon Carré, soon after our arrival in Paris. I had spent rapturous hours in the National Gallery, on our way through London, & had made there a memorable acquaintance - that of Franciabigio's Knight of Malta, whose motto, Tar Ublia chi bien eima, I had written down in my diary - but, vividly as I remember my first moment there, they come back to me with less intensity than that first rush of sensation before the Giorgione, the Titan & the Mona Lisa. I felt as if all the great waves of the sea of Beauty were breaking over me at once - 30

Such emotions and sensations became the touchstones by which she interpreted reality.

Contrary to the impression given by Percy Lubbock in The Portrait of Edith Wharton, she took great interest in music, but never saw it as an isolated art form. It was an integral part of the aesthetic world which lifted man out of himself:

I've discovered the most incredibly beautiful thing in the Holy Saturday "office" - the "Exultet" chanted by the priest when the Holy Candle is blessed. Do you know it? I didn't. It may (they say) be by Saint Augustine, & sounds just like him - like a great symphony played not on instruments but on clouds & winds & seas & skies. 31

This element of ecstasy wherein the individual becomes aware of dimensions outside his personal world attracted her to Anglo-Catholic ceremonial in her youth:

Apart from some of the "Dutch Reformed" rite, the New York of my youth was distinctively Episcopalian; and to this happy chance I owe my early saturation with the noble cadences of the Book of Common Prayer, and my reverence for an ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs. 32

Her own writing reflected this formal diction which, even though it was highly polished, lacked affectation; some titles in her fiction - "the valley of decision" for instance, or "house of mirth" - came

31. Edith Wharton to Galliard Lapsley, 13 April, 1934 (Yale Papers).
from her study of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

The attraction of her closest companion, Walter Berry, consisted, in part, in his ability to share the aesthetic aspirations in her life:

The comrade that he was to me in my work, he was also in the enjoyment of all things beautiful, stirring and exalting. He was tireless in his appreciation of beauty—beauty of architecture, of painting, of landscape. Whatever I saw with him, in the many lands we wandered through, I saw with a keenness doubled by his, and studied afterward with an ardour with which his always kept pace. To the end, through prolonged ill-health and the bitter consciousness of failing powers, his soul still struggled out to beauty.33

He was the person to whom she showed her first manuscript, and he immediately became her most important critic, reading and commenting on most of her work before she submitted it for publication.

Her love for Italy was almost certainly the result of her conviction that beauty was the most important quality in life, a quality which she believed was so highly honoured in that country. In 1917 she defined the difference between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin view of life:

Aestheticism means the serene ability to get on without comfort, and comfort is an Anglo-Saxon invention which the Latins have really never understood or felt the want of. What they need (and there is no relation between the needs) is splendor on occasion, and beauty and fulness of experience always. They do not care for the raw material of sensation; food must be exquisitely cooked, emotion eloquently expressed, desire emotionally heightened, every experience must be transmuted into terms of beauty before it touches their imagination.34

This transmutation of experience into terms of beauty attracted her to France where she made her home from 1907 until her death in 1937.

She slowly structured her own experience by the mode of living she called "Latin". Unless events, images, persons and houses

33. Wharton, A Backward Glance, p.117.

were seen in the perspective of the beautiful they lacked vital meaning for her. It was necessary that she surround herself with these transformed objects:

Sometimes I ask myself why I have two houses & gardens & a motor, with all their attendant cares - & then I realize that it's not paying too dear for the greedy joys I get out of it all - the order, the loveliness, & the blessed privacy; the sensations you so deeply savour in your moonlit garden. No, I'm that kind of a person, a rooted possessive person, & I always shall be.  

Her pattern of life reflected her aesthetic theory and, as her friend Robert Sencourt wrote, "She had what Dante called the habit of art; a developed dexterity which answered to a refined instinct for beauty".  

This vision dominated not only the interpretation of her personal experience, but her understanding of society. As beauty gave meaning to her own experience, so also could it regulate and govern relationships between persons and classes. As Irving Howe observes:

... the world of her youth had been an aristocracy of surface ("In that simple society," she recalled, "there was an almost pagan worship of physical beauty") but she had always wanted it to be something better - something beautiful and truly distinguished. She had wanted to look upon it as potentially an aristocracy of value, and throughout most of her life she struggled with this desire and her recognition that it was an impossible, even unreasonable desire.  

This desire for an aristocracy of value setting the tone for the life of a people or a nation came to be a theme continually to recur in her work. The tension between the individual and his environment was related to the striving for moral principles which grows from a perception of beauty. Her aesthetics demanded an elitist society because it was only in such that a stable aristocracy could

35. Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 5 July, 1922 (I Tatti Papers).
The three principles which determine her pattern, morality, culture, and class, are the three which Richardson asserted. Her world, like his, is one of the subtleties of conscience, and niceties of deportment, of respect for education and cultivation, or recognition of superiority embodied in an aristocracy. 38

The clash between America and Europe was for her between a new society which did not value or encourage the growth of beauty and an older one which did. After the Civil War her father's income was significantly reduced. In order to economize he rented both his Newport summer home and his New York town-house and travelled in Europe for six years with his wife and daughter, thereby exposing Edith in her most formative years to the older European culture:

I did not learn till much later to how prosaic a course I owed my early years in Europe. Happy misfortune, which gave me, for the rest of my life, that background of beauty and old-established order! I did not know how deeply I had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York. 39

This nobility and harmony manifested themselves in the buildings and interiors she later incorporated in her books so that, as Edmund Wilson observed, "She was not only one of the great pioneers, but also the poet of interior decoration." 40 But nature was also informed by the beauty which she believed to be the integrating factor in life, and it came to be one of her greatest sources of inspiration. In A Backward Glance she recalled some of her earliest impressions and their effect on her:

Yet what I recall of those rambles is not so much the comradeship of the other children, or the wise and friendly talk of our guide, as my secret sensitiveness to the landscape — something in me quite incommunicable to others, that was tremulously and inarticulately awake to every detail of wind-warped fern and wide-eyed briar rose, yet more profoundly alive to a unifying

39. Wharton, A Backward Glance, p.44.
magic beneath the diversities of the visible scene - a power with which I was in deep and solitary communion whenever I was alone with nature. It was the same tremor that had stirred in me in the spring woods of Mamaroneck, when I heard the whisper of the arbutus and the starry choir of the dogwood; and it has never since been still.41

The mysterious power within nature and her "wish to make the picture prettier"42 led to her fascination with landscape and gardens.

In 1918 she wrote to Bernard Berenson, "I console myself, as always, with Beauty & Books. Beauty is here a "revenire in this godlike forest, under this Latnian moon".43 Two years later she wrote to Mary Berenson:

I'm afraid my life conquering, as you handsomely call it, is just the "return to the land." I have always been more deeply sylvan, & heriti & agri & all the rest of it, than anything else, & now the flowers & birds & woods literally "fill the room up of oh, so many "absent friends". 44

This orientation towards the moral imperative of the beautiful is present in her prose writing, the short stories, novels, art and travel literature. An understanding of her ideas helps us to deal with her work in which this "aesthetic morality"45 is the organizing theme. It also illuminates the actions of characters in individual works and helps to explain their orientation to their environment, their choices, successes and failures. This is not to say that she is a didactic writer. As Lovett observed:

For her, it is true, morality has ceased to be the assertion of external authority, and is a matter of fine perception of the responsibilities of men and women toward each other in their mutual bonds and contacts: she is not concerned with didactic methods or the teaching of etiquette to the middle classes, but rather what George Meredith says the English race

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41. Wharton, A Backward Glance, p.54.
43. Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 24 August, 1918 (I Tatti Papers).
44. Edith Wharton to Mary Berenson, 3 March, 1920 (I Tatti Papers).
45. Lovett, p.9.
had never spiritually comprehended, "the signification of living in society," processes and a sense of the inheritance of beauty and order from the past.46

Her early critics were concerned with the lack of a didactic orientation in her early fiction, but throughout her life she believed that it was never necessary for the artist to moralize in order to be moral. In 1926 she gave advice to a young American writer about the problem:

... this is the saddest book you have written, I think — the greatest unconscious denunciation of the standardized & the immediate as against the haphazard & the gradual & the hidden spring underground. I say "unconscious" in the sense of simply painting a picture, & not seeking to enforce a moral — because the artist is always so acutely conscious that to state is enough ...47

The relationship between her ideas about beauty and those expressed in her work is extremely close. As Geoffrey Walton writes, "There is surely a fairly simple connection between Mrs Wharton's personal elegance, her taste in domestic architecture, and her literary medium".48 The man who has the sensibility to respond to beautiful objects is thereby able — as well — to perceive gradations in the moral spectrum:

... the degree to which conscience is active depends directly upon the strength of intellect, that is, upon the mental ability to recall past impressions ... Her moral people are always of distinctly superior intelligence — highly receptive to beauty, sensitive to all the nuances of moral value.49

The converse is also true. Vulgarity and insensitivity to beauty signifies that a character has significant personal flaws, because moral and aesthetic perceptions come from the same source. She believed that "every experience must be transmuted into terms of beauty,"50 and this was her "conscious denunciation of the standarized

46. Lovett, pp.79-80.
47. Edith Wharton to Zola Gale, 29 November, 1926 (Wisconsin Historical Society).
49. Lyde, pp.42-3.
& the immediate as against the haphazard & the gradual & the hidden
spring underground". To read her with this statement in mind
clarifies and illuminates the writing and reveals that view of
reality which characterizes everything she stood for and wrote about.

Writing to Iris Origo on the occasion of her father's death,
she describes someone who exemplified her ideal:

Perhaps the distinctive thing about him, in this respect,
was that his tastes were interwoven with his personality.
I have never known an intelligence in which the play of
ideas was so free, yet their reaction so tinged by the
elusive thing called 'character'. Coolness of thought
and ardour of moral emotion dwelt together ...

Two gifts of his rich nature helped him to this
impartiality: his love of letters and his feeling for
beauty. Nothing so clarifies the moral sense as a drop
of aesthetic sensibility ... The result was a receptiveness
of mind and a tolerance of heart. 52

This is Edith Wharton's distinctive note, the attempt to animate the
moral sense through aesthetic sensibility.

51. Edith Wharton to Zola Gale.
CHAPTER II

Mrs Wharton's friendship with Henry James was one of the most significant relationships in her life. For her he was another American who had left his homeland because it was barren in terms of the cultural riches necessary to stimulate the imagination of the creative artist. The society he discovered in Europe enabled him to see fellow Americans blending the strengths and weaknesses of the new with the old world. Most of his characters moved in the leisured society which Mrs Wharton knew from her personal experience, and the ethical preoccupations in his novels and tales which evolved in a world of taste and aristocratic harmony appealed to her desire to blend these two worlds. He served as a model to her in terms of his writer's craft, was a valued and intimate friend and reinforced her conviction that aesthetic and moral demands could be reconciled. Their friendship was fostered because of their common attraction to Beauty as an ideal, their personal intimacy, and a common background which stressed a reverence toward a conservative tradition in the visual arts as well as ethical principles. James was one of the few persons who gave advice to Edith Wharton on both personal and literary matters, and she treasured this element of trust between them.

It is somewhat difficult to reconstruct the exact nature of their relationship because each had a deep sense of privacy. Before he died, James destroyed many of the letters he had received from friends:

He had always said that an artist should not leave his personal papers to accident ... He burned his manuscripts and hundreds, thousands of letters received from the great men he had known and the multitude of persons who had come into his orbit.1

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1. Edith Wharton to Walter Maynard, 17 April, 1923 (Auchincloss collection).
Most of Edith Wharton's letters to him were probably destroyed at this time because those which were returned to her after his death were only the ones written in 1914 and 1915 describing the progress of the War in France. But from these letters and the manuscripts which survive it is possible to see the various aspects of their relationship.

The role that beauty played in their lives was to Mrs Wharton, one of the strongest links between them. She wrote Mary Berenson:

> I often think of Henry James's once saying to me that no two words in the English language moved him so deeply or called up such a train of images of beauty, as "Summer afternoon".

Mrs Wharton was referring to an experience that she and James had when they visited Bodiam Castle together on a quiet summer day. She commemorated the occasion by writing a poem "Summer Afternoon (Bodiam Castle, Sussex)". In it she celebrates the beauty which linked her to James:

> All these the moments hold; yet these resolved To such clear wine of beauty as shall flush The blood to richer living ...

> ... suddenly

> We took the hues of beauty, and became, Each to the other, all that each had sought.

> Thus did we feel the moment and the place One in the heart of beauty; while far off The rooks' last cry died on the fading air, And the first star stood white upon the hill.

She discovered that it was the aesthetic perception in James's writing that most appealed to her. After his first extended visit to her while seeing America in 1905, she wrote to their mutual acquaintance Charles Eliot Norton,

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2. Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August, 1914 (Yale Papers).
The "bath of beauty" through which as Mr James said, we journeyed back to Lenox, rounded off most appropriately our few delightful hours at Ashfield ... Mr James left this morning, carrying away, I think, a real fondness for this little corner of his big country.5

James's evaluation of Mrs Wharton written to Percy Lubbock was that she was "... wonderful and admirable for courage, energy and intelligence".6 In 1908 he remarked to A. John Hugh-Smith:

Ah, my dear young man, you have made friends with Edith Wharton. I congratulate you! You may find her difficult, but you will never find her stupid, and you will never find her mean.7

He wrote to her in 1908, "You are indeed my ideal of the dashing woman".8 Most importantly, he shared his own most intimate experience and philosophy of life when he gave her advice during the painful period of the collapse of her marriage:

I move in darkness; I rack my brain; I smash my teeth; I don't pretend to understand or to imagine ... Only sit tight yourself and go through the movements of life. That keeps up our connection with life - I mean of the immediate and apparent life; behind which, all the while, the deeper and darker and unapparent, in which things really happen to us, learns, under that hygiene, to stay in its place. Let it get out of its place and it swamps the scene; besides which its place, God knows, is enough for it!9

Nevertheless, his characteristic humour was never lacking in their friendship. He wrote her seven months later, "... so does a poor old croaking barnyard fowl advise a golden eagle!"10

Mrs Wharton felt so close to James that she was able to write to his secretary Theodora Bosanquet shortly before his death:

I venture to be a little insistent because, in the absence of Mr James's family, I think the Dr should know that there is someone to whom the exact facts should be reported - & you can explain to him who I am & how old & intimate a friend of Mr James's.

After he died she wrote to Miss Bosanquet that "We who knew him well knew how great he would have been if he had never written a line".

Mrs Wharton passionately believed that only she and her few friends knew the true James. To one of her closest friends, Gaillard Lapsley, she kept reiterating this theme:

Thank God, we never wasted him! No, not a fraction of a second of him ... His friendship has been the pride & honour of my life. Plus ne m'est rien after such a gift as that — except the memory of it.12

Yes, we had a Henry that no one else knew; it was the Henry we had! ... How rich we are in the past — but how poor one feels whenever one of one's thoughts take the accustomed way to Chelsea, & comes back without an answer.13

James's enduring friendship was one of the deepest influences upon her life. One of the last essays he wrote was a contribution to her publication for war relief, The Book of the Homeless. As he grew older they became more closely bound to each other:

When one is still sickish and shaky one tumbles wrong — even when one has wanted to make the most delicate geste in life. But the great thing is that we always tumble together — more and more never apart; and that for that happy exercise and sweet coincidence of agility we may trust ourselves and each other to the end of time.14

Their common background of Boston, Newport and New York City provided them with attitudes and tastes which they shared even though James was nineteen years the elder. The person who most typified this cultural milieu of New England was Charles Eliot Norton;

12. Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 17 December (Yale Papers — no year).
he introduced the young Henry James to the public by printing his first review in *The North American Review*, and at the end of the century Norton assisted Edith Wharton when she was writing her first novel *The Valley of Decision*. Both writers acknowledged their debt to him and he personified the dilemma which each of them had to resolve. How can the cultured American fulfill himself when his roots are in the civilization of Europe? Mrs Wharton described his influence on Americans in the following manner:

> Among those of my intimate friends who came under Norton's influence at Harvard there was none who did not regard the encounter as a turning point in his own growth. Norton was supremely gifted as an awakener, and no thoughtful mind can recall without a thrill the notes of the first voice which has called it out of its morning dream.\(^{15}\)

James described Norton as a missionary in the United States who possessed "plentiful courage as well as plentiful knowledge"\(^{16}\) in his task of civilizing "a young roaring and money-getting democracy".\(^{17}\) He felt that Charles Eliot Norton was the American who stayed behind to impart the values of European culture to his nation. His book *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* served as a guide to James when he first travelled there as a young man.

Paul Elmer More wrote that Norton was the complete man of culture for whom the lessons of the past had become his personal experience.\(^{18}\) His conception of society was one which both James and Mrs Wharton recognized as a necessary background for the novel of manners:


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Society was to him 'the very rarest and best thing that the world proper can give us. It is the thing that our modern materialism is largely killing out, - that is, in its highest form, the society that bears witness to leisure and culture, and good breeding, made up of men who, though versed in affairs, are still idealists and lovers of poetry.'

It was he who introduced James to Dickens during his American lecture tour in 1868. Later, in Europe, Norton brought the young writer in contact with Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Morris as well as the American James Lowell. Although they were not intimate friends, Norton and James shared "a common ground for their love for the cultural riches of the Old World". The older man was especially valuable in helping him to appreciate the visual, sensuous detail in a landscape or scene, which was to become one of his most notable characteristics as a novelist:

Through the wedding of his visual sense and his verbal power he dominated and used his other senses. The reader has the feeling of having seen James's interiors, for instance, but he has also been made aware of the texture of the furnishings, and of the very smells in the rooms. At every turn James invites us to look ...

In his letters to Norton he constantly requested picture-post-cards of the places the Norton family had seen on their travels through Europe because of "his need ... always to re-imagine their experience in his mind's eye, to repaint it". When he later travelled through Europe with the Whartons they would mail post-cards to Norton in much the same spirit that Norton had communicated to James many years earlier; on March 23, 1907 James sent one to Norton signed by the three of them:

Near this wonderful little old church in Portou we affectionately think & talk of you & wish you were here to tell us more about it.24

Norton replied, and Mrs Wharton wrote again in May. Her description of the European journey with James contains not only a vivid description of the trip but a sense of regret because she was leaving the artistic richness of Europe for the thinner atmosphere of America:

The impression of these tormented, sinister capitals at the choir of Chavigny was so strange and haunting that we felt we must share it with one of those "che sanno" - I only wish we could have shown you the whole church ... Our whole journey was full of wonder for me ... there was a sense of suffocation from the excess of suggestions received. This France is so rich ...

Well, we are returning to a country where the atmosphere is thin enough to permit my over-crowded sensations to "settle"!25

Her terms of reference were those that Norton used when writing to James thirty-four years earlier about the philosophical difference between New England and Latin civilization:

Born and bred in New England as we were, where the air we breathe is full of the northern chill, and no other philosophy but that of utilitarianism is possible - it is not easy to learn to be content with the usefulness of doing nothing. Italy is a good place, however, for deadening the overactive conscience, and for killing rank ambition.26

It is certainly probable that Mrs Wharton and James had discussed Norton's view of the American dilemma of cultural separation from European roots.

When she was at work on The Valley of Decision, an historical novel about eighteenth-century Italy, she wrote acknowledging his assistance:

The books have reached me safely & will prove a treasury of information - not so much of facts as of suggestion. I have begun with Wright, who is full of picturesque

bits of vivid phrases, & who seem to me to have had a more modern feeling for 'local colour' than rest of 18th century travelers. I need not say again what a help these books will be to me, & not the books only, but the interest & sympathy which prompted you to trust me with them.27

He made her welcome on her frequent calls when they discussed European civilization and its manifestation in art-literary or visual; he served her in the capacity of teacher in much the same way as he had done for James thirty years earlier. After her publication of Italian Backgrounds in 1905 she wrote, "To have taken you to Italy, and been your companion there for a few hours is to justify the existence of my little book".28 Norton stressed with both of them the necessity for strong links with European civilization, and it was to be James who became to her the person who most exemplified the ideal of the cultured man. Reviewing Percy Lubbock's edition of his letters she wrote:

His meaning is best given by that penetrating phrase in 'The American Scene': 'It takes a great deal of history to make a little tradition, a great deal of tradition to make a little taste, and a great deal of taste to make a little art.'29

Art could exist only in conjunction with ethical ideals, because she saw that for James "every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values".30

What attracted her most in him was not the technical innovations in his experimental fictions, but his belief that the most important matter "was always subject, and the criterion of subject the extent of its moral register."31 Edwin Bowden observed:

By means of the arts life [for James] is caught, the past is made a part of the present, and continuity and tradition are made tangible.²²

Mrs Wharton felt that it was essential to keep a cultural tradition alive, as it was in James's work, because art and morality grow from such a tradition. During the Great War she gave a precise definition:

By real civilization I mean an education that extends to the whole of life in contradistinction to that of school or college; I mean the education that forms speech, forms manners, forms taste, forms ideals and, above all, forms judgment. This is the kind of civilization of which France has always been the foremost model; it is because she possesses its secret that she had led the world so long not only in art and taste and elegance but in ideas and in ideals.³³

This "secret" gives life to the aesthetic as well as the moral, the intellectual as well as the political.

That war was the last and greatest shock they shared together. Tradition dangerously threatened, they saw in the military conflict the Barbarian (Germany) attacking Civilization (France and England).

To James, as to Edith Wharton, no event in their lifetime had ever seemed so stirring, had ever brought them into so close a sense of connection with the old verities of honor and valor and beauty and intelligence held so dear that they are worth dying for.³⁴

Outliving James by twenty years and watching with dismay the rapid change in post war society, she believed that America was losing its heritage. The task of the artist then, was all the more difficult:


³³ Wharton, "Is There a New Frenchwoman?,” The Ladies' Home Journal, April, 1917, p.93 (Yale Papers).

You know how hard it is to make a good fire on a hearth from which all the ashes have been cleared away - That is what America has done with all her great inheritance of culture & manners - & our fires don't burn long. 35

These words she addressed to the young Zola Gale in 1927. As she grew older, with the personal influence of James receding she took an ever increasing interest in the role of the Church in society. It was its historical continuity rather than its dogmatic theology which she valued:

Her instincts were moral, conservative and, as the years went on, she felt the spiritual tradition of the Church was essential to the background of civilization both in culture and common sense. 36

Their common love for painting (and conviction that it was the painter who most resembled the novelist) naturally drew them together. He studied painting with John Le Farge in Newport, and his brother William had even considered a career as a painter; he always kept up his interest in the visual arts. Ruskin had told Charles Eliot Norton that he wished Henry James Jr had been appointed Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge rather than Sidney Colvin. About this time James wrote that he was puzzled when guiding Emerson through the galleries of the Louvre and the Vatican. For Emerson certain chords "did not vibrate at all" 37 and he was greatly surprised that an author should be so little moved by the visual:

His perception of the objects contained in these collections was of the most general order. I was struck with the anomaly of a man so refined and intelligent being so little spoken to by works of art. It would be more exact to say that certain chords were wholly absent; the tune was played, the tune of life and literature, altogether on those that remained. 38

He never found these chords absent in his friend Mrs Wharton.

She was deeply impressed with The Art of Fiction where he emphasized that

the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle), is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of the other.39

Both are concerned with exactness of detail. James states baldly, "I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel".40 Mrs Wharton strove with meticulous care for visual and sensuous detail in her own work. She saw, moreover, James's concern for quality in the artistic mind evinced the union of the aesthetic and moral:

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality is the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth.41

The novelist and critic was concerned with the vocation of the artist from his early story "The Landscape Painter" to "Mora Montravers" and "The Outcry" (1911). Interestingly Mrs Wharton also shared this interest in the creative artist as painter or writer which is reflected in the fact that nine of the fifteen stories in her first two collections are concerned with them. She felt that moral questions could be best explored in the life of an artist because of his aesthetic sensitivity.

Mrs Wharton had always been a lonely person despite her marriage and the strenuous social life which she created, and she must

41. James, The House of Fiction, p.44.
have perceived that this was also true for James himself. Her intimate friend Morton Fullerton once wrote to James from Paris asking him what the actual point de depart of his life was, and James replied in the following manner:

The port from which I set out was, I think, that of the essential loneliness of my life — and it seems to me the port also, in sooth, to which my course again finally directs itself! The loneliness was — what is it still but the deepest thing about one? Deeper, about me, at any rate, than anything else: deeper than my "genius," deeper than my "discipline," deeper than my pride, deeper, above all, than the deep counterminings of art.42

Edith Wharton shared this condition of loneliness. Although she passionately loved two men she was never able to marry either of them, and Charles Du Bos reports that she once cried out to him:

Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty of any love that lies outside marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!43

This fulfillment in life was one she never attained through love, but through an aesthetic sensibility. In 1893 she published a short story entitled "The Fulness of Life" which she never allowed to be reprinted. It concerns a woman who is questioned after death by a spirit about fulfillment in life. The woman informs it that this never came from her marriage. He replies:

'To what influence, then, did you own those exquisite sensations?'
'I can hardly tell. Sometimes to the perfume of a flower; sometimes to a verse of Dante or of Shakespeare; sometimes to a picture or a sunset ... sometimes, but rarely, to a word spoken by someone who chanced to give utterance, at the right moment, to what I felt but could not express.'
'Someone whom you loved?' asked the Spirit.
'I never loved anyone in that way,' she said, rather sadly, 'nor was I thinking of any one person when I spoke, but of two or three who, by touching for an instant upon a certain chord of my being, had called forth a single note of that strange melody which seemed sleeping in my soul.'44

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James was one of these few persons in her life from whom Mrs Wharton accepted advice. The passage most frequently cited by critics concerning his admonitions is in the letter written by James to Mary Cadwalader Jones and reprinted in Percy Lubbock's edition of James's letters in 1920. Mrs Jones was Edith Wharton's sister-in-law and she was also a good friend of James; she often acted as his hostess in New York when he visited America. She had sent him The Valley of Decision in 1920 as well as the first two collections of short stories.

He replied:

I take to her [Mrs Wharton] very kindly as regards her diabolical little cleverness, the quality of intention and intelligence in her style, and her sharp eye of an interesting kind of subject ... They've made me again, as I hinted to you other things had, want to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her ... She must be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a backyard in New York.45

But in the Yale Collection there is the copy of an unpublished letter which James wrote to Mrs Wharton three days earlier than the letter to Mrs Jones. Edith Wharton made a copy of the letter sent from Lamb House and gave it to Sally Norton, the daughter of Charles Eliot Norton. It is this copy which survives. In it James informs Mrs Wharton that he has asked Scribners to send her a copy of The Wings of the Dove, "a rather long-winded (but I hope not hopelessly heavy) novel".46 He said that he would like to delay a discussion of The Valley of Decision until they met, but thought it important to acknowledge the value of the book:

Even, however, were I prepared to chatter to you about The Valley, I think I should sacrifice that exuberance to the timely thought that the first duty to pay to a serious and achieved work of art is the duty of recognition telle quelle, & that the rest can always wait in the presence of a book so accomplished, pondered, saturated, so exquisitely studied & so brilliant & interesting from a

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46. Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August, 1902 (Yale Papers).
literary point of view - I feel that just now heartily
to congratulate you covers plenty of ground. 47

However, he wanted to immediately give some advice "while you are young,
free, expert, exposed (to illumination)", 48 which was that she should
be concerned with the "American Subject" which surrounded her; he
asked her to learn by his example:

What I should say in a word is: Profit, be warned by my
awful example of exile & ignorance. You will say that
j'en parle a mon aise - but I shall have paid for my ease,
and I don't want you to pay (as much) for yours. But these
are impertinent importunities, from the moment they are not
developed. All the same Do New York! The first-hand
account is precious. 49

Critics have always interpreted his published letter to
Mrs Jones written three days later as his full opinion of Edith Wharton's
future as a novelist. This is not the case since his advice must be
seen in the context of his personal situation. At the close of the
nineteenth century he strongly felt that an American should remain in
his native country. Hamlin Garland reported that in 1899 James said
to him:

If I were to live my life over again, I would be an American.
I would steep myself in America, I would know no other land. 50

In the same year he wrote to his brother William that it was of great
importance for young Americans "to contract local saturations and
attachments in respect to their own great and glorious country". 51

Two years after his first letter to Mrs Wharton he wrote an essay for
Hawthorne's centenary in which he claimed that Hawthorne's success was
due to the fact that he remained in his native country:

47. James, Letter of 17 August, 1902.
49. James, Letter of 17 August, 1902.
50. Editor's Introduction, Henry James, Hawthorne, ed. Tony Tanner
Salem had the good fortune to assist him, betimes, to this charming discrimination - that of looking for romance near at hand, and where it grows thick and true, rather than on the other side of the globe and in the Dictionary of Dates.  

Of course this stance opposes James's opinions of his famous essay on Hawthorne thirty years earlier.

In each situation, James was advising Hamlin Garland, Mrs Wharton and his brother William in terms of his personal exile. He revised his idea concerning the value of remaining in America after his extended journey there the year after he had expressed his view of Hawthorne in 1904. The American Scene reflects the new light in which he saw America. Therefore, the advice concerning Mrs Wharton - "She must be tethered in native pastures" - which he had given Mrs Jones was significant only because of his personal assessment of the situation which he changed after his visit. During his trip he was a guest of Mrs Wharton at her home "The Mount" in Eastern Massachusetts and he must have shared with her his impressions of America at the time. The true place of the writer in New York society was described by another intimate and life-long friend of Mrs Wharton, Mrs Winthrop Chanler, who had been a pupil of Franz Liszt:

The New York world of those early nineties was based on a sort of untitled but long-established and social hierarchy, from which all random elements were rigorously excluded. It held many attractive people, good looking, agreeable, well-dressed women and men; but as a society it seemed flat and arid, a Sahara without lions or lion hunters. The Four Hundred would have fled in a body from a poet, a painter, a musician, or a clever Frenchman.  

James's important advice - "Do New York! The first-hand account is precious" - was followed. Mrs Wharton had been preparing a novel about Americans in Europe, and in 1903 she wrote to Macmillan

52. Hawthorne, ed. Tanner, p.18.
54. Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August, 1902 (Yale Papers).
I ought to mention, however, that I have the scenario of two novels in hand, & I may not write first the one of which I spoke to your cousin - called "Disintegration" - but another dealing with the subject of Americans living in Europe - probably called "The Deserters."  

However, her next novel, *The House of Mirth*, was set in New York as James had recommended. She was always a puzzle to James because she could combine a highly organized life in wealthy society and yet submit herself to the discipline of the writer's craft which he considered so important. Yet he did realize that she harmonized the two vocations without damage to either of them. In 1906 he wrote to Mrs Jones that he looked forward with great anticipation to visiting Mrs Wharton in Paris.

It would still be interesting even if as only illustrating further, to my slightly troubled and bewildered eyes, the wild the almost incoherent freedoms & restlessness of wealth, and its wonderful art, when it's combined with ability, of harmonizing the same with literary concentration of so positive and productive an order.

During his lifetime he grew to be a valued friend, but he was also significant to Mrs Wharton because, in his life and literary achievement, she saw a man dealing with the same moral and aesthetic problems which characterized her personal and professional life. There were several aspects of James's writing that she did not appreciate or find interesting. His experiments with technical development in the novel did not appeal to her and she frankly admitted that she had difficulty in reading the later novels. The complexity of the moral question in his work was never reflected in her fiction, although his achievement was always a model and inspiration to her. She remained a dedicated friend as well as devoted admirer of the Master, but felt

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55. Edith Wharton to her publisher, 3 March, 1903 (Macmillan Collection, British Museum).

56. Henry James to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 18 November, 1906 (Yale Papers).
closest to him in what she felt to be their common dedication to beauty as the ultimate value in life as well as art:

... suddenly

We took the hues of beauty, and became,
Each to the other, all that each had sought.

Thus did we feel the moment and the place
One in the heart of beauty57

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57. Edith Wharton, "Summer Afternoon (Bodiam Castle, Sussex)."
The achievement of Henry James as an artist revealed to Edith Wharton the possibility of an American returning to his cultural roots in the Old World and participating in its civilization. The European who was to serve as a model for Mrs Wharton was the female writer Violet Paget known under her pseudonym as Vernon Lee. Mrs Wharton read Vernon Lee's books in the 1880s and became a personal friend after they met in 1893. Vernon Lee introduced Edith Wharton to a number of fields of interest which eventually formed some of the most fascinating aspects in her life - Italian gardens, furniture, architecture, travel and history. But most importantly, Miss Lee was one of Walter Pater's disciples and an exponent of his views concerning beauty. In the late Victorian atmosphere of doubt concerning the traditional values of religion and morality she saw his emphasis on art and a cultivation of the beautiful as a new standard for society. His studies of Greek and Renaissance art provided a basis for viewing European culture and conduct which was extremely close to Mrs Wharton's personal attempt to harmonize the values of morality and the aesthetic sensibility.

Although Vernon Lee was only six years older than Edith Wharton, she gained notoriety as an author at the age of twenty-four when she published The Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy in 1880. By 1889 she was widely enough known for Browning to refer to her in Asolando:

"No, the book
Which noticed how the wall-growths wave," said she,
"Was not by Ruskin."
I said "Vernon Lee?"  

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Maurice Baring was to write that "Vernon Lee was and is by far the cleverest person I ever met in my life and the person possessed with the widest range of the rarest culture". Henry James was equally impressed with Vernon Lee when he came in contact with her:

They met in various London homes and Henry described her as 'a most astounding young female.' Euphorion was 'most fascinating and suggestive, as well as monstrous clever. She has a prodigious celebration.'

She had dedicated her first novel to him, but he became infuriated when she satirized him in a short story and broke off their relationship in 1892.

Edith Wharton was greatly influenced by Vernon Lee's study on eighteenth-century Italy because it opened up a world which reflected the values she cherished. Almost thirty years after reading it she wrote to Vernon Lee:

> It will be a real pleasure to write an article on your delightful - if I were not torn with contending sympathies, I should say most delightful of books; at any rate the one specially dear to me as opening my eyes to that dear despised foolish and brilliant 18th century in Italy, which no one saw till you told us to look.

During the 1880's Mrs Wharton followed the career of Vernon Lee, and when Paul Bourget visited Newport in 1893 he noticed that the Wharton home "Land's End" reflected her spirit with its eighteenth-century furniture, formal garden and conversation concerning travel in Italy. He provided his new American friend with a letter of introduction to Vernon Lee, and they finally met the following year. She was a model for Edith Wharton not only because of her success as a writer, but because her aesthetic sensitivity was the most striking characteristic in her flamboyant personality.

2. Quoted by Burdett Gardner, "Who Was Vernon Lee?", *Colby Library Quarterly*, III (August, 1952), p.120.
Everything that she studied (and whatever she studied she tackled with seriousness and professional competence—art, music, literature, history, philosophy, and psychology) became the material of her aesthetics.

The setting for Edith Wharton's first novel had been inspired by Vernon Lee's work on Italy, and after The Valley of Decision had been published Eugene-Lee Hamilton wrote enthusiastically to praise it:

It is easy enough to write novels about the Middle Ages or The Renaissance—probably all of them absolutely false;—I have just been doing so myself. But it requires a Stendhal or Edith Wharton to write a Chartreuse de Parme or a Valley of Decision. All the good judges that I have talked over your book with—beginning with my Sister—have been equally struck with it.  

The following year his sister published a five act play Ariadne in Mantua which reflected her preoccupation with the values of tradition, discipline and civilization:

Ariadne in Mantua may well epitomize Vernon Lee's achievement: a life dedicated to art, rigorously disciplined and guided not by the 'mere impulse, unreasoning and violent,' or pleasure and the 'forces of nature,' but directed conscientiously toward the 'restraining influences of civilization.'

Edith Wharton was extremely impressed with the play and wrote, "It is exquisite, and so completely the kind of fanciful poetical thing that I long to see it done." Vernon Lee shared Mrs Wharton's view that aesthetic values could be perpetuated only through the cultural continuity of a stable civilization.

In the same year Century Magazine commissioned Edith Wharton to write a number of essays to accompany a series of Maxfield Parrish paintings of Italian villas. Miss Lee assisted her in the project and when Italian Villas and Their Gardens was published as a book in 1904

6. Eugene Lee-Hamilton to Edith Wharton, 10 June, 1902 (Yale Papers).
the following was the dedication:

To
VERNON LEE
Who Better Than Any One Else Has Understood
And Interpreted the Garden-Magic
of Italy.9

During the twentieth century Vernon Lee continued to give
Edith Wharton frank evaluations of her latest fiction and Mrs Wharton
would often refer to these in letters to mutual friends.10 Her
strongest influence on the formation of Edith Wharton's attitudes was
in the years 1880-1905; both women had formed their ideals in a world
that had long ceased to exist. In 1929 Vernon Lee wrote a preface to
an anthology of her own works:

I imagine that he [a critic] wanted such selections as
might show that although my salad days were passed, alas,
in Victorian times before his own birth, yet I had put
forth crops of (sere and yellow!) leaves in this autumnal
twentieth century, nay in this discontented post war
wintriness.11

The most important element in Vernon Lee's view of life was
the predominence of the aesthetic. This aspect was based not only
on her personal experience but also on the philosophical theories of
Walter Pater concerning the beautiful. She made a close study of his
writings and was, aside from his sisters, Pater's closest female
friend. She interpreted his defense of the beautiful as a statement
concerning aesthetics and also as a guide for moral action. Individual
works of artistic value lead one to discover the nature of spiritual
beauty; both Vernon Lee and Pater were deeply influenced by Plato:

9. Edith Wharton, Italian Villas and Their Gardens (London: John Lane,
The Bodley Head, 1904), p.v.

10. See Edith Wharton to Galliard Lapsley, 10 July, 1930 (Yale Papers),
Edith Wharton to John Hugh-Smith, 10 July, 1930 (Yale Papers),
Edith Wharton to Galliard Lapsley, 3 December, 1931 (Yale Papers).

11. Vernon Lee, A Vernon Lee Anthology, ed. Irene Cooper Willis (London;
He began as an aesthete and ended as a moralist. By faithful and self-restraining cultivation of the sense of harmony, he appears to have risen from the perception of visible beauty to the knowledge of beauty of the spiritual kind, both being expressions of the same perfect fittingness to an ever more intense and various and congruous life.12

Miss Lee never identified Pater with the decadence of the "art for art's sake" movement which was associated with his pupil Oscar Wilde, because discipline and a strong sense of duty were two of his strongest qualities. She believed that Pater progressed from his perception of physical beauty to that of the spiritual because he discovered the harmony existing in Platonic forms:

This inborn affinity for refined wholesomeness made Mr Pater the national exponent of the highest aesthetic doctrine — the search for harmony throughout all orders of existence ... Supreme draftsman as he was, it protected him from the craftsman's delusion of "art for art's sake" in these uninstructive, over-dextrous days ... Standing as he did, as all the greatest artists or thinkers (and he was both) do, in a definite, inevitable relation to the universe ... his conception of art, being the outcome of his whole personal mode of existence, was inevitably one of art, not for art's sake, but for the sake of life — art as one of the harmonious functions of existence.13

When Vernon Lee sent him a series of her essays in 1882 he replied that the book "left on my mind a wonderfully rich impression of a world of all sorts of delightful things, under the action of a powerful intelligence".14 The next year she dedicated her next work to him:

To Walter Pater, in appreciation of that which in expounding the beautiful things of the past, has added to the beautiful things of the present.15

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He told her he admired the essays, was grateful for the dedication and proud to have his name associated with her. He saw that her theories were close to his own views and felt that her work made "the criticism of art and poetry a real part of the 'criticism of life'".

To Pater and Vernon Lee the love of beauty was at the center of human experience; "the sense of beauty ... meant two-thirds of whatever makes life worth living for". The beautiful was never an isolated facet of one's experience but the central controlling force by which all other things took on meaning:

... in this world all is isolated, dispersed, imperfect; but it shows also the power, the irresistible impulse we possess of uniting, concentrating, and perfecting by our vision, our perception, our feeling. Great as is the art of the artist, the art is more potent still of him who perceives, who connects the single work, the single art, with life, intermeshing it with all life's nerves and arteries.

This was exactly the same orientation towards life that Walter Pater had adopted. In 1873 he published his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* which shocked the Victorian world by demanding that a person treasure moments of passionate intensity inspired by the beauty of a face, a landscape, or a flash of insight:

> Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, - for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How many we see in them all that to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

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To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.¹⁹

Religion did not offer an existence beyond death nor did any other Victorian philosophy reveal the purpose of living. Man’s lifetime was only an interval before he ceased to exist and the most valuable experiences are those passionate moments aroused by objects of beauty:

For our one chance lies in expanding that interval of life, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy, and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion — that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.²⁰

This message of an ecstasy which gives meaning to life — as well are art — became the dominate theme in Edith Wharton’s life. She stated this explicitly when writing to Bernard Berenson during the Great War about some of his ideas on aesthetics:

> Oh, bless you again & again: especially for "What is true of life is true of art: its ultimate aim is ecstasy," and what follows. It coincides so willingly with the "aesthetic" of my own metiere that I’ve so long yearned to write that I could hug you — & myself!²¹

When writing to Berenson three weeks later she reiterated this theme by referring to a trip they had taken together to Germany before the war. The automobile tour had revealed the beauties of landscape, art galleries and music under the guidance of Berenson:

> Sometimes I think there’s no loneliness like that of having too many strings to one’s harp! I’ve never forgotten that giro to see the Forbidden country where

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we twanged them all - or at least I did! (Though it's a lyre one twangs; I don't remember how one "operates" a harp?)

Mrs Wharton had been attracted to Pater's theory of the beautiful because of her acute perception of the beautiful and the ugly. She had written of her childhood, "No doubt my complete mental isolation intensified all my sensations ..." This passionate intensity which was aroused by an aesthetic experience continued throughout her life:

... I was also - & this most of all - the rapt creature who heard the choiring of the spheres, & trembled with a sensuous ecstasy at the sight of beautiful objects, or the sound of noble verse. I was all this in one, & at once, because I was like Edgmont's Clarchen, "now wildly exultant, now deeply downcast," & always tossed on the waves of a passionate inner life. I never felt anything calmly - & I never have to this day! This ecstatic response was much more important for Mrs Wharton than any clear understanding of the nature of beauty. In all of her writings there is little evidence that she was concerned with a formal theory of aesthetics. Her personal involvement - and those of the characters in her fiction - was always with the subjective response to beauty rather than an abstract comprehension of it. In this she was completely in harmony with Pater:

In all Pater's work there is an element of self-identification, amounting at times to autobiography. But the decisive piece of self-identification is to be found in his essay on Winckelmann. The hunger for a golden age, the austere devotion to physical beauty, the feeling of a dedication to art and to the unravelling of its laws, 'the desire' as Pater says, 'to escape from abstract theory to intuitions, to the exercise of sight and touch' - all the characteristics which Winckelmann had united with a burning clarity."

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Unless the beautiful was revealed in the physical it had little relevance. Pater stated that it was not necessary for a critic to have a theory of aesthetics; he should be tuned interiorly to have the ability to respond to a work of art:

What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects.26

The element of subjectivity was one of the most important points in this approach to the beautiful. Because individual experience was the basis for this orientation then it naturally followed that the emphasis must be placed on the individual response rather than on any theory.

With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.27

Any attempt to formulate a coherent theory of aesthetics was bound to be of little value because it must necessarily deal with the generalized or the universal and thus neglect the personal:

Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes meaningless and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics.28

It was not surprising, therefore, that Edith Wharton did not define the beautiful in her writing. To do so would – in Pater's terms – lessen the impact of an aesthetic response. His rejection of the importance of an intellectual formulation meant that "beauty" was never defined because of its strong subjective element.

For Pater, beauty is something immediately experienced, felt upon the pulses - not a bloodless abstraction. In effect, he makes 'beauty' a blanket term covering the impressions we receive and enjoy from literature and the arts and from Wordsworth's 'mighty world of eye and ear'.

When Mrs Wharton was reviewing the book *Italian Cities* she praised its authors because they wrote from their specific experiences rather than from preconceived theories of art. This made the book valuable for her, because she was impressed with their sense of perception:

> The sureness of touch with which the writers have differentiated the outer aspect of the cities they depict, so that each stands forth in individual outline and colour, must convince even readers unacquainted with Italy that their descriptions are the result of personal impressions, and not of any preconceived literary or artistic ideal. The whole book, in fact, has this quality of spontaneous observation and reflection, of having, in the French phrase, been felt rather than filtered through other sensibilities.

Mrs Wharton's friend Sally Norton, may have shared with her the remarks of Henry James concerning *The Tragic Muse*. His reflections on the novel and the reader's response to it would have been very much in concert with the orientation of Mrs Wharton:

> I have left to the end, my dear Grace, thanking you properly for the very "handsome" way in which you speak of the massive Muse. I am delighted that it strikes you as a success, for I tried so hard to make it one that if it hadn't been it would have been a failure instead. That's all I can say about it - as I never have begun to understand how one can "justify" a work of art or imagination or take up anything said on the subject. One's own saying is what one has tried to say in it. This is there or it's absent, & when the thing is done nothing will make it better or worse.

The idea that a work of art is its own justification appealed to Pater; since the only deep experience was the aesthetic and he went well beyond what James might have thought when seeing all other fields

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in terms of it. Mrs Wharton, however, would agree with Pater.

Pater starts with an aesthetic taste, and goes on to judge moral precepts by how far they satisfy that taste. He approves of goodness because it is beautiful, not of beauty because it is good ... The worth of a view resided in the beauty it could inspire, not in its conformity to some absolute conception of truth.32

She responded to art, literature and friendship all in the same manner. In A Backward Glance she wrote:

I enjoy the commerce with great minds as a pointer enchanted with the glories of an Alpine meadow rather than as a botanist cataloguing its specimens.33

In her own life she surrounded herself with friends, gardens, houses, furniture and journeys which fulfilled this need for the beautiful. She patterned her experiences in order to avoid the ugly and cultivate the attractive: as with Pater the aesthetic dimension took the place of the philosophical or religious:

... it was not possible to justify the love of beauty on ideal and religious grounds. But, said Pater, why try? Life is just a stream of impressions dissolving one into the other as they float continuously through our minds. Some, however, seem fraught with an unusual beauty and significance; while they are with us, we feel our spirits expanded, enriched, delighted. Let our aim therefore be to arrange our lives so that we have as many of these precious impressions as possible.34

He certainly desired a religious belief, but found it impossible in the sceptical climate of the late nineteenth century, although he envied persons such as Sir Thomas Browne or Charles Lamb who lived in an earlier age and accepted the religious faith of their generation.

Vernon Lee was more explicit in the substitution of the aesthetic for the religious. She spoke of an "almost religious attitude in these

34. Cecil, pp.7-8.
aesthetic questions," and felt that it was possible to satisfy the religious needs of man by art rather than by belief in the supernatural because "a good half of all mythology is not dogma, but poetry, a good half of ritual is Art". She believed that art not only pleased, but also expanded a person's capacity for greater intellectual and moral achievement!

Her puritanism betrays itself the instant she raised the question of the purpose and value of art, and that question is the essence of everything that she writes about art ... Art is therefore socially useful, producing happiness, spiritual refreshment, and tending to inhibit most of the instincts whose superabundance can jeopardise individual and social existence'.

Edith Wharton, however, was much closer to Pater than to Vernon Lee with regard to theorizing about the nature and effect of beauty. Pater saw that abstractions removed one from those moments of intense aesthetic joy and saw little value in it; Mrs Wharton also preferred the concrete to the abstract. In 1903 she wrote to Sally Norton:

Miss Paget's mania for discoursing on theories of aesthetics, when she might be giving the world so much valuable information about 17th & 18th century Italy, is one of those perversities which I could never fathom.

Nevertheless Vernon Lee's exploration of the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic - a problem which Mrs Wharton continually dealt with in her fiction - reinforced the idea that both define each other.

If, however, the evolution from aesthete to moralist produced a narrowing of sensibility or any restriction or limitation upon the province of art itself, Vernon Lee would have deplored it. But as she traced its course, and demonstrated it in her own development, this heightened moral sense actually extended one's appreciation.

35. Lee, Art and Man, p.32.
37. Colby, p.128.
38. Edith Wharton to Sally Norton, 23 March, 1903 (Pitlick Papers).
Walter Pater was once asked by a student, "Why should we be moral?"
He is said to have replied, "Because it is so beautiful".  

Even though Pater did not formulate intellectual norms by which beauty could be identified he did see the necessity for having a standard. The artist must of course be influenced by the movements and fashions of his contemporary society, but there is an established ideal from which all true forms of beauty grow. Ancient Greece had established this norm:

But besides these conditions of time and place, and independent of them, there is also an element of permanence, a standard of taste, which genius confesses. This standard is maintained in a purely intellectual tradition. It acts upon the artist, not as one of the influences of his own age, but through those artistic products of the previous generation which first excited, while they directed into a particular channel, his sense of beauty. The supreme artistic products of succeeding generations thus form a series of elevated points, taking each from each the reflection of a strange light, the source of which is not in the atmosphere around and above them, but in a stage of society remote from ours. The standard of taste, then, was fixed in Greece, at a definite historical period. A tradition for all succeeding generations, it originates in a spontaneous growth out of the influences of Greek society.

This golden age had discovered beauty in its fulness and it was only by returning to this source - as the artists of the Renaissance did - that the creative life could flower. This was the moment in history in which man achieved a balance between his own self and the external world; it was therefore a model for artists of all ages:

The longer we contemplate that Hellenic ideal, in which man is at unity with himself, with his physical nature, with the outward world, the more we may be inclined to regret that he should ever have passed beyond it, too content for a perfection that makes the blood turbid, and frets the flesh, and discredits the actual world about us.

A fragment of one of Mrs Wharton's short stores alludes to this theory:  

40. Johnson, p.77.
of the perfect age having been created by the Greeks. Her main
character is condemned to a life of boredom because she had once been
exposed to the standards of the Greeks:

But there; that was the fault of her classical education,
the fault of her having been the daughter of a professor
of ancient Greek in that new world in which every last
fragment of the past takes on such an unreal radiance.
If she had not been also her father's friend and confidant,
and his favourite pupil, if he had not peopled her soul's
world with figures of eternal beauty, and set her head
ringing with the rhythms of eternal poetry, she might not
have found it so hard to endure the narrowness and monotony
of life.43

Edith Wharton's friend and travel-companion Mrs Winthrop
Chandler shared her belief that if one is cognizant with the art of
the ancient world then true aesthetic perception is possible:

Any early acquaintance with these incontestable master-
pieces breeds, I think, a constancy of the aesthetic
sense. We may later learn to appreciate other schools
and widely different one's but the great masters of
Greece and Italy have taught us to look for what is
essential to all art; its imperishable message that the
world is full of beauty for those who have eyes to see.44

Pater was impressed by the fact that restraint was the under-
lying law which typified all Greek art, and it was this characteristic
which heightened its intensity:

Sculpture finds the secret of its power in presenting
these types, in their broad, central, incisive lines ... 
Works of art produced under this law, and only these,
are really characterised by Hellenic generality or
breadth. In every direction it is a law of restraint.
It keeps passion always below that degree of intensity
at which it must necessarily be transitory, never winding
up the features to one note of anger or desire, or
surprise.45

Mrs Wharton's close friend Bernard Berenson had been greatly influenced
by Pater, believing that the ideal had been discovered by the Greeks

44. Chanler, Roman Spring, p.67.
46. See Bernard Berenson, Sunset and Twilight, ed. Nicky Mariano
and that succeeding generations discarded this at their peril. He thought there had been a decline in the visual arts in the late nineteenth century continuing into the twentieth:

In the figure arts it has meant throwing away composition ... It was accompanied by the conclusion not based on seeing, on observing, but on exasperation and the preconceived assumption that the squalid, the sordid, the violent, the bestial, the misshapen, in short that low life was the only 'reality'.

Painters turned for their inspiration not to the great masters of all centuries but to those, whether competent or incompetent, whose subject-matter fanned their fury against the Greeks.47

But Berenson thought that this classical norm applied not only to painting and sculpture, but to literature as well. Picasso and James Joyce were both departing from an ideal of beauty:

The most remarkable draughtsman still alive [Picasso] had taken every advantage of his skill to hide his true gifts. Perhaps in deepest secret he draws in orthodox fashion everything he bedevils while painting, as I have been assured Joyce wrote out in plain King's English what he fricassed for his printed prose.48

Edith Wharton and Berenson often discussed modern literature, and both felt that the experiments in contemporary writing were deviations from the ideal of beauty to a preoccupation with the ugly, which by their criteria was the distorted. This rigid view led Mrs Wharton to decry not only the fiction of Joyce but the poetry of Eliot. In 1923 she wrote to Berenson concerning Ulysses:

It's a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & unformed & unimportant drivel; & until the raw ingredients of a pudding make a pudding I shall never believe that the raw material of sensation & thought can make a great work of art without the cook's interblending. The same applies to Eliot - I know it's not because I'm getting old that I'm unresponsive.49


49. Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 6 January, 1923 (I Tatti Collection).
This censorious dogmatism arose from her conviction that art was the remaking of the "raw material of sensation" into something beautiful, and this was always typified by the law of restraint Pater had observed in Greek art. Berenson agreed that Joyce was part of a trend with which they could not sympathise because it was concerned with the deviant rather than the ideal.

The importance of Mrs Wharton's position is not whether she correctly or incorrectly appreciated the modern movement in this century but that it reflected her great need to have a well established standard because otherwise the beautiful would be lost amidst the squalid and sordid elements in life. As she wrote to Galliard Lapsley concerning Sinclair Lewis:

> Elmer Gantry is a pitiful production. America is like that no doubt, but not all & not only like that. As I said to Walter the other day, the trouble with them all is that they don't know what a gentleman is, & after all it was a useful standard to get one's perspective by. I do despair of the republic, as it is, and without wanting any more reasons for it.50

This need for a standard was the reason why she rejected America and chose France as her home:

> Edith Wharton found in France, more powerfully present than elsewhere, a quality which her inmost nature craved. That conscious continuity of custom and conformity which had revealed itself to her at Nohant as the order to which George Sand was ultimately obedient - this, to Edith Wharton, was the very essence of the French tradition she loved.51

Walter Pater had discovered that continuity was extremely important for a society if the beautiful was to be safeguarded. As he became older he gradually came to see that custom was so essential that it assumed a moral value of its own. "In the constant modification of his early teaching, Pater came to find in custom, or conventionality, an ethical force."52 This also happened to Mrs Wharton.

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50. Edith Wharton to Galliard Lapsley, 13 April, 1927 (Yale Papers).
51. Bell, Edith Wharton & Henry James, p.125.
52. Letters of Walter Pater, ed. Evans, p.xxv.
Because of his emphasis on an ideal which had been established in the past, it was only natural that Pater chose an historical setting for his novel *Marius the Epicurean* and criticised works of art of the past. This habit of looking back to a golden age became for his disciple Vernon Lee a cultivation of what she identified as "the emotion of the past":

> For though I should like to have seen ancient Athens, or Carthage according to Salambo, and though I have pined to hear the singers of last century, I know that any other period than this of the world's history would be detestable to live in. For one thing – one among other instances of brutish dullness – our ancestors knew nothing of the emotion of the past, the rapture of old towns and houses.53

She came to realize that it was necessary to adopt this backward glance because it would heighten those sensations which Pater had extolled.

> Life would become richer if it was viewed through this perspective:

To this alone would I place my *historical habit* in the second hand. For, as the sensitiveness to nature means supplementing our physical life by the life of the air and the sun, the clouds and the waters, so does this historic habit mean supplementing our present life by a life in the past; a life larger, richer than our own multiplying our emotions by those of the dead.54

Edith Wharton adopted this orientation from the beginning of her career as a novelist. Europe was of course much more suggestive because its relics of the past were so much more numerous than those of America. The American Mrs Chanler reflected this:

> Rome tells us her story without reference to textbooks. It sinks into our sense of things and becomes part of our consciousness, as it never can to a child brought up in a new country lacking all concrete images of the past.55

In an uncompleted novel Mrs Wharton expressed this situation using the sharp image of the dust of time.

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55. Chanler, p.203.
Clephane had a special tenderness for the old house which held under its gabled roof and on its panelled walls that fine dust of family tradition so seldom left to gather undisturbed in American dwellings.56

It is significant that so many of Edith Wharton's novels and stories are set in the past. Vernon Lee recognized that The Valley of Decision was important because the "emotion of the past" facilitated subjectivity which was so important to Pater:

La Signora Wharton ci de meglio: un quadro, una serie di quadri, veduti attraverso una personalita d'artista e tradotti in simboli artistici: la verita subbiettiva dell'anima di un epoca e di un paese rivelandosi sotto lo sguardo di un anima di scrittore vero ... il romanzo storico porta rivivere solo facendosi di piu in piu subbiettivo ...

By choosing a period in the past for her first novel Edith Wharton was able to refer back to a golden age in order to stress the values she felt were lacking in her own world. Miss Lee identified these:

... quello della Signora Wharton ci mostra L'Italia del 1700 come colpisce una moderna appassionata d'arte e di giustizia, il cui desiderio di un avvenire migliore contrasta colla sua nostalgia per quei tempi - che forse non furon mai! - di tradizione e di privilegio, di raffinatezza e di dignita ormai scomparse.

Walter Pater and Vernon Lee had reinforced Edith Wharton's desire to harmonize the demands within society by the aesthetic sense. They had indicated the practical necessity of the beautiful in a world which was becoming insensitive to it, demonstrating where it was to be found and cherished in personal experience. In her career as a writer


57. "Mrs Wharton gives us something even better: a picture, a series of pictures seen through an artist's personality and translated into artistic symbols: the subjective soul of an age unfolding under the gaze of a real writer's soul ... the historical novel will be able to live again only on the condition of becoming more and more subjective ...". Vernon Lee, "Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision" (Yale Papers - n.d.), pp.9-10.

58. "... Mrs Wharton shows the eighteenth century Italy in the way it strikes a modern personality keen on art and justice, whose longing for a better future clashes with her nostalgia for those times - that perhaps never were! - of tradition and privilege, of refinement and dignity now vanished." Lee, pp.14-15.
Mrs Wharton constantly attempted to show that vulgarity and evil could be overcome by the orderly and the graceful. When comparing her with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Frederick J. Hoffman made the following observation:

Inevitably, Mrs Wharton's view of order was associated with the question of taste. The vulgar and the meretricious were invariably linked with the morally abhorrent. The world must be beautiful as well as orderly; its beauty requires a sharp sense of the proper and the graceful in the beholder. Here was a world of the discrete, the comprehensible, in which both the line of conduct and the limits of beauty could immediately be apprehended and judged. Indeed, in much of her fiction the question of taste was immediately a question of moral discretion as well.  

This moral discretion was built on an aesthetic sensibility which Pater and Vernon Lee had shown to be the only absolute value within a civilization which had outgrown - or irretrievably lost - the remainder of its religious and philosophical heritage.

In 1899 Mrs Wharton published her first collection of short stories which she entitled The Greater Inclination. The seven stories and one short play were chosen from those she had written during the previous decade and which had been accepted by various magazines such as Scribner's and Century. Her friend Walter Berry assisted in selecting which stories should be reprinted and discarded.

The first tale in The Greater Inclination - "The Muse's Tragedy" - is modelled on Henry James's novella The Aspern Papers. It is probable that both Mrs Wharton and James heard the anecdote, which is the basis for their plots, from the same source.¹ Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Vernon Lee's stepbrother, had related the tale to James about Shelley's sister-in-law who was the mother of Byron's daughter Allegra. Mrs Wharton, no doubt, also heard the donnee from the invalid brother of her friend. The young writer in "The Muse's Tragedy" is called Danyers, and he finally meets the woman reputed to be the mistress and inspiration of the great poet Vincent Rendle whom he has admired since his college days when he wrote an appreciative essay on the writer.

Edith Wharton's story is divided into three sections; in the first Danyers meets the older woman Mrs Anerton, and in the second he falls under her spell while they are together working on a book about the poet. The third part is in the form of a letter from Mrs Anerton to the young man in which she confesses that she was nothing to Rendle but a companion

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who encouraged but never inspired his work. She had doubted that she was a person who could be loved and thus attempted to make Danyers fall in love with her in order to reassure herself.

"The Muse's Tragedy" is similar to *The Aspern Papers* in that both of them are concerned with the young literary pilgrim and the older woman who was reputed to have been the ideal for a notable poet. For James, however, the moral awakening of his hero, the evocative description of Venice and the pathetic situation of the niece of the great lady are his primary interests. The point of view of the participant narrator is at the centre of the story. Mrs Wharton has none of this technical complexity; in fact, the shift of the narrator in the third section is clumsy. Her concern is with the older woman rather than the young man, but she does share with James the fascination of contemplating a great artist from the recent past. This distance in time allows a romantic myth to grow around the great writer, a myth which inexorably draws Danyers:

> Where, in his boyhood, he had felt only the perfect the almost austere beauty of form, the subtle interplay of vowel-sounds ... he now thrilled to the close-packed significance of each line ... - his imagination lured hither and thither on fresh trails of thought, and perpetually spurred by the sense that, beyond what he had already discovered, more marvellous regions lay waiting to be explored.²

His response to this world is that total commitment urged by Pater.

> When Danyers considers that society thought that the poet should have married Mrs Anerton after her husband's death he is shocked:

> How such a reparation would have vulgarized their past - it would have been like 'restoring' a masterpiece; and how exquisite must have been the perceptions of the woman ...³

The young man evaluates the proposal in terms of the artist's creation,

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³ *The Greater Inclination*, p.7.
and the act would have been harmful because it would have "vulgarized" the relationship of the past. The incorrect action is seen in terms of bad taste. The image of the restored painting reinforces the point, and the reflection about the exquisiteness of the perceptions is a direct echo of Pater's call to cultivate the ecstatic response to one's experience.

In the first two sections the narrator also sees the situation in the same manner as a portrait painter would describe a character and background:

The lady whose entrance broke upon his solitary repast in the restaurant of the Hotel Villa de'Este had seated herself in such a way that her profile was detached against the window; and thus viewed, her domed forehead, small arched nose, and fastidious lip suggested a silhouette of Marie Antoinette ... the same air of tacitly excluding the obvious and exceptional.4

The heavy accent on the formality of the picture with reference to the aristocratic Marie Antoinette allows Danyers to give free rein to his own imagination, where the character and the narrator share the same point of view.

The second in the collection, "A Journey," demonstrates Mrs Wharton's ability as a fine story-teller. The situation is simple; the heroine who is never identified by name is travelling to New York by rail from the West with her husband who is ill. During the journey he dies, and she conceals the fact from the fellow-travellers and rail officials in order to avoid the strain of being put off the car with a corpse in a strange town. She finally loses consciousness as the train enters Grand Central Station in New York. The author stresses the sensibility of the main character and chronicles her decline as the paralysing fear finally overcomes her.

The narrator of "The Pelican" is a detached observer who tells the story of his acquaintance Mrs Amyot and her career as a public speaker.

The first time I saw her she was standing by the piano, against a flippant background of Dresden china and photographs, telling a roomful of women preoccupied with their spring bonnets all she thought she knew about Greek art. The contrast between her subject matter and physical surrounding leads the narrator to realize that there is also some moral ambiguity paralleling this flaw in taste:

To the invaluable knack of not disturbing the association of ideas in her audience, she added the gift of what may be called a confidential manner - so that her fluent generalizations about Goethe and his place in literature (the lecture was, of course, manufactured out of Lewes's book) had the flavor of personal experience, of views sympathetically exchanged with her audience on the best way of knitting children's socks, or of putting up preserves for the winter. It was, I am sure, to this personal accent - the moral equivalent of her dimple - that Mrs Amyot owed her prodigious, her irrational success. It was her art of transposing second-hand ideas into first-hand emotions that so endeared her to her feminine listeners. It was her dishonest use of the personal accent is emphasized by the metaphor of the dimple. But the important fact is that the narrator discovers Mrs Amyot's real condition because her moral failure is manifested by the insensitivity of the audiences. She appeals for his help because she tells him she must continue her career - however shoddy it is - to support her fatherless son. The speaker assists by recommending her to "go West" where her obvious deficiencies will not be noticed. For Mrs Wharton the "West" always stood for vulgarity in her fiction:

In the West she achieved a success which for a year or more embittered my perusal of the morning papers. The fascination that lures the murderer back to the scene of his crime drew my eye to every paragraph celebrating Mrs Amyot's last brilliant lecture on the influence of something upon somebody;

and her own letters - she overwhelmed me with them - spared me no detail of the entertainment given in her honor by the Palimpsest Club of Omaha or of her reception at the University of Leadville.  

Mrs Wharton developed a strong sense of satire when dealing with the West as is demonstrated by the Palimpsest Club and the University of Leadville. Mrs Amyot is finally exposed by her son who denounces her vulgarity and dishonesty; the financial need to support her child had ceased long before. The story reflects the author's identification of aesthetic vulgarity with moral failure.

"Souls Belated" is concerned with Lydia Tillotson and Ralph Gannett who together escape to Europe from provincial New York society before her divorce is finalized. The freedom that they choose is a repudiation of the puritanical morality of America which Mrs Wharton represents in physically repulsive images:

Before she met Gannett her life had seemed merely dull: his coming made it appear like one of those dismal Cruikshank prints in which the people are all ugly and all engaged in occupations that are either vulgar or stupid.  

The reference to Cruikshank sees both life in general and ugliness in particular in terms of art. The interior of a house is perhaps the most frequently recurring metaphor in Edith Wharton's work:

The moral atmosphere of the Tillotson interior was as carefully screened and curtained as the house itself: Mrs Tillotson senior dreaded ideas as much as a draught in her back. Prudent people liked an even temperature; and to do anything unexpected was as foolish as going out in the rain.  

The rejection of one false moral standard means they must find another. Gannett chides Lydia because she judges life too theoretically; he tells her that "Life is made up of compromises", and they discover that they

7. The Great Inclination, p.66.
need acceptance by a society which will only recognize a man and woman living together in the context of marriage. This realization is possible because Lydia is confronted by another woman in this situation and is repulsed by her crudeness:

"I want to speak to you," that lady said [to Lydia], in a rich hard voice that seemed the audible expression of her gown and her complexion.\(^ {11} \)

Moral enlightenment comes only by seeing its aesthetic equivalent, and the couple have learned that the price of society's approval is compromise - but the cost is not too high.

In "A Coward" the young hero Vibart meets Mr and Mrs Carstyle while paying his respects to their attractive daughter in the resort town of Millbrook, Rhode Island. Mr Carstyle's character is sharply etched in the imagination of the young man because of the distinct contrast he provides to his wife:

Mrs Carstyle was one of the women who make refinement vulgar. She invariably spoke of her husband as Mr Carstyle and, though she had but one daughter, was always careful to designate the young lady by name. At luncheon she had talked a great deal of elevating influences and ideals, and had fluctuated between apologies for the overdone mutton and affected surprise that the bewildered maid-servant should have forgotten to serve the coffee and liqueurs as usual.\(^ {12} \)

Her husband draws close to Vibart as the story progresses and finally confesses that he once committed a cowardly act resulting in the death of his friend; the remainder of his life has consisted in an unsuccessful attempt to make reparation. His personal worth is enchanced by the degree to which he is differentiated from his wife, and Mrs Wharton typically illustrates this in the image:

... the house itself, and the guests who came and went in it like people rushing through a railway-station, offered no points of repose to his thoughts. Some

\(^ {11} \) The Great Inclination, p.107.

houses are companions in themselves: the walls, the book-shelves, the very chairs and tables, have the qualities of a sympathetic mind; but Mrs Vance's interior was as impersonal as the setting of a classic drama.¹³

"A Cup of Cold Water" is significant because here she deals with New York society, and her critique of it foreshadows the dilemmas her characters confront in The Valley of Decision and The House of Mirth.

The ironic tone and epigrammatic wit which became two of the most distinctive aspects of her style are much in evidence:

To the girls in Miss Talcott's set, the attentions of a clever man who had to work for his living had the zest of a forbidden pleasure; but to marry such a man would be as unpardonable as to have one's carriage seen at the door of a cheap dress-maker. Poverty might make a man fascinating; but a settled income was the best evidence of stability of character. If there were anything in heredity, how could a nice girl trust a man whose parents had been careless enough to leave him unprovided for?¹⁴

Her supreme charm was the simplicity that comes of taking it for granted that people are born with carriages and country-places: it never occurred to her that such congenital attributes could be matter for self-consciousness, and she had none of the nouveau riche prudery which classes poverty with the nude in art and is not sure how to behave in the presence of either.¹⁵

This is a world where money is an absolute necessity to a leisured society. The protagonist Woburn is "peculiarly susceptible to those forms of elegance which are the flower of ease".¹⁶ But his need to relate the external beauty to an interior one is exactly the same desire that Edith Wharton spoke of in the Newport speech:

It was not merely by the external grace of these drawing-room ornaments that Woburn's sensibilities were charmed. His imagination was touched by the curious exoticism of view resulting from such conditions. He had always enjoyed listening to Miss Talcott even more than looking

¹³. This Greater Inclination, p.144.
at her. Her ideas had the brilliant bloom and audacious irrelevance of those tropical orchids which strike root in air.  

Woburn must compromise his principles or leave society, the same predicament that Lily Bart confronts in *The House of Mirth*. Unfortunately for both characters the descent into poverty is one which strips life of all those ornaments which should be the outward manifestation of personal moral harmony:

Woburn instinctively associated poverty with bad food, ugly furniture, complaints and recriminations: it was natural that he should be drawn toward the luminous atmosphere where life was a series of peaceful and good-humored acts, unimpeded by petty obstacles. To spend one's time in such society gave one the illusion of unlimited credit; and also, unhappily, created the need for it.

He is caught in the ambiguous position wherein he must either choose to abandon ideals or accept a repulsive style of life evidenced in this description of a formal ball:

The bald man with the globular stomach, who stood at Mrs Gildermere's elbow surveying the dancers, was old Boylston, who made his pile in wrecking railroads; the smooth chap with glazed eyes, at whom a pretty girl smiled up so confidingly, was Collerton, the political lawyer, who had been mixed up to his own advantage in an ugly lobbying transaction ... The little ferret-faced youth in the corner was Regie Colby, who wrote the *Entre-Nous* paragraphs in the Social Searchlight: the women were charming to him and he got all the financial tips he wanted from their husbands and fathers.

The story loses its thrust when Woburn makes the admirable decision to help a young woman about to commit suicide and thereby remains to face a prison sentence for embezzling funds. The sentimental conclusion detracts from the effect of the tale, but remains important because of the moral quandary which it explores.

18. *The Greater Inclination*, p.188.
It [the weeping] roused, too the drugged pulses of his own grief: he was touched by the chance propinquity of two alien sorrows in a great city throbbing with multifarious passions.20

The final short story in this volume, "The Portrait" is another attempt to understand the artist's superior perception. George Lillo, a successful and talented painter, refuses to paint a portrait that would reveal the true nature of a gangster in order to save his daughter from suffering. Mrs Wharton adroitly describes the criminal's character with much the same exactitude as the painter:

His daughter had described him as a scholar. He wasn't that, of course, in any intrinsic sense: like most men of his type he had gulped his knowledge standing, as he had snatched his food from lunch-counters; the wonder of it lay in his extraordinary power of assimilation. It was the strangest instance of a mind to which erudition had given force and fluency without culture; his learning had not educated his perceptions: it was an implement serving to slash others rather than to polish himself.21

Fashionable New York is dissatisfied with the painting because Lillo does not reveal the sitter's psyche. He also shares this disappointment but has the consolation of realizing that he is protecting the criminal's daughter from the realization of her father's deficiency. The artist not only sees beneath the surface of life but is more conscientious than other men:

'She went on to say how glad she was that I [Lillo] saw him as she did. So many artists admired only regular beauty, the stupid Greek type that was made to be done in marble; but she's always fancied from what she's seen of my work - she knew everything I'd done, it appeared - that I looked deeper, cared more for the way in which faces are modelled by temperament and circumstance; "and of course in that sense," she concluded, "my father's face is beautiful."'22

The Touchstone was published by Scribners in New York in 1900, but the London edition, brought out in the same year by John Murray, had

the title *Gift from the Grave* because the original name was the title of a novel which had just been released in England. The British title is more appropriate because the tale — Mrs Wharton's first long work of fiction — is concerned with the gift the poet Margaret Aubyn bestows on her beloved Glennard after her death. He finances his marriage by anonymously publishing the dead writer's letters to him telling of her unrequited love. The moral dilemma concerns his incorrect use of the artistic treasures from the past to support himself and his wife in New York society. The necessity of compromise stressed in "Souls Belated" is reiterated here, but the moral perplexities are much more complex. The tale is based on James's story "Sir Dominick Farrand" where a young writer discovers some compromising letters written by the late Sir Dominick and is tempted to sell them to finance his marriage and begin a career writing for the editor to whom he intends to sell the letters. He refuses, marries without the money, and is rewarded by discovering that his wife is the daughter of Sir Dominick.

The protagonist in *The Touchstone* has the difficulty of either renouncing his fiance, entering into a marriage financed by an improper act, or living with her in poverty. The latter alternative, however, is unacceptable because of the effects of poverty:

> She [his fiance] had seen more than most girls of the shabby side of life, of the perpetual tendency of want to cramp the noblest attitude. Poverty and misfortune had overhung her childhood, and she had none of the pretty delusions about life that are supposed to be the crowning grace of girlhood.  

His marriage is free from this constraint because of the income from the sales of the letters, but the consequences of his choice come to haunt him and expose the extent of his callousness.

... to reproach one's self for not having loved Margaret Aubyn was a good deal like being disturbed by an inability to admire the Venus of Milo.24

Nevertheless he attempts to remain in this state of ignorance;

And somehow - in the windowless inner cell of his consciousness where self-criticism cowered - Glennard's course seemed justified by its merely material success ... 25

but the image of the house, expresses his real dilemma:

Some griefs build the soul a spacious house, but in this misery of Glennard's he could not stand upright. It pressed against him at every turn. He told himself that this was because there was no escape from the visible evidences of his act.26

It is the poet Margaret Aubyn who gives Glennard the second gift of freedom. When he visits her grave he recognizes how apathetic he was in his former existence when he was unable to share the life of beauty which she led and created. His misappropriation of the literary treasure from that past confirms his coarseness, but it also begins the gradual moral regeneration through pain, because it again puts him in contact with the artist:

In this lucidity of retrospection the most trivial detail had its meaning, and the joy of recovery was embittered to Glennard by the perception of all that he had missed. He had been pitifully, grotesquely stupid; and there was irony in the thought that, but for the crisis through which he was passing, he might have lived on in complacent ignorance of his loss. It was as though she had brought him with her blood.27

In her next collection of short stories, Mrs Wharton continues her investigation of the relationship of art to life; five of the seven tales in Crucial Instances deal with writers, collectors or painters. The remaining two are concerned with an Italian setting of the past.

"The Duchess at Prayer" is narrated by an American who is fascinated by

24. The Touchstone, p.6.
25. The Touchstone, p.59.
26. The Touchstone, p.90.
27. The Touchstone, p.117.
the past; speaking of his guide he observes that "He was the oldest man I had ever seen; so sucked back into the past that he seemed more like a memory than a living being". Since this atmosphere allows the speaker to be temporally as well as culturally distanced from his surroundings, his own world suffers in comparison:

   Everywhere were vanishing traces of that fantastic horticulture of which our dull age has lost the art. Down the alleys maimed statues stretched their arms like rows of whining beggars; faun-eared terms grinned in the thickets, and above the laurustinus walls rose the mock ruin of a temple, falling into real ruin in the bright disintegrating air.

The past is valuable to Edith Wharton because it can be imbued with a romantic nostalgia. The great country house, for example, embodies the aspiration and activities of previous generations:

   Have you ever questioned the long shuttered front of an old Italian house, that motionless mask, smooth, mute, equivocal as the face of a priest behind which buzz the secrets of the confessional? Other houses declare the activities they shelter; they are the clear expressive cuticle of a life flowing close to the surface; but the old palace in its narrow street, the villa on its cypress-hooded hill, are as impenetrable as death. The tall windows are like blind eyes, the great door is a shut mouth. Inside there may be sunshine, the scent of myrtles, and a pulse of life through all the arteries of the huge frame; or a mortal solitude, where bats lodge in the disjointed stones and the keys rust in unused doors.

   The narrator finds that the statue of the praying Duchess has a face of frozen horror and agony and is told by the guide the story of her lover being buried under the new statue by the jealous husband. The chiselled face has mysteriously changed from its devout tranquility to frenzied terror reflecting traumatic experience in life.

   It is a house again, in "The Angel at the Grave", that encases

29. Crucial Instances, p.3.
the relics of a vanished world and also retains its spirit. The young girl who acts as guardian angel has come from the crude West and is here able to experience civilization:

To a child compact of enthusiasms, and accustomed to pasture them on the scanty herbage of a new social soil, the atmosphere of the old house was full of floating nourishment. In the compressed perspective of Paulina's outlook it stood for a monument of ruined civilizations, and its white prâ toile opened on legendary distances. Its very aspect was impressive to eyes that had first surveyed life from the jig-saw "residence" of a raw-edged Western town.31

Her imagination is nurtured by the New England home and the values of tradition and stability provide the framework for contemplation. The beautiful objects which surround her give more than adequate compensation for the renunciations she must make:

On women of Paulina's mold this piety toward implicit demands, toward the ghosts of dead duties walking unappeased among usurping passions, has a stronger hold than any tangible bond. People said that she gave up young Winsloe because her aunts disapproved of her leaving them; but such disapproval as reached her was an emanation from the walls of the House, from the bare desk, the faded portraits, the dozen yellowing tomes that no hand but hers ever lifted from the shelf.32

The moral strength she has gained from this environment is threatened when she realizes that the outside world has discontinued its literary pilgrimage to the shrine, but she is rewarded when a young scholar reassures her that a revival of interest in her ancestor can take place because she has not abandoned her guard at the graveside. In this story Mrs Wharton is using a trite situation to illustrate her point, and the use of nineteenth-century melodrama is an inadequate explanation of her character's motivations.

"The Recovery" is the story of the painter Keniston, a renowned American artist who comes to Paris in middle age to exhibit his

32. Crucial Instances, p.44.
pictures, but discovers that compared with the richness of Europe and its artistic heritage his efforts are those of a neophyte. The American-European theme in the story is the basis for the poignant discovery that his personal limitations are due to his nation's lack of a significant cultural inheritance. This tale is an illustration of the quandry of the American artist that James traces in his essay on Hawthorne.

Keniston's wife shares his situation and Mrs. Wharton describes her with great accuracy:

It was in this mood that she opened the article on Keniston. She knew about him, of course; she was wonderfully 'well up,' even for East Onondaigua. She had met, on a visit to New York, a man who collected Kenistons, and a photogravure of a Keniston is an 'artistic' frame hung above her writing-table at home.

The reference to East Onondaigua, the substitute of a photogravure for an original and the 'artistic' frame all underscore the provinciality of America.

The same character experiences a unique awakening when she is confronted with Paris:

Never had she felt more isolated amid that ordered beauty which gives a social quality to the very stones and mortar of Paris. All about her were evidences of an artistic sensibility pervading every form of life like the nervous structure of the huge frame—a sensibility so delicate, alert and universal that it seemed to leave no room for obtuseness or error. In such a medium the faculty of plastic expression must develop as unconsciously as any organ in its normal surroundings; to be 'artistic' must cease to be an attitude and become a natural function. To Claudia the significance of the whole vast revelation was centred in the light it shed on one tiny spot of consciousness—the value of her husband's work. There are moments when to the groping soul the world's accumulated experiences are but stepping-stones across a private difficulty.

This demonstrates the growth of Pater's "ecstasy" which overwhelsms and brings with it complete illumination. Because neither she or her husband had a Charles Eliot Norton in their native country to give them a gradual

34. Crucial Instances, p.87.
initiation to this denser and richer culture, the discovery comes with a great sense of shock. Mrs Wharton is concerned with the same idea that T.S. Eliot later developed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” - if the artist is not conscious of the cultural achievements of his race his own creation will be severely limited.

Claudia realizes that although her husband’s work has been criticized, praised and publicised in America it loses any identity when exhibited in a gallery close to the Louvre. Since a work of art embodies the values of a person as well as those of a culture her own identity is threatened because of the quality of her husband’s American paintings:

She swept a startled eye from one familiar painting to another. The canvases were all there - and the frames - but the miracle, the mirage of life and meaning, had vanished like some atmospheric illusion. What was it that had happened? And had it happened to her or to the pictures? She tried to rally her frightened thoughts; to push or coax them into a semblance of resistance; but argument was swept off its feet by the huge rush of a single conviction - the conviction that the pictures were bad.35

Claudia’s sudden conviction of her husband’s failure leads her logically, in Mrs Wharton’s terms, to the further realization that:

Any disregard of ... a claim would have vulgarized her most delicate pleasures; and her husband’s sensitiveness to it in great measure extenuated the artistic obtuseness that often seemed to her like a failure of the moral sense.36

In “The Recovery” this immediate enlightenment is not credible to the reader since Mrs Wharton does not expand on the experience. This is an instance where the illumination intrudes arbitrarily into the story and thereby weakens it. Therefore, Keniston’s final declaration to remain in Paris “till I learn how to paint”37 is robbed of its full effect.

“The Rembrandt” deals with an elderly lady forced to sell a painting that she incorrectly believes to be by Rembrandt in order to pay...
her debts and finance the last remaining years of her life. The shift of emphasis concerning the work of art from the creator to the collector and the type of person who protects it during succeeding generations allows Mrs Wharton to emphasize the mysterious value and power of object d'arts in much the same way as James does in *The Spoils of Poynton*. The old woman Mrs Pontage, like the heroine in "The Angel at the Grave," acts as a guardian of art which both strengthens and ennobles her. The young narrator is a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and must inform Mrs Pontage that the painting is not an original Rembrandt:

> Along with her faith in the Rembrandt I must destroy not only the whole fabric of Mrs Pontage's past, but even that life-long habit of acquiescence in untested formulas that makes the best part of the average feminine strength. I guess the episode of the picture to be inextricably interwoven with the traditions and convictions with served to veil Mrs Pontage's destitution not only from others but from herself. Viewed in that light the Rembrandt had perhaps been worth its purchase-money; and I regretted that works of art do not commonly sell on the merit of the moral support they may have rendered.

This final reflection is ironical because the painting is sold twice for its moral not financial value. The young narrator uses his position as a buyer to purchase it for the museum and the wealthy members of the Board of Trustees buy the painting a second time with their private funds when they learn the nature of the situation. All characters who come in contact with the painting are made better because of it. The importance of conservation in Mrs Wharton's work is constantly re-emphasized because without it the art of the past is unable to give vigour to the values of the present. Those who keep the fire burning at the shrine are as important as the original artists themselves.

"The Moving Finger" closely resembles "The Rembrandt" and "The Duchess at Prayer" in stressing the interdependence between art and life.

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39. Wharton, "The Rembrandt* *Crucial Instances*, p.132.
The portrait painter Claydon creates the picture of Mrs Grancy, the woman he loves:

"Pygmalion," he began slowly, "turned his statue into a real woman; I turned my real woman into a picture." 40

In the Platonic terms of Vernon Lee and Pater there is one form which is perfect and others which are a reflection of this ideal. Mrs Wharton gives her artists the ability to know both. Claydon is asked by Mrs Grancy's husband to alter her portrait after her death to that of the woman who would have aged if she lived. After Grancy has a serious illness Claydon again changes the picture and now Mrs Grancy's image foretells the death of her husband who dies soon after he sees it. The artist then returns the painting to the original image and lives with the woman whom he both loves and has created in oils.

Mrs Wharton shows that Clayton has the artistic power not only to paint but to create the environment wherein all elements in his life contribute to his aesthetic temperament. The narrator in the tale gives a fine description of his studio and its contents:

I turned away and began to stroll about the studio. Claydon was something of a collector and his things were generally worth looking at. The studio was a long tapestried room with a curtained archway at one end. The curtains were looped back, showing a smaller apartment, with books and flowers and a few fine bits of bronze and porcelain. The tea-table standing in this inner room proclaimed that it was open to inspection, and I wandered in. A blu pondre vase first attracted me; then I turned to examine a slender bronze Ganymede, and in so doing found myself face to face with Mrs Grancy's portrait. 41

The volume is concluded with "The Confessional" which reflects her interest in Italy because it is there that the relics of the past form part of the heritage of the country. The tale, about an Italian priest who ministers to a poor immigrant parish in America, contains a retrospective view of his life with an old aristocratic family in Italy.

41. Crucial Instances, p.175.
It was doubtless to this picturesque accident that Don Egidio owed the mingling of ease and simplicity that gave an inimitable charm to his stout shabby presence. It was as though some wild mountain-fruit had been transplanted to the Count's orchards and had mellowed under cultivation without losing its sylvan flavor. I have never seen the social art carried farther without suggestion of artifice. The fact that Don Egidio's amenities were mainly exercised on the mill-hands composing his parish proved the genuineness of his gift. It is easier to simulate gentility among gentlemen than among navvies; and the plain man is a touchstone who draws out all the alloy in the gold.42

Don Egidio understands the difference between his clerical calling and the life he led among the wealthy, but he never forgets that other life of deprivation from which he has been saved. He was...

... an ignorant peasant lad, coming from hard words and blows and a smoke-blackened hut in the hills to that great house full of rare and beautiful things, and of beings who seemed ... even more rare and beautiful.43

This sensitivity makes him all the more culpable when he succumbs to the supplications of his friend the Count and allows him to listen to the confession of his wife in order to verify her innocence of adultery. The Count and the priest are punished in being banished to America to do their acts of reparation in a land of cold winters barren of the cultural riches of Italy.

Mrs Wharton saw the social amenities of life as another extension of the harmonious and civilized existence she prized so highly. But the idea of snobbishness or any form of pretension was as abhorrent as the vulgarity she rejected:

To whatever privations his parochial work had since accustomed him, the influences of that earlier life were too perceptible in his talk not to have made a profound impression on his tastes; and he remained, for all his apostolic simplicity, the image of the family priest who has his seat at the rich man's table.44

43. Crucial Instances, p.198.
44. Crucial Instances, p.185.
Although the author usually wrote about the life of the wealthy, she did not do so because she felt they were inherently superior to other men; they merely had a greater opportunity for cultural, intellectual and social cultivation due to their life of leisure. Because of their financial position they could afford to surround themselves with works of art, and so were all the more susceptible to its influence. Thus, if a character in her fiction is not a practising artist he is usually a person of wealth. (The exception is when she is dealing with Italy where she often writes of all social classes there because every one lives in close proximity to the relics of the classical, Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and with the continuance of the Roman Catholic faith and Roman Catholic cultures.) In her own writing, she was anything but snobbish, as the later stories such as The Fruit of the Tree, Ethan Frome, Summer and "Bunner Sisters" prove.

When Vernon Lee was reviewing Mrs Wharton's first novel The Valley of Decision she compared it to Shorthouse's John Inglesant written twenty years earlier:

> Questi romanzi hanno per caratteristica l'essere nati non tanto dallo studio di una data epoca, quanto dal fascino che una data epoca ha esercitato sopra una mente individuale.45

Mrs Wharton's work is an examination of the need for beauty and art within a traditional culture and explores the threats to the stability of that society in eighteenth-century Italy. The main character is a Lombard nobleman, Odo Valsecca, who combines the finer qualities of his aristocratic background with his personal desire for the humane reforms advocated by the encyclopedists. In order to unite these two tendencies he sacrifices his personal fulfilment, freedom and marriage, only to see his

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45. "The novels have the common feature of being born not so much from the study of a certain age, as from the fascination a certain age has exercised on an individual's mind." Vernon Lee, "Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision" (Yale Papers - n.d.), p.11.
aspiration for a more enlightened society destroyed by the internal opposition of the liberals, clerics and peasants and the external threat of the French, Austrians and the Papal States.

Even as a child Odo is "an ardent and sensitive boy,"\(^46\) who observes and reflects on his personal desires and environment with great lucidity because of "the super acute state of his perceptions".\(^47\) Although he is "unusually sensitive to external impressions"\(^48\) and has "a born taste for splendour,"\(^49\) he is as conscious of the suffering of the peasants and the intellectual frustration of the middle classes as he is appreciative of his own delight in art, philosophy and political theory:

None was more open than he to the seductions 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.\(^50\)

His continual effort throughout the novel is an attempt to achieve this integration which Mrs Wharton portrays as being necessary for personal happiness and political tranquility.

His idealism becomes one of the commanding passions of his life but does not dull his devotion to beauty:

> The Vision touched him on the lips and said:
> Hereafter though shalt eat me in thy bread,
> Drink me in all thy kisses, feel my hand
> Steal 'twixt thy palm and joy's, and see me stand
> Watchful at every crossing of the ways,
> The insatiate lover of thy nights and days.\(^51\)

Odo is essentially different from the other reformers in the novel, however, since his libertarian instincts stem from noblesse oblige rather than a

\(^{47}\) Valley of Decision, p.18.
\(^{48}\) Valley of Decision, p.22.
\(^{49}\) Valley of Decision, p.25.
\(^{50}\) Valley of Decision, p.151.
\(^{51}\) Valley of Decision, p.341.
mere intellectual conviction. It is because he is moved by noble aspirations that he is politically enlightened; his high rank in the aristocracy has its corresponding demands on his personal independence. When he is tempted not to claim his throne because he prefers a marriage of love he sees that he can only achieve the culmination of his desires by assuming his inherited position:

... there came to him ... a vision of the life he was renouncing, not as it concerned the public welfare but in its merely personal aspect: a vision of the power, the luxury, the sumptuous background of traditional state and pædagogative in which his artistic and intellectual tastes, as well as his easy impulses of benevolence, would find unchecked and immediate gratification.32

Nevertheless, he is perplexed by the paradox that his family has lost its inherent right to rule because its very position of power has proved to be its enfeeblement. He is best seen in relationship to his ancestors when in contemplation amidst the family portraits in the long gallery of the palace:

It seemed to Odo as he gazed on the long line of faces as though their owners had entered one by one into a narrowing defile, where the sun rose later and set earlier on each successive traveller; and in every countenance, from that of the first Duke to that of his own peruked and cuirassed grandfather, he discerned the same decadency: that duality of will which, in a delicately tempered race, is the fatal fruit of an undisturbed pre-eminence. They had ruled too long and enjoyed too much ...53

The effect of this observation is ambiguous because Odo himself is the last of his line and personifies the full flowering of its most admirable characteristics. She analyses this quandary with great care; in her view decadence from within destroys a ruling class that will, in turn, result in the collapse of its civilization.

The answer lies in scrupulously disciplined activity, thought and feeling, a harmony only attainable through moderation, that Vernon Lee identified as an inheritance from Walter Pater. For Odo this emphasis on restraint is the prescription for preserving a vigorous

52. Valley of Decision, p.472.
Although he rejects the religious beliefs of his friend and companion, the Jesuit de Crucis, he has a great admiration for his other qualities:

To Odo's spontaneous yet reflective temperament there was something peculiarly impressive in the kind of detachment which implies, not obtuseness or indifference, but a higher sensitiveness disciplined by choice.\footnote{Valley of Decision, p. 545.}

Mrs Wharton finds in the society of eighteenth-century Turin this fine balance, and she dwells at length on the education of her hero at its court, a model society:

"You are going," said he \cite{Cantapresto}, "to one of the first cities of Europe, one that has all the beauty and elegance of the French capital without its follies and excesses. Turin is blessed with a court where good manners and a fine tone are more highly prized than the extravagances of genius \ldots"\footnote{Valley of Decision, p. 79.}

The philosophical tenets of Pater and Vernon Lee are present in Odo's impressions of his family as a young child. They are received not through a physical or psychological affinity but by comparing them to the dazzling figures in the medieval frescos that he gazes on by the hour:

An almond-faced lady on a white palfrey with gold trappings represented his mother, whom he had seen too seldom for any distinct image to interfere with the illusion; a knight in damascened armour and scarlet cloak was the valiant captain, his father, who held a commission in the ducal army; and a proud young man in diadem and ermine, attended by a retinue of pages, stood for his cousin, the reigning Duke of Pianura.\footnote{Valley of Decision, pp. 7–8.}

He takes great delight in paintings and statues inspired by the ancient pagans and makes special journeys to admire the creations of Caracci at Parma and Giulio Romano at Mantua. These works of art exist in an almost Platonic world of the ideal such as is reflected in Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn"; Keats was the poet who most influenced Edith Wharton. Her protagonist is constantly consoled by the tranquility he experiences in

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\footnotesize{54. Valley of Decision, p. 345.}
\footnotesize{55. Valley of Decision, p. 79.}
\footnotesize{56. Valley of Decision, pp. 7–8.}
their presence. "Odo's fancy always turned with peculiar fondness to those clear-limbed youths moving in that world of untroubled beauty."^57

The poet Alfieri is one of the most important influences on the most important influences on the young hero, and this is because of his artistic abilities as well as his political theories:

Among the youth of their class they were perhaps the only two who already felt, however obscurely, the stirring of unborn ideals, the pressure of the tide of renovation that was to sweep them, on widely-sundered currents, to the same uncharted deep. Alfieri at any rate, represented to the younger lad the seer who held in his hand the keys of knowledge and beauty.^58

Pater's insistence on the ecstatic experience of beauty rather than a definition of its nature is close to Odo's discovery that the meaning in his personal life comes intuitively rather than through a discursive process. His libertarian ideals spring from a nobility of character, not from a well-defined philosophical system:

To Odo, happily, Count Benedetto's surroundings spoke more forcibly than his theories. Every object in the calm several rooms appealed to the boy with the pure eloquence of form. Casts of the Vatican busts stood against the walls and a niche at one end of the library contained a marble copy of the Apollo Belvedere ... They roused Odo's curiosity as if they had been the scattered letters of a new alphabet ...^59

Pater had advocated a return to the ancient world as the men of the Renaissance had done several centuries earlier, for here was both the classical conception of beauty and a golden age. Mrs Wharton admires the eighteenth-century men who rediscover the lost antique culture and resurrect its works of art. Her admiration for this vocation of conservation had been expressed in short stories such as "The Muse's Tragedy," "The Angel at the Grave" and "The Rembrandt".

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57. Valley of Decision, p.41.
58. Valley of Decision, p.103.
59. Valley of Decision, p.106.
He /Odo/ was seated with a party of gentlemen in the saloon of Sir William Hamilton's famous villa of Posilipo, where they were sipping the Ambassador's iced sherbet and examining certain engraved gems and burial-urns recently taken from the excavations. The scene was such as always appealed to Odo's fancy: the spacious room ... opening on a prospect of classical beauty and antique renown ... and about him men of taste and understanding, discussing the historic or mythological meaning of the objects before them, and quoting Homer or Horace in corroboration of their guesses.60

As a novelist of manners,61 the polished conversation of an enlightened aristocracy provides her with an ideal situation in which to explore how these arts reveal a finer inner self. The classicism of the eighteenth-century echoes both the Renaissance and the ancient world and is perhaps the last time that vulgarity in architecture and interior furnishing in particular and taste in general is successfully banished from public life. Of course, Odo manifests the breeding of this society:

Spite of his /the Duke of Monte Alloro/ preference for such company, he had a nobler side, the ruins of a fine but uncultivated intelligence, and a taste for all that was young, generous and high in looks and courage. He was at once drawn to Odo, who instinctively addressed himself to these qualities, and whose conversation and manners threw into relief the vulgarity of the old Duke's cronies.62

The importance of taste in this milieu is not peripheral because without it there would be no agreed convention, and she regards convention not as something restrictive and stultifying but as liberating. Through taste the inner sensibility of the moral and aesthetic consciousness can be delicately but accurately expressed, as she and James well knew:

The older he /James/ grew the more acutely and passionately did he feel the huge absurdity and grotesqueness of things, the monstrous perversity of evil. His taste became more and more delicate and sensitive. Oh my wondering why anyone should attach importance to taste, "Attach importance!" he burst out, "That isn't what one ever does or did to it. Why, it attaches importance to one!"63

60. Valley of Decision, p.343.
The concern for an older and more stable order recurs throughout the novel:

... Odo, at the old Count's side, was entering on the great inheritance of the past.\(^\text{64}\)

Eugene Lee Hamilton, Vernon Lee's step-brother, wrote to Mrs Wharton telling her that she was dealing with a period "so like and yet so unlike ours that the writer must have mentally lived in it to write about it at all".\(^\text{65}\) She wrote to Charles Eliot Norton, who assisted her in the laborious research, that she was constantly searching for the eighteenth-century "picturesque bits,"\(^\text{66}\) vivid phrases and local colour. She resembles George Eliot who expended more energy and effort on *Romola* than on any other of her novels; (Louis Auchincloss considers *The Valley of Decision* to be the superior novel).\(^\text{67}\) Both looked to the past, but Edith Wharton saw a specific age when the noblest works of beauty had been gathered together in one moment of human achievement where the past and present were one:

The Duke's library filled a series of rooms designed in the classical style of cinque-cento. On the very threshold Odo was conscious of leaving behind the trivial activities of the palace, with the fantastic architecture which seemed their natural setting. Here all was based on a noble permanence of taste, a convergence of accumulated effort toward a chosen end; and the door was fittingly surmounted by Seneca's definition of the wise man's state: *Omnia illi secula ut deo serviunt.*

Odo would gladly have lingered among the books which filled the rooms with an incense-like aroma of old leather. His imagination caressed in passing the yellowish vellum backs, the worn tooling of Aldine folios, the heavy silver clasps of ancient chronicles and psalters ...\(^\text{68}\)

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65. Eugene Lee-Hamilton to Edith Wharton, 20 June, 1902 (Yale Papers).
Vernon Lee, in her Italian review of the novel, states that the story contains moments so evocative that we have a past that is real because we live in it.\textsuperscript{69}

L'uomo moderno viaggia non solo nello spazio ma nel tempo; ed il passato, intravisto da lui come un paesaggio intravveduto dal finestrino del treno, può suscitare in esso quel desiderio nostalgico, quel Faustiano "fermati sei bello" - che è il vero movente interno di ogni opera d'arte.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{69} "Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision", p. 13.

\textsuperscript{70} "The modern man travels not only through space but through time as well, and the past, caught by him like a landscape caught through the window of a train, can excite that nostalgic wish, that Faustian "stop, you are beautiful", which is the true inner cause of any work of art." "Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision", p. 12.
CHAPTER V

Sanctuary (1903)
The Descent of Man and Other Stories (1904)
The House of Mirth (1905)
Madame de Treymes (1907)

In 1903 Mrs Wharton published the novel Sanctuary, a story both melodramatic and sentimental, for she had not yet become the accomplished craftsman who would produce the popular and critically acclaimed House of Mirth just two years later. But the novel reflects her preoccupation with morality and beauty; it is divided in two sections separated by a lapse of twenty years in time. In the first, Kate Orme discovers that the man whom she plans to marry is morally weak, but goes ahead with the marriage in order to save any further offspring of his from the same hereditary failing. When the child grows to manhood he becomes a talented and creative architect due to the guidance of his mother, and her strength assists him to avoid the crime of using his dead friend's drawings in an important competition.

Blake Nevius has discovered an unpublished fragment of another novel whose theme is defined by Mrs Wharton as "the immersion of the larger in the smaller nature which is one of the mysteries of the moral life". He also applies this theme to Sanctuary; here Kate is the person who responds to the beautiful in both nature and human creation:

Everything about her seemed to contribute to that rare harmony of feeling which levied a tax on every sense. The large coolness of the room, its fine traditional air of spacious living, its outlook over field and woodland toward the lake lying under the silver bloom of September; the very scent of the late violets in a terrace; the fall, now and then, of a leaf through the still air — all, somehow, were mingled in the suffusion of well-being ...2

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This "rare harmony of feeling" is the joyous response to life advocated by Pater, and it is as intense as her concern for right and wrong:

The circumstances of her past had raised to clairvoyance her natural insight into human motive, and made of her a moral barometer responding to the faintest fluctuations of atmosphere, and years of anxious meditation had familiarized her with the form which her son's temptations were likely to take.³

This type of response to another person's dilemma is very much in the Jamesian tradition and his influence on Mrs Wharton is marked:

Anyone familiar with the styles of both James and Mrs Wharton will be constantly alive to the echoes. For example, the latter's heroines are often described as 'spreading,' 'quietly beating,' or 'folding' the invisible wings of the spirit, or they may be simply aware, like Kate Orme in Sanctuary, that 'whereas, before, the air had been full of flitting wings, now they seemed to pause over her and she could trust herself to their shelter.'⁴

Kate's responsiveness to nuance is due to her artistic training; when she first meets her son's fiance the young lady strikes her as "a young Saint John of Donatello's".⁵ The mother is finally successful in helping her son to resist the temptation because the discriminating taste he has received from her equips him to deal with his problem:

As long as the inner eye had food for contemplation, he cared very little for the deficiencies in his surroundings; or, it might rather be said, he felt, in the sum-total of beauty about him, an ownership of appreciation that left him free from the fret of personal desire.⁶

A collection of ten short stories was published a year after Sanctuary and was entitled The Descent of Man and Other Stories. The first tale is an ironic portrayal of a college professor who writes a parody of the popular book which reconciles science and religion only to see his work become a respectable best-seller. Like James, Mrs Wharton had little regard for the sensationalism of the mass-circulation press,

³. Sanctuary, p.5.
⁴. Nevius, p.35.
⁵. Sanctuary, p.92.
⁶. Sanctuary, p.79.
and its crassness in the story is another aspect of the general spoliation of the American environment:

Slips emblazoned with the question; Have you read 'The Vital Thing'? fell from the pages of popular novels and whitened the floors of crowded street-cars. The query, in large lettering, assailed the traveller at the railway bookstall, confronted him on the walls of 'elevated' stations, and seemed, in its ascending scale, about to supplant the interrogations as to sapolio and stove polish which animate our rural scenery.7

The professor, whose "head passed in due course from the magazine and the newspaper to the biscuit-tin and the chocolate-box"8 as his fame grows, has compromised his principles by writing this type of book and the vulgarity of his exploitation of the market is the external manifestation of a spiritual poverty he comes to experience.

The note of irony is just as strong in "The Other Two" which is the most successful story in the collection:

A New York divorce is in itself a diploma of virtue, and in the semi-widowhood of this second separation Mrs Varick took on an air of sanctity, and was allowed to confide her wrongs to some of the most scrupulous ears in town.9

Alice Waythorn, as she is known following her third marriage, is a person who has risen in society because of each succeeding alliance. Although her first husband continues to come to visit his daughter Alice sees him only as a symbol of a past she has escaped:

Haskett had once reminded Waythorn of the piano-tuner, and Mrs Waythorn, after a month or two, appeared to class him with that domestic familiar.10

Variation in furnishings, clothes and manners between groups fascinate Mrs Wharton so that she adroitly shows Mr Waythorn's shocked reaction when he realizes his wife's past.

8. The Descent of Man, p.31.
9. Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," The Descent of Man, p.43.
10. The Descent of Man, p.66.
Varick, whatever his faults, was a gentleman, in the conventional, traditional sense of the term; the sense which at the moment seemed, oddly enough, to have most meaning to Waythorn. He and Varick had the same social habits, spoke the same language, understand the same allusions. But this other man ... it was grotesquely uppermost in Waythorn's mind that Haskett had worn a made-up tie attached with an elastic. Why should that ridiculous detail symbolize the whole man? Whythorn was exasperated by his own paltriness, but the fact of the tie expanded, forced itself on him, became as it were the key to Alice's past. He could see her, as Mrs Haskett, sitting in a 'front parlour' furnished in plush, with a pianola, and a copy of 'Ben Hur' on the centre-table."

Alice has accommodated herself with ease to so many different situations in her marital progress up the social ladder which Mrs Wharton brilliantly dramatises when all three husbands simultaneously meet and their former (and present) wife serves them tea while her present partner reflects, "... she was as easy as an old shoe" - a shoe that too many feet have worn.

The triviality of popular journalism and the conventional best-seller is again her concern in "Expiation". The main character is as obtuse in her manners as she is as a writer of sentimental novels:

"I can never hear the bell ring without a shudder."

Her [Mrs Fatheral] unruffled aspect - she was the kind of woman whose emotions never communicate themselves to her clothes - and the conventional background of the New York drawing room with its prevailing implication of an imminent tea-tray and of an atmosphere in which the social functions have become purely reflex, lent to her declaration a relief not lost on her cousin Mrs Clinch, who, from the other side of the fireplace, agreed, with a glance at the clock, that it was the hour for bores.

This insensitivity is also manifested by the pomposity of both Mrs Fatheral and her uncle the Bishop: snobbishness is merely another form

11. The Descent of Man, p.60.
12. The Descent of Man, p.68.
of poor manners for Mrs Wharton and she castigates her characters who manifest it:

The Bishop always entered a room well; but, when unannounced, or preceded by a Low Church butler who gave him his surname, his appearance lacked the impressiveness conferred on it by the due specification of his diocesan dignity. The Bishop was very fond of his niece Mrs Fetheral, and one of the traits he most valued in her was the possession of a butler who knew how to announce a bishop.¹⁴

Mrs Fetheral's novel Fast and Loose is an insipid and harmless work, but it achieves the status of a best-seller because of the sensational publicity which follows from the Bishop's condemnation of the book. In return for his cooperation his niece donates her earnings to the cathedral fund for stained glass windows, her uncle's favourite charity. The dishonesty of both characters is equalled by their personal vulgarity.

"The Lady's Maid's Bell" is a ghost story of no outstanding merit, but it foreshadows later well constructed tales. "The Mission of Jane" is about an adopted daughter who finally brings her parents closer together because of their common attempt to raise a dour child and find an eligible suitor for her. In this story as in all her work the author's skill in characterization stems from her identification of personal traits with their surroundings:

Most of his wife's opinions were heirlooms, and he took a quaint pleasure in tracing their descent. She was proud of their age, and so no reason for discarding them while they were still serviceable. Some, of course, were so fine that she kept them for state occasions, like her great-grandmother's Crown Derby; but from the lady known as Aunt Sophronia she had inherited a stout set of every-day prejudices that were practically as good as new; whereas her husband's, as she noticed, were always having to be replaced.¹⁵

In Sanctuary a young woman is described as "a young Saint John of Donatello" and this sort of reference to painting is made in "The Mission of Jane" when the narrator sees the mother in the same context.

¹⁴.  The Descent of Man, p.86.
¹⁶.  Sanctuary, p.92.
Over this anonymous particle of life Mrs Letherbury leaned, such ecstasy reflected in her face as strikes up, in Correggio’s Night-piece, from the child’s body to the mother’s countenance.17

The ability to describe physical experience with such accuracy is manifested again in her evocation of odours:

He had visions of coming home in the afternoon to a house smelling of linseed and paregoric ...18

In "The Reckoning" Mrs Wharton deals with her preoccupations with tradition, vulgarity and moral enlightenment. Mrs Wharton uses the same plot in her 1922 novel The Glimpses of the Moon, but she achieves a stronger effect here. The economy of the short story form enables her to trace the growth of wisdom with some force and clarity despite the superficiality of the plot.

The protagonist Julia Westfall adopts the new ethical standard, "Thou shalt not be unfaithful – to thyself,"19 and divorces her husband to marry her friend Clement with the understanding that their marriage is permanent only so long as neither grow bored with the other. This depravity exists because the orthodox values of society have ceased to apply:

It was vaguely felt, in the Van Sideren circle, that all the audacities were artistic, and that a teacher who pronounced marriage immoral was someone as distinguished as a painter who depicted purple grass and a green sky. The Van Sideren set were tired of the conventional colour-scheme in art and conduct.20

It is significant that the same realistic norm applies to both aesthetics and morality, which this segment of New York society violates simultaneously. The daughter of Mr and Mrs Van Sideren is also tainted by the effects of her parents moral dissipation.

18. The Descent of Man, p.173.
20. The Descent of Man, p.198.
The fact that Una smoked cigarettes and sipped an occasional cocktail did not in the least tarnish a certain radiant innocence which made her appear the victim, rather than the accomplice, of her parent's vulgarities.21

Julia Westall is forced to come to terms with the true nature of the ethical chaos of her world when her second husband Clement abandons her for a new woman. Not only does she gain a new and chastened moral vision, but for the first time reflects upon the physical objects surrounding her:

Her eyes wandered about the familiar drawing-room which had been the scene of so many of their evening confidences ... It was a room with which she had never been able to establish any closer relation than that between a traveller and a railway station; and now, as she looked about at the surroundings which stood for her deepest affinities - the room for which she had left that other room - she was startled by the same sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity. The prints, the flowers, the subdued tones of old porcelains, seemed to typify a superficial refinement which had no relation to the deeper significances of life.22

"The Letter" is a tale reflecting her interest in Italy and the charm of the past which it preserves. She values the Latin cultures because their need for beauty is, in her view, always given highest priority:

They [the Latins] do not care for the raw material of sensation: food must be exquisitely cooked, emotion eloquently expressed, desire emotionally heightened, every experience must be transmuted into terms of beauty before it touches their imagination.23

The story concerns the letter of an Italian patriot which becomes a symbol of their entire civilization:

The Latin race is rhetorical ... The letters which the Italian patriots sent home from their prisons or from the scaffold are not the halting farewell that anguish would have wrung from a less expressive race: they are veritable 'compositions,' saved from affectation only by the fact that fluence and sonority are a part of the Latin inheritance.24

24. The Descent of Man, p.245.
The subject of her next story is the dilettante, a type she knew very well in the New York where most men invariably went into the professions and left a concern for the arts to those few who cultivated a genteel interest in literature, painting and sculpture. What she disliked was the lack of passionate commitment typifying this latter group, and "The Dilettante" is a criticism of this. Mr Thursdale treats his old friend as if she were a work of art:

... he had felt the dilettante's irresistible craving to take a last look [at her] as a work of art that was passing out of his possession.25

The narrator condemns Thursdale's egocentricity not because he treats a woman as an object but because he lacks any deep involvement with her. The self-abandonment urged by Pater in regard to the sublime is just as necessary in a human relationship. The dilettante who trifles with art is as reprehensible to Mrs Wharton as the one who does so with another person's affections. His insensitivity contrasts sharply with the admirable qualities of his friend which are reflected in her home:

Mrs Vervain was at home ... and it struck Thursdale as another proof of his friend's good taste that she had been in no undue haste to change her habits ... the drawing-room as once enveloped him in that atmosphere of tacit intelligence which Mrs Vervain imparted to her very furniture.26

Ironically his fiance finally rejects him precisely because he never took his friend Mrs Vervain as his mistress.

"The Quicksand" closely resembles Sanctuary; the central figure is Mrs Quentin, a woman of both artistic and moral discrimination, who is diametrically opposed to the young lady her son wished to marry:

The girl's mind was like a large light empty place, scantily furnished with a few massive prejudices, not designed to add to any one's comfort but too ponderous to be easily moved.

26. The Descent of Man, p.269.
Mrs Quentin's own intelligence, in which its owner, in an artistically shaded half-light, had so long moved amid a delicate complexity of sensations, seemed in comparison suddenly close and crowded ...27

In a passage describing the encounter between the two women Mrs Wharton's language indicates her ideas about refinement:

It was the kind of room in which no member of the family is likely to be found except after dinner or after death. The chairs and tables looked like poor relations who had repaid their keep by a long career of gruelling usefulness; they seemed banded together against intruders in a sullen conspiracy of discomfort. Mrs Quentin, keenly susceptible to such influences, read failure in every angle of the upholstery. She was incapable of the vulgar error of thinking that Hope Fenno might be induced to marry Alan for his money; but between this assumption and the inference that the girl's imagination might be touched by the finer possibilities of wealth, good taste admitted a distinction.28

The words "conspiracy" and "failure" are qualities of the furniture, and "vulgar" and "taste" apply to conscience. In a similar manner, the relationship between literature and daily experience is complete as they merge one into the other:

"If she'd the young girl been brought up on Trollope and Whyte-Melville, instead of Tolstoi and Mrs Ward, we should have now been vulgarly sitting on a sofa, trying on the engagement-ring."29

In this short story the most physical details approximate inner states of awareness:

The look extended itself to his negligent attitude, to the droop of his lone fine hands, the dejected tilt of his head against the cushions. It was like the moral equivalent of physical fatigue ...30

The role of art in Mrs Quentin's life is that of the great consoler, for when contemplating a roomful of paintings in the civic museum she actually shares in their life through her complete abandonment to their grandeur,

27. Edith Wharton, "The Quicksand," The Descent of Man, p.293.
29. The Descent of Man, p.286.
which is an experience always denied to the egocentric dilletante:

The long line of mellow canvases seemed to receive her into the rich calm of an autumn twilight. She might have been walking in an enchanted wood where the footfall of care never sounded.31

The concluding tale in the volume, "A Venetian Night's Entertainment," is a light piece which relates the experiences of a young New England boy visiting the splendours of Venice in the nineteenth-century and is reminiscent of The Valley of Decision.

1905 saw the publication of The House of Mirth, an immediate best-seller. Thirty thousand copies were sold within three weeks, and by the end of a month the number soared to sixty thousand. Twenty days later the sales reached one hundred thousand, and the book was listed in the American best-seller list for the next four months.32 For Mrs Wharton the success was a personal triumph, and she was elated because "It was good to be turned from a drifting amateur into a professional".33 There was an additional element of importance because she had now broken from the milieu where a writer was somewhat suspect:

Mrs Wharton knew herself to have been within an ace of destruction at the hands of a society analogous to the one she depicts so mordantly in The House of Mirth.34

This new freedom meant that her career as a novelist was firmly established and she was prepared for the complete break from America which she made two years later when she chose to settle permanently in Paris:

She had felt herself an incongruity among the members of her family and her family's friends; her only affinities were with men, who, like the Lawrence Selden of her novel, The House of Mirth, lived stockaded against a barbarian society in a private 'republic of the spirit.'35

31. The Descent of Man, p.300.
35. Bell, p.127.
Part of the richness of this novel, however, is a result of her deep attachment to the New York society to which she belonged for over forty years combined with a sharply critical view of deficiencies:

Mrs Wharton never renounces her community with Lily's harsh judges, not even when she is exposing their most vicious hypocrisies. Her attack is always within the family.36

In her autobiography she is careful to defend her interest in this society in the Jamesian terms of significance. Like him, she feels that there must be an importance of subject:

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.37

In the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition published over thirty years later she is concerned with the theme of waste. As Blake Nevius has observed, she is one of the first novelists to deal with the waste of spiritual resources which has accompanied the exploitation of the land and forests in America since the turn of the century.38

She discussed this theme with Henry James when he visited America in 1905 and was a guest at her summer home "The Mount" in Western Massachusetts. In her autobiography she regrets the new wealth made from the steel mills, and in The Fruit of the Tree she wrote about the tragic effects of factories on the environment which was a result of the unrestrained industrial expansion in New England. The contemptible exploitation of Lily Bart's talent was something that the spiritually impoverished New York society could ill-afford!

The fact is that Nature, always wasteful, and apparently compelled to create dozens of stupid people in order to produce a single genius, seems to reverse the process in manufacturing the shallow and the idle. Such groups always rest on an underpinning of wasted human possibilities; and it seemed to me that the fate of the persons embodying these possibilities ought to redeem my subject from insignificance. This is the key to The House of Mirth.

The title taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes reflects the state of her social order: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." \(^{40}\)

Her attitude toward this world, however, is coloured by her intense identification with it; in the retrospective essay written two years before her death she recalls how it was an ideal world for the delineator of customs: \(^{41}\)

Ah, golden days for the novelist were those in which a lovely girl could besmirch her reputation by taking tea between trains at a bachelor's flat. \(^{42}\)

For her it is a simple world where the "avenging moral forces" which overcome their victim Lily Bart can be so easily defined. Because the circle in which Mrs Wharton lived from her eleventh year until the writing of the novel remained fairly static she is able to describe the manifestations of corruption in minute detail. She later saw this society completely disappear in the upheaval and aftermath of the Great War and realized that here in the New York of the turn of the century was the world of her own personal values and traditions:

Trollope's difficulty, however, was nothing compared with that of the novelist of manners whose first tales go back to the eighteen-nineties, and who is asked to deal with one of them from the formidable vantage-ground of 1935. To find an analogy, it would be necessary to imagine a French novelist of manners the curve of whose work should straddle the cataclysmic period from the execution of Louis XVI to the battle of Waterloo. Out of the savage crimes and senseless destruction of those brief years a new world was born.
differing as radically from the old world which it destroyed as that strange amalgam of new forces that grew out of the fall of the Roman Empire differed from the civilization it overthrew ...\textsuperscript{43}

But her great problem in that earlier period is the dependence of beauty on luxury in New York. If seductive luxury is inextricably innerwoven with the beautiful then is the latter bound to be frustrated and unproductive? The heroine Lily Bart personifies the dilemma:

\ldots she \emph{Lily} was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in.\textsuperscript{44}

Mrs Wharton agrees with Vernon Lee that the aesthetic and moral spheres react on each other, but Vernon Lee took the question one step further. If ugliness and vulgarity are opposed to goodness then a society must be found (or created) where the benefits of beauty will be provided for all - rich and poor alike:

\begin{quote}
This strikes me every time I see or think about a certain priest's \emph{simple but beautiful} house on a hillside \ldots Such a house and the life possible in it are beginning, for many of us, to become the ideal, by whose side all luxury and worldly grandeur becomes insipid or vulgar. For such a house as this embodies the possibility of living with grace and decorum \emph{throughout} by dint of loving carefulness and self-restraining simplicity. I say with grace and decorum \emph{throughout}, because all things which might beget ugliness in the life of others, or ugliness in our own attitude towards others, would be eliminated, thrown away like the fossil which Thoreau threw away because it collected dust. Moreover, such a life as this is such as all may reasonably hope to have, may, in some more prosperous age, obtain because it involves no hoarding of advantage for self or excluding therefrom of others.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately, such a possibility did not exist in the world she knew because only the wealthy could afford the cultivation made possible by their life of leisure. Thus, the heroine Lily Bart is fated to be destroyed from the beginning of the novel:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} The House of Mirth, pp.v-vi.
\item \textsuperscript{44} The House of Mirth, p.28.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Vernon Lee, Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), pp.200-201.
\end{itemize}
She was evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.\(^46\)

The claims of conscience in the novel are always paramount; Lily Bart is forced to leave the highest echelon of society because her scruples forbid her from indulging in compromising actions which might ensure her place there. The story traces her descent from the fashionable insiders to the garish outsiders and finally to the impoverished workers:

... in books like The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence she could work on the assumption, so valuable to a writer who prized economy of structure, that moral values can be tested in a novel by dramatizing the relationships between fixed social groups and mobile characters. In the friction thus engendered, moral values come to be seen not as abstract categories imposed upon human experience but as problems, elements in the effort of men to cope with conflicting desires and obligations.\(^47\)

The wealthy upper class to which Lily belongs is closed to outside influences and is typified by its attachment to material goods:

She \[^{Lily's aunt}\] 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.\(^48\)

In an older European culture religion might be a guide for conduct, but in New York it is just another social duty to be performed - and a boring one at that:

... The Wetheralls always went to church ... Mr and Mrs Wetherall's circle was so large that God was included in their visiting-list. They appeared \[^{For church}\], therefore, punctual and resigned, with the air of people bound for a dull 'At Home' ...\(^49\)

As Diana Trilling has observed, the wealthy in The House of Mirth are morally unworthy of the beauty they can afford.\(^50\)

The establishment in New York is obtuse, but the nouveau riche

\(^{46}\) The House of Mirth, p.8.
\(^{47}\) Bell, p.239.
\(^{48}\) The House of Mirth, p.40.
\(^{49}\) The House of Mirth, p.56.
\(^{50}\) Diana Trilling, p.110.
are no more acceptable because of their lack of refinement. Lily must
find distractions "which mitigated the crudeness of her course in lingering
with the Gormers," a family buying themselves into the social world.
The author wisely describes this new circle of coarseness in pictorial
rather than psychological terms because she probably had less personal
experience of this new class:

It was, however, only figuratively that the illumination of
Mrs Hatch's world could be described as dim: in actual fact
Lily found her seated in a blaze of electric light, impartially
projected from various ornamental excrescences on a vast
concavity of pink damask and gilding, from which she rose like
Venus from her shell. The analogy was justified by the
appearance of the lady, whose large-eyed prettiness and the
fixity of something impaled and shown under glass.

As Lily descends the social ladder she moves into this world of
hotels, a place which she never knew when living in the homes of her family
and friends in the same city:

The environment in which Lily found herself was as strange
to her as its inhabitants. She was unacquainted with the
world of the fashionable New York hotel - a world over-
heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical
appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements,
where the comforts of a civilised life were as unattainable
as in a desert.

This new situation is far from the older one of established tradition
and habitations because of the mobility of life necessary for those
attempting to buy themselves into society. Only when Lily reaches the
level of the poorer workers in New York does her journey come to an
abrupt halt, but this again is another transient world of the boarding
house which is, of course, much more impoverished. In Mrs Wharton's
perspective the greatest indictment against it is not its dinginess or
dirt but crudity:

In the peacock-blue parlour, with its bunches of dried
pampas grass, and discoloured steel engravings of sentimental
episodes, he looked about him with unconcealed disgust, laying
his hat distrustfully on the dirty console ...

51. The House of Mirth, p.259.
52. The House of Mirth, p.298.
53. The House of Mirth, p.298.
54. The House of Mirth, p.325.
One of the most interesting minor characters is the Jewish Mr Rosedale, whose ascent, paralleling Lily’s descent, clearly delineates the strata of that society; Mrs Wharton later recognized Fitzgerald’s portrayal of Wolfsheim in The Great Gatsby as similar:

But Rosedale is a character who develops and grows while Wolfsheim is static. Mrs Wharton’s assessment of Rosedale changes as he advances up the social scale because he retains a certain integrity and (more importantly) his taste becomes more and more polished. When he first appears in the novel he is like Wolfsheim a stock fictional Jew:

He was a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac.56

One of the stylish matrons rejects her husband’s attempt to disguise Rosedale as a novelty at her party because “he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory ...”57

When Rosedale proposes to Lily his status has risen because his power of discrimination is greater:

I know there’s one thing vulgar about money, and that’s the thinking about it; and my wife would never have to demean herself in that way.58

At the conclusion of the story he has achieved the eminence from which Lily has fallen, and Mrs Wharton clearly admires him because his ethical standard and aesthetic taste have been refined according to her criterion:

It was as though the sense in her unexplained scruples and resistances had the same attraction as the delicacy of feature, the fastidiousness of manner, which gave her an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match.

56. The House of Mirth, p.15.
58. The House of Mirth, p.192.
As he advanced in social experience this uniqueness had acquired a greater value for him, as though he were a collector who had learned to distinguish minor difference of design and quality in some long-coveted object.  

She comes to see Jewishness much like George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*. The reason for Lily's failure is that her inheritance from the past never fortified her against the attractions of a luxurious life. Neither she nor New York society has the rich inherited tradition that Deronda, as an English gentleman, possessed; the same is true of Rosedale. 

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 and individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving.

Although he overcomes the crudeness associated with his origin and the ethical deficiencies of the upper class into which he is admitted, Lily and Seldon are defeated by the latter. She possesses both beauty and principles; Seldon, the cultivated bachelor-dilettante, leads the life of one of Mrs Wharton's artists, and Gerty devotes her time to selfless service to others. Each, however, loses the battle. Lily is too attached to luxury; Seldon is not a man of action, and Gerty, though good, is imperceptive. Beauty which lacks the force to initiate moral action is enfeebled, and goodness without beauty is dulled of its radiance. Lily's quandry is tragic because neither alternative presented to her is acceptable, and so her death becomes a dramatic inevitability at the conclusion of the novel!

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... it is clear that Mrs Wharton shares, and expects us to share, Lily's horror of the alternatives: the ugliness of poverty or the ugliness of submitting to corrupt standards. Her belief in the relation between wealth and both aesthetic and ethical refinement made it inevitable that she should regard poverty as unmitigated disaster.61

Lily is always presented as a beautiful woman; the reader's most vivid impression of her is through the studied sensibility of Seldon's consciousness:

Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine. He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her.62

Her own perceptions of life are of a special type: "scenes delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life".63 The difficulty arises because in New York the only way that she can satisfy this desire for the sublime is in the world of the rich. As Irving Howe observes:

Lily Bart is a victim of taste, both good and bad: she has a natural taste for moral and aesthetic refinements which causes her to be repelled by the world of the rich, and she has an acquired taste for luxury that can be satisfied only in that world.64

Just as Mrs Wharton sees Lily as a comely lady she also portrays Seldon as the man who leads the civilized life of the spirit. He is the observer, like Ralph Touchett in The Portrait of a Lady:

The intellectual of The House of Mirth and, in his quality of spirit, as much as "artist" as Lily, Seldon, with his decent bachelor quarters, his good worn rugs and books ... 65

His rooms are described with customary precision:

He ushered her into a slip of a hall hung with old prints. She noticed the letters ... then she found herself in a small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug ... A breeze had

62. The House of Mirth, p.5.
63. The House of Mirth, p.27.
65. Diana Trilling, p.113.
sprung up, swaying inward the muslin curtains, and bringing a fresh scent of mignonette and petunias from the flower-box on the balcony.\textsuperscript{66} 

The author's criticism of Seldon is a passionate indictment of the refinement which fails to reach into the world of action. She clearly desires him to do this, and when he does not he is cursed with the intense frustration which he experiences at Lily's deathbed. He is the visionary who communicates his spirit to Lily but who is too late in assisting her to act. His cousin Gerty, however, does accomplish a great amount of good but that is insufficient:

For Edith Wharton, two fatal counts against Gerty condemn her, in the final analysis, to ineffectuality: she is poor and she is dingy. Through no fault of her own, she is without the capacity either to give or create beauty, which is the only permanent method of helping humanity. As a result, she simply does not count in the scheme of things.\textsuperscript{67}

Mrs Wharton has no animus against Gerty such as George Eliot in Middlemarch seems to have had against the attractive and seductive Rosamond Vincy, but Gerty is unresponsive to tastefulness and this makes her fatally flawed for the author as well as for Lily Bart:

"Oh, I know—you mean Gerty Farish." She \textsuperscript{Lily} smiled a little unkindly. "But I said marriageable—and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know."\textsuperscript{68}

Gerty Farish, seated next to Seldon, was lost in that indiscriminate and uncritical enjoyment so irritating to Miss Bart's finer perceptions.\textsuperscript{69}

The destruction of the beautiful in The House of Mirth by a frivolous society is a story of pathos, but the lack of a sufficiently potent counter-attack by the forces of beauty, art and morality has greater tragic implications usefully summarized by Alfred Kazin:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{66} The House of Mirth, p.7.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Lyde, p.117.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} The House of Mirth, p.7.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} The House of Mirth, pp.143-44.
\end{itemize}
She had accepted all the conditions of servitude to the vulgar new order save the obligation to respect its values. Yet it was in the very nature of things that she should rebel not by adopting a new set of values or by interesting herself in a new society, but by resigning herself to soundless heroism. Thus she could read in the defeat of her characters the last proud affirmation of the caste quality. If failure was the destiny of superior men and women in the modern world, failure was the mark of spiritual victory. For that is what Edith Wharton’s sense of tragedy came to in the end; she could conceive of no society but her own, she could not live with what she had. Doom waited for the pure in heart; and it was better so.

This soundless heroism is typical of both Seldon and Lily and is a recurring theme in the remainder of Mrs Wharton’s work. There is a stoic acceptance of life, but the deeply-felt need for the celebration of the beautiful is never abandoned:

... he [Seldon] inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the Stoic’s carelessness of material things combined with the Epicurean’s pleasure in them. Lily’s reaction to events is also one of quiet nobility, a quality which emerges as one of her most prominent traits as she descends from her pinnacle in society:

There was something to be done before she left the house: to be done with all the nobility she knew how to put into such gestures.

These heroic and noble dimensions are associated with the classical sense the writer values so highly. The society tableau in which Lily poses as the portrait of Mrs Lloyd is reminiscent of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ formal conception of art:

She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own ... It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’ canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace ... The noble buoyance of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Seldon always felt in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her. Its expression was

71. The House of Mirth, p.166.
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 the moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part.\textsuperscript{73}

The echo of the Platonic element is, for Edith Wharton, an affirmation of the great importance of Lily Bart despite her failure. As Louis Auchincloss remarked, "one feels that Lily Bart, in all New York, is the lone and solitary lady".\textsuperscript{74}

After \textit{The House of Mirth} there was a lapse of two years until her next tale, \textit{Madame de Treymes}, was published. By now she had left America permanently and settled in Paris in the Faubourg Saint-Germain on the Rue de Varenne not too far from the Hotel Biron. It was in the garden of this house that Strether in \textit{The Ambassadors} had seen the waste of his life in America and recognized the possibilities in his newly-awakened life. It is therefore appropriate that her new tale has strong Jamesian overtones; it is modelled on his \textit{Madame de Mauves}.

The protagonist of the novella is John Durham, come to Paris to marry his old friend Madame de Treymes who is shortly to be divorced. He is a person of probity and is particularly adept at savouring delicate impressions:

\begin{quote}
His European visits were infrequent enough to have kept unimpaired the freshness of his eye, and he was always struck anew by the vast and consummately ordered spectacle of Paris: by its look of having been boldly and deliberately planned as a background for the enjoyment of life, instead of being forced into grudging concessions to the festive instincts, or barricading itself against them in unenlightened ugliness, like his own lamentable New York.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

The lack of splendour in his native city is not the only reason for his disenchchantment. Social intercourse there is also blunt and lacks the subtlety of its European counterpart:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{The House of Mirth}, p.146.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Louis Auchincloss, "Edith Wharton and Her New Yorks," Howe (ed.), p.104.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Edith Wharton, \textit{Madame de Treymes} (London: Macmilland and Co., Limited, 1907), p.1.
\end{itemize}
Durham, indeed, was beginning to find that one of the charms of a sophisticated society is that it lends point and perspective to the slightest contact between the sexes.  

The tale is especially interesting because of its treatment and depiction of the effect of the older culture on the two impressionable characters from the younger country. Durham notices that French society has transformed Fanny from a not untypical young New Yorker to a woman of both elegance and notable grace:

The influences that had lowered her voice, regulated her gestures, toned her down to harmony with the warm dim background of a long social past - these influences had lent to her a natural fineness of perception, a command of expression adapted to complex condition.  

She is now more an integral member of society than the mere individual she had been in America.

In James's short stories there is usually a greater emphasis on a character's impressions and visions, and the value of an experience often relies on its quality of suggestibility. Similarly, Durham, when he is reminded of his native land, thinks immediately of those sharp images which represent it to him, but he compares woman in a rural American setting to a vision of a great French urban vistas. The author's point would have been stronger if he contrasted Paris with New York or Boston:

A vision of earnest women in Shetland shawls, with spectacles and thin knobs of hair, eating blueberry pie at unwholesome hours in a shingled dining-room on a bare New England hill-top, rose pallidly between Durham and the verdant brightness of the Champs Elysees ...

This harshness is a characteristic of those Americans who live in Europe like Durham and Fanny, but, unlike them, refuse to have their native bluntness modified by the contact with the older and more complex society:

76. Madame de Treymes, p.4.
77. Madame de Treymes, p.28.
78. Madame de Treymes, p.8.
Her Mrs Elmer Boykin very drawing-room had the hard bright atmosphere of her native skies, and one felt that she was still true at heart to the national ideals in electric lighting and plumbing.79

Mrs Wharton establishes the poverty of imagination of these other Americans, as she does in The House of Mirth, by portraying their tendency to over-indulge in the luxurious as a substitution for the lack of other values:

... the smallness of the company was counterbalanced by the multiplicity of the course.

The national determination not to be "downed" by the despised foreigner, to show a wealth of material resources obscurely felt to compensate for the possible lack of other distinctions - this resolve had taken, in Mrs Boykin's case, the shape - or rather the multiple shapes - of a series of culinary feats, of gastronomic combinations ...80

Fanny's French sister-in-law is puzzled by the situation, since in her restricted society of the older French aristocracy she has met only polished Americans such as Durham and Fanny. When she meets their other countrymen who have almost no conversational abilities she begins to understand "that, by some law of social compensation, the crudity of the talk might account for the complexity of dishes."81

One of the primary differences between the European and the American is the former's complex and web-like family ties which give identity. When Fanny marries into a French family she gradually realizes this and attempts to enlighten Durham:

"There is nothing in your experience - in any American experience - to correspond with that far-reaching family organization, which is itself a part of the larger system ..."81

He slowly begins to learn that the most distinctive trait of the American is his strong sense of individuality. The European is always bound by

79. Madame de Treymes, p.35.
80. Madame de Treymes, p.57.
81. Madame de Treymes, p.58.
the restraints of the social ties such as George Eliot analysed in *Middlemarch*:

All these amiably chatting visitors, who mostly bore the stamp of personal insignificance on their mildly sloping or aristocratically beaked faces, hung together in a visible closeness of tradition, dress, attitude, and manner, as different as possible from the loose aggregation of a roomful of his own countrymen.82

Mrs Wharton sees the American as possessing a conscience which is the product of a New England disposition to regard each human being as peculiarly self-reliant in the Emersonian sense. In his painful reappraisal Durham formulates his principle of action: "conduct, in the last resort, must be judged by its enlarging or diminishing effect on character".83 This stress on the individual rather than the social gives an enlightenment which would be foreign to the Frenchman. But it is only because he has been sensitized by the European experience that he has the ability to see the ethical possibilities so clearly, and his other countrymen, such as the Boykins, remain spiritually blind because they have never undergone that experience.

Durham refuses to marry Fanny; he has discovered that by doing so he would cause her to lose her son. The forces of society deny them their happiness together, but their gesture is an heroic, if tragic, one. Madame de Treymes sees this and speaks of them both in terms of antique nobility:

"She [Fanny] had confidently commissioned you to find a way for her, as the medieval lady sent a prayer to her knight to deliver her from captivity, and you came back, confessing that you had failed, but never justifying yourself by so much as a hint of a reason why."84

82. Madame de Treymes, p.46.
83. Madame de Treymes, p.78.
84. Madame de Treymes, p.96.
Edith Wharton believes that a passion for the beauty and goodness of a rich cultural tradition can overcome all obstacles. But although this aspiration does not prove to be possible (as Lily and Seldon discover in *The House of Mirth* and Durham and Fanny realize in *Madame de Treymes*), she never abandons her attempt to make it so.
The same year that Madame de Treymes was published Edith Wharton brought out her first full-length work since The House of Mirth. This best-seller had been so eagerly read by the public and praised by the critics, that it would have been difficult to follow with another success. Unfortunately, she chose to deal with an environment completely out of her personal experience, and the result is far below the achievement of previous books. The Fruit of the Tree bears a great resemblance to Mrs Gaskell's North and South and Mary Barton; it is essentially a novel about the results of nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism in New England, but Mrs Wharton brings so many dissimilar elements into the plot (such as mercy-killing) that the entire structure of the story sags under the weight.

But her concern with the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is still strong and she now attempts to see it in terms of American workers. The main character John Amherst sees the destitution of a factory town and condemns it because the expansion of the system can only bring the extinction of beauty:

No - the mill-town would not grow beautiful as it grew larger - rather, in obedience to the grim law of industrial prosperity, it would soon lose its one lingering grace and spread out in unmitigated ugliness devouring green fields and shaded slopes like some insect-plague consuming the land. The conditions were familiar enough to Amherst...

This indignation is coupled with his altruistic motives concerning the improvement of the conditions of the workers and their families. He marries in order to improve their lot:

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... He [Amherst] would scarcely have contemplated marriage with a rich woman unless the source of her wealth had offered him some such opportunity as Westmore [the mill] presented. His special training, and the natural bent of his mind, qualified him, in what had once seemed a pre-destined manner, to help Bessy to use her power nobly, for her own uplifting as well as for that of Westmore ...

This is the same theme of nobility that was in The House of Mirth and Madame de Treymes. Mrs Wharton was influenced here by George Eliot, a debt that Henry James recognized when commenting on the novel:

The element of good writing in it [The Fruit of the Tree] is enormous - I perpetually catch you at writing admirably (though I think here, somehow of George Eliotizing a little more frankly than ever yet; I mean a little more directly & avowedly. However, I don't "mind" that - I like it; & you do things which are not in dear old Mary Ann's chords at all).³

She differs from George Eliot, however, in that John Amherst's concern is apart from his desire to preserve the New England landscape. He hopes to change the conduct of the company owners and managers so that he can remove squalidness from the lives of workers. Only when this is accomplished will goodness be an integral part of the lives of the poor:

With sudden disgust he [Amherst] saw the sordidness of it all - the poor monotonous houses, the trampled grass-banks, the lean dogs prowling in refuse-heaps, the reflection of a crooked gas-lamp in a stagnant loop of the river; and he asked himself how it was possible to put any sense of moral beauty into lives bounded forever by the low horizon of the factory ... this outspread meanness of the suburban working colony, uncircumscribed by any pressure of surrounding life, and sunk into blank acceptance of its isolation, its banishment from beauty and variety and surprise, seemed to Amherst the very negation of hope and life.⁴

Mrs Wharton sees the working class condemned to permanent deprivation unless the industrial exploitation of both urban and rural America is drastically curtailed. Her description anticipates the Valley of the Ashes in F.Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, and like

². The Fruit of the Tree, p.177.
⁴. The Fruit of the Tree, pp.21-22.
him she felt that the continued spoilation of the landscape was not only a result of greed but a perpetuation of its fruits. This impoverishment bequeathed to future generations of Americans was a denial of the opportunity to be deeply moved by nature that she had experienced in her youth. The unspoiled environment was one of the few consolations for her as a lonely child.

The following year, in 1908, she collected a group of short stories in *The Hermit and the Wild Woman*, which contains nothing of importance. The title story is little but a description of medieval life. "The Last Asset" is more successful; she returns to the theme of the American in Europe which she had developed in *Madame de Treymes*. Unlike the novel, the major characters in this story are all American, and the narrator has spent long impressionable years as an observant newspaper correspondent in London and Paris. The fellow expatriate, Mr Newell, has not been as susceptible to the influence of Europe:

> The city itself seemed to have made as little impression on him or its speech. He appeared to have no artistic or intellectual curiosities, to remain untouched by the complex appeal of Paris, while preserving, perhaps the more strikingly, from his very detachment, that odd American astuteness which seems the fruit of innocence rather than of experience.  

Garnett's objectivity gives him the opportunity to view his countrymen from a distance, and he comes to the conclusion "that there is no one on earth as idle as an American who is not busy". This perpetual sense of movement combined with unenlightened innocence produces a Philistinism which he finds personified in Mrs Newell:

> She had found out long ago that, on certain lines, it paid in London to be an American, and she had manufactured for herself a personality independent of geographical or social demarcations, and presenting that remarkable blend of plantation dialect, Bowery slang and hyperbolic statement.


which expresses the British idea of an unadulterated Americanism.\(^7\)

She cajoles the young reporter into bringing her estranged husband to his daughter's wedding in order to demonstrate the respectability of this somewhat notorious family. Garnett's conscience is uneasy about the subterfuge, but he finally banishes his scruples when he realizes that the happiness of the bride redeems his efforts.

"The Trust" is another account of a young American who wishes that his own aspirations could be communicated to the entire continent. The narrator describes how his wealthy friend Paul Ambrose sets forth his plans as soon as he finishes his undergraduate career at Harvard:\(^8\)

They were immense, these plans, involving, as it sometimes seemed, the ultimate aesthetic redemption of the whole human race, and provisionally, restoring the sense of beauty to those unhappy millions of our fellow-countrymen who, as Ambrose movingly pointed out, now live and die in surroundings of unperceived and unmitigated ugliness.\(^9\)

When Paul returns from studies in Paris his altruistic impulses are confirmed with a new intensity which Europe has given him:

\[
\text{... he brought back a touching enthusiasm for the forms of beauty which an old civilization had revealed to him, and an apostolic ardour in the cause of their dissemination.}\]

In this tale Mrs Wharton separates the moral endeavour of actually completing the project, which is the establishment of an academy for the study of art, from Ambrose's original inspiration. The accomplishment of his dream is inhibited by his parsimoniousness. The narrator relates how another friend marries the widow of Ambrose and attempts to fulfil the original idea. He is also a failure but has the strength to leave his family in order to assume the hazardous post of United States ambassador in a tropical country. Here he dies of malaria while improving the lot of the natives. Before leaving he tells the narrator;

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7. The Hermit, p.50.
9. The Hermit, p.117.
"I've tried other ways - but I'm no good at business.
I see now that I shall never make money enough to carry
out the scheme myself; but at least I can clear out,
and not go on being [Paul's] pensioner - seeing
his dreams turned into horses and carpets and clothes - "¹⁰

Thus the project is saved because he hopes his step-son will be inspired
by this sacrifice and fund the project to bring beauty to Americans.

The contrived plot robs the story of verisimilitude for the reader.

"The Pretext" is set in a provincial New England college town
and is Jamesian in tone since the married heroine Margaret Ransom has
all the scruples of her Puritan inheritance combined with a passionate
hunger for the cultural riches of Europe:

... was it right to try to make one's hair look thicker and
wavier than it really was? Between that and rouging the
ethical line seemed almost imperceptible, and the spectre
of her rigid New England ancestry rose reprovingly before
her."¹¹

Her husband represents the world which Charles Eliot Norton saw as a
place "here the air we breathe is full of the northern chill":¹²

He moved almost alone between the prim flowerless grass-
plots, the white porches, the protrusion of irrelevant
shingled gables, which stamped the empty street as part
of an American college town.¹³

The young and dashing English nobleman Guy Dawnish enters this atmosphere
and brings with him an echo of the outside world that Mrs Ransom so
desperately longs for. She sees a picture of his home and poignantly
reflects:

This was Guise Abbey, his uncle's place in Wiltshire, where
under his grandfather's rule, Guy's own boyhood had been
spent: a long gabled Jacobean facade, many-chimneyed, ivy-
draped, overhung (she felt sure) by the boughs of venerable
rookery.¹⁴

¹⁰. The Hermit, p. 129.
¹². Leon Edel, Henry James; The Conquest of London 1807-1882 (London:
¹⁴. The Hermit, p.154.
When he professes his love for her she renounces him according to the dictates of her conscience, but the memory of his admiration is treasured throughout the following year and gives meaning to her bleak existence. She finally learns from one of his relatives that he has used her as a pretext to screen someone else whom he loves or possibly as an excuse to leave an engagement with another woman his age in England. In addition to the humiliation which she experiences, the drabness of her world makes her existence all the more oppressive:

She waited alone in her pale little drawing-room, with its scant kakemonos, its one or two chilly reproductions from the antique, its slippery Chippendale chairs.\(^{15}\)

Mrs Wharton goes on to deal with the artist who has been the slave of fashionable taste throughout his career. The narrator learns that the painter Jack Gisburn has abandoned his work after marrying his wealthy wife. Since the story is told from the perspective of a speaker who is observant and responsive to impressions of beauty it is not surprising that his curiosity as to Gisburn's motives is equally perspicacious:

It is, as a rule, the people who scorn money who get most out of it; and Jack's elegant disdain of his wife's bank balance enabled him, with an appearance of perfect good breeding, to transmute it into objects of art and luxury. To the latter, I must add, he remained relatively indifferent, but he was buying Renaissance bronzes and eighteenth century pictures with a discrimination that bespoke the amplest resources.\(^{16}\)

The ambience of the former painter's home reflects that his marriage has not dulled his artistic taste:

I looked about the spacious white-panelled room, with its famille-verte vases repeating the tones of the pale damask curtains, and its eighteenth-century pastels in delicate faded frames.\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\) The Hermit, p.170.

\(^{16}\) Edith Wharton, "The Verdict," The Hermit, p.198.

\(^{17}\) The Hermit, p.206.
He finally discovers that Gisburn has abandoned his portrait painting because a sitter gave him an insight into the superficial nature of his work. Nevertheless, the author implies that he is still leading a valuable life as a discriminating collector because now he is a more honest person.

In "The Pot Boiler" the author castigates the creator who bows to the dictates of the fashion of the day and neglects his unique talent. The painter Ned Stanwell is in love with the sister of his sculptor-friend Caspar Arran who is not only poor and ill but a person of mediocre ability. The fourth character is the popular portrait painter Mungold who has such little talent that he:

completely satisfied the artistic requirements of the inartistic. Mungold was not to be despised as an apostate - he was to be congratulated as a man whose aptitudes were exactly in line with the taste of the persons he liked to dine with.18

To support Kate and her brother, Stanwell compromises his artistic conscience and paints popular pictures in the manner of the superficial Mungold. Despite his selfless act Kate refuses his offer of marriage because of this infidelity to his art:

"You've sold your talent, and you know it: that's the dreadful part. You did it deliberately," she cried with passion.19

"There's no occasion which can justify an artist's sacrificing his convictions!" she exclaimed.20

Ironically, she accepts Mungold's proposal and is willing to be supported along with her brother by the fashionable painter's earnings. Mrs Wharton makes one of her strongest statements yet about the artist's duty to be true to his calling, since it is his integrity that is at stake:

19. The Hermit, p.256.
20. The Hermit, p.256.
"I know all you are going to say," she murmured, with a kind of nobility which moved him even through his sense of grotesqueness. "But you must see the distinction, because you first made it clear to me. I can take money earned in good faith - I can let Caspar live on it. I can marry Mr Mungold because, though his pictures are bad, he does not prostitute his art."  

This prostitution of art is the unforgivable error which taints other aspects of life; Stanwell profits from the lesson and returns to his distinct style of painting, a purged man.

"The Best Man" is a political tale about the wife of the Governor of Midsylvania, a place that the author implies is lost in the cultural wastelands of America. Mrs Mornway is a discriminating person who possesses all the attributes one comes to except in one of Edith Wharton's heroines:

Her life had given her ease without triviality, and a sense of the importance of politics seldom found in ladies of her nationality. She regarded a public life as the noblest and most engrossing of careers, and combined with a great social versatility an equal gift for reading blue-books and studying debates. So sincere was the latter taste that she passed without regret from the amenities of a European life well stocked with picturesque intimacies to the rawness of the Midsylvanian capital.

There is the familiar contrast between America and Europe here and the appeal of "nobility" and "taste". When Mrs Mornway is exposed by a blackmailer, she reveals the entire story to the public in order to save her husband since her courage equals her other attributes.

Two years had elapsed after The Hermit and the Wild Woman before Mrs Wharton brought out her next collection in 1910, Tales of Men and Ghosts. "The Bolted Door" is another example of the retribution which comes to one who commits murder in order to further his career as a novelist. He is destroyed since beauty cannot be bought at the price

of evil.

The following story, "His Father's Son," examines some of the questions that recur in *The Great Gatsby*, a novel which Mrs Wharton admired when it appeared fifteen years later. Her sense of irony is strong in this study of the relationship between Manson Grew and his son Ronald, whose dreams of greatness remind one of Gatsby. Mrs Grew "slept in the Wingfield cemetery, under a life-size theological virtue of her own choosing", and so has been unable to follow her son's meteoric rise to social acceptability in fashionable New York while financed by the sale of his father's Grew's Secure Suspender Buckle.

The elder Grew is not a man to underestimate:

> The souls of short thick-set men, with chubby features, mutton-chop whiskers and pale eyes peering between folds of fat like almond kernels in half-split shells - souls thus encased do not reveal themselves to the casual scrutiny as delicate emotional instruments. But in spite of the disguise in which he walked Mr Grew vibrated exquisitely in response to every imaginative appeal; and his son Ronald was always stimulating and feeding his imagination.²⁴

But Ronald realizes that his fine taste is not the same as his father's:

> ... on the marble centre-table, with its beaded cover and bunch of dyed pampas grass, lay the illustrated Longfellows and the copy of Ingersoll's lectures which represented literature to Mr Grew ...²⁵

The young gentleman knows that he loves music, painting and poetry, so when he discovers that his mother once wrote admiring letters to a renowned concert pianist he can only conclude that if heredity is to be believed this must be his real father. Mr Grew the elder, however, unceremoniously informs him that he wrote the letters to the musician and that Ronald must be his son because his fatuousness matches his.

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In "The Daunt Diana" Mrs Wharton reconsiders the vocation of the collector as artist. The painter, sculptor and architect create beauty, but this calling is also noble in its conserving function. Ringham Rinney is one of the two narrators in the story and is qualified to speak because of his involvement with art:

Ringham Rinney threw himself back into his chair with the smile of a collector who had a good thing to show ... I don't think much of Ringham's stuff-boxes, but his anecdotes are usually worth while. He's a psychologist astray among bibelots, and the best bits he brings back from his raids on Christie's and the Hotel Drouot are the fragments of human nature he picks up on those historic battle fields. If his flair in enamel had been half as good we should have heard of the Rinney collection by this time.27

The collector Humphry Neave gives a certain life to pieces in his collection because of his intense consciousness of their pulchritude. In return, they reveal to him their essential nature, a type of **elan vital.**

Rinney describes Neave:

"You remember Neave's hands - thin and dry, with long inquisitive fingers thrown out like antennae? Whatever they hold - bronze or lace, enamel or glass - they seem to acquire the very texture of the thing, and to draw out of it, by every finger-tip, the essence it had secreted."28

This is similar to Pater's idea of the type of ecstasy wherein the viewer and the work of art become one. Mrs Wharton regards connoisseurship as a high calling. Neave begins his career as a poor man who can collect because he acts as an expert appraiser for more wealthy buyers. It is likely that the story is inspired by the career of her intimate

26. Men and Ghosts, p.95.
friend Bernard Berenson with whom she had been corresponding and visiting for at least seven years. She later wrote to "BB", as she always referred to him, that his statement concerning art was also hers:

"What is true of life is true of art; its ultimate aim is ecstasy," & what follows. It coincides so willingly with the "aesthetic" of my own metier that I've so long yearned to write that I could hug you – & myself!

When Neave becomes a prosperous man in his own right, as Berenson did, he makes a monumental purchase which includes the famous Daunt Diana. He mysteriously sells the collection and devotes himself to searching for and repurchasing the individual pieces. He is finally a poor man (in terms of money), but he lives with and cares for the objects of his devotion, for they are now his complete life. In return they communicate their essence to him. He reflects;

"Why, my other things, my own things had wooed me as passionately as I wooed them; there was a certain little Italian bronze, a little Venus, who had drawn me, drawn me, imploring me to rescue her from her unspeakable surroundings in a vulgar bric-a-brac shop at Biarritz, where she shrank out of sight among sham Sevres and Dutch silver."  

The collector not only saves beauty but is saved by it. In this tale she dramatizes the hidden power within an object such as the bronze by tracing its effect on Neave. He is now a man who not only accepts poverty gracefully but embraces it since it removes all distractions from his contemplation of art. He is the perfect antithesis of Gilbert Osmond.

The next three stories, "The Debt," "Full Circle," and "The Legend" are all thin stories. "The Eyes," however, is rightly considered

31. Men and Ghosts, p.119.
to be one "of the most remarkable of Edith Wharton's short tales".  

It is a mystery story concerning a dilettante Andrew Culwin who has
the eyes not of a coward but of a man who is so clever that he never
takes any risks. He is the complete reverse of the protagonist in
"The Daunt" because of his non-involvement in life, and by extension, art.
A group of friends gather in his home and entertain themselves by telling
ghost stories:

Seen through the haze of our cigars and by the drowsy
gleam of a coal fire, Culwin's library, with its oak
walls and dark old bindings made a good setting for such
evocations ...  

He is a man of taste and possesses the ability to cultivate a life of
beauty, but because he does not do so Mrs Wharton sees him as haunted
by his failure. His talent, however, is beyond question:

He had always been possessed of a leisure which he had
nursed and protected, instead of squandering it in vain
activities. His carefully guarded hours had been devoted
to his cultivation of a fine intelligence and a few
judiciously chosen habits ...  

Despite his opportunity for success he is presented as a man devoid of
productive life:

His mind was like a forum, or some open meeting-place for
the exchange of ideas: somewhat cold and draughty, but
light, spacious and orderly - a kind of academic grove from
which all the leaves had fallen. 

His failure in the past to write the book he projected for himself
results in the frightening experience of being visited by two grotesque
eyes immediately after his abandonment of the project. The second great
test in his life occurs as the result of a friendship with a promising
young man. The narrator describes the relationship:

32. Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of
34. Men and Ghosts, p.245.
35. Men and Ghosts, p.245.
It was indeed a fact that Culwin, for all his dryness, specially tasted the lyric qualities in youth. As he was far too good an Epicurean to nip the flowers of soul which he gathered for his garden, his friendship was not a disintegrating influence ... 36

The sinister aspect of the situation, however, is due to the fact that Culwin refuses to tell the young man the truth about his limited talent and allows the lad to be deceived. Yet he selfishly continues to enjoy the rewarding companionship which is so pleasant.

Culwin remarks:

"I imagine its safe to lay down the general principle that predestined geniuses don't, as a rule, appear before one in the spring sunshine of the Forum looking like one of its banished gods. At any rate, poor Noyes wasn't a predestined genius. But he was beautiful to see, and charming as a comrade." 37

The older man is condemned because he trifles with his obligations and his just recompense is to be haunted by the eyes which his guests realize are his own. There are no homosexual overtones in the story; Mrs Wharton wrote so many novels and tales that it was likely she would sometime explore the relationship between an older and younger man in her career.

Like "His Father's Son," "The Blond Beast" is an exploration of the bond between father and son. The centre of the story is the discovery of the young blond hero Hugh Miller that the superficial Darwinism he learned at college ("... it was pleasanter to eat than be eaten ...") 38 is an insufficient explanation for reality. Mrs Wharton clearly admires him for his forthright honesty when he plans to use his patron merely for advancement, building his strategy for success on making himself indispensable to the rich:

36. Men and Ghosts, p.246.
Young Milner felt no scruples about formulating these principles to himself. It was not for nothing that, in his college days, he had hunted the hypothetical "Moral sense" to its lair, and dragged from their concealment the various self-advancing sentiments dissembled under it. His strength lay in his precocious insight into the springs of action, and in his refusal to classify them according to the accepted moral and social sanctions. He had to the full the courage of his lack of convictions.39

When he begins to succeed in his project it is presented in terms of the aesthetic:

> Viewed materially and practically, it was a thing to be proud of; yet it was chiefly on aesthetic grounds that he glowed with pride at the afternoon's work.40

His is finally rewarded when he realizes that his original principles are not correct.

The American-European theme is part of the ghost story "Afterward". The coarseness of the Mid-West is contrasted with the serenity of an old manor-house deep in the English countryside:

> It was to sit, in the thick December dusk, by just such a wide-hooded fireplace, under just such black oak rafters, with the sense that beyond the mullioned panes the downs were darkened to a deeper solitude; it was for the ultimate indulgence of such sensations that Mary Boyne, abruptly exiled from New York by her husband's business, had endured for nearly fourteen years the soul-deadening ugliness of a Middle Western town ...41

Mrs Boyne's sense of security is reinforced and embodied in the antiquities of the country house:

> It [sense of security] was in the air when she woke in her low-ceilinged dusky room; it went with her down-stairs, to the breakfast-table, flashed out at her from the fire, and reduplicated itself from the flanks of the urn and the sturdy flutings of the Georgian teapot.42

Ironically, the ghost which comes to lure her husband away to his death is not the one that has haunted the manor for hundreds of years but from

42. Men and Ghosts, p.328.
the American Mid-West. Mr Boyne has not paid the compensation for a man injured in his mine before coming to England because he was not required to do so according to the courts. This man's spirit follows the couple to their refuge and takes his due recompense.

The concluding story in Tales of Men and Ghosts contains a powerful expression of Mrs Wharton's belief that painful endurance may be the only adequate response to life; this same theme was to be brilliantly developed in Ethan Frome the following year. Geoffrey Walton has observed of "The Letters" that the reader:

almost feels that Edith Wharton is teaching a lesson in the meaning of mutual toleration and acceptance of the plain reality of ourselves, but once again it is all dramatized for us vividly to experience it. It is an individual relationship, not a mere type case. Sadness and absurdity are just about equally balanced.  

Lizzie West, a governess, is her former employer's second wife who has inherited a large legacy. Her predecessor was a woman titillated by backstairs gossip:

It was the same kind of curiosity that Mrs Deering, overhead in her drug-scented room, lavished on her dog-eared novels and on the society notes of the morning paper ...  

Deering is a painter and, of course, this is one of the principle reasons that Lizzie is drawn to him; her generosity is naturally coupled with his career. Before they are married he abandons his calling due to weakness of will and adverse circumstances. Mrs Wharton's scorn at his fall is illustrated in the following passage, by the catalogue of his employments and the sting in the word "tout":

... he had contrived to sell a picture or two ... There followed a period of eclipse, during which she inferred that he had tried his hand at diverse means of livelihood, accepting employment from a fashionable house-decorator, designing wall-papers, illustrating magazine articles, and acting for a time - she dimly understood - as the social

43. Geoffrey Walton, p.103.

tout of a new hotel desirous of advertising its restaurant. \textsuperscript{45}

Sadly, Lizzie does not realize that this lack of devotion to his work indicates a failing in her future husband which is, for Mrs Wharton, a disastrous flaw. The story resembles \textit{The Portrait of a Lady} in many respects. Like Isabel Archer, Lizzie, an heiress, marries a man who is seemingly devoted to a civilized life, but lacks the means to fulfil his talent. Gilbert Osmond is evil, Deering is obtuse. Three years after her marriage the second Mrs Deering discovers that her husband never even bothered to read the love letters she wrote him before they were married:

As her husband advanced up the path she had a sudden vision of their three years together ... She understood now that she had gradually adjusted herself to the new image of her husband as was, as he would always be ... For she saw now, in this last wide flash of pity and initiation, that as a comely marble may be made out of worthless scraps of mortar, glass, and pebbles, so out of mean mixed substances may be fashioned a love that will bear the stress of life. \textsuperscript{46}

Lizzie's stature is not equalled by her husband's achievement, and so the union of the two will always be one of deprivation because the two elements do not coexist. Her heroic resignation is Mrs Wharton's answer to the situation, and Lizzie's new life is built on the lucid recognition of painful realities and her quality of endurance. In this she is not unlike Isabel Archer.

The most successful single work of Edith Wharton is probably \textit{Ethan Frome} published in 1922. It bears a strong resemblance to \textit{Wuthering Heights}, and in \textit{A Backward Glance} she writes that "Emily Bronte would have found as savage tragedies in our remote \textit{New England} valleys as on her Yorkshire moors". \textsuperscript{47} As in \textit{Wuthering Heights} there is a detached narrator whose point of view is the perspective from which all

\textsuperscript{46.} \textit{Men and Ghosts}, p.394.

Percy Lubbock records how Henry James enjoyed the ironic note (for her intimate friends) in the beginning of the story:

I remember one day at Qu'acre, when Howard Sturgis, turning the pages of her latest story (it was *Ethan Frome*), read out a passing remark of the fictitious narrator's - 'I had been sent by my employers'; and how Henry caught at the words, with his great round stare of drollery and malice at the suggested image - of Edith sent, and sent by employers! - what a power of invention it implied in her to think of that!48

The narrator is a cultured man whose speech and acuteness of observation differentiates him from all the other characters in the story.

He perceives the nuances in both physical detail and conversation:

In the "best parlour", with its black horse-hair and mahogany weakly illuminated by a gurgling Carcel lamp, I listened every evening to another and more delicately shaded version of the Starkfield chronicle.49

He possesses a deep interest in the moral implications of the story he relates and avoids being patronizing to the inhabitants of rural New England:

Though Harmon Gow developed the tale as far as his mental and moral reach permitted there were perceptible gaps between his facts and I had the sense that the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps.50

It is clear that Mrs Wharton also sees Western Massachusetts as a grim place "morally and physically"51 where insanity, incest and "mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts".52 The bleakness of the scene is one of the most crucial aspects of the story:

The snow had ceased, and a flash of watery sunlight exposed the house on the slope above us in all its plaintive ugliness.53

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50. *Ethan Frome*, p. 29.
53. *Ethan Frome*, p. 36.
Ethan's predicament is much more than a personal tragedy because it is one expression of the fearful reality that it is not only man-made objects which lack pulchritude but the physical universe as well:

He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface; but there was nothing unfriendly in his silence. I simply felt that he lived in a depth of moral isolation too remote for casual access, and I had the sense that his loneliness was not merely the result of his personal plight, tragic as I guess that to be, but had in it, as Harmon Gow had hinted, the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters.54

He is the embodiment of this frozen woe and his personal isolation is from the comely world which has been smothered beneath the snow. When the narrator first sees Ethan's home (which was also his parents') the most notable aspect about it is that it is stunted. For the speaker this has a "symbolic sense"55 because he sees "in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body".56

Miss Lyde has observed that:

... there is an unmistakable correspondence between the physical scene with its struggle between life and coma, and the stunted convention of the isolated world which has twisted Ethan's life and smothered his one chance at emotional fulfillment.57

Because Ethan is so much a part of the inherent deprivation of this world he seems almost fated to frustration and failure. The narrator reflects on the fact that the village emerges from its six month siege against the elements like "a starved garrison capitulating without quarter"58 and he realizes the "sinister force of Harmon's phrase: 'Most of the smart ones get away'".59 Since Ethan never escapes he is

55. *Ethan Frome*, p.36.
The tale is Mrs Wharton's description of hell; when the speaker first observes Ethan there is the impression that he "looks as if he were dead and in hell now". At the conclusion of the story the last reflection by Mrs Hale is that:

"the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues."61

This applies, however, only to Ethan and not to either Zeena or Mattie. Although the latter is a piteous object after the accident, only the sparsest details are given of her in one succinct vision:

Under her shapeless dress her body kept its limp immobility, and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives.62

The reader, of course, feels sympathy, but almost as one would for a small suffering animal. Although Mattie is dealt with at length before the climax of the story she is important primarily because of the light she casts on Ethan's sensibility. In addition, the reader surmises that she has become merely another quarrelsome and whimpering Zeena.

Ethan is the only victim who consciously suffers. As in the most admirable of Mrs Wharton's heroes he responds to nature with lucid intuition:

He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moment field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion. But hitherto the emotion had remained in him as a silent ache, veiling with sadness the beauty that evoked it. He did not even know whether anyone else in the world felt as he did, or whether he was the sole victim of this mournful privilege.63

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60. Ethan Frome, p.28.
61. Ethan Frome, p.28.
62. Ethan Frome, p.115.
63. Ethan Frome, p.43.
Mattie's presence stimulates this "silent ache" and he experiences sensations which are "less definable but more exquisite". The same term that Pater uses. The dichotomy between his inner need for beauty and the harsh reality of external circumstances is absolute. The:

... tastes and acquirements in a man of his condition made the contrast more poignant between his outer situation and his inner needs ...

Ethan Frome is important because Mrs Wharton shifts the emphasis from the aesthetic to the moral in the tale. In most of her fiction a character is either a wealthy individual surrounded by the fruits of civilization or he is a practicing artist adding to that heritage. But Ethan is enabled because of his admirable perseverence, and despite his physical infirmity is attractive to the reader in his rugged strength. The narrator never dwells on the effects of Ethan's injury as he does on the physical repulsiveness of both Zeena and the later Mattie.

Despite the fact that he makes two moral decisions in the story he is still condemned to this hell-in-life. The first is taken when he realizes that if he takes advantage of the Hale's sympathy to gain money on false pretences he is doing wrong. In addition he refuses to desert the unfeeling and graceless Zeena because of her dependence upon him:

With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was. He was a poor man, the husband of a sickly woman, whom his desertion would leave alone and destitute; and even if he had the heart to desert her he could have done so only by deceiving two kindly people who had pitied him.

The second moral stance is his positive sense of endurance.

This quality is foreshadowed when he walks through the cemetery:

64. Ethan Frome, p.43.
65. Ethan Frome, p.34.
He passed by the graves on the knoll and turned his head to glance at one of the older headstones, which had interested him deeply as a boy because it bore his name.

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
ETHAN FROME AND ENDURANCE HIS WIFE
WHO DWELLED TOGETHER IN PEACE
FOR FIFTY YEARS

The scene carefully balances the last comment in the story by Mrs Hale who doesn't see "much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard ...". Despite the horror of the situation he endures - in pain - and supports the two broken women.

Lionel Trilling is incorrect in saying that it is "a very great fault in Ethan Frome that it presents no moral issues, sets off no moral reverberation". Ethan does have a moral stature because of the decisions enumerated above. Blake Nevius is also mistaken in believing that it is a story "of despair arising from the contemplation of spiritual waste". Alfred Kazin is much more accurate when he sees that there is a common theme in both Ethan Frome and The House of Mirth. Mrs Wharton resigns herself to soundless heroism; "if failure was the destiny of superior men and women in the modern world, failure was the mark of spiritual victory". Ethan Frome's only possible response is a type of mute, noble endurance. That is within his control. What is beyond his control is the grotesqueness of the world in which he lives and of which his shrunken body is an expression.

When an American critic wrote that Ethan Frome was a successful New England story written by someone who knew nothing of New England, Mrs Wharton indignantly replied;

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67. Ethan Frome, p.66.
68. Ethan Frome, p.119.
70. Nevius, p.118.
"Ethan Frome" was written after I had spent ten years in the hill-region where the scene is laid, during which years I had come to know well the aspect, dialect, and mental and moral attitude of the hill-people.\textsuperscript{72}

She knew more than this. When her biography is published it will reveal that her notebooks show the person who is the model for the character Ethan Frome is Edith Wharton.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{72} A Backward Glance, p. 296.

\textsuperscript{73} Conversation with R.W.B. Lewis, sometime Master of Calhoun College and Professor of English and American Studies, Yale, and Mrs Wharton's authorized biographer. 15 April, 1973, Villa I Tatti, Settignano, Florence.
CHAPTER VII

The Reef (1912)
The Custom of the Country (1913)
Xinqui and Other Stories (1916)
Summer (1917)

The House of Mirth, The Reef, Ethan Frome and The Age of Innocence are Mrs Wharton's four masterpieces; The Reef, however, is especially interesting because it is her most Jamesian work. It deals with Americans in Europe, and the reader views the events of significance through the consciousness of the two principal characters. The Master had no need to prevaricate when he praised her for the achievement:

The whole of the finest part is, I think, quite the finest thing you have done; both more done than even the best of your other doing, and more worth it through intrinsic value, interest and beauty.

Anna Leath is one of Mrs Wharton's most striking heroines who responds to all experience because of her "sensitiveness to the appeal to inanimate things, to the colour and texture of whatever wove itself into the substance of her emotion". James extended his complete approbation to her:

... the woman is an exquisite thing, and with her characteristic finest, scarce differentiated notes that is some of them) sounded with a wonder of delicacy.

Anna also bears a great resemblance to Isabel Archer. Like her she contracts a marriage with a man obviously her inferior yet who values her for her exquisite possibilities. He is:

... a characteristic specimen of the kind of American as to whom one is not quite clear whether he lives in Europe in order to cultivate an art, or cultivates an art as a pretext for living in Europe.

4. The Reef, p.4.
This ambiguity is resolved when she discovers that although he is a talented painter of watercolours and collector of snuff boxes, he is essentially a dilettante. Because he prizes her she mistakenly interprets him, but from the highest of motives:

That she should be so regarded by a man living in an atmosphere of art and beauty, and esteeming them the vital elements of life, made her feel for the first time that she was understood.5

Her great ambition to experience all "in terms of beauty and fine feeling"6 leads her in the first marriage to expect his love for finer things to be equalled by his aspirations. She hopes not to repeat the error in her second marriage to George Darrow.

Sophy Viner resembles Gerty in The House of Mirth; the two act with admirable courage, but their poor taste limits the significance of their actions. Soon after their relationship begins Darrow notices that she does "not feel ... beauty and mystery";7

... her visual sensitiveness was less keen than her feeling for ... "the human interest." She seemed hardly conscious of sensations of form and colour, or of any imaginative suggestion ...8

Although he is attracted, their affair is doomed from the beginning because she consistently responds with such banality:

There was the Louvre, of course, and the Luxembourg; but when he had tried looking at pictures with her she had first so persistently admired the worst things, then so frankly lapsed into indifference ...9

Mrs Wharton uses the image of a painting to represent his attraction to Anna. "She was like a picture so hung that it can be seen only at a certain angle; an angle known to no one but its

5. The Reef, p.90.
6. The Reef, p.91.
7. The Reef, p.33.
8. The Reef, p.37.
possessor. Barrow is the owner of this painting; his love for her is paralleled by the connoisseur's regard for an object. Anna uses the word "bric-a-brac" when she refers to Sophy:

"Yes. As if I'd treated her like the bric-a-brac that used to be sent down here 'on approval,' to see if it would look well with the other pieces."

It is significant that Anna does not speak of Sophy as a painting, a fine vase or a bronze - "bric-a-brac" is the key word.

Her delicate conscience is constantly aware of all shades in the moral spectrum. That she commits errors of judgement is not of great consequence; the effort she makes to redress each is. She learns in much the same way as Jane Austen's Emma:

...the irony of Anna's situation at the close is that she looks for guidance to Sophy Viner, whose moral sensibility she has been accustomed to regard as inferior to her own ...

Sophy's heroic act of renouncing Owen, nevertheless, is not of significance in itself but because it furthers Anna's self-discovery.

The important violation of ethical standards in the novel is delineated in the affair between Darrow and Sophy. Not a permanent commitment of love, it is an ephemeral bond which Mrs Wharton evokes when picturing their hotel room: "featureless," "transient," "sardonic," "sinister," "non-committal," and "impersonal:"

... half a dozen paper novels lay on the mantel-piece among cigar-cases and toilet bottles; but these traces of his passage had made no mark on the featureless dullness of the room, its look of being the makeshift setting of innumerable transient collocations. There was something sardonic, almost sinister, in its appearance of having deliberately "made up" for its anonymous part, all in non-committal drabs and browns, with a carpet and paper that nobody would remember, and chairs and tables as impersonal as railway porters.

10. The Reef, p.129.
11. The Reef, p.269.
13. The Reef, p.73.
Her ability to express ideas through things is particularly remarkable in *The Reef*:

But his passion swept over her like a wind that shakes the roof of the forest without reaching its still glades or rippling its hidden pools.\(^ {14} \)

"There are prejudices and prejudices. My mother, of course, got hers from Monsieur de Chantelle, and they seem to me as much in their place in this house as the pot-pourri in your hawthorn jar.\(^ {15} \)

James recognized her achievement:

In the key of this, with all your reality, you have yet kept the whole thing: and, to deepen the harmony and accentuate the literary pitch, you have never surpassed yourself for certain exquisite moments, certain images, analogies, metaphors, certain silver correspondences ...\(^ {16} \)

Characters as well as ideas are interpreted by means of the concrete image. Madame de Chantelle is caught exactly:

Among the flowers and old furniture of the large pale-panelled room, Madame de Chantelle had the inanimate elegance of a figure introduced into a "still-life" to give the scale.\(^ {17} \)

The elderly lady later completes the identification with her surroundings by confessing to Darrow "I'm old-fashioned - like my furniture".\(^ {18} \)

Stylistically, Mrs Wharton is at her best in *The Reef* not only in precise diction but in her control of language, tight and balanced:

She was distinguished from the daughters of wealth by her avowed acquaintance with the real business of living, a familiarity as different as possible from their theoretical proficiency; yet it seemed to Darrow that her experience had made her free without hardness and self-assured without assertiveness.\(^ {19} \)

\(^ {14} \) *The Reef*, p.87.
\(^ {15} \) *The Reef*, p.93.
\(^ {17} \) *The Reef*, p.133.
\(^ {18} \) *The Reef*, p.191.
\(^ {19} \) *The Reef*, p.26.
The author is also concerned here with the question of point-of view. Both Darrow and Anna are people whose perceptions constantly reverberate with each sensation and whose imaginations are thereby amplified. James was interested in the shift of point of view from the man to the woman:

... this is really, I think, but a triumph of your method, for he remains of an absolute consistent verity, showing himself in that way better perhaps than in any other, and without a false note imputable, not a shadow of one, to his manner of so projecting himself.20

It is interesting that they are so alike. Darrow is constantly "wondering", feeling "the mystic pang", "musing thus ...",23 and, similarly with Anna. She "was surprised at her own insensibility..."24

and:

Her air was less of expectancy than of contemplation: she seemed not so much to be watching for any one, or listening for an approaching sound, as letting the whole aspect of the place sink into her while she held herself open to its influence.25

Undine Spragg, the main character in The Custom of the Country published the following year (1913) is a sharp contrast to Anna Leath. She is much more like Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair, but without any of her positive qualities. Blake Nevius observes that Undine is "the most uncomplicated heroine in Edith Wharton's gallery", and this lack of ambiguity or mystery in her protagonist makes for a very much thinner characterisation than any of her predecessors. The novel is too long

21. The Reef, p.28.
22. The Reef, p.29.
23. The Reef, p.29.
25. The Reef, p.81.
(almost six hundred pages) and the story line too loose to sustain
interest. Undine is married four times, but the last two marriages
are not explored in depth. Any one of the book's three worlds - New
York, Paris, the diplomatic milieu - would have provided sufficient
material for a novel.

As it is, the opposed values of Undine and the world of
tradition is so complete that there is no psychological complexity, no
dimension to the story beyond mere conflict. An important element in
The Custom of the Country is the responsibility borne by her parents for
her mind and temperament. Kindly but ineffectual people, Mrs Spragg
is merely "a wax figure in a show-window",27 and her husband's:

thin hair was worn a little too long over his coat collar,
and a Masonic emblem dangled from the heavy gold chain
which crossed his crumpled black waistcoat.28

Their greatest failing, however, is allowing (and encouraging)
Undine to apply the same corrupt standards in her social advancement
as Mr Spragg uses in his business:

Where Mr Spragg discarded honor in financial affairs, Undine
cancels it in every branch of human relations ...29

Her second husband Ralph finally comes ultimately to the realization
"that 'business' has created its own special morality",30 and that the
Spraggs dismal Mid-West is that very world:

Her Undine's mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery
as the prairie schoolhouse in which she had been educated;
and her ideals seemed to Ralph as pathetic as the ornaments
made of corks and cigar-bands with which her infant hands
had been taught to adorn it.31

Mrs Wharton is too strident here; her bitter tone intrudes and weakens

29. Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,
Undine's "crudity and her limitations"\textsuperscript{32} are exposed relentlessly. Physically she is best seen in harsh electric light (in 1913) because her "beauty was a vivid, and almost as crude, as the brightness suffusing it".\textsuperscript{33} Similarly her vocabulary is limited and embarrassing.

Undine sat between Mr Bowen and young Marvell, who struck her as very "sweet" (it was her word for friendliness) ...\textsuperscript{34} "Ease and luxury"\textsuperscript{35} exert an inexorable attraction upon her as it did for Lily Bart, both unappreciative and unscrupulous:

It was characteristic of her that she remembered her failures as keenly as her triumphs, and that the passionate desire to obliterate, to "get even" with them, was always among the latent incentives of her conduct.\textsuperscript{36}

She finds it as easy to abandon her child and sick husband as to break up the jewels that "were ... family relics", and force her French husband to sell the great tapestries that were his heirlooms.

This violation of the past represents her systematic attack on "the reserves and discriminations which divided that tradition from the new spirit of limitless concession".\textsuperscript{38} Ralph is the personification of the older verities and feels like "a modern man in mediaeval armour"\textsuperscript{39} as he sees his rites and customs collapse about him; "the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it".\textsuperscript{40} Tragically, the forces which propel Undine are stronger; she

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Custom of the Country, p.83.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Custom of the Country, p.21
\item \textsuperscript{34} Custom of the Country, p.34.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Custom of the Country, p.377.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Custom of the Country, p.98.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Custom of the Country, p.213.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Custom of the Country, pp.305-6.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Custom of the Country, p.469.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Custom of the Country, p.142.
\end{itemize}
personifies the vulgarity of the twentieth century.

The first work of fiction published after the outbreak of the Great War was *Xingu and Other Stories* in late 1916. Most of the tales were written before the war, and only two are of merit, "Bunner Sisters" and "Autre Temps ...". The former had been written in 1891 or 1892, but it must have been revised for this edition, as the author is in firmer control than in *The Custom of the Country*, three years earlier. The tale is unusual in that she deals only with the urban poor, but her characterization and descriptive passages are much finer than the sections of *The Fruit of the Tree* which deal with the same world. Nevertheless, just as it bears a resemblance to Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*, this reminds one of Cranford in an urban setting. There is the same concern with domestic detail in "Bunner Sisters":

> From that day forward, however, she began to take a certain tranquil pleasure in thinking of Mr Ramy's small shop, not unlike her own in its countrified obscurity, though the layer of dust which covered its counter and shelves made the comparison only superficially acceptable. Still, she did not judge the state of the shop severely, for Mr Ramy had told her that he was all alone in the world, and lone men, she was aware, did not know how to deal with dust.

Unlike any of the characters in *Cranford*, the two sisters are objects of pathos, but there is in both novels a similar concentration on the foibles and charms of the elderly. Mrs Wharton solves the difficulty of imparting aesthetic significance to the tawdry tenements by having her objective narrator describe Eliza in language that no character within the tale would use. In this manner Mrs Wharton demonstrates how the good act becomes one of beauty:

> In honour of some event of obvious importance, she had put on her double-dyed and triple-turned silk. Age, while bestowing on this garment a patina worthy of a Renaissance bronze, had deprived it of whatever curves the wearer's

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41. Nevius, p.124.

the pre-Raphaelite figure had once been able to impress on it; but this stiffness of outline gives it an air of sacerdotal state which seemed to emphasize the importance of the occasion.43

Eliza is admirable because she "had never dreamed of allowing herself the luxury of self-pity",44 and "was well-trained in the arts of renunciation".45

Her sister Evelina, on the contrary, is always "self-absorbed"46 and affected when she adopts "the high drawl she cultivated before strangers".47 Eliza, however, does not hesitate to sacrifice the man she loves for her sister, give all her savings to her and devotedly nurse her on her deathbed. The religious ambiguity of the situation obsesses Eliza and this quandry makes her a sad as well as an honest figure:

But other and more serious burdens lay on her startled conscience. For the first time in her life she dimly faced the awful problem of the inutility of self-sacrifice. Hitherto she had never thought of questioning the inherited principles which had guided her life. Self-effacement for the good of others had always seemed to her both natural and necessary ... Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not insure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered ... She felt she could no longer trust in the goodness of God, and that if he were not good he was not God, and there was only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sisters.48

The story "Autre Temps ..." was originally published five years before it was included in this collection. It is a poignant tale because it concentrates upon the stringency of outdated ethical standards.

Mrs Lidcote is a divorcee who returns to New York eighteen years after she

43.  Xingu, p.313.
44.  Xingu, p.326.
45.  Xingu, p.330.
46.  Xingu, p.370.
47.  Xingu, p.333.
fled the ruins of her broken marriage. Her daughter has just remarried and so Mrs Lidcote hastens to assist her. On the ocean crossing, she discovers that fashion has changed which indicates a fundamental shift in values:

... in the present fluid state of manners what did anything imply except what their hats implied - that no one could tell what was coming next?49

To her surprise her daughter and new son-in-law are completely acceptable to society in their new roles. Their furniture suggests the contrast with her passionate experience eighteen years earlier when Mrs Lidcote had been ostracized for a similar action:

There was nothing about the place, or about Leila and Wilbour, that suggested either passion or peril: their relation seemed as comfortable as their furniture, and as respectable as their balance at the bank.50

Mrs Wharton's style is as taut here as in *The Reef* or *The House of Mirth*. The following passage illustrates her careful choice of staccato words in the first part of the sentence to indicate a changeable world, and the heavy ponderous words in the second section reflect the older and more demanding society:

Where indeed in this crowded, topsy-turvy world, with its headlong changes and helter-skelter readjustments, its new tolerances and indifferences and accommodations, was there room for a character fashioned by slower sterner processes and a life broken under their inexorable presence?51

Mrs Lidcote learns that although her daughter is acceptable the mother is not - because she is judged by the older standard. When she is enlightened she sadly returns to Europe "with the irony of perceiving that the success or failure of the deepest human experience may hang on a matter of chronology".52

49. Xingu, p.105.
50. Xingu, p.122.
51. Xingu, p.121.
52. Xingu, p.124.
The next short novel, *Summer*, is a companion piece to the winter-story *Ethan Frome* and "was written at a high pitch of creative joy, but ... while the rest of my being was steeped in the tragic realities of the war". Unlike "Bunner Sisters" it describes materially circumscribed life, and parallels the New England tale because the small and desolate village oppresses the human spirit both physically and intellectually!

There it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraphy, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no "business block"; only a church ... and a library for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and here the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves.

The dreariness is matched for the young heroine Charity by the repulsiveness of her guardian who attempts to take advantage of her:

> His rumpled grey hair stood up above his forehead like the crest of an angry bird, and the leather-brown of his veined cheeks was blotched with red.

Into this scene of deprivation comes the young and handsome Lucius Harney, an artist making a study of eighteenth-century architecture in rural New England. When he abandons Charity he frustrates her bid for freedom from this environment. Mrs Wharton is critical of their passionate encounter at the Fourth of July picnic and indicates the transitory nature of the affair:

> A few days of autumn cold had wiped out all trace of the rich fields and languid groves through which she had passed on the Fourth of July; and with the fading of the landscape those fervid hours had faded, too.

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55. *Summer*, p.171.
When Charity attempts to flee to "the Mountain" from which her family came we see complete degradation of the "hill-people". This is rendered in a sharp descriptive passage where she discovers her mother's dead body:

One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee; a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled down about the ankle. 57

This horrific visual destitution is the mute expression of the moral squalor as well:

As she lay there, half-stunned by her tragic initiation, Charity vainly tried to think herself into the life about her. But she could not even make out what relationship these people bore to each other, or to her dead mother; they seemed to be herded together in a sort of passive promiscuity in which their common misery was the strongest link. 58

Charity is enlightened by the return to her origin and now has the strength to return to a life with a subdued Royall who will offer the simple dignity of a marriage and a tranquil home in which to raise the child Harney has given her. It is not a great deal, but Charity has the mute nobility of an Ethan Frome to face the knowledge of her circumstances with heroic endurance. "Charity stood among these cross-currents of life as motionless and inert as if she had been one of the tables screwed to the marble floor." 59

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57. Summer, p.250.
58. Summer, p.256.
CHAPTER VIII

The Marne (1918)
The Age of Innocence (1920)
The Glimpses of the Moon (1922)
A Son at the Front (1923)

Mrs Wharton's first novel about the Great War is a disappointing work dealing with a young American, Troy Belknap, who is only fifteen when he leaves France at the beginning of the conflict. He returns on his eighteenth birthday to join an ambulance brigade and is eventually wounded in battle when he rushes to the front lines with the first Americans entering combat. A melodramatic plot and sentimental scenes indicate that the control she exercised in Summer is absent here. The Marne reads more like war propaganda than serious fiction.

In the judgment of the most ardent francophile, Edith Wharton's good intentions would hardly be sufficient to offset the banality of her fable and the slapdash style in which it is related.¹

The subtlety she manifested in the other novel, only a year before, or in The Age of Innocence two years later is lacking. Those two backward glances to a simpler American setting gave her an opportunity for a detachment she cannot establish in this tale about the European conflagration. She writes not as a novelist but as a relief-worker.

The hero Troy combines the most discriminating taste with glowing moral ardour. The sights which move him as a lad of fifteen are those perceptively recorded in the travel writings of either Edith Wharton or Henry James:

The little boy's happiness would have been complete if there had been more time to give to the beautiful things that flew past them: thatched villages with square-towered churches.

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His response to Germany's invasion is as equally intense; Mrs Wharton's style here is more emotive but far less precise than in the above passage which is indicative of the unevenness in the entire novel:

France, his France, attacked, invaded, outraged; and he, a poor helpless American boy, who adored her, and could do nothing for her ...

In order to reinforce his altruistic motivation she stresses the insensitivity of his fellow countrymen in the plight of France:

... he [Troy] became ... sullen, humiliated, resentful at being associated with all the rich Americans flying from France.

He scorns his mother's frantic efforts to leave the country and the other wealthy Americans because of "their general tendency to regard the war as a mere background to their personal grievances". Throughout the story all the failings of Americans are stressed; at the outbreak of hostilities they flee the war (in which they are not involved). For the first several years they fail to enter the conflict, and when they do the author castigates the vulgarity of their motivation:

... the chief impression it [The Marne] creates is that the author had a number of grievances against her compatriots to work off and that they would not wait.

This unfortunate imbalance more than seriously weakens *The Marne*: the war becomes a means of defending cultural values. The moral imperative is expressed by young Troy.

His boy's mind was sorely exercised to define the urgent emotions with which it laboured. To save France — that was the clear duty of the world as he saw it.¹

There is no doubt that Mrs Wharton sees it the same way. In addition, the desecration of beauty is also a principle effect of the destruction. "It emptied towns of their inhabitants as it emptied veins of their blood; it killed houses and lands as well as men."³ It is important to note that she uses the verb "to kill" when applied to French homes and estates — it is coupled with the destruction of human life. One of the consequences of the fighting is that the effort of merely staying alive becomes paramount and consequently "killed romance, it killed poetry and adventure, it took all the meaning out of history and conduct and civilization"⁹ ... a catalogue of all she cherishes.

She accuses the Germans of barbarity, but it is interesting to note that the Americans, with the exception of the hero and his friend Sophy, are almost as barbaric in their vulgarity. Beauty is so closely identified with French civilization that any of the Allies who are not imbued with it are not only crude, but their motives are open to question:

"Very few of the number of Americans knew France or could speak French, and most of them were full of the importance of America's mission. This was Liberty's chance to Enlighten the World; and all these earnest youths apparently regarded themselves as her chosen torch-bearers."¹⁰

The satirical view of the American war slogans is juxtaposed with her uncritical acceptance of the French counterpart. In addition, she re-emphasizes her concept of the cultural deficiency of the Mid-West and the West; "there was a good deal more doing back home at Podunk or

7. The Marne, p.43.
8. The Marne, p.28.
10. The Marne, pp.63-64.
Tombstone of Skohegan".  

Nevertheless, her ideal is the energetic young American inspired by French traditions. When Troy finally faces the enemy in the trenches he experiences "a newly-awakened moral energy", and his friend Sophy is "a girl who had certainly not come to France in quest of vulgar excitement."  

The Marne is a sad and embarrassing book because it foreshadows a decline in Mrs Wharton's fiction which would not be noticed because of the brilliance of her next novel, until the 1920's.  

The Age of Innocence was published in 1920; she received the Pulitzer Prize, and again entered into the world of best-selling writers.  

Mrs Wharton defined the essence of the book in a letter to Mary Berenson:  

And then came your dear letter, & nearly drew tears from these flinty eyes! I did so want "The Age" to be taken not as a "costume piece" but as a "simple & grave" story of two people trying to live up to something that was still "felt in the blood" at that time ...  

The novel also presents a view of New York in the latter nineteenth century both critical and laudatory in its assessment, ironic and nostalgic in its tone.  

Just as George Eliot had placed Adam Bede and Middlemarch in the world of her early youth, Mrs Wharton set The Age of Innocence in a New York that she had abandoned but did not cease to cherish. Edmund Wilson sees the novel as her valedictory, since none of her later fiction compares to it; he judges it to be a protest novel about the frustration of lovers by social (or domestic) obstructions:  

... setting it back in the generation of her parents, she is able to contemplate it without quite the same rancor, to soften its sharpness with a poetic mist of distance. Yet even here the old impulse of protest still makes itself felt as the main motive.  

11. The Marne, p.84.  
Millicent Bell rightly compares it to Henry James's *Washington Square*, also evocative of an older and simpler society:

It was small and provincial; it could never have contained either of them; ... A sweet, clear flavor of American vintage lingered on the palate and nothing Europe had to offer ever quite matched it.\(^{16}\)

The external threats to this world from the outside commercial interests foreshadowed in *The House of Mirth* and identified in *The Custom of the Country* are absent here. The only forces of destruction are within the narrow limits of New York society. The very insularity of this world that allows the preservation of tradition can also suffocate the creative life within. Nevertheless, a stable society with accepted customs and norms is the ideal setting for her kind of fiction.

Her conservative instincts respond to his slow-moving society even as she feels its limitations. The shades of meaning conveyed by gesture, tone and inherited symbols are uniquely suited to her vision:

The persons of their world lived in an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies, and the fact that he and she understood each other without a word seemed to the young man to bring them nearer than any explanation would have done.\(^{17}\)

This New York of the Gilded Age is not one distinguished by intellectual conservation, so all the more emphasis is placed on these other modes of communication. In the last section of the story Newton's son Dallas reflects that his parents always conveyed their ideas through a deaf-and-dumb show.\(^{18}\)

This synthesis of the aesthetic and moral sensibilities is traced through the developing romance between Archer and the Countess Olenska. She has returned a representative of the culture of the old

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world, while he personifies the traditional code of New York, even though he often questions its validity. Her beauty is her chief characteristic, although most members of the "Four Hundred" do not recognize it:

But there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least theatrical, struck him as highly trained and full of a conscious power.  

The reader sees her through Archer's eyes; part of Mrs Wharton's technique is to expand his awareness. He gradually recognizes, therefore, the nature of his responsibilities as clearly as he initially responded to her beauty. His first impressions are entirely different from the rest of society; when she first appears, his sister Janey informs him most people "were disappointed that her appearance was not more 'stylish' - for stylishness was what New York most admired", a rather gentle ironic reflection, capturing in a sentence the superficiality of New York society.

Madame Olenska (the very name is redolent of a romantic past) is a striking woman whose charm is reflected in the furnishings of the temporary home she has created since her arrival. The simplicity and suggestiveness of her surroundings contrast sharply with the over-decorated and claustrophobic Victorian homes of the wealthy:

He [Newland] had been before in drawing rooms hung with red damask, with pictures "of the Italian school"; what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house, with its blighted background of pampas grass ... had, by a turn of the hand, and the skillful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign", subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments.

This setting she has chosen for herself alienates most of the Mingotts and the Wellands because of the impropriety of her living in a

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Bohemian quarter given over "to people who wrote". She suspects that her family considers literature compromising because writers are a group explicitly excluded from 'good' society. The only other person to respond to the literary element is Archer who declines three dinner invitations in order to unpack and read his newly-arrived books from London:

... a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant's incomparable tales, and a novel called Middlemarch, as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews.

Ellen, who dresses in deep red or stark black, contrasts with the Archer woman, "tall, pale, and slightly round-shouldered, with long noses, sweet smiles, and a king of drooping distinction like that in certain faded Reynold's portraits".

Archer's role in the romance is to teach Ellen the verities of his culture. It is important that he does so at first unconsciously, repeating the notions he has inherited. It is only when she accepts them and acts upon them that their full force comes home to him. As an older man he realizes that to live by these imperatives requires that heroic sacrifice be made as he did when separating from Ellen for the sake of his wife and child. He muses that "the worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else".

After he has fallen in love with Ellen he sees this code in a different light because now it touches him personally. She tells him:

"Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing - give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage ... you proved to me that I ought to do it."
In her avowal she shows how her whole life has been changed:

"I felt there was no one as kind as you; no one who gave me reasons that I understood for doing what at first seemed so hard and - unnecessary. The very good people didn't convince me; I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew; you understood; you had felt the world outside tugging at one ... you hated happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd never known before - and it's better than anything I've known." 27

This speech is characterized by the abstractions so clearly illustrative of Mrs Wharton's concerns - in terms like "reasons", "understood", "good", "tempted", "disloyalty", "cruelty" and "indifference".

The complexity of Archer's and Ellen's situation makes for a which density and richness in The Age of Innocence is lacking in The Custom of the Country. The American-European theme is presented in several different ways; although Ellen represents European culture she is an American, and Archer is aware of developments in British and continental literature and painting through his own reading and travel. Mrs Wharton is demonstrating that only by unifying European and American values can the correct balance be found, since the older culture possesses Wisdom, but the younger has the vigour and strength to put it into action.

However, she does not hesitate to describe the crippling limitations of both worlds. Morally, Europe is as deficient as America in its taste. Beaufort is an example of the hospitable, witty and handsome Englishman who has entered New York society and is the only character to cause scandal by committing the gravest indiscretion: financial impropriety. When Archer thinks of Ellen's suffering in her marriage to a corrupt aristocrat "It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes". 28

27. Age of Innocence, p.142.
28. Age of Innocence, p.58.
Ellen Olenska, in this later novel, is principally the representative of what has been gained from an older civilization, more liberal manners, more cultivated tastes. But her "knowledge" is also, ambiguously, a knowledge of sorrow and sin ...  

The provinciality of New York, in its turn, is stultifying and narrow; Newland is oppressed by:

The heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of the disciplined clocks, the perpetually renewed stack of cards ... the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next and each member of the household to all the others ...  

The lack of any serious interest in the arts leaves a gulf to be filled, as "the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clan who cared [only] about eating and clothes and money". Mrs Wharton describes the questionable profusion of courses at dinner with her incisive eye for detail.

Galsworthy does the same for Victorian England, but he lacks her sense of irony:

After a velvety oyster soup came shad and cucumbers, then a young broiled turkey with corn fritters, followed by a canvasback with currant jelly and a celery mayonnaise. Mr Letterblair, who lunched on a sandwich and tea, dined deliberately and deeply, and insisted on his guest's doing the same.  

There is a political as well as an intellectual sterility. Archer recognises that "the country was in possession of the bosses and the emigrant, and decent people had to fall back on sport or culture". This is an ironic reflection, from Mrs Wharton's view, as "decent people" excludes writers, and "culture" means little more than attendance at the opera and the meeting of the museum board of directors. He knows "he had done little in public life - he would always be by nature a

29. Bell, p. 277.  
31. Age of Innocence, p. 36.  
32. Age of Innocence, p. 86.  
33. Age of Innocence, p. 106.
contemplative and dilettante" — a bitter accusation. To Edith Wharton the dilettante must always be an unfulfilled person. Of the two lovers Ellen is obviously the more complete.

Her attitude to her homeland at this time is demonstrated in a letter to Bernard Berenson a year after *The Age of Innocence* was published:

> And to think of the U.S. being the Promised Land after all! The letter in which you announced this discovery so took my breath away that I have sat gasping ever since, unable to answer it! — I suppose the answer is that we all have our elective countries deep down in us, & that deep calleth unto deep — though depth, in any sense, in the last attribute to be postulated of America.  

A further point of interest in the novel is the extent to which physical passion plays a part in the dramatic action. When Archer first sees Ellen his reaction is immediate:

> ... the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him. He hated to think of May Wellan's being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of taste.  

The ambiguous use of the words "shocked and troubled" are indicative of the physical nature of his response to Ellen. Throughout the novel she is both sensual and sensuous, but their attraction to one another is also psychological:

> Now his imagination spun about the hands as about the edge of a vortex; but still he made no effort to draw nearer. He had known the love that is fed on caresses and feeds them; but this passion that was closer than his bones was not to be superficially satisfied.  

This situation is important because Mrs Wharton seldom deals with

34. *Age of Innocence*, p.274.  
35. Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, 16 February, 1921 (I Tatti Papers).  
36. *Age of Innocence*, p.22.  
explicit passion in her fiction and disliked those writers, such as D.H. Lawrence, who did. When Archer finally begs Ellen to allow him to take her away to a place where they can be completely united, cut off from any social restraints, she rejects his offer not because of the moral question involved, but because it would be an impossible thing to do. She has seen too many similar couples in small European watering-places who found the situation impossible because they had escaped old bonds only to find new ones.

The parallel with Anna Karenina is obvious:

... neither he nor Ellen nor their creator regard the sacrifice as a sterile one. Had he followed Ellen to Europe, The Age of Innocence might have become Anna Karenina, and Ellen might have ended as badly as Tolstoy’s heroine. The only way that she and Archer can convert their love into a thing of beauty is by renunciation.

The renunciation of a life together is also a declaration on the author’s part that however flawed a society might be it is necessary to protect essential personal relationships. To escape from an ordered world means only that there would be new, if different, restrictions somewhere else.

The sublimation of passion in The Age of Innocence is the only way she can synthesize her aesthetic and moral ideals:

... to conclude that Archer’s life has therefore had no meaning is to miss the very point Mrs Wharton is making ... The very qualities in the characters of Archer and Ellen which made their love for each other exquisite and beautiful made it impossible for them to be happy at the expense of anyone else ... The price of this exquisite sensibility is the ultimate sacrifice of "the flower of life" which this same sensibility at least allowed them to glimpse.

The Glimpses of the Moon, published two years later, is far removed from nineteenth century New York; she now attempts to chronicle the moves of the post-war generation in the ‘twenties, and the result is

deeply disappointing:

Whatever the explanation, her decline as a serious novelist could hardly have been more drastically forecast than by the publication, less than two years after The Age of Innocence, of the weakest of her novels, The Glimpses of the Moon (1922). 40

A number of theories have been advanced to explain the decline; Edmund Wilson thinks her great work (including The Age of Innocence) was stimulated "by some exceptional emotional strain" 41 brought on by her marital problems and that when these ceased to trouble her the writing consequently went soft. This explanation is inadequate for two reasons: firstly, she divorced Edward Wharton in 1913 and did not bring out The Age of Innocence until 1920; secondly, most of the facts about her private life are still unknown, and so on "the basis of the scanty evidence available, it is not easy to account for her sudden fall from grace". 42

It is more likely that the Great War had destroyed her society and the imaginative world that she had created out of it:

In 1914 the world had suddenly become an alien place to Edith Wharton, and it was this first failure to see the issues in any terms but black and white that insured the permanence of her alienation. 43

She was in the same predicament as E.M. Forster who witnessed the collapse of his world in the war; he subsequently wrote no novels afterwards except the brilliant Passage to India which related to a situation outside post-war society, as in its own way The Age of Innocence was about another world. Unlike Forster, however, she continued to write, and she was still concerned with an America she had not lived in since 1907. She was not unaware of the strain that this placed on her writing; in

40. Nevius, p. 196.
41. Wilson, p. 28.
42. Nevius, p. 195.
43. Lyde, p. 168.
1923 she wrote to Walter Maynard:

\[
\text{... I daresay I'll get my second wind soon ... & then}
\text{you'll see me frisking over to see the new U.S., which}
\text{I badly need to if I'm to go on writing about it.}^{44}
\]

James had been absent from the United States for long periods, but there had been no major cultural cataclysm on the scale brought about by the Great War during his career as a novelist. It is arguable that if James's lifetime as a writer had continued into the 'twenties (although his age would have forbidden it) he would have suffered the same fate. As it was, she chose to soldier on:

Her initial reaction from the shock, that mood of nostalgia which produced *The Age of Innocence* and the four vignettes of nineteenth-century New York society, gave way gradually to the only possible alternative; she would examine the "ultra-modern" postwar civilization in the light of what now seemed to be a discredited social, moral and aesthetic tradition. In spite of expatriation and her growing inaccessibility, she would make what for her was a valiant effort, although doomed from the start, to understand the new generation.^{45}

The defects of the novel are many. It is far too long for a writer whose talent is always best shown in short stories and compact novels. *The Glimpses of the Moon* is nearly five hundred pages long. The characterization is thin and the following passage typical:

\[
\ldots \text{swimming homeward through the crystal light he looked up at the garden brimming with flowers, the long low house with the cypress wood above it, and the window behind which his wife still slept. The month had been exquisite, and their happiness as rare, as fantastically complete, as the scene before him. He sank his chin into the sunlit ripples and sighed for sheer content ...}^{46}
\]

The emotion is banal ("sighed for sheer content"); her usual evocative and precise imagery has disappeared from the narrative. The only specific is the reference to the "cypress". Phrases such as "crystal light" and "sunlit ripples" are especially weak. Her ear for American

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44. Edith Wharton to Walter Maynard, 17 April, 1923 (Auchincloss Collection).
colloquialisms is now virtually deaf: "he had the luck to let it for a thumping price to some beastly bounders".  

Her aesthetic and moral concerns are the only factors which identify this novel as a work by Edith Wharton. In 1921 she wrote to Bernard Berenson:

The book isn't new - dear no! - I interrupted it last winter to write "The Old Maid," but, as a matter of fact, I began it two years ago, or more, & have been hard at it for a year. It's called "The Glimpses of the Moon," & tries to picture the adventures of a young couple who believe themselves to be completely (?) & up-to-date, but are continuously tripped up by obsolete sensibilities, & discarded ideals. - A difficult subject which of course seemed the easiest in the world when I began it.48

Nick and Susy Lancing, the Americans living in Europe, are people of discrimination, but they are almost destroyed because they adopt the corrupt moral standard of the new post-war world:

... whenever either of them got the chance to do better he or she should be immediately released? The law of their country facilitated such exchanges, and society was beginning to view them as indulgently as the law.49

It is clear that the author's critique is of the prevailing code rather than the two main characters who adopt it. Nick is an artist, a writer who has published a collection of sonnets and Chinese Influences in Greek Art, a book that a jaded society has responded to by "dinner invitations rather than in more substantial benefits".50 He has "an inexhaustible interest in every form of beauty",51 and at the conclusion of the story finally finishes a considerable work, The Pagent of Alexander, that confirms his vocation as a professional writer.

50. Glimpses of the Moon, p.16.
51. Glimpses of the Moon, p.15.
and destroys the illusion that he may be only a cultivated amateur.

Susy is similar:

What a pity that this exquisite insight, this intuitive discrimination, should for the most part have been spent upon reading the thoughts of vulgar people ... And visible beauty - how she cared for that too! 52

With her usual irony Mrs Wharton juxtaposes the Lancings and the other Americans who complete their circle:

Now, at last Mrs Hicks saw the possibility of being at once artistic and luxurious, of surrendering herself to the joys of modern plumbing and yet keeping the talk on the highest level. 53

The modern code is a temptation for the two lovers; it offers a spurious freedom by encouraging them not to make a commitment to each other because "love and finery and bridge and dining-out ... are all on the same plane". 54 Nick and Susy finally overcome these false standards and return to a simpler society enshrined in the family of an American artist:

That had been Susy's discovery: for the first time she was among awakening minds which had been wakened only to beauty. From their cramped and uncomfortable household Grace and Nat Fulmer had managed to keep our mean envies, vulgar admirations, shabby discontents; above all the din and confusion the great images of beauty had brooked, like those ancestral figures that stood apart on their shelf in the poorest Roman households. 55

Mrs Wharton pondered for four years how she might put her war experiences into fictional form and finally wrote A Son at the Front in 1923. Sadly, it contains all the faults of her earlier war-novel The Marne and is marred by the same stylistic defects present in that novel and The Glimpses of the Moon. A letter she wrote to Bernard

54. Glimpses of the Moon, p.78.
55. Glimpses of the Moon, p.298.
Berenson partially explains her decline:

The other day I was revising the proofs of the last chapters of "A Son at the Front" when my eyes filled with tears - the first time in history that my own genius had ever affected my lachrymal glands! - At first I was ashamed of this disproportionate reaction, but then I remembered that you always said it was going to be my best - & well, hang it, I don't mind thinking so myself in such company! ... Anyhow, by next September you'll be in a position to judge, book in hand.

Well - I hadn't meant to break our long silence with an "I - story," but re-reading those proofs brought so vividly before me the reading of the first chapters to you that there you were again, listening - & are still, as I write, & such a degree that I feel I shall find you presently, below on the terrace ...56

It is possible that those few friends, such as Berenson, to whom she showed her manuscripts and made changes according to their suggestions ("... I've 'fattened' the "Old Maid" at the point at which you & BB & Robert thought her tissues needed reinforcing")57 were literary critics. Unfortunately, it is impossible to make a definitive judgement at the present time because of the lack of biographical information.

In A Son at the Front she did not swerve from her belief that morality and art could be combined and act as a heal-all for a civilization that had almost destroyed them. In fact, her statement is as forceful here as it had been in any previous short story or novel.

Referring to A Son at the Front, Blake Nevius writes:

To the situation in her fiction she applied the test of certain inherited values, social, moral, and aesthetic; but when those values proved somehow inadequate to the situation, or when the situation called for a more comprehensive intellectuality which would embrace questions, say, of religion or politics or economics, she was not to be intimidated. With her usual confidence, she cut the material to her pattern.58

57. Edith Wharton to Mary Berenson, 28 April, 1921 (I Tatti Papers).
George Campton is an expatriate American artist who lives and paints in Montmartre. His only son George is conscripted into the army, having been born in France. Despite all of his parent's efforts to keep him from the front, he goes into battle and is killed. Like the young Troy in *The Marne*, he does not hesitate to fight for the preservation of French civilization; Edith Wharton never ceased to view the war as a crusade against barbarism. Like his creator, John Campton sees his son as a young knight.

The setting for the novel is Paris: "There she lay in the security of her beauty, and once more proclaimed herself eternal".\(^59\) In this atmosphere it is natural that George reflects his surroundings.

His face:

defied all rules and escaped all classifications by a mixture of romantic gaiety and shrewd plainness like that in certain eighteenth-century portraits.\(^60\)

Father and son grow closer together as they draw nearer to the creative experience. The following is one of the places where Mrs Wharton explicitly formulates her belief that one can reach the essence of beauty through both painting and literature:

From that day the Father and George understood each other. Initiation had come to them in different ways, but their ardour for beauty had the same root. The visible world, and its transposition in terms of one art or another, were thereafter the subject of their interminable talks, and Campton, with a passionate interest, watched his son absorbing through books what had mysteriously reached him through his paint-brush.\(^61\)

The elder Campton gradually develops a full appreciation of "the perfection of his son's moral balance".\(^62\)

The final passionate plea comes from a friend of the family who

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60. *Son at the Front*, p.24.
expresses the author's valorous response to the almost total destruction of her civilization:

I see now that that is my real duty - just as it is yours, just as it is that of every artist and every creator ... We must save Beauty for the world; before it is too late we must save it out of this awful wreck and ruin ... there is the same instinct in us, the same craving, the same desire to realize Beauty ... Surely everyone of us ought to be helping to save Beauty; everyone is needed, even the humblest and more ignorant of us, or else the world will be all death and ugliness. And after all, ugliness is the only real death, isn't it?°5

This last sentence is, in a nutshell, the strength and the limitation of her vision of life.

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63. Son at the Front, pp.191-92.
Edith Wharton attempted to recapture the popular acclaim which had greeted *The Age of Innocence* in four short tales about four decades of New York life beginning in 1930. These vignettes, however, are unsuccessful—they are merely nostalgic evocations of the past. She had feared that some readers would find *The Age of Innocence* a costume-piece, but her amused and amusing treatment of the subject made such a false view unlikely. The same is not true of *Old New York*. Although she is still critical of certain aspects of that world, she sees it in a romantic glow which obscures her true gifts—precision and irony.

"The Old Maid" is marred by a sentimental plot. "False Dawn" contains some fine passages and demonstrates that, unlike the stylistic excesses of the writing in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, her prose is still capable of economy and lucidity:

> The strawberries came from Mr Raycie's kitchen garden; the Georgian bowl came from his great-grandfather (father of the Signer); the verandah was that of his country-house, which stood on a height above the Sound...  

The artificiality of "The Spark" is due to the arbitrary reference to Walt Whitman's memory, and "New Year's Day" is essentially a period-piece. Archer and Ellen had been well-drawn individuals in a historical setting, but the characters in *Old New York* are, for the most part, types blurred in the setting of a vanished epoch.

In 1925 Mrs Wharton returned to the United States to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale University. She stayed in the country only a few weeks, but believed that she had breathed enough native air to

write another novel set in New York. It is the story of Kate Clephane, a divorcee who, having twenty years earlier abandoned husband and child, returns from abroad. Her daughter now calls her back and Kate returns hoping to begin a new existence.

Beginning with The Mother's Recompense Mrs Wharton's point of emphasis shifts from a strong concern with society to a greater concern for the individual. Before the war she believed that art and morality were preserved through tradition. War had destroyed this continuity and the stewardship now fell upon the individual:

There is only one kind of freedom possible for Edith Wharton's characters /now/: that which they created within themselves with the aid of culture and which they may share with kindred souls in a republic of the spirit. ²

Ethan Frome personifies the rugged endurance characteristic of the bleak New England countryside. In The Reef Anna Leath refers to the norms of her society, "the tradition of faith to the spoken vow, or the deeper piety of the unspoken dedication".³ Newland Archer teaches Countess Olenska the social code of old New York and she responds by an act of high morality. In The Mother's Recompense and the succeeding novels the leading character has only his personal criteria to guide him. He must oppose the current shifts of ethical conduct and, as a result, becomes increasingly alienated from the contemporary world. Those truths by which he lives come from an older but not quite vanished or vanquished generation. Part of the general decline in Edith Wharton's post war novels is due to this strain on hero or heroine over-burdened by fighting off forces of moral decline and at the same time trying to create a personal refuge, a "great good place".

When Kate Clephane sees her old home decorated in the modern

style by her daughter Anne, the mother muses, "Not particularly original; but a sober handsome room, and comfortable, though so far from 'cosy'." The slight lack of discrimination in her daughter's taste is emblematic of something more deeply wrong with the world. The present bland standardization, the result of mass production, is now a world-wide phenomenon; Mrs Wharton sees it as a triumph of a peculiarly American trait:

Only - what was there to observe? Again the sameness of the American Face encompassed her with its innocent uniformity. How many of them it seemed to take to make up a single individuality. Most of them were like the miles and miles between two railway stations. She saw again with gathering wonder, that one may be young and handsome and healthy and eager, and yet unable, out of such rich elements, to evolve a personality.

The greatest shock to Kate, however, is to discover that her daughter is in love with the man she had run away with twenty years earlier. She realizes that he is a thoroughly bad person since "It must have been his bad taste - the bad taste that could lead him into such an opening as that ..." In addition, his superficial character is revealed in his noticable lack of dedication to art, for he was once a writer and painter:

She wanted to be kind and say: "And your painting? Your writing?" but she didn't dare. Besides, he had probably left both phases far behind him, and there was no need, really, for her to concern herself with his new hobbies, whatever they might be.

The scornful juxtaposition of artistic endeavour and "his new hobbies" is the most serious accusation that Mrs Wharton can make. It is no surprise that he has abandoned his vocation as he abandoned his lover. Kate's fears are confirmed when after he meets her again he does not cease to pursue her daughter.

5. The Mother's Recompense, p.90.
6. The Mother's Recompense, p.112.
In this universe of perverseness and blandness Kate Clephane can seek consolation from the old verities of taste and rectitude. Her friends from the turn of the century still exist to proclaim another world:

The house was old Mrs Clephane's wedding gift to her daughter, and everything in it had obviously been selected by someone whose first thought concerning any work of art was to ask if it would chip or fade. Nothing in the solid and costly drawing-room had chipped or faded; it had retained something of Enid's invulnerable youthfulness, and, like herself, had looked as primly old-fashioned in its first bloom as in its well-kept maturity.8

The qualities of the house are synonymous with the traditional values which gave rise to them; nothing chips or fades, but is perennially old-fashioned. The solidity of this world is an indictment of the superficial 'twenties:

The double mahogany doors were thrown open. Landers, with his still little bow, offered her an arm, and they passed into a dusky flock-papered dining-room which seemed to borrow most of its lighting from the sturdy silver and monumental cut-glass of the dinner-table. A bunch of violets, compact and massive, lay by her plate. Everything about Fred Landers was old-fashioned, solid and authentic.9

The substantiality of the mahogany, the elegance of the silver and the heavy richness of the violets underlines the hollowness of her daughter's "few modern pictures ... a budding wistaria ... big tables, capacious armchairs".10

Kate finally withdraws her objections to Anne's marriage, because to reveal the secret would cause the "sterile pain" she sees as destructive. She is unlike Lily Bart in that she rejects money because of its associations:

8. The Mother's Recompense, p.142.
10. The Mother's Recompense, p.41.
11. The Mother's Recompense, p.166.
... the possession of money, in particular, had always been so associated in her mind with moral and mental dependence that after her break with Hylton Davies poverty had seemed one of the chief attributes of freedom.\textsuperscript{12}

She willingly returns to an inexpensive life in the watering-places of Europe where the:

... very room, as Kate entered, on fire from the wind, seemed stuffier, untidier and, yet - vulgarer - than she had remembered. The empty glasses with drowned lemon-peel, the perpetually unemptied ash-trays, the sketches by the Countess's latest protege ... all this disorder was now, for the first time, reflected in the faces about the card-tables.\textsuperscript{13}

The difficulty in \textit{The Mother's Recompense} is that there is a discrepancy between the world in which the protagonist moves and the social milieu. Kate rejects the offer of marriage from Landers, a man she loves and admires, and chooses a place to live which is dominated by the vulgarity she so strongly abhors. It is evident that Mrs Wharton regards it as an endorsement of her heroine's nobility when, opposing the new standards (or lack of standards), she accepts a life of self-denial as the price for that opposition. This stance is an awkward authorial intrusion rather than being organically placed within the plot. This leads to an ambiguous conclusion. Mrs Wharton's dilemma is that of dealing with a society she not only dislikes but fails to comprehend. This is a difficult position for one who excels as a novelist of manners. Nevertheless, one admires the heroine's moral choice even if its meaning is not clear.\textsuperscript{14}

Perhaps no one else would ever understand ... But there it was. Nothing on earth would ever again help her - help to blot out the old horrors and the new loneliness - as much as the fact of being able to say to herself, whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions, that once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12. The Mother's Recompense, p.161.}
\textsuperscript{13. The Mother's Recompense, p.26.}
\textsuperscript{14. The Mother's Recompense, p.341.}
Here and Beyond is a collection of six short stories which appeared one year later in 1926. It is free of the defects which mar her later work. The tales are either about artists or they are ghost stories, and make little intellectual demand on author or reader.

"Miss Mary Pask" combines both elements. The narrator is a painter who visits the sister of an old friend when he is working in Brittany. The choice of an artist as narrator gives Mrs Wharton the opportunity to filter the action through the eyes of a highly imaginative and observant character. It is a realistic piece and appropriately spooky. The artist tries to find Miss Pask's cottage near the seaside after painting during weather he describes as "one day all blue and silver, the next shrieking gales or driving fog". This instability is a reflection of his enfeebled constitution which, coupled with his "New England conscience" and imaginative excesses, provides an explosive situation.

When he arrives at Miss Pask's house he remembers that she died a year ago and is terrified when she appears to greet him. Mrs Wharton's skill at writing ghost tales is best seen in the staccato rhythm of her sentences which heighten the tension:

I have always been a noticer of hands. The key to character that other people seek in the eyes, the mouth, the modelling of the skull, I find in the curve of the nails, the cut of the finger-tips, the way the palm, rosy or sallow, smooth or seamed, swells up from its base.

This exact perception of minute details makes the narrator perfectly credible. In addition, direct and simple diction intensifies horror:

17. Here and Beyond, p.2.
18. Here and Beyond, p.15.
"my flesh rose in ridges of fear". 19

The narrator is also believable because his creativity is coupled with honesty and sympathetic concern:

... I was half aware of bedraggled cushions, odds and ends of copper pots, and a jar holding a faded branch of some late-flowering shrub. A real Mary Pask "interior"! 20

But her old face ... with the unnaturally red cheeks like varnished apples and the blue eyes swimming in vague kindliness, seemed to appeal to me against my cowardice, to remind me that, dead or alive, Mary Pask would never harm a fly. 21

He flees the house in terror and after several months in a sanatorium learns that, ironically, his information about Miss Pask's death was incorrect. He saw no ghost, only a kindly old lady. His troubled conscience is now as over-wrought as his imagination was that terrifying night.

"The Young Gentlemen" is also a story of an artist. The narration is enriched by observations on American architecture:

The uniform newness of a new country gives peculiar relief to its few relics of antiquity - a term which, in America, may fairly enough be applied to any building already above ground when the colony became a republic. 22

It is clear that he includes himself among the more cultivated of his countrymen ("we artists and writers"), 23 and his concerns with "the picturesqueness of the old light-house before it was rebuilt, or the paintability of the vanished water-mill" 24 reveal his sensibility.

In the light of his architectural interests he unobtrusively introduces the American-European contrast:

19. Here and Beyond, p.15.
20. Here and Beyond, p.16.
21. Here and Beyond, p.17.
22. Here and Beyond, p.32.
23. Here and Beyond, p.33.
24. Here and Beyond, p.38.
And now that civic pride has taught Americans to preserve and adorn their modest monuments, setting them in smooth stretches of turn and nursing the elms of the village green, the place has become far more attractive, and far worthier of its romantic reputation ...  

In conversation with his acquaintance Mrs Durant about their common friend Mr Cranch the international theme is reiterated:

"He's so punctilious."
"Well, we Americans are not punctilious, and being one himself, he ought to know it by this time."
She pondered again. "It's his Spanish blood, I suppose ... he's frightfully proud." 

Their friend commits suicide when the village discovers that he has two deformed children by a Spanish wife and the artist becomes their guardian.

In "Bewitched" Mrs Wharton returns to the bleaker scenes of poor New England hill-people reminiscent of Ethan Frome and Summer. The same atmosphere of despondence in Ethan Frome is combined with that of a degeneracy of spirit reflected in the buildings:

He glanced through the thickening fall of snow at the desolate front of the Rutledge house, the more melancholy in its present neglected state because, like the gate-posts, it kept traces of former elegance.

The area which "even in summer, wore a mournful solitary air" is certainly otherworldly, but (as Ethan had experienced) is a hell-in-life:

"I never knew a place," Deacon Hibben said, "as seemed so far away from humanity. And yet it ain't so in miles."

The sense of death which prevades the house personified in Mrs Rutledge whose "prominent eyes looked like the sightless orbs of a marble statue" and the text over the mantlepiece, "The Soul That Sineneth It Shall Die". The Deacon and Bosworth are the outsiders

25. Here and Beyond, p.33.
26. Here and Beyond, p.54.
27. Here and Beyond, p.81.
28. Here and Beyond, p.82.
29. Here and Beyond, p.82.
30. Here and Beyond, p.86.
31. Here and Beyond, p.86.
called in to hear the tale of a ghost who is bewitching Rutledge;
Bosworth, a man who left the hill country after childhood, recalls
the hideous scenes of insanity he witnessed when a boy. Mrs Wharton's
detailed description of the ugliness of the scene is related to the
degeneracy of people cut off from outside civilization. Mrs Rutledge
has a prescription for her husband's cure:

"I was a little girl then, but I used to hear my folks
talk of it winter nights. Lefferts Nash and Hannah Cory.
They drove a stake through her breast. That's what cured
him."32

The sister of the dead girl dies; retribution is achieved.

"The Seed of Faith" is an examination of a young man whose
idealism is unmatched by a cultural sympathy. Willard Bent, a young
Baptist missionary in North Africa is no longer scandalized by the
obscenities he hears in Morocco, though he does not abandon the hope
of ever hearing the natives "reveal some sense of a higher ideal of what
at home the earnest women he knew solemnly to call a Purpose".33
His friend Harry Spink demonstrates the cultural level of the Americans
when he sees the traditional ornaments of the country:

"Say! It might be a good idea to import some of this
stuff for Fourth of July processions - Knights of Pythias
and Secret Societies' kinder things" Spink mused, pausing
before the brilliant spectacle.34

The older missionary whom he admires has had no evangelistic
success and finally turns fanatic, insults Islam publicly in the mosque
and is torn apart by an enraged mob. Hence the ironic title of the
story, 'the blood of martyrs is the seed of the faith'. Mrs Wharton,
however, skillfully illustrates how the younger missionary comes to see
that an understanding of native culture is as necessary as his sense of
vocation!

32. Here and Beyond, p.101.
33. Here and Beyond, pp.125-26.
34. Here and Beyond, p.137.
Willard was oppressed by the thought that had always lurked beneath his other doubts. They talked, he and Mr Blandhorn, of the poor ignorant heathen - but were not they themselves equally ignorant in everything that concerned the heathen? ... Mr Blandhorn seemed never to have been troubled by this question, but it had weighed on Willard ever since he had come across a quiet French ethnologist who was studying the tribes of the Middle Atlas. Two or three talks with this traveller - or listenings to him - had shown Willard the extent of his own ignorance. He would have liked to borrow books, to read, to study; but he knew little French and no German, and he felt confusedly that there was in him no soil sufficiently prepared for facts so overwhelmingly new to root it in.  

In 1927 *Twilight Sleep* appeared, a novel ranking with *The Glimpses of the Moon* as one of the poorest of her works. The plot is contrived, and the improbable shooting at the conclusion tests the credulity of the reader. Her earlier lucid and controlled style is now loose and verbose. The following passage is typical:

> 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, balked of their natural prey, and cast their hungry shadow over the young.  

*The Mother's Recompense* examines the relationship between the principal character and her hostile environment. *Twilight Sleep* is primarily concerned with simply defining the nature of the environment and is flawed because the heroine Nona Manford is a shadowy, incomplete figure. It is clear that Mrs Wharton intends her to be a reincarnation of the traditions of an earlier generation: she is oppressed by ugliness in any form.

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35. *Here and Beyond*, p.178.

"Funny," Nona thought again - "that all this ugliness should
prick me like nettles ..."57

Her conscience is as discriminating as her eye for interior decoration:

The drawing-room (it suddenly occurred to her) was very
expressive of the modern marriage state. It looked, for
all its studied effects, its rather nervous attention to
"values," complementary colours, and the things the modern
decorator lies awake over, more like the waiting-room of a
glorified railway station than the setting of an established
way of life.58

The author does not seem to bother to establish how Nona turns out to be
from another age. The character totally lacks credibility.

Her mother Pauline Manford is, at the same time, a representative
of a frenzied modern age determined to obliterate all forms of pain.

Life becomes wholly a "twilight sleep":

Her whole life ... 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 ... 59

Mrs Manford and her generation retreat from suffering because
they have lost contact with hereditary verities. Mrs Wharton hopes
that the children of this new age will return to them, but the very
insubstantiality of Nona's character holds out little hope in the novel
for the reader.

57. Twilight Sleep, p.236.
58. Twilight Sleep, p.30.
59. Twilight Sleep, p.306.
In the same year that \textit{Twilight Sleep} appeared Mrs Wharton's closest friend and literary adviser, Walter Berry, died. It had been her practice to accept his critical advice since her initial venture (\textit{The Decoration of Houses}) in 1897. A few days after his death she wrote to Gaillard Lapsley, "No words can tell you of my desolation. He had been to me in turn, all that one being can be to another, in love, in friendship, in understanding ..."\textsuperscript{1} She confessed to the young John Hugh-Smith:

Yes, I am glad indeed that it is over, but I perceive now that I, who thought I loved solitude, was never for one moment alone - and a great desert lies ahead of me.\textsuperscript{2}

In addition to this burden of personal loss, she had been conscious for the last few years of the harsh critical reception to her novels. With her usual wit, she remarked:

\begin{quote}
\texttt{What's all that about a scalpel & India-rubber gloves? You must have been reading one of the good old American critics on "the hard brilliance" of my style (because I differentiate shall from will!)}
\end{quote}

However, she was especially offended by Virginia Woolf's evaluation of her work:

\begin{quote}
And Mrs Virginia Woolf ... writes a long article in the U.S. Saturday Review of Literature to say that no interesting American fiction is or shd be written in English; & that Henry Hergesheiner (sic) & I are negligible because we have nothing new to give - not even a language!
Well - such discipline is salutary.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 16 October, 1927 (Yale Papers).
\item Edith Wharton to John Hugh-Smith, 15 October, 1927 (Yale Papers).
\item Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 6 June, 1925 (Yale Papers).
\item Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 17 August, 1925 (Yale Papers).
\end{enumerate}
She valued her association with Sinclair Lewis who dedicated *Babbitt* to her in 1922 and with F. Scott Fitzgerald who sent her a personally dedicated copy of *The Great Gatsby* when it was published. Both authors visited her eighteenth-century home Pavillon Colombe in St Brice-sous-Foret outside Paris. Fitzgerald told her friend Mrs Chanler that he had three ambitions in life:

(1) to be faithful to his wife, (2) to write the best and clearest prose of the twentieth century, and (3) to become a close friend of Edith Wharton.⁵

After a visit by Sinclair Lewis she reflected;  

He is utterly imperceiving & frankly interested in the sale of "Arrowsmith"! What a queer product - for he really is an artist, though he seems so unaware of it. No: the book isn't as good as *Babbitt*, but the average modern novelist could "live for a year like a gentleman" in its leavings ...⁶

Despite the admiration of these important writers, she found the new literary generation entirely foreign. Virginia Woolf's criticism had stung, and when she saw that Aldous Huxley was editing D.H.Lawrence's letters, she caustically remarked, "The new Percy editing the new Henry!"⁷ It was only too easy for her to remember when she had been the intimate of the Master at the height of his powers and fame. In addition, she became more deeply alienated from her native land; "I do despair of the Republic, as it is".⁸

When she came to write *The Children* she was troubled by all these personal difficulties, and the novel is one of her poorest. It is the story of Martin Boyne, an American engineer living abroad who becomes the unofficial guardian of the neglected children of a roaming American family. He falls in love with the eldest child Judith and parts

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7. Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 10 July, 1930 (Yale Papers).
8. Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 13 April, 1927 (Yale Papers).
from Rose Sellers, an older woman he is about to marry. Most of the characters are wooden and one-dimensional; Rose Sellers, however, is a fully achieved creation, and her characterization is the only successful element in The Children. Mrs Wharton, at this stage in her career, was obviously much more capable of portraying a middle-aged woman frustrated in love rather than a group of children and their surrogate parent.

The author's strong disapproval of the present generation of Americans in Europe was over its rootlessness. Boyne himself has been working "on his engineering jobs first in the Argentine, then in Australia, and since the war in Egypt";\(^9\) one of the young children had been sharpened and worn down by contact with too many different civilizations - or perhaps merely with too many different hotels.\(^10\)

Martin Boyne always likes the amenities of the "Palace Hotels; but he loathed the mere thought of the people who frequented them".\(^11\)

This constant moving has two effects. First, it corrodes the traditional standards of society; as the governess Miss Scope observes;

> 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.\(^12\)

Second, such mobility amongst the younger members of the family results inevitably in jaded or dulled sensibility. When Boyne brings Judith to an exquisite cathedral in Palermo he is stunned because "he presently perceived that she could see nothing ... nothing was happening in the face which was usually the theatre of such varied emotions".\(^13\) Rose Sellers, however, is diametrically the opposite:

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He was reminded, with a pang, of the contrast between her ordered and harmonious life (she always reminded him of Milton's "How charming is divine philosophy!") and the chaotic experiences of the poor little girl \( \text{Judith} \) who for a moment had displaced her image. Inconceivably vulgar and tawdry, sordid and inarticulate, under all the shouting and the tinsel, seemed that other life and those who led it.\(^{14}\)

Mrs. Sellers, a widow, offers the alternative to rootlessness, for in "his homeless years that sense of her stability had appealed to him peculiarly".\(^{15}\) She is typical of the Edith Wharton post-war heroes who create a small world about themselves with the aid of a culture shared with other kindred spirits.\(^{16}\)

No one could arrange a room half so well; and she had arranged herself and her life just as skillfully. The material she had to deal with was poor enough; in every way unworthy of her, but, as her hands could twist a scarf into a divan-cover ... so she managed, out of a mediocre means, a mediocre husband, an ugly New York house, and a dull New York set, to make something distinguished, personal, almost exciting ...\(^{17}\)

Her qualities are those of an earlier era. Mrs. Wharton had described the deaf-and-dumb form of communication in *The Age of Innocence* where men and women "just sat and watched each other and guessed at what was going on underneath".\(^{18}\) This subtlety, alien to the 'twenties, is natural in Mrs. Sellers!

It was not necessary for Rose Sellers to formulate objections; they were latent everywhere in her delicate person, in the movements of her slim apprehensive fingers, the guarded stir of her lashes.\(^{19}\)

The finest descriptions in the novel deal with the "self-sufficing harmony"\(^{20}\) she is able to impart to an atmosphere:

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The door had opened on the candlelight of their little dinner-table, on the sparkle of white wine and smell of wild strawberries and village bread.21

She represents older values of discriminating taste which have matured in spite of the rootlessness of society. Nevertheless, Mrs Wharton frustrates this "middle-age ... beatitude"22 - Boyne rejects Mrs Sellers for his parent-lover relationship with the adolescent Judith. This is authorial interference which she had imposed on The Mother's Recompense; The Children similarly suffers from an ambiguous conclusion. Boyne's motivation is incompletely realized and the novel is thereby weakened.

When Mrs Wharton was travelling to America in 1923 aboard the Cunard liner "Mauretania" she wrote Berenson that "Coming back here ... is to me like coming to a cemetary. All the people I loved best in America have died since 1914".23 This limited knowledge of the American scene made it all the more difficult for her to write two long novels about the vicissitudes of a young artist maturing in the contemporary environment of her native country. Hudson River Bracketed is a novel of over five-hundred and fifty pages, and although there are some admirable passages in it, Mrs Wharton never excelled in writing lengthy novels.

The protagonist Vance Weston, comes from the heart of the American Mid-West:

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.24

Hudson River Bracketed dramatizes "the disastrous consequences of cultural deprivation for the American who aspires to become an artist".25 Mrs

Wharton sees his background as no preparation for a career as an artist. (It is interesting that he never attempts to incorporate his childhood and adolescent experience in Illinois in his writing.) When he comes to New York he discovers that it is not uncommon to see books in ordinary homes; "he hardly knew that collections of books existed as personal possessions, outside of colleges and other public institutions".  

In the world of Eastern America he finds that his hitherto mute aspirations to be an artist now have an opportunity for fulfillment because the environment is no longer hostile to his ideals.

Art had hitherto figured in his mind as something apart from life, inapplicable to its daily uses; something classified, catalogued and buried in museums. Here for the first time it became a breathing presence; he saw its relation to life and caught a glimpse of the use of riches and leisure.

Weston is inspired by an old house, The Willows, a fine example of Hudson River Bracketed (the title refers to an indigenous style of domestic architecture) built in 1850 and "one of the most successful instances of ... architectural elements ingeniously combined from the Chinese and the Tuscan". The charm of the past moves him profoundly as does Halo Spear who, like the house, "in a world of shifting standards, had always held fast to her own values". Just as the aristocratic old house is surrounded by "unmown grass, and heavy shrubberies of unpruned syringa and lilac" so are its traditions neglected by the twentieth-century. Halo is a reminder of the vanished classical world Pater would have admired:

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Mutilated beauty! How rich the words sounded on her lips— as if she swept the rubbish of the centuries from some broken statue, noble in its ruin! \(^51\)

She opens new vistas for Weston because her untroubled grace reflects the beauty he is trying to express in his fiction:

... there she sat, by the fire in the library, alone. She wore something dark and lacy, through which her upper arms showed; and the sober book-lined room, with its shaded lamps, and a few lily-like crimson flowers in a tall jar seemed a part of her, the necessary background to her aloof and reticent grace.

Her evocation of a finer world finally leads Vance to fall in love with her and they sail for Europe together. Mrs Wharton continues the saga in *The Gods Arrive* three years later where she traces Weston's development as a writer and describes Halo as a woman who knows "There was no amount of psychic sensibility one could not read into the walls and furniture of an old empty house". \(^33\)

Before this sequel there was a collection of short stories which contains "After Holbein," the most powerful of her final tales. It is a chilling story completely lacking in the nostalgia which typifies her later stories about the New York of her youth. She describes how an elderly New York bachelor suffers a loss of memory and goes to dine with a senile lady who believes she is still hostess to fashionable society, but no one is present except the failing single guest. The grotesqueness of the tale is heightened by the author's recovery of her control and fine grasp of detail as she castigates the older New York for its crudeness and cruelty:

It is a truly devastating satire culminating in macabre horror, on formal entertaining in the grand style as practiced by the very wealthy ... \(^54\)

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The succinct description of old Mrs Jasper's servant Lavinia establishes the tone of the sinister scene:

Everything about her had dried, contracted, been volatilized into nothingness, except her watchful grey eyes, in which intelligence and comprehension burned like two fixed stars.\(^7^\)

The use of the words "dried" and "contracted" combined with the intense conscious awareness ("intelligence and comprehension"), and the sense of nihilism ("volatilized into nothingness") is a good example of economy employed towards overall effect. The nurse, who is the servant's companion, reinforces the eerie presence of decay - she is "the intimate friend of the trained nurse who was keeping alive, by dint of piqûres and high frequency, the inarticulate and inanimate Mrs Amerworth".\(^8\)

Anson Warley is "a small poor creature, chattering with cold inside, in spite of his agreeable and even distinguished exterior".\(^9\)

Mrs Wharton successfully uses the reference to this coldness as expression of the sterility which is the result of his selfishness, although he "tried to warm the shivering soul within him at all the passing bonfires of success".\(^10\)

... he mounted to the lofty water-shed which fed the sources of his scorn. The view from there was vast and glorious, and air was icy but exhilarating ...\(^11\)

This scorn is only one of his moral failures; he combines the absorption with self with an equally insufferable snobbishness. At sixty-three years of age:

he found himself looking forward with equanimity to an eternity of New York dinners.

On, but only at the right houses; that was understood!

The right people - the right setting - the right wines.\(^12\)

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\(^7\) Certain People, p.78.
\(^8\) Certain People, pp.83-84.
\(^9\) Certain People, p.63.
\(^10\) Certain People, p.64.
\(^11\) Certain People, p.66.
\(^12\) Certain People, p.68.
When he leaves home — after shouting at his solicitous valet — he loses his memory and proceeds to the wrong house to dine with the pathetic Evelina Jasper. The author reflects, "It was bitter cold".\(^{41}\) Mrs Jasper is a representative of the wealthy but tasteless society of nineteenth-century New York. Edith Wharton identifies Evelina’s present condition in most graphic terms:

> the poor old lady, who was gently dying of softening of the brain, still imagined herself to be New York’s leading hostess ...\(^{42}\)

This is externally manifested by "her tiara askew on her purple wig".\(^{43}\) Her house on Fifth Avenue was "an entertaining machine",\(^{44}\) and this impersonal hospitality is indicative of the crassness of the rich:

> Hundreds, no thousands of dinners (on gold plate, of course, and with orchids, and all the delicacies that were out of season), had been served in that vast pompous dining-room, which one had only to close one’s eyes to transform into a railway buffet for millionaires, at a big junction, before the invention of restaurant trains ...\(^{45}\)

The marvellous absurdity of this image shows Mrs Wharton’s attitude toward society no less strong than F. Scott Fitzgerald’s. In the following passage the words "undiscriminating" and "undifferentiated" capture the vulgarity of this world:

> Poor old Evelina ... In a way she was right. There was really no reason why that kind of standardized entertaining should ever cease; a performance so undiscriminating, so undifferentiated, that one could almost imagine, in the hostess’s tired brain, all the dinners she had ever given merging into one gargantuan pyramid of food and drink, with the same faces, perpetually the same faces, gathered stolidly about the same gold plate!\(^{46}\)

The author’s final ironic comment about the quality of wine and conversation is coupled with a bitter nihilism:

\(^{41}\). Certain People, p.88.
\(^{42}\). Certain People, p.70.
\(^{43}\). Certain People, p.70.
\(^{44}\). Certain People, p.69.
\(^{45}\). Certain People, p.69.
\(^{46}\). Certain People, pp.70-71.
He smiled again with satisfaction at the memory of the wine and wit. Then he took a step forward, to where a moment before the pavement had been - and where now there was nothing.\textsuperscript{47}

The quality of Mrs Wharton's novels may have declined, but she was still keenly aware of their critical reception. After \textit{Certain People} appeared she wrote the following to Mr Jewett, her publisher at Appleton's:

\begin{quote}
I am just moving to Paris and I have not had time to look over it ("Certain People") carefully, but I have found two misprints already, one of which makes me very unhappy. 
... The second, the worst one, on page 158, on Professor Durand's visiting card is the incredible substitute of "Docteur des Lettres" for "Docteur es lettres", and this, I confess, makes me sad, for it is just the sort of mistake that every educated reviewer will pounce on.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

It is curious that she was concerned so with details but not with larger critical questions of style. Nevertheless, her wit was never blunted. She wrote to her publisher:

\begin{quote}
Many thanks for your letter of Feb 6th. \textit{Age of Innocence}. Will you kindly tell the President of the Authors' Club of New York that I absolutely decline to be "digested"!\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

In the sequel to \textit{Hudson River Bracketed} she moved the action from New York to Europe - the same year she wrote to a minor American poet:

\begin{quote}
there is so much to say about American "culture" that no time & talk can do justice to the subject; & I shd greatly like the chance to thresh it out with you, while a trace of our language survives to be talked about.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Her alienation from the American scene was strongly reinforced by the death of her fellow expatriate Walter Berry. She dedicated this novel to him and remarked to Gaillard Lapsley:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Certain People, p.101.
\textsuperscript{48} Edith Wharton to Mr Jewett, 3 November, 1930 (Yale Papers).
\textsuperscript{49} Edith Wharton to Mr Jewett, 19 February, 1930 (Yale Papers).
\textsuperscript{50} Edith Wharton to Mr Spingarn, 3 November, 1932 (Spingarn Collection, The New York Public Library).
I want to put Walter's initials on the first page of "The Gods", because for 20 years he was always begging me to write that book. Whenever I told him of a new literary plan he always said: "All right; but when are you going to do the young fellow who is a novelist? So the book is really his.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{The Gods Arrive} is not as good as the first half of the saga.

The banality of the following passage is not atypical:

\begin{quote}
She thought, with a little thrill of feminine submission: How strong and decided he seems! He tells me what to do - he takes everything for granted.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Her crisp diction is now dissipated in phrases such as "life burned with beauty, and every hour was full of magic".\textsuperscript{53}

Her irritation with her raw fellow countrymen is as intense as ever:

\begin{quote}
She recognized in him the roving American with a thin glaze of culture over an unlettered origin, and a taste for developing in conversation theories picked up in random reading, or evolved from an imperfect understanding of art and history.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

The contrast between the East and Mid-West that she had explored so often is made here again, but there is a shift of emphasis. As Euphoria, Illinois was to New York in \textit{Hudson River Bracketed}, so New York is to Europe in \textit{The Gods Arrive}. For Vance there is the fine edge of intelligence everywhere in Paris:

\begin{quote}
Now, where he went, he seemed to meet it; as though it were as much a part of Paris as the stately architecture, the beauty of streets and river, and the sense of that other accumulated beauty stored behind museum walls.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Although inspired by the richness of European art, Weston can

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 17 March, n.y. (Yale Papers).
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Gods Arrive}, p.47.
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Gods Arrive}, pp.44-45.
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Gods Arrive}, p.76.
\end{itemize}
only duplicate his first novel. Both productions are similar to

The Age of Innocence and Old New York but are implicitly criticized when Halo (who acts as Vance's conscience) chides him:

"you said you'd never do another story like 'Instead' -
a 'costume-piece', I mean. I thought you were determined
not to go back to that, but always to do contemporary
subjects." 56

This reflection is reminiscent of Mrs Wharton's own statement, "I did
so want 'The Age' not to be taken as a 'costume piece'". 57

The present world lacked the richness of the past, and the
older world seemed to be growing fainter as its moral standards faded away.
Halo's parents, "however emancipated their sympathies, conformed to
tradition in their conduct". 58 However, "words like dignity and self-
respect seemed to belong to an obsolete language". 59

Weston does not write his novel about contemporary society in
either Hudson River Bracketed or The Gods Arrive, though at the conclusion
of the latter he is about to do so. In the same way Edith Wharton never
gave up trying to write about an increasingly alien world; the results
are uneven and rarely wholly successful.

56. The Gods Arrive, p.64.
57. Edith Wharton to Mary Berenson, 12 December, 1920 (I Tatti Papers).
In 1933 Mrs Wharton collected together five short stories under the title of *Human Nature*. The social upheaval continued to distress her, and she reflected that "The world is whizzing down so crazily to the everlasting abyss that I really can't write any more - at least I can't at present"; in fact, she did not complete another novel before her death four years later. She also continued to feel her estrangement from contemporary literature, and wrote to the editor of the *Saturday Literary Review*:

> I am not a professional critic, and if I were to say what I think of a good many younger writers, I should be regarded simply as a novelist of the old school incapable of understanding the new generation.  

*Human Nature* contains an important story, "Her Son", which was one of the manuscripts selected for publication in a five thousand dollar prize contest in 1932 sponsored by *Scribner's Magazine*. It is a dramatization of the rivalry between two women who personify the opposition between grace and idealism and tawdriness and unscrupulousness. As the narrator states, "I suspected ... antagonism. The women were so different, so diametrically opposed to each other in appearance, dress, manner, and all the inherited standards". Mrs Glen discovers her lost son from whom she had been parted when he was an infant; his foster parents Mr and Mrs Brown come with Stephen to live with his newly-found mother. In reality the three are imposters who come to squander Mrs Glen's fortune.

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1. Edith Wharton to Gaillard Lapsley, 20 September, 1933 (Yale Papers).
2. Edith Wharton to Henry S. Canby, 15 March, 1934 (Overbury Collection, Barnard College).
The narrator, an old family friend, portrays her as "beautiful, benevolent and inarticulate". This latter quality makes her vulnerable to the machinations of the Browns, but even after embezzlement she is not bereft of "ripe beauty".

Illness and anxiety had scarred her as years and weather scar some beautiful image on a church-front.

The face that looked out had still the same carven beauty; but its texture had dwindled from marble to worn ivory.

Mrs Brown, on the other hand, is a "middle-aged flapper with layers and layers of hard-headed feminine craft under her romping ways". Her hotel room also reflects her personal habits:

I ... entered a small plushy sitting-room, with faded mimosa in orange vases, newspapers and cigarette-ends scattered on the dirty carpet ... the table laden with gin and bitters, empty cocktail glasses and disks of sodden lemon.

Even though Mrs Glen is vulnerable because of her kindness, she fascinates young Stephen, a perceptive and talented painter. He refuses to accept any more of her money and leaves only to die of tuberculosis, but confessing to the narrator:

"I'd like to paint her some day - if ever I'm fit for it," he said; and I wondered whether his scruples applied to his moral or artistic inadequancy.

Mrs Wharton published her autobiography in 1934 only to find, in December, "these last months have been unusually lean ones for me, owing to the unexpectedly small sale of 'A Backward Glance'". She had

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11. Edith Wharton to Mr Williams, 14 December, 1934 (Yale Papers).
not replied to a cable from Appleton asking for a short story, because
"I thought the price too low to be worth considering", but changed
her mind because of her financial commitments.

Her sharp eye was still as observant about details as ever,
and when she received a new edition of Ethan Frome in 1936 she instructed
her secretary to write to Scribner's forthwith:

She is shocked to find a misprint on the first page of
the forward, line 12 from the top of page, where "new
standards of manners in my country" is printed "on my
country". This misprint makes the paragraph so mean­
ingless that Mrs Wharton hopes very much you will be
able to have it corrected, by hand if it is not possible
otherwise, before the book appears.13

That same year saw another collection of tales, The World Over, most of
which had been printed previously.

"Roman Fever" is a short piece showing her at her best.

Geoffrey Walton observes:

After drawing so many themes and types of character from
the Society of the city of her birth and making so much
of its values in morals, cultural interests, manners, and
customs, it is very appropriate that Edith Wharton, as the
connoisseur of "good talk," should end her presentation of
it with this glimpse of an unexpected kind of sophistication.14

Two New York matrons "of ripe but well-cared-for middle age"15 spend an
afternoon in conversation on a hill overlooking the Palatine and the Forum.
The more admirable of the two, Mrs Ansley, impresses her companion as
"old-fashioned"16 and her husband "Horace Ansley was - well, just the
duplicate of his wife. Museum specimens of old New York. Good-looking

12. Edith Wharton to Mr Williams, 14 December, 1934 (Yale Papers). After
A Son at the Front (1923) all Mrs Wharton's new fiction was published
by Appleton.

13. Edith Wharton's Secretary to Messrs Charles Scribner's Sons, 7 March,
1936 (Yale Papers).


irreproachable, exemplary."  

This type intrigues Mrs Wharton - they represent a class whose reserve is not necessarily a manifestation of coldness or disdain. It is that sublimation of personal desire for the good of society which had characterized Newland Archer and Countess Olenska. The following passage from an unfinished novel *Disintegration* reflects this situation:

Clephane was not the man to formulate his emotions, or Mrs Clephane the woman to encourage their expression, and the tradition of taste in which they had grown up forbade any outward sign of conjugality; but it was precisely this enforced reserve which emphasized the man's subserviency of will and intellect - that immersion of the larger in the smaller nature that is one of the mysteries of moral life.  

The image of Rome represents this manner of living:

She [Mrs Ansley[ looked straight out at the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendour at her feet.

The word "wreckage" indicates that there has been failure and some element of frustration in "passion", but there is also the noble "splendour" indicating the scope of the enterprise. Mrs Slade thinks of how Rome has meant something different to each generation. For their grandparents, it was the fear of Roman fever contracted in the damp chill of summer evenings in the old city. For their mothers it was the "sentimental dangers" awaiting unchaperoned young ladies, and "to our daughters no more dangers than Main Street." Mrs Slade tries to harm her companion because they both loved the same man; (Mrs Slade later married him). But even though she inflicted "so purposeless a wound on her friend" her hatred is frustrated because Mrs Ansley reveals

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that she bore the child of the man they both loved.

In 1937 (the year of her death) Mrs Wharton collected eleven stories together under the title *Ghosts*; in the personal introduction she foresees the effect of the mass media and in a perceptive passage sounds not unlike Marshall McLuhan:

... deep within us the ghost instinct lurks, I seem to see it being gradually atrophied by those two world-wide enemies of the imagination, the wireless and the cinema. To a generation for whom everything used to nourish the imagination because it had to be won by an effort, and then slowly assimilated, is now served up cooked, seasoned and chopped into little bits, the creative faculty (for reading should be a creative act as well as writing) is rapidly withering, together with the power of sustained attention; and the world which used to be so grand à la carte des lampes is diminishing in inverse ratio to the new means of spanning it; so that the more we add to its surface the smaller it becomes.23

The European conflagration on the horizon also troubled her.

In that same year she had written to an old friend:

How I sympathize with you in your reluctance to give up your old house! I am so attached to my two country places that I hope the Bolchevics [sic] will let me keep them a few years more. After all, there are more changes in peaceful New York than there are in storm-ridden Europe.24

That spring at St Claire-le-Chateau, Hyeres (the mediaeval Carmelite monastery on the Riviera she had skillfully converted into a winter house) she suffered a stroke. She made a partial recovery and was able to return to Pavillon Colombe outside Paris but shortly afterwards she died. Her final novel was published posthumously by her literary executor, Gaillard Lapsley. In his introductory note he states that "During the last four or five years of her life it was the centre of her creative interest and activity".25 Blake Nevius believes it to be:

184.

a novel which, had she finished it, would probably have taken
its place among her half-dozen best and which even as it stands
indicated that with a congenial subject she could subdue her
irritability and regain control of her style. 26

In The Buccaneers she returns to the period of The Age of
Innocence. But unlike the stable society of that era in the earlier
novel, her last one is an examination of the rejection of several young
women by New York society who later marry into the English aristocracy.
The eighteen-seventies saw the beginning of the great migration of
American heiresses who were to replenish the fortunes of many impover-
ished Englishmen. 27

This uncompleted novel is different from The Age of Innocence
because it is a thinly disguised (and not altogether successful) attempt
to come to terms with her own contemporary world, especially the revital-
ization of old traditions under the threat of extinction. Rather than
her own Newport, Rhode Island, she centres the American action in the
less fashionable but more energetic Saratoga Springs, New York. It is
not unlike eighteen-century Bath:

The fact was, you could hardly tell a lady now from an
actress, or - er, the other kind of woman, and society at
Saratoga, now that all the best people were going to
Newport, had grown as mixed and confusing as the fashions. 28

It is evident that she now sees this new shifting of classes as an
opportunity to reinforce tradition, an attitude suggesting a broadening
and maturing of her vision.

She also explores the matter in the richer and denser world of
the English landed aristocracy. Thirty years earlier James had advised
her to turn her attention to England because "the real field of your

26. Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of


28. The Buccaneers, p.4.
extension is here — it has far more fusability with our native and primary materials. After her first novel he had written:

So, as, after all, to mention it in two words does it no sort of justice, let it suffer the wrong of being crudely hinted as my desire earnestly, tenderly, intelligently to admonish you, which you are young, free, expert, exposed (to illumination) — by which I mean while you're in full command of the situation — admonish you, I say, in favour of the American subject. Take hold of it and let it pull you where it will.

In The Buccaneers it "pulls" her to realize that the most significant questions do not deal with the conflicts between America and Europe, but in the fusion of the strengths of each culture. Both are impoverished without the other for:

the traditions and representatives of English society are subjected to a searching scrutiny. The values stand after the demolition of absurdities and falsities, and the American contribution is treated as a revitalization.

She virtually ceases to be hypercritical about Americans and sees that their aesthetic hunger and moral ardour are deeply needed by the older and more exhausted world. James understood this notion implicitly:

An American of course, with his fondness for antiquity, his relish for picturesqueness, his 'emotional' attitude at historic shrines, takes Oxford much more seriously than its sometimes unwilling familiars can be expected to do.

The same attitude is much more passionately expressed by the American Mrs Gracedew in his play The High Bid when she implores Captain Yule to keep his country home intact:

30. Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August, 1902 (Yale Papers).
\[... a duty like this abides ... There's nothing you can break with that would be like breaking here. The very words are ugly and cruel - as much sacrilege as if you had been trusted with the key of the Temple. This is the Temple! ... Don't profane it! Keep up the old altar kindly - you can't raise a new one as good ... you must have beauty in your life, don't you see? - that's the only way to make sure of it for the lives of others. Keep leaving it to them, to all the poor others, and heaven only knows what will become of it. Does it take one of us to feel that? - to preach you the truth? Then it's good, Captain Yule, we come right over - just to see, you know, what you may happen to be 'up to'. We know what we haven't got, worse luck, so that if you've happily got it you've got it also for us. You've got it in trust, you see, and oh we have an eye on you!\]^{35}

Nan St George, the heroine, comes to England to preach this duty, and Lady Glencoe speaks for Europe when she says to her, "We English are spoilt; we've ceased to feel the beauty, to listen to the voices of the past. But you ... come to it with fresh eyes and fresh imagination".\(^{34}\) Nan does make a disastrous mistake in her marriage (like Isabel Archer), but it is because she "married, not for a title, but for history".\(^{35}\) "She did not admit to herself that her first sight of the ruins of the ancient Tintagel had played a large part in her wooing."\(^{36}\) Nevertheless, her moral standards are as admirable as her imaginative sensibility - e.g. she attempts to better the workers' lot on her husband's estates:

Nothing in her early bringing-up had directed her mind toward any kind of organized beneficence, but she had always been what she called "sorry for people", and it seemed to her that there was a good deal to be sorry about in the lot of these people who depended solely, in health and sickness, on a rich man's whim.\(^{37}\)

James had recognized "There used to be little notes in you that were like fine benevolent finger-marks of good George Eliot",\(^{38}\) and this

\[\begin{align*}
\text{33. } & \text{Henry James, "The High Bid," The Complete Plays of Henry James, ed.}\nonumber
\text{ Leon Edel, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), p.582.} \\
\text{34. } & \text{The Buccaneers, p.345.} \\
\text{35. } & \text{Walton, p.191.} \\
\text{36. } & \text{The Buccaneers, p.249.} \\
\text{37. } & \text{The Buccaneers, p.251.} \\
\text{38. } & \text{Henry James to Edith Wharton, 4 December, 1912, Letters, ed. Lubbock,}\nonumber
\text{ II, p.295.}
\end{align*}\]
is clearly shown in *The Buccaneers*. Nan St George is very much a sort of George Eliot heroine, a woman devoted to duty and the service of others, but, like Gwendolen Harleth she needs a Deronda to teach her, and Guy Thwarte presents himself as mentor. He is "linked to . . . an old community of land and blood" and "Tradition, as embodied in the ancient walls and the ancient trees of Honoursiove, seemed to him . . . a priceless quality." In the outline of the projected book Nan abandons her husband and elopes with Thwarte. Like Mrs Wharton herself, she violates one of the signal moral bonds of a society she otherwise reveres. Mrs Wharton's reflections on George Eliot are revealing:

She *George Eliot* wrote, in a moment of profound insight, that 'the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it'; but she never ceased to revere the law she had transgressed.

Edith Wharton herself never ceased to revere the law she had transgressed, and she emphasised its value perhaps too insistently in her fictions as unconscious reparation.

In her final novel *The Buccaneers* (1937) Mrs Wharton was as concerned with the aesthetic and moral sensibility as she was in *The Greater Inclination* (1899). Throughout her career she never ceased to be fascinated by artists, members of the leisure class and those unique characters in impoverished circumstances sensitive to the beautiful (as in *Ethan Frome*, *Summer* and "Bunner Sisters"). All three of these groups gave their members the opportunity to be inspired and guided by the beauty, whether in art or nature, and their actions were, in turn, morally purified. Mrs Wharton never ceased to reverence those societies which nurtured and conserved the physical environment and objects of beauty.

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This concern with aesthetic morality is paramount in her
great works such as The House of Mirth, The Reef, Ethan Frome, "Bunner
Sisters", and The Age of Innocence, but it is no less so in her less
successful fiction whether it be her early or late work. Therefore,
it was important to have examined this aesthetic and moral sensibility
in all her novels and stories because it reveals how central this concern
was to everything she wrote. Indeed, a full length study could be made
of her non-fiction (travel, architecture and gardening are all areas in
which she explored this same theme). Her old age was characterized by
a decline in her work, but there are always passages in this later fiction
where she returns to her former brilliance. Although she was alienated
from literary trends in this period, major writers such as Sinclair
Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald never failed to acknowledge their debt to her.

Whether it is true that a person who is in contact with beauty
will be the better morally is a question beyond the scope of literary
criticism. That it is true in all her work, especially the five great
achievements mentioned above has been demonstrated. That it is true
in life is a question for the social scientist, philosopher, psychologist
and theologian.

Throughout the passionate upheavals of her married life, the
almost thirty years as an expatriate writing about her countrymen, the
collapse of the civilization she sustained herself during and after the
'14-'18 War and a lonely old age, she never lacked the courage or drive
to try to create a world of beauty and morality. She refused to abandon
her American citizenship, and when James did so she reckoned it as
ineffectual and unnecessary. She never regretted her decision to
leave America for Europe, and might well, in describing Nan St George,
have been writing of herself:

42. Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James (London: Peter Owen,
She thought of the thinness of the mental and moral air in her home. In America... At least life in England had a background, layers and layers of rich deep background, of history, poetry, old traditional observances, beautiful houses, beautiful landscapes, beautiful ancient buildings, palaces, churches, cathedrals. Would it not be possible, in some mysterious way, to create for one's self a life out of all this richness, a life which should somehow make up for the poverty of one's personal lot?43

Edith Wharton's achievement as a novelist proves that it is possible.

43. The Buccaneers, p. 305.
APPENDIX 1

1A - EDUCATION THROUGH THE EYES *

Mrs Wharton Addresses the Teachers on
Art in the Schoolroom

In response to an invitation to listen to a paper by Mrs
Edward R. Wharton on "Schoolroom Decoration," the teachers of the public
schools almost without exception gathered in the large west room in the
Clarke street schoolhouse yesterday afternoon, filling it completely.
Besides the teachers there were present Messrs Horton, Terry and
Bachelior of the school committee and a few other guests. The room is
one that has been decorated by the association of which Mrs Wharton is
the head, and the photographs and plaster casts were much admired by all
present.

Mrs Wharton, Mr Harper Pennington, Mrs Victor Sorchan and
Superintendent Baker occupied seats on the platform, and Mr Baker spoke
briefly, saying that while the teachers and scholars had been enjoying
their vacation two ladies had been very busy in the work of decorating
the schoolrooms. Their labor has been for the teachers and the scholars,
all of whom owe to them a deep debt of gratitude. He then introduced
Mrs Wharton, who addressing herself to the teachers spoke substantially
as follows:

I want your help in completing the decoration of the Newport
schools; not your contributions but your personal co-operation in making
your pupils and their parents understand the purpose of our undertaking:
in making the people feel that to put some beauty into the bare rooms
of Newport is not only a good thing but a necessary thing, and necessary
not only on artistic grounds but on moral grounds as well. Our object
in decorating the schoolrooms is not to turn all the school children into
painters and sculptors or to teach them history, but to surround them
with such representations of beauty as in older civilizations the
streets, the monuments and galleries of almost every city provide. In
our country the conditions are unfavorable to the development of taste.
We must teach our children to care for beauty before great monuments
and noble buildings arise. There are signs of improvement; the
desire for beauty is increasing and people are beginning to understand
the immense educational value of good architecture and art. Our object
is to advance this development of taste by surrounding our school
children with an atmosphere of beauty, by putting in the rooms representa-
tions of the best works of art. If with your aid we can prove to the
fathers and mothers that in surrounding the children with beauty we are
also protecting them from ugliness - the ugliness of indifference, the
ugliness of disorder, the ugliness of evil; having done this our cause
is gained.

Beautiful pictures and statues may influence conduct as well
as taste. To keep children out of mischief they must be kept busy.
Every one knows the ceaseless, irrepressible activity of children's hands
and tongues. The hands are always investigating, the tongue is always
asking questions, and the more thoughtful parent realizes that the child's
eyes are equally busy; and to supply fitting objects for its investigation
is one of the most important duties of parents and teachers. In
decorating the schoolrooms we strive to provide answers for the questions
which the child's eye is always asking. No child will sit with his eyes
perpetually glued to his lesson-book. Now and then his glance will wander,
and his thoughts with it. These distractions will not be met by a bare
expanse of dreary, white-washed wall, but rather by some object which
will instantly present to the child's mind an image of beauty, heroism,
wisdom or virtue. We have learned to make the schoolbook interesting,
and the next step forward in the science of education is to make the
schoolroom interesting too.
Education is the discipline of learning, the train of thought aroused by what is learned, the formation of a child's character. The fact that schooling is a means, not an end - the means of making efficient, enlightened and useful citizens - has almost become a truism. The tendency of modern education is rather towards the harmonious development of the whole character than to the acquisition of any set of facts. The value of object lessons is more generally recognized. The underlying principle of the kindergarten system is applied to the higher branches of education. Everywhere the exaction of the eye is considered - that is, everywhere except on the school room walls. But even these, happily, are no longer always bare. In several cities a change has been made.

In time perhaps the need for which we are pleading will be recognized by the municipalities. But first the citizen must educate the city; we must prove our readiness to be taxed for beautiful as well as for useful things, or rather we must prove that beauty is useful. Thrift, order, refinement, ambition and the countless daily pleasures of the observant eye are qualities which are kept alive by the miraculous influence of beauty. Every woman knows how hard it is to take pride in a house that hasn't a single pretty thing in it, and many a man, who may never have thought about the matter, and may appear quite insensible to such things, is unconsciously influenced by the beauty and refinement of his home. We all know how children, so unmerciful to torn carpets and shabby furniture, can be taught to respect what is fresh and pretty and to take a pride in helping to keep it so.

And this is the way in which beauty fosters the civic virtues. Who can long be rough and shatterly and indifferent in a pretty, well-kept house? If a little of the prettiness and order is allowed to overflow into each room, each member of the family will come to regard himself as holding a share in the capital of beauty, and as vitally interested in preserving and increasing that capital. Every woman who knows the truth of what I have been saying, takes pains to surround her children with
beautiful things. They teach them to love and reverence beauty, as they love and reverence goodness. The child who is shut out from beauty during a great part of each day, in the schoolroom with its bare walls, will soon lose his feeling for it, and become indifferent to the graces and refinements of his home.

The importance of beautiful surroundings in making study interesting and teaching easy is another point worth considering. How it helps a teacher, who is talking of art, or history, or literature, to point to some noble bas-relief or picture, to some portrait of the poet or hero in question. And how easily the child remembers the lesson so aptly illustrated. Some of you have anticipated the work of this association by hanging photographs, prints and various decorations of your own making. Every attempt of this kind made by a teacher is direct evidence of the need, the vital need, of the work we have undertaken. To those who have been the pioneers in this work I wish to point out the fact that beauty, as a means of education, performs a double office. True beauty teaches not only love of itself but hatred of ugliness; and not only of positive ugliness but of the negative kind which is less perceptible to the untrained eye, but really just as harmful and deteriorating.

In art, as in literature and in conduct, the child must be taught to care only for the best. It is as easy to buy a plaster cast, or a photograph of some really great work of art as a foolish pink and while chromo. It pays to buy the best. Care only for the best, and be content to go without art rather than tolerate its inferior forms. Don't indulge your pupils in a diet of trashy prettiness. Such a diet is as harmful as a perpetual nibbling of sugar plums. It destroys the healthy appetite for beauty, as eating sweets between meals destroys the appetite for wholesome food. Beauty is not a sugar plum; it is sterner fare. Feeding on this trashy beauty may be compared to the perpetual reading of trash. Every teacher knows how soon such reading
destroys a taste for the best literature. Better bare walls in a
schoolroom than bad art. But nowadays there is no excuse for either.
The best reproductions in plaster or in photographs can be obtained for
a small amount of money. The best is within reach; let us for our-
selves and our children refuse anything less than the best.

In conclusion Mrs Wharton said: Ladies and Gentleman: You now
see what it is we ask of you. We want you to join us in giving a series
of object-lessons in beauty, not only to the school children of Newport
but to the public and to the municipality. We want to teach this lesson
of beauty so clearly and so forcibly that, when Newport builds her next
school, a special appropriation for decorating it with works of art will
be regarded as a matter of course; and meanwhile we want you to help
our association in carrying on the work that has been begun.

I have only to add that the rooms which we have decorated were
selected entirely with reference to their size, their lighting or some
such practical conditions. Our object was to decorate first the rooms
most likely to produce a good effect, and the choice was left entirely
to us by the school committee and the superintendent. Next year we
hope that all the rooms will be done, and that all will give satisfaction
to both teachers and pupils.

Following Mrs Wharton, Mr Harper Pennington, the well known
artist, spoke briefly. He said that in furtherance of Mrs Wharton's
paper it might be pointed out that the artist's mission is not only to
make what is beautiful but to destroy what is ugly. By showing what is
beautiful we will in time put aside all that is ugly. It is evident that
no artist designed the ordinary stove, and even that might be made a thing
of beauty. It is better to put the very best things before the people
and gradually they will refuse to look at what is ugly, and gradually,
perhaps very gradually, to appreciate what is beautiful. Hideous
representations are to be avoided. The children will come to appreciate
the beautiful very slowly, and we must constantly surround them with
beautiful things in order to make them appreciate them.

Superintendent Baker spoke of the ways in which the teachers
might help the association, by securing small contributions from their
friends, by arranging the details for the decoration of the school rooms
and by selecting what is appropriate to the rooms in which they are
located. They should always remember that the movement is for their
own benefit and that of the scholars.

A suggestion made by Miss Currin, one of the teachers, that a
teachers' fair might result in raising a considerable fund for the object,
seemed to meet with favor, Mrs Wharton saying that she intended to remain
in Newport until the middle of December and would gladly assist in the
undertaking.

Hon. J.W. Horton of the school committee, Alderman Fred M.
Hammett and Mr Henry W.Clarke spoke briefly, and the meeting was closed
with a manifest increase in the interest in the work which has been so
auspiciously begun by Mrs Wharton and Mrs Sorchan, and in which hereto­
fore, the citizens of Newport have apparently taken but little interest.

The following additional contributions to the fund for
decorating the schools have been received:

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<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Mrs J.Lanier</td>
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* Newspaper cutting - Yale Papers.
To the Editor of the Daily News:

Sir: The interest shown by the public in the project of school decoration leads me to ask space for a report of the work done since last July by the association for decorating the Newport schools. At that time, as you are aware, two members of the association decorated a room in the Lenthal school, and invited the public to inspect it and to contribute towards carrying on the work. As a result of this appeal, $167 was collected, and the funds thus raised were used to decorate one room in each of the twelve remaining schools. The work done has apparently met with general approval, and we are specially encouraged by the interest manifested by many of the teachers and scholars, since it gives evidence of the real need of such an undertaking.

It is obvious, however, that but a small part of our task is accomplished. To embellish one or two rooms in each school and leave the rest bare and unadorned is an injustice to teacher and pupils. Such a work cannot produce any good results unless it is completed, and to complete it more money must be raised.

The persons who responded so generously to our first appeal are almost all summer visitors, who have many other obligations in their winter homes, and who, while taking a general interest in the welfare of Newport, have no special reason for concerning themselves with the development of her schools. The permanent residents, especially those whose children attend the schools, are those to whom we naturally looked for aid; but, to our great disappointment, we have received but few contributions from citizens of Newport. This is the more disappointing
as we have been given to understand that the work of the association is favorably regarded here; while we have taken special pains to make it known that any contribution, however small, will be of service in buying casts and photographs.

Will you not aid us in making another appeal to the public? Will not some of the parents who have witnessed the pride and pleasure of their children in the adornment of the rooms help us to carry on the work? Much might be done if some of your readers would undertake, during the winter, to make small collections among their friends. We are sure they would do so if they could hear from the teachers what pride the children take in being in a "decorated" room, and how eagerly the less fortunate look forward to the day when their room is to be embellished.

It would be a mortification to us to have to disappoint the Newport children; and we venture to add that it would reflect little credit on Newport where the work thus begun abandoned for lack of funds, while in Salem, Brookline and other neighboring places similar enterprises have been successfully completed.
The following is a list of the contributors to school decoration, additions to which will be acknowledged as received:

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<td>Miss Blight</td>
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<td>Miss Brice</td>
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<td>Mrs Grande d'Hauteville</td>
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<td>Miss Marguerite F. King</td>
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* Newspaper cutting - Yale Papers.
APPENDIX 2

2A

Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision,*
London and New York, 1902.

I do not know if Mrs Wharton's novel will be appreciated in Italy. What a country is able to stir in the imagination of the stranger is surely one of its most valuable gifts to the world; (and each country, like each age, each climate, each type of personality, can contribute to the universal symphony with a note, a timbre, sometimes with a wonderful snatch of melody entirely sui generis); but most of the time this gift does not exist but in the mind of the people who feel it, and cannot be communicated to the nationals of that very country. Later on, when cosmopolitan critics have explained and have made it possible to taste a foreign literature, maybe the readers of a certain people can enjoy those very feelings that their landscapes, their cities, their own physical and moral features, had produced in a foreigner's soul. So Taine did, letting Italian readers understand all that Italy had stirred as terrible or exquisite images in the bizarre minds of the Elizabethian playwrights. In the same way, beyond expectation, my friend Enrico Nencioni, of whom I keep a sweet and venerated memory, succeeded in squeezing from Shelley's and even better from Browning's poetry, that wonderful essence which our greatest had distilled from Italian things. But this is critical work; it is, like all the really fruitful criticism, a second efflorescence blossoming out of the husks of the first. And I think it most possible that the beautiful book by Mrs Wharton will receive now as inadequate an appreciation by contemporary Italians, as Goethe's Travels in Italy might have received by the Italians living in 1780, the same ones depicted by the American novelist.
This book in fact deals with a strangely neglected subject: the Italian seventeenth century. It is the intimate biography of a character typical and imaginary, a minor Lombard prince, whom we follow in his spiritual and worldly vicissitudes, starting from his neglected childhood as a small provincial nobleman related to a renowned family of the Renaissance, through his travels, his love-affairs, his friendships, his readings, until the moment when his liberal and humanitarian dreams are horribly dissipated by priestly conspiracy, by Jacobin fanaticism, by the stupid brutality of the peasants, when all of them join in order to spoil the work he had so generously started, and to push back the state he wanted free, happy and enlightened ... Bonapartean rapacity, into the enervating and cruel tyranny of the Austrians and of the Vatican. Oddone Valsecca, Duke of Pianura, a pupil of the encyclopedists, friend of Filangieri and of Pimentel, fellow-student at the academy of Vittorio Alfieri, has not only sacrificed his own individual independence, his free development as a person, but has also believed it necessary to sacrifice even the sole and greatest love in his life, in order to reign over a small state and to reform it. His reforms are rejected, the people, who have been stirred up by the priestly rabble and incited by the philosophists, revolt against him, during the rising his beloved mistress, his worshipped inspirer Egeria is killed, and the book closes showing him dethroned, exiled, disillusioned, broken-hearted, on the point of starting to fight on behalf of the Sardinian army, that very revolution in which he and his mistress had so heartily believed.

Is it likely? Is it historically correct? The work I did very many years ago about the eighteenth century in Italy, yields (among other pleasant, and maybe less deserved things) the great pleasure of enabling me to reply: yes, Mrs Wharton's novel is historically truthful, both in concrete events and in its moral ambience, to an amazing degree.

But this truth is not only an objective one. The mid-eighteenth century
Italy, that we find in this novel is somewhat more than a topographical map, inasmuch as it shows with extraordinary care and vividness the actual shapes, the real distances and heights, and all the unevennesses of the historical ground. Mrs Wharton gives us something even better: a picture, a series of pictures seen through an artist's personality and translated into artistic symbols: the subjective soul of an age unfolding under the gaze of a real writer's soul. And here I return to my first subject, and I shall explicitly state that, in my opinion, the historical novel, which had been dead a long time, or rather has been alive only sporadically with Scott, Manzoni, George Sand, and the extraordinary Meinhold of "Bernstein Hexe", the historical novel — I say — will be able to live again only on the condition of becoming more and more subjective, turning into the narrative of events (as Pseudo-Cavalca used to say of the Virgin Mary) not really realised but wished by the writer's heart. A new school of the historical novel seems to be emerging nowadays in England. Even apart from the magnificent tales of adventure by our greatest prose-writer and novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson, I allude especially to a kind of novel which had already started twenty years ago with John Inglesant by Shorthouse, and which continues with a recent masterpiece, "Richard Yea and Nay" by Stewlett. These novels have the common feature of being born not so much from the study of a certain age, as from the fascination a certain age has exercised on an individual's mind.

The modern man travels not only through space but through time as well, and the past, caught by him like a landscape caught through the window of a train, can excite that nostalgic wish, that Faustian "stop, you are beautiful", which is the true inner cause of any work of art. A fresco, a room deserted for a long time in some Gonzaga's or Farnesi's palace, the sight one can have leaning on a ruined (délabre) parapet of a Roman villa, a shepherds' path through oak-groves where the abandoned chapel, the black cross, witnesses some forgotten
tragedy, and pushes back the fantasy towards hidden distances; all these things, and along with them a world or two from a letter or an old biography, a face gazing from some portrait by "Unknown Painter", and, most of all, some bars of a melody, evoke a past that is real because we live it. This has been the genesis of John Inglesant by Shorthouse, an unforgettable novel to which Mrs Wharton's is closely connected. The difference between the two being that while Shorthouse's book deals with the enchanting Italy, terrible and mysterious, glimpsed by the English of the seventeenth century, Mrs Wharton's shows the eighteenth century Italy in the way it strikes a modern personality keen on art and justice, whose longing for a better future clashes with her nostalgia for those times - that perhaps never were! - of tradition and privilege, of refinement and dignity now vanished.

At this point, before concluding this brief review of a book that will find only a few people able to appreciate it, but these will appreciate it as only the few can, at this point - I say - I would allow myself to ask the author a question I asked myself in vain: in what spirit was it produced? Is it a disheartening book, a work of mere art and imagination, produced by one who does not believe any longer in life and in truth? This Oddone Valsecca, who gave everything, who lost everything, who is preparing himself for the useless journey, for the causeless war, kneeling in the oratory where he used to pray as a child, what end does he come to? Shall we imagine him embittered and narrow-minded like Alfieri in Misogallo, or converted to all the things he used to fight, like De Maistre? Or can we hope that his man, already middle-aged in 1796, lived like Botta and a few other noble-minded ones to inaugurate the enthusiasms and the efforts in 1830 and 1848?

The belief in the truth, in the good, in the better, the passionate longing for brotherhood which as much as the noblest love bound the souls of the Duke of Piamura and of his mistress, is it to be regarded somehow like those old palaces, those neglected
gardens, those half-forgotten melodies, simply a food for nowadays sophisticated and useless dilettantism?

I do not think so. Anyway, I feel that having lived in imagination with this book's characters has left me with not a smaller faith in the future but a greater. We are also mainly disillusioned people. It may be helpful then to pluck up our courage by the example of those who suffered one hundred years ago the terrible disillusion of that time. Events sometimes step backwards because they have been rushed too far forward, but the journey onwards, though suddenly interrupted, is carried on. Let us not be enticed by our epicurean melancholy to offer our sword to the Old Order, as Addone Valsecca did to the King of Sardinia; nor kneel too long in the oratory where we had been praying as children. To Mrs Wharton's protagonist, Italy and Europe should have seemed irremediably lost. On the contrary, in that very moment they were reviving.

[Vernon Lee]

* Translated from the Italian by Dr G. Castellani.*
Non so se il romanzo della Signora Wharton verrà apprezzato in Italia. Ciò che un paese può suscitare nella fantasia degli estranei e certo uno dei suoi più preziosi doni al mondo; (ed ogni paese, come ogni epoca, ogni clima, ogni tipi di personalità, può fornire alla grande sinfonia universale una nota, un timbro, talvolta un meraviglioso squarcio di melodia affatto sui generis); ma questo dono non esiste il più delle volte che nel sentimento di chi lo riceve, ed è incommensurabile ai nazionali di quel paese stesso. Più tardi, quando la critica cosmopolita ha spiegato e fatto assaporare una letteratura forestiera, può darsi che i lettori di un popolo arrivino a godere quelle stesse impressioni che i loro paesaggi, le loro città, le loro stesse fisionomie fisiche e morali avevano prodotto nell'anima altrui; così il Taine ha fatto capire ai lettori italiani tutto quello che l'Italia aveva fatto sorgere d'immagini terribili o squisite nel cervello bizarro dei drammaturghi inglesti dell'eta d'Elisabetta; così, sopra ogni credere, il mio amico Enrico Nencioni, di dolce e venerata memoria, trovo il mezzo di estrarre dalla poesia di Shelley, e più ancora dalla poesia di Browning, quell'essenza maravigliosa che i nostri due grandissimi avevano distillato dalle cose italiane. Ma questo è lavoro critico, e, come tutta la critica veramente feconda, una seconda efflorescenza venuta su dalle spoglie di una prima. E credo possibilissimo che il bel libro di M. Wharton verrà per ora così poco apprezzato dagli italiani attuali quanto il Viaggio italiano di Goethe sarebbe stato apprezzato dagli italiani del 1780, quelli stessi descritti dalla romanzière americana. Giacché questo libro si aggira sopra il soggetto così stranamente trascurato del settecento italiano. E' la biografia intima di un personaggio tipico e immaginario, un principetto Lombardo di cui
seguiamo le vicende spirituali quanto secolari dalla sua infanzia trascurata di piccolo nobile di provincia apparentato ad una illustre stirpe del Rinascimento, attraverso i suoi viaggi, i suoi amori, le sue amicizie, le sue letture, fino al momento quando i suoi sogni liberali e umanitari vengono orribilmente dissipati dalla cospirazione pretesca, dal fanatismo giacobino, dalla stupida brutalità contadinesca che tutti si uniscono contro di lui per rovinare la sua opera magnanimaente principiata, ed a rispingere lo stato ch'esso volevo libero, felice e illuminato, sotto la di rapacita Bonapartiana, sotto la snervante e crudele tirannia austriaca e Vaticana. Oddone Valsecca, Duca di Pianura, discepolo degli enciclopedisti, amico di Filangieri e della Pimentel, condiscepolo d'accademia di Vittorio Alfieri, ha sacrificato la sua indipendenza individuale, il suo libero sviluppo come persona, ha creduto sacrificare persino l'unico e grandissimo amore della sua vita, per regnare sopra un piccolo stato e riformarlo. Le sue riforme vengono rispinte; il popolo, sobillato dalla pretaglia, aizzato dai filosofanti, si rivolta contro lui; nella sommossa viene uccisa la donna sua amata, l'adorata sua Egeria ispiratrice; ed il libro chiude mostrandocelo spodestato, esule, disilluso, affranto di cuore, avviandosi a combattere nell'esercito sardo quella stessa rivoluzione alla quale egli e la sua donna avevano così ferventemente creduto.

E' verosimile? e storicamente corretto? I lavori che feci, moltissimi anni sono, intorno a questo stesso settecento italiano, mi fruttano, (fra altre cose piacevoli e forse meno meritate) il piacere grande di poter rispondere: si; il romanzo della signora Wharton e di una verità storica, tanto nei fatti concreti quanto nell'ambiente morale, addirittura maravigliosa. Verità non solo obbiettive pero. Questa Italia della seconda meta del 1700, quale la troviamo in questo romanzo, e qualcosa più di una pianta topografica mostrandoci con mirabile accuratezza ed evidenza le forme assolute, le distanze e le altezze vere,
tutti gli incidenti del terreno storico. La Signora Wharton ci da
meglio: un quadro, una serie di quadri, veduti attraverso una
personalità d'artista e tradotti in simboli artistici: la verità
subbiettiva dell'anima di un epoca e di un paese rivelandosi sotto lo
sguardo di un'anima di scrittore vero. E qui torno al mio primo tema;
e diro esplicitamente che a parer mio il romanzo storico, morto
da gran pezzo o piuttosto vissuto sinora solo sporadicamente in Scott,
Manzoni, George Sand e quel mirabile Meinhold della "Bernstein Hexe" -
, il romanzo storico potrà rivivere solo facendosi di più in più subbiettivo,
diventando il racconto di fatti (come diceva il pseudo-Cavalca della vita
della Madonna) non già avverati, ma desiderati dal cuore di chi scrive.
Una nuova scuola di romanzo storico par che sorga lentamente ai giorni
nostri nell'Inghilterra attuale. Senza parlare degli splendidi
racconti d'avventura del nostro più grande prosatore e romanziere
moderno, Robert Louis Stevenson, alludo specialmente ad una categoria
di romanzo che principio già ventanni sono col John Inglesant di
Shorthouse, e che continua un recente capolavoro, il "Richard Yea-
and-Nay" del Stewlett. Questi romanzi hanno per caratteristica l'essere
nati non tanto dallo studio di una data epoca, quanto dal fascino che una
data epoca ha esercitato sopra una mente individuale. L'uomo
moderno viaggia non solo nello spazio ma nel tempo; ed il passato,
intravisto da lui come un paesaggio intravveduto dal finestrino del
treno, può suscitare in esso quel desiderio nostalgico, quel Faustiano
"fermati sei bello - " che è il vero movente interno di ogni opera d'arte.
Un affresco, una stanza lungamente disabitata di qualche palazzo dei
Gonzaga o dei Farnesi; la veduta che si ha appoggiandosi sul parapetto
rovinato (delabre) di una villa Romana; un sentiero da pecorai
attraverso i querceti dove la cappella abbandonata, la croce nero
testimone di qualche tragedia obbliata, fanno e spingono
la fantasia in lontananze nascoste; tutte queste cose, e con esse una
parola o due di una lettera o biografia vecchia, un viso che si guarda da qualche ritratto fatto da "Pittore Ignoto", più di tutto qualche battuta di melodia, fanno sorgere nella nostra anima un passato che è vero, poiché è vissuto da noi. Così è stata la genesi del John Inglesant del Shorthouse; romanzo indimenticabile a cui si connette strettamente il romanzo della Signora Wharton. Solo che, mentre il libro del Shorthouse si aggira sull'Italia affascinante, terribile e misteriosa intravveduta dagli Inglesi del 1600; quello della Signora Wharton ci mostra l'Italia del 1700 come colpisce una moderna appassionata d'arte e di giustizia, il cui desiderio di un avvenire migliore contrasta con la sua nostalgia per quei tempi - che forse non furon mai - di tradizione e di privilegio, di raffinatezza e di dignità ormai scomparse.

E qui, prima di terminare questo accenno ad un libro che troverà pochi capaci d'apprezzarlo, ma da questi verra apprezzato come solo i pochi sanno apprezzarlo, si rivolgerei a me stessa: quale è lo spirito in cui venne scritto? E' un libro scoraggiante, e un opera di pura arte e fantasia, fatta da chi non crede più alla vita ed al vero? Questo Oddone Valsecca che ha tutto dato, tutto perduto, e che si appresta all'inutile viaggio, alla guerra senza ragione, inginocchiandosi nell'oratorio dove aveva pregato bambino; questo Oddone Valsecca come va a finire? Dobbiamo immaginarcelo inasprito e rimpiccolito d'idee come l'Alfieri del Misogallo, o convertito a tutte le forme che aveva osteggiato, come il De Maistre? Oppure possiamo sperare che quest'uomo già maturo nel 1796, vivesse come il Botta ed altri pochi generosi, per inaugurare gli entusiasmi e gli sforzi del 1830 e 1848?
La fede al vero, al buono, al meglio, l'ardente desiderio di fraternità che, quanto l'amore nobilissimo e univa le anime del Duca di Pianura e della sua donna; tutto ciò devesi considerare un po' come quei vecchi palazzi, quei giardini abbandonati, quelle melodie semidimenticate, come cibo del delicato e inutile dilettantismo del giorno
d'oggi?

Non credo. Io almeno ho sentito che la convivenza immaginaria coi protagonisti di questo libro, mi ha lasciato non minor fede all'avvenire, ma maggiore. Anche noi siamo in gran parte dei disillusi. Ci valga per darci coraggio l'esempio di coloro che soffrirono centanni fa dalla terribile disillusione d'allora. Le cose camminano ogni tanto indietro, perché si sono precipitate troppo in \[12\] avanti; ma il cammino in avanti, anche interrotto violentemente, riprende.

Non ci lasciamo sedurre dalle nostre malinconie epicuree a offrire la nostra spada all'antico Regime come Oddone Valsecca l'offri al Re di Sardegna; neanche a inginocchiarsi troppo lungamente nell'oratorio dove pregammo bambini. Al protagonista della Signora Wharton l'Italia, l'Europa dovevan sembrare perdute irremissibilmente. Eppure in quel momento stesso esse risorgevano.

\[\text{Vernon Lee}\]
My first conscious recollection is of being kissed in Fifth Avenue by my cousin Dale Fraring.

It was a winter day, I was walking with my father, and I was a little less than four years old, when this momentous event took place. My cousin, a very round and rosy little boy, two or three years older, was also walking with his father; and I remember distinctly his running up to me, and kissing me, and the extremely pleasant sensation which his salute produced. With equal distinctness, I recall the satisfaction I felt in knowing that **I had on my best bonnet**, a very handsome bonnet made of a bright Tartan velvet with a white satin ground, with a full ruffling of blond lace under the brim. Thus I may truly say that with my first conscious sensations were produced by the two deepest-seated instincts of my nature - the desire to love and to look pretty.

I say "to look pretty" instead of "to be admired", because I really believe it has always been an aesthetic desire, rather than a form of vanity. I always saw the visible world as a series of pictures, more or less harmoniously composed, and the wish to make the picture prettier was, as nearly as I can define it, the form my feminine **instinct of pleasing took**.

I am able to date this first adventure with precision, because it happened before we went to Europe to live, and I was four years old when we left America. I believe we went because my father's income was reduced by "bad times" (and also, probably, by bad management of his property), and he wished to economize for a time, and to let his newly-built country-house at Newport, and our town house as well. I imagine that the expense of these two establishments weighed rather heavily on
him, and that my mother, who was a very indolent woman—though she could be spasmodically active when anything amused her for the moment—preferred the drifting European life to the care of two houses and the obligations which my father's taste for society laid upon her when they were at home... Of the first two or three years of our life abroad I remember chiefly vague pictures of travel—for my visual sensibility seems to me, as I look back, to have been as intense then as it is now—and the most excruciating moral tortures. The visual impressions were received in the course of our varied wanderings in Italy, Spain, France, Germany and England. It is difficult, of course, to disentangle these from the palimpsest of later impressions received in the same scenes; but I recall certain images—impressions of scenery, and more sharply-drawn visions of rooms—which must belong to the primitive period. I think my suffering from ugliness developed earlier than my sense of beauty, though it would seem that one being the complement of the other, they must have coincided in my consciousness. At any rate, the ugliness stamped itself more deeply on my brain, and I remember hating certain rooms in a London house of my aunt's, and feeling for ugly people an abhorrence, a kind of cold cruel hate, that I have never been able to overcome.

One of the first results of this detestation of physical ugliness was an incident which will explain what I meant just now in saying that I suffered moral tortures in my childhood. When my parents settled down in Paris—I must have been six or seven at the time—I was sent to a small private dancing-class kept by a certain Mlle Michelet, who had been a danseuse at the Grand Opera. Mlle Michelt was a large good-humoured swarthy person, who, while destitute of beauty, inspired in me no physical repugnance; but she had a small shrivelled bearded mother whom I could not look at without disgust. This disgust I confidentially revealed to the little boy I was in love with at the time.
(I was always in love with some little boy, and he was generally in love with another little girl.) I described Mlle Michelet as looking like "une vieille cheve," and the description was greeted with such approval that, if I had been a normal child, I should have been delighted with the success of my witticism. Instead of this, however, I was seized with immediate horror at my guilt; for I had said something about Mlle Michelet's mother which I would not have said to her, and which it was consequently "naughty" to say, or even to think.

Now the only possible interest connected with this anecdote lies in the curious fact that my compunction was entirely self-evolved. I had been brought up in the atmosphere of truthfulness, and of moral fierte, but I had never been subjected to any severe moral discipline, or even to the religious instruction which develops self-scrutiny in many children. I had an easy-going affectionate nurse, who had been with us since my brothers were babies, and a succession of gentle going nursery-governesses, who never preached or scolded, or evoked moral bogeys; and my parents were profoundly indifferent to the subtler problems of the conscience. They had what might be called the code of worldly probity, but the Christian sense of an abstract law of conduct, of any religious counsel of perfection, was completely absent from their talk, and probably from their consciousness. My mother's rule of behaviour was that one should be "polite" - my father's that one should be kind. Ill-breeding - any departure from the social rules of conduct - was the only form of wrong-doing I can remember hearing condemned. I had never, as far as I know, been told that it was "naughty" to lie (perhaps because I had never conceived it possible to do so); but I had often been told that it was naughty to scratch, to interrupt, not to "shake hands nicely", and to tear the lace ruffles out of my bonnet (what fun it was to hear them crack!) - I had, nevertheless, worked out of my mind a rigid rule of absolute, unmitigated truth-telling, the least
imperceptible deviation from which would inevitably be punished by the
dark Power I knew as "God". Not content with this, I had further
evolved the principle that it was "naughty" to say, or to think, any­
thing about any one that one could not, without offense, avow to the
person in question; with the grim deduction that this very act of avowal
would in such cases, be the only adequate expiation of one's offense.
I therefore nerved myself - with what anguish, I still recall! - to the
act of publicly confessing to Mlle Michelet before the assembled dancing­
class, that I had called her mother an old goat, and I perfectly remember
(such are the sophistries of the infant heart) a distinct sense of
disappointment where, instead of recognizing and commending the heroism
of my conduct, she gave me a furious scolding for my impertinence. My
distress was increased by the conviction that my mother would have
disapproved of the whole thing - and of the act more than the thought
leading up to it; and I believe my first sense of moral bewilderment -
of the seeming impossibility of reconciling an ideal of conduct with the
unexpectedness of human experience - dates from this unhappy incident.
At any rate, for years afterwards I was never free from the oppressive
sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please - God and
my mother - who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of
behaviour, differed totally as to their application. And my mother was
the most inscrutable of the two.

Nothing I have suffered since has equalled the darkness of horror
that weighed on my childhood in respect to this vexed problem of truth­
telling, and the impossibility of reconciling "God's" standard of
truthfulness with the conventional obligation to be "polite" and not
hurt anyone's feelings. Between these conflicting rules of conduct I
suffered an untold anguish of perplexity, and suffered alone, as imag­
inative children generally do, without daring to tell any one of my
trouble, because I vaguely felt that I ought to know what was right, and
that it was probably "naughty" not to. It is difficult to imagine how
the sternest Presbyterian training could have produced different or more
depressing results. I was indeed "God-intoxicated", in the medical sense
of the word.

Happily I had two means of escape from this chronic moral malady.
One was provided by my love of pretty things - pretty clothes, pretty
pictures, pretty objects - and the other by my learning to read. How I
learned no one ever knew. My father taught me my alphabet, and was
planning to lead me on to "cat" and /37 "bat" when one day I was found
seated in the drawing-room, reading a play called "Fanny Lear", by
Halery, I think. Of the intermediate stages neither I nor any one in
my family had been conscious; and I can remember nothing of the process
except the fact - as clear to me as if it had happened yesterday - of
perusing Mr Halery's pages with an apparent mastery of the meaning of the
short words and the sound of the long ones. When I recall how carefully
my reading was supervised from that hour to the day of my marriage, it
seems odd that it should have begun with the story of a prostitute!

From that moment I was enthralled by words. It mattered very little
whether I understood them or not: the sound was the essential thing.
Wherever I went, they sang to me like the birds in an enchanted forest.
And they had looks as well as sound: each one had its own gestures and
physiognomy. What were dolls to a child who had such marvellous toys,
and who knew that as fast as one wearied of the familiar ones, there
were others, more wonderful still, to take their place?

When I read my first poetry I felt that "bliss was it in that dawn
to be alive." Here /37 were words transfigured, lifted from earth to
heaven! I think my first experience of rhyme was the hearing of the
"Lays of Ancient Rome" read aloud by my father. The movement of the
metre was intoxicating: I can still feel the thump thump of my little
heart as I listened to it!
But this first taste only sharpened my appetite, and I plunged into Tennyson, the only accessible poet. Here indeed were "realms of gold." My enjoyment of the rhythmic beauty of "Locksley Hall" and "In Memoriam" was undisturbed by any intellectual effort, as I understood hardly a world of what I was reading. The simpler poems, which I could partially understand — the Queen of the May, and Clara Vere de Vere, for instance — interested me far less; though I confess to a weakness for "The Lord of Burleigh", based, I think, on its documentary interest as a picture of love and marriage. (Subjects which already interested me profoundly.) From this poem I drew the inference that a husband's first act after marriage was to give his wife a concert. ("And a gentle consort made he").

As I never asked the meaning of an unknown word, and never hesitated to supply my own definitions, I had a stock of remarkable "readings" of this kind; and I remember, for instance, that many years later, I still thought that persons who had "committed adultery" had to pay higher rates in travelling (probably as a punishment of their guilt), because I had seen somewhere, in a train or a ferryboat, the notice: "Adults 50 cents, children 25 cents."

But this increase of knowledge was as nought compared to the sensuous rapture produced by the sound and sight of the words. I never for a moment ceased to be conscious of them. They were visible, almost tangible presences, with faces as distinct as those of the persons among whom I lived. And, like the Erl Koseigs daughters, they sang to me so beautifully that they almost lured me from the wholesome noonday air of childhood into some strange supernatural region where the normal pleasures of my age seemed as insipid as the fruits of the earth to Persephorie after she had eaten of the pomegranate seed.

But I perceive that in setting down this record of my youthful emotions I have not put them in their proper order, for one of the most intense and enduring awoke in me before I learned to read. It was the
passion for story-telling; a taste so common to solitary children that it would hardly be worth mentioning if it had not taken so curious a form in my case. The peculiarity in question was my associating the act of fiction with the printed page before I could decipher a word of the latter. I did not want to tell the stories I was forever intenting, I wanted to read them aloud; and every day for hours I paced the nursery floor, engaged in the absorbing occupation of reading these inexhaustible tales from a book which, as often as not, I held upside down, but of which I never failed to turn the pages. This strange pursuit was called "making up", and was carried on long after I learned to read, and always book in hand. My mother often tried to note down the narratives I poured out, but I "read aloud" so fast that she was never able to capture more than a few words. I was very particular about the book I used, and my invention flagged when I had what I called "the right print" – rather a small type, with a full page. I remember that some of the (?) Trollopes were peculiarly inspiring.

This devastating passion grew on me to such an extent that my parents became alarmed, and called in the aid of toys and play-mates to distract me. But the only toys I cared for were animals, and the only play-mates little boys. Dolls and little girls I frankly despised, though I tried to be "polite" when their company was forced upon me. Never shall I forget the long-drawn wariness of the hours passed with "nice" little girls, brought in to "spend the day," and unable to converse with me about Tennyson, Macaulay, or anything that "really mattered". I used to struggle as long as I could against my perilous obsession, and then, when the "pull" became too strong, I would politely ask my unsuspecting companion "to excuse me while I went to speak to Mamma," and dashing into the drawing-room would pant out, "Mamma, please go and amuse those children. I must make up." And in another instant I would be shut in her bedroom, and measuring its floor with rapid strides,
while I poured out to my tattered (?) the accumulated floods of my pent-up eloquence. Oh, the exquisite relief of those moments of escape from the effort of trying to "be like other children"! The rapture of finding myself again in my own rich world of dreams! I don't think I exaggerate or embellish in retrospect the ecstasy which transported my little body and soul where I shut myself in and caught-up my precious (?) . It was really the Pythoness fury that possessed me!

Of the substance of these endless improvisations I remember nothing, save that they were always about "real people", and never about fairies. Fairy-tales bored me, and as I have always had a sense of the "au dela", and of Casements opening on the perilous foam of the seas of magic, I can account for the fact only by supposing that I had heard of fairies only through "children's books", a form of literature which I despised, as any intelligent child does after a taste of "real books". Certainly my youthful realism was due to no absence of the anthropomorphic fancy, for the Gods of Greece peopled my earliest dreams. When I was not more than five or six, a friend of my father's, who came to dine every Sunday, used to take me on his knee after dinner (one wonders how I came to be up at that hour!) and "tell me mythology". I looked forward to this event during the whole week, for it came next to "making up" in the order (?[4] of my emotional experiences. It stands out, moreover, as the only glimpse my childhood ever had of the imaginative faculty in others. My parents and my teachers read me stories, but were the mere mouth-pieces of what they read; no one else ever told me a story, or gave a personal interpretation to the narrative; and our Sunday evening guest was the only person who ever showed signs of knowing anything about the secret story-world in which I lived. No doubt my complete mental isolation intensified all my sensations, and perhaps it now leads me to regard as singular many experiences that may be common to all fanciful children.
I can only say that none of the children I knew had the clue to my labyrinth.

I think my parents by this time were beginning to regard me with fear, like some pale predestined child who disappeared at night to dance with "the little people". They need not have felt any such anxiety, for all the normal instincts of my sex were strong in me.

When my mother died I found among her papers several "brouillous" of letters I have indited to aunts and god mothers. They are all concerned with the "pretty dresses" I wore at various children's parties, and one contains the fatuous phrase "I wish you could have seen me in my white muslin at Elise's birthday party". (Elise Jusserand.) And then the objective world could never lose its charm to me while it contained puppy-dogs and little boys. I loved all forms of furry animals, but gave my preference to these two. (Canary-birds I called with dolls and little girls, as negligible if one could get anything better.) Games in which dogs and little boys took part were the child fun of what I may call my external life; and I still meet in the alleys of the Champs Elysees, in the "borchi" of the Princes and the Boboli gardens, the ghosts of the romping children - the Harry and Willies and (?) - with a view to those subjugation I practised the arts of the ball and the skipping-rope, and shook out my red hair so that it caught the sun!

II

When I was nine years old I fell ill of typhoid fever, and lay for weeks at the point of death. We were at Mildbad in the Black Forest, then a small unfashionable "Bath", where my mother was taking the cure. The leading physician of the place (the only one, perhaps) had never seen a case of typhoid, and was obliged to write daily for advice to his son, also a physician, who was with the German army (it was just before the close of the Franco-Prussian war.)
This method of "absent treatment" was not successful, and at last the Dr. told my parents that I was dying. That very day they happened to hear that the physician of the Czar of Russia was passing through Mildbad. In their despair they appealed to him, and on his way to the train he stopped at our hotel for five minutes, looked at me, changed the treatment - and saved my life.

This illness formed the dividing line between my little-childhood, and the next stage. It obliterated - as far as I can recall - the torturing moral scruples which had darkened my life hitherto, but left me the prey to an intense and unreasoning physical timidity. During my convalescence, my one prayer was to be allowed to read, and among the books given me was \[\text{17}\] one of the detestable "children's books" which poison the youthful mind when they do not hopelessly weaken it. I must do my mother the justice to say that, though wholly indifferent to literature, she had a wholesome horror of what she called "silly books", and always kept them from me; but the volume in question was lent by two little playmates, a brother and sister, who were very "nicely" brought up, and of whom it was to be assumed that they would have only "nice" stories in their possession. To an unimaginative child the tale would no doubt have been harmless; but it was a "robber-story", and with my intense Celtic sense of the super-natural, tales of robbers and ghosts were perilous reading. This one brought on a serious relapse, and again my life was in danger; and when I came to myself, it was to enter a world haunted by formless horrors. I had been naturally a fearless child; now I lived in a state of chronic fear. Fear of what? I cannot say - and even at the time, I was never able to formulate my terror. It was like some dark undefinable menace, forever dogging my steps, lurking, and threatening; I was conscious of it wherever I went by day, and at \[\text{18}\] night it made sleep impossible unless a light and a nurse-maid were in the room. But, whatever it was, it was most formidable and pressing when I was returning from my daily walk (which I always took with a maid
or governess, or with my father.) During the last few yards, and while
I waited on the door-step for the door to be opened, I could feel it
behind me, upon me; and if there was any delay in the opening of the
door I was seized by a choking agony of terror. It did not matter who
was with me, for no one could protect me; but, oh, the rapture of
relief if my companion had a latch-key, and we could get in at once,
before it caught me!

This species of hallucination lasted seven or eight years, and I
was a "young lady" with long skirts and my hair up before my heart
ceased to beat with fear if I had to stand for half a minute on a door­
step! I am often inclined - like most people - to think my parents might
have brought me up in a manner more suited to my tastes and disposition;
but I owe them the deepest gratitude for their treatment of me during
this difficult phase. They made as \sqrt{12} \light of my fears as they could,
without hurting my feelings; but they never scolded or ridiculed me for
them, or tried to "harden" me by making me sleep in the dark, or doing
any of the things which are supposed to give courage to timid children.
I believe it is owing to their kindness and forbearance that my terror
gradually wore off, and that I became what I am now - a woman hardly
conscious of physical fear. But how long the traces of my illness lasted
may be judged from the fact that, till I was twenty-seven or eight, I
could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost-story, and
that I have frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it
frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library!

Shortly after I recovered from the typhoid fever we went back to
America to live. I was keenly interested in this change in our
existence, but I shall never forget the bitter disappointment produced
by the first impressions of my native country. I was only ten years
old, but I had been fed on beauty since my babyhood, and my first thought
was: "How ugly it is!" I have never since thought \sqrt{20} \otherwise, or
felt otherwise than as an exile in America; and that this is no
retrospective delusion is proved by the fact that I used to dream at
frequent intervals that we were going back to Europe, and to wake from
this dream in a state of exhilaration which the reality turned to deep
depression.

Yet there was much to interest me in our new life, and I was
always passionately interested in things! From a wandering existence
in continental hotels we went to a comfortable town-house, luxuriously
mounted, and a charming country-place on Narragansett Bay, in the out-
skirts of Newport, where I found everything to delight the heart of a
happy, healthy child - cows, a kitchen-garden full of pears and quinces
and straw-berries, a beautiful rose garden, a stable full of horses (with
a dear little pony of my own), a boat, a bath-house, a beautiful
sheltered cave to swim in, and best of all, two glorious little boys
to swim with! I wonder now that I did not forget all about Europe.
The little boys were our neighbours, the children of M. Lewis Rutherford,
the distinguished [217] astronomer (father of Mrs Henry White) whose
place "married" with ours, & who was an intimate friend of my parents.
The younger of the two boys, Winthrop Rutherford was just my age, the
ger, Lewis, three or four years older. They were two of the most
beautiful young creatures it is possible to imagine, the younger
(?) , gay to audacious, the elder (?) , tender-hearted and
shy. Need I say that I fell in love the former and that the latter fell
in love with me? With these delightful companions all my days were
spent; for the German governess whom he had brought from Europe having
proved unsympathetic & dissatisfied, my parents sent her home, & arranged
that I should study with the governess of the Rutherford children, who
became afterward my own dear pedagogue - Ann Bahlmann. Under such
conditions work was pleasant enough, but play was of course infinitely
better! How we played! I had a poney, Lewis and Winthropp had a
donkey, & everybody had dogs. Dogs of all ages, sizes and characters swarmed through my early years - & how I loved them! The first - a furry Spitz puppy - was given me before I was four years old, & from that moment I was never without one, except during a brief interval in Europe, when a delicious brown rabbit named "Bonaparte" ruled alone in my heart. I always had a deep, instinctive understanding of animals, a yearning to hold them in my arms, a fierce desire to protect them against pain & cruelty. This feeling seemed to have its source in a curious sense of being somehow, myself, an intermediate creature between human beings & animals, & nearer, on the whole, to the furry tribes than to homo sapiens. I felt that I knew things about them - their sensations, desires & sensibilities - that other bipeds could not guess; & this seemed to lay in me the obligation to defend them against their human oppressors. The feeling grew in intensity until it became a morbid preoccupation, and I passed out of the phase of physical fear that I have just described only to be possessed by a haunting consciousness of the sufferings of animals. This lasted for years, & was the last stage of imaginative misery that I passed through before reaching a completely normal & balanced state of mind. I helped to cure myself by working as hard as I could to better the condition of animals wherever I happened to be living,

So I lived my two lives, the one of physical exercise & healthy natural "fun", & the other, parallel with it, but known to none by myself - a life of dreams & visions, set to the rhythm of the poets, & people.
with (?I images of beauty. I cannot say that either of these lives occupied more space than the other; & perhaps the most curious thing about my youth is the equilibrium preserved between my solitary intellectual sympathies, & the sociable instincts which made me desire to be with other children, & to shine in their company. This eagerness to excel is one of the marked traits of my youth. I wanted to lead, to influence, I wanted — it must be (?) ! — to E'pater! There is nothing unusual in this, on the part of a clever child; but usually such strongly marked characteristics persist, & in my case the desire to be admired & to dominate died out before I was thirty.

Our return to America had brought me one untold boom — the possibility of access to a library. In the country we had few books, but in town there must have been five or six hundred which but for me would have slumbered undisturbed behind the glass doors of the book-cases. My mother read nothing but novels & books on horticulture; my father read sermons, & narratives of Arctic exploration. But at that time every gentleman, whether he was a reader or not, possessed what was known as "a gentleman's library"; that is a fair collection of the "standard" works in French & English. As there were no novels on the library shelves (except Scott & Disraeli), I was at once given free access to them, my mother's rule being that I must never read a novel without asking permission, but that "poetry & history" (her rough classification of the rest of literature) could do no harm. I must add that, having been thus put on my honour, I never once failed to observe the compact, & never read a novel without asking leave until the day of my marriage.

Oh, the rapture of my first explorations in that dear dear library! I can see now where almost every volume stood, from the beautiful old Swift & Fielding & Sterne in eighteenth century bindings (from my grandfather's library) to the white vellum Macaulay, with gold
tooling & red morocco labels! I can feel the rough shaggy surface of
the Turkey rug on which I used to lie stretched by the hour, my chin
in my hands peering over one precious volume after the other, &
forming fantastic conceptions of life from the heterogeneous wisdom
that absorbed. I could make out a fairly complete list of the volumes;
but instead of this, I will try to name, in the order of their importance,
those from which I drew my chief intellectual sustenance. First,
unquestionable, came Chambers's Encyclopaedia of English Literature,
that admirable storehouse of great prose and poetry, in which I learned
the cadences of the Areopagitica & the Non-Burial, & caught fragmentary
glimpses of the Elizabethan drama. Oh, how I longed for more of Ford
& Marlowe and Webster! But the idea that they were obtainable in any
other form apparently never occurred to me; & so I read & re-read the
great scenes of the Duchess of Malfy, & the Broken Heart & Faustus &
Edward II, & tried to write others, like them ... next came -
Coleridge's "Friend". Let no one ask my why! I can only suppose it
answered to some hidden need to order my thoughts, & get things into
some kind of logical relation to each other: a need which developed
in me almost as early as the desire to be kissed & thought pretty!
It originated, perhaps, in the sense that weighed on my whole childhood
- the sense of bewilderment, of the need of guidance, the longing to
understand what it was all about. My little corner of the cosmos
secured like a dark trackless region "where ignorant armies clash by
night", & I was oppressed by the sense that I was too small & ignorant
& alone ever to find my way about in it ... After Coleridge came Sainte
Bennes, Corneille, Raciner, & a very good anthology of French prose &
verse. Some of Macaulay's essays I enjoyed, & parts of Augustin
Thierry's History. (The vivid Merovingian pictures.) I don't remember
Gibbon, but I read bits of Carlyle without much enthusiasm. (I hated
his blustering, bullying tone) - & then I came upon Ruskin! His
wonderful cloudy pages gave me back the image of the beautiful Europe I had
lost, & woke in me the habit of precise visual observation. The ethical & aesthetical fatras were easily enough got rid of later, & as an interpreter of visual impressions he did me incomparable service.

There seem to have been few poets in the library, for I remember reading only Wordsworth (without enthusiasm there). But soon after this I fell in love with our clergyman, & thereby opened wide the gates of literature. The Revd. Dr Washburn, rector of Calvary Church, must have been a man of about fifty-five. He was a scholar & a linguist, & had a beautiful voice. I have always been very sensitive to qualities of intonation, & to beauty of diction, & it was ecstasy to me to sit in the dusky shadowy church, & hear him roll out: "What though I have fought with the beasts at Ephesus?" or "Caust thou loose the sweet influences of the Pleiades?" I was about thirteen when this consuming passion fell upon me, & it raged for three or four years to the exclusion of every other affection. I am not aware that it was ever known to its object, but it led to my making the acquaintance of his daughter, a queer, shy, invalid girl of twenty or so, in whom I suspect there were strong traces of degeneracy. This daughter became passionately, morbidly attached to me; & as she was extremely cultivated, & a great reader (though not really intelligent) she soon saw that I was starving for mental nourishment, & poured it out upon me in reckless profusion. There was no measure to my appetite, & as I knew French, German and Italian as well as English (having learnt them all in my babyhood in Europe), we ranged through four literatures - though chiefly absorbed in German & English. At the same time I was "studying" German literature with Miss Bahlmann, & learning to read Middle High German in order to enjoy the Niebelungen in the original. This led me to read the Eddan, & then Miss Washburn suggested that I should learn Anglo-Saxon in order to "enjoy" (ye gods!) The Saxon Chronicle & Layamous Brut in the original. "Gesagt-gethan" - I was soon fluent in Anglo-Saxon, but, apart from the pleasure derived from "The Battle of Brunanbuh", which is glorious, I remember getting
no especial satisfaction from this new acquirement, save the hope that
Dr Washbury might fall in love with me when he knew that I had learned
Anglo-Saxon!

This hope was not fulfilled - but my time was not wasted, since my
studies let me naturally to philology, & to Keat\textsuperscript{1}, Kemble,\textsuperscript{2} Morris,
Barle &\textsuperscript{C}, admitted me to new delights. Here I was back in the realm of
words, my own native country, as it were; & for the next year or two I
was steeped in comparative philology - March, May Müller, & latti quanti;
all the obsolete "authorities" whose very names I have forgotten! These
worthies introduced me to their protege the Aryan, & in that elusive being
& his (?) I long took a passionate interest. Meanwhile my love
of poetry & letters was fed by all these studies, & I plunged with rapture
into the great ocean of Goethe. At fifteen I had read every word of
his plays and poems. Dichlung and Wahrheit, & Wilhelm Meister. (The
other novels were novels, & therefore prohibited)

Faust was one of the "epoch-making" encounters for me - another was
Keates. A third was - a little volume called "Coppee's Elements of
Logic", which I discovered among the books my brother Harry had brought
back \textsuperscript{32} from Trinity Hall; & of the three, at the time it was Coppee who
who made the greatest difference to me! Here again - explain who will;
I can only state the fact. I shall never forget the thrill with which
my eye first lit on those arid pages, one day when, in my brother's
absence, I was ferreting about in his book-shelves (carefully avoiding
the novels.) I felt at last as if I had found the clue to life - as if
nothing would ever be as dark & bewildering again! As I read, it seemed,
as if I had known it all before - my mind kept on saying "Of course, of
course", as my fascinated eyes flew on from page to page. And when,
much later, I read:

"How charming is divine Philosophy; not harsh & crabbed, as dull fools
suppose, But musical as in Apollos' lute",
I thought of Coppee, & gave a full assent!
It was certainly providential that, on the same shelf with Coppee, & almost at the same moment, I found an abridged edition of Sir William Hamilton's History of Philosophy! Oh, thrice-blest discovery! Now I was going to know all about life! Now I should never be that helpless, blundering thing, a mere "little girl", again! The two little black cloth volumes, with their yellow paper & small black type, were more precious to me than anything I possessed ...

And all the while Life, real Life, was ringing in my ears, humming in my blood, flushing my cheeks & waving in my hair - sending me messages & signals from every beautiful face & musical voice, & running over me in vague tremors when I rode my pony, or swam through the short bright ripples of the bay, or raced & danced & tumbled with "the boys". And I didn't know - & if, by any chance, I came across the shadow of a reality, & asked my mother "What does it mean? I was always told "you're too little to understand", or else "It's not wise to ask about such things" ...

Once, when I was seven or eight, an older cousin had told me that babies were not found in flowers but in people. This information had been given unsought, but as I had been told by Mamma that it was "not nice" to enquire into such matters, I had a vague sense of contamination, & went immediately to confess my involuntary offense. I received a severe scolding, & was left with a penetrating sense of "not-niceness" which effectually kept me from pursuing my investigations farther; & this was literally all I knew of the processes of generation till I had been married for several weeks - the explanation which I had meanwhile worked out for myself being that married people "had children" because God saw the clergyman - marrying them through the roof of the church!

While I am speaking of this, I will add that, a few days before my marriage, I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery, that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, & begged her with a heart beating to suffocation to tell me "what being married was like". Her
handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most
dreaded. "I never heard such a ridiculous question!" she said
impatiently; & I felt at once how vulgar the thought was.

But in the extremity of my need I persisted. "I'm afraid, Mamma -
I want to know what will happen to me!" The coldness of her expression
deepened to disgust. She was silent for a dreadful moment; then
she said with an effort: "You've seen enough pictures & statues in
your life. Haven't you noticed that men are - made differently from
women?"

"Yes," I faltered blankly.

"Well, then?"
I was silent, from sheer inability to follow, & she brought out sharply:
"Then for heaven's sake don't ask me any more silly questions. You can't
be as stupid as you pretend!"

The dreadful moment was over, & the only result was that I had been
convicted of stupidity for not knowing that I had been expressly forbidden
to ask about, or even to think of! ... I record this brief conversation,
because the training of which it was the beautiful & logical conclusion
did more than anything else to falsify & misdirect my whole life ... And,
since, in the end, it did neither, it only strengthened the conclusion
that one is what one is, & that education may delay but cannot deflect
one's growth. Only, what possibilities of tragedy may lie in the delay!

III

All this time my two ruling sentiments - the desire to learn & the
desire to "look pretty" - received not the least encouragement. It
never occurred to my parents to give me anything beyond the ordinary
teaching - French, German, music & drawing - or to have these acquirements
made interesting by first-rate teachers. If I had only had a tutor -
some one with whom I could talk of what I read, & who would have roused
my ambition to study! My good little governess was cultivated & conscientious, but she never struck a spark from me, she never threw a new light on any subject, or made me see the relation of things to each other. My childhood & youth were all intellectual desert.

This fact did not make me feel any superiority to my play-mates or to the (?) persons about me. On the contrary, it humiliated me to be so "different". I was not a "bright" child in talk, & I often felt as a disadvantage with livelier companions. Yet I had the sense that I had more will, more strength than they. Only I did not care to use it, or know to what use to put it. I did not want to dominate - I wanted to be adored! And yet I detected the admiration of those I did not care for, & unsought demonstrations of affection filled me with repugnance. I was frequently told - perhaps on this account - that I had less "heart" than my brothers. Perhaps I had. Yet if I had been praised a little now & then I might have softened & grown more expressive. But it was thought, at that time, "injudicious" to commend children for their good looks or their intelligence, & wholesome to ridicule them for their supposed defects & affectations. I was laughed at by my brothers for my red hair, & for the supposed abnormal size of my hands & feet; & as I was such the least good-looking of the family, the consciousness of my physical short-comings was heightened by the beauty of the persons about me. My parents - or at least my mother - laughed at me for using "long words", & for caring for dress (in which heaven knows she set me the example!); & under this perpetual cross-fire of criticism I became a painfully shy self-conscious child.

But meanwhile I had found a new refuge from these outward miseries - I had begun to write! My earliest efforts date from my tenth year & are in the form of poems & stories. Writing paper was apparently hard to obtain, but I begged the right to all the wrapping paper that came into the house, & my earliest works were laboriously inscribed on large
brown sheets which I was not clever enough to fold & cut up into "cahiers". I began by sentimental poems, & morbid stories about little girls who "get lost", but soon passed on to blank verse tragedies - & sermons! I loved writing sermons, & I really think I should have been an ornament to the pulpit.

My mother took an odd inarticulate interest in these youthful productions, & kept a blank book in which she copied many of them. She also perpetrated the folly of having a "selection" privately printed when I was sixteen; & from a recent perusal of these two volumes I am reluctantly obliged to conclude that, with one exception, nothing in my oeuvre de jeunesse showed the slightest spark of originality or talent. The exception is a little poem called "Opportunity", which I wrote when I was about sixteen; as it is very short I transcribe it here.

- Opportunity -

Who knows his opportunities. They come
Not trumpet-tongued from heaven, but small & Dumb,
Not beckoning from the future's promised land,
But in the narrow present close at hand.
They walk beside us with unsounding feet.
And like those two that trod the Eastern street,
And with their Master bartered thought for thought,
Our eyes are holden, & we know them not.

Meanwhile my religious preoccupations were increasing, probably because of my absorbing passion for our venerable Rector; & I read, a tort et a travers, every "religious" work I could lay hands on, from the sermons of Frederick Robertson to those of a Revd. Dr Cumming, who belonged to some dissenting sect in England, & devoted floods of fiery eloquence to expounding - literally - the number of the Beast & other cryptic allusions
of the Apocalypse. As religion was never mentioned in the family (though we went to church regularly every Sunday) I had but the vaguest idea of differences of creed, & did not learn till long afterwards that to members of the Episcopalian Church the elucubrations of Dr Cumming represented the rankest heresy. But passionately as I was interested in Christianity, I was always horrified by the sanguinary conception of the Atonement. I remember saying to myself again and again, in moments of deep perplexity: "But if the servants did anything to annoy Mamma, it would be no satisfaction to her to kill Harry or me." Capricious as my mother was, I could not picture her as carrying her illogicalness to that extreme; & it was appalling to think that God must be even more inconsequent. Nevertheless, it never occurred to me then to question the reality of this dreadful Being: I accepted his existence as one of the dark fatalities that seemed to weigh on the lives of mortals; & I think it was at about this time that I wrote in one of my note-books the lugubrious phrase: "If I ever have children I shall deprive them of every pleasure, in order to prepare them for the inevitable unhappiness of life!"

The picture I have drawn of myself in these last pages is that of a morbid, self-scrutinizing & unhappy child. I was that - & yet I was also, at the same time, a creature of shouts & laughter, of ceaseless physical activity, of little wholesome vanities & glowing girlish enthusiasms. And I was also - & this most of all - the creature who heard the choiring of the spheres, & trembled with a sensuous ecstasy at the sight of beautiful objects, or the sound of noble verse. I was all this in one, & at once, because I was like Egmont's Clârchen "now wildly exultant, now deeply downcast," & always tossed on the waves of the passionate inner life. I never felt anything calmly - & I never had to this day!

Meanwhile a great event had happened in my life - I had been printed (not privately, by an admiring parent, but publicly, by a real Editor!) This incident took place when I was about seventeen. I had read an
account of a little boy who had been put in the "lock-up" for some
childish offense, & had hanged himself in the night. This appealed to
the morbid strain in my nature, & I wrote a poem on the subject, which
I sent to the Editor of one of the New York Papers - I think the World.
I had been given, a year or two before, that stimulating work, Quealleubos's
rhetoric, & had learned from it the difference \[42\] between the forms of
English (or rather Latin) verse. I knew now when I was writing in Iambic
pentameters, & when a dactyl or a spondee fell from my pen. I was proud
of this knowledge, & zealous to conform to the "rules of English versi-
fication"; and yet - and yet - I couldn't see that Shakespeare or Milton
had! This was almost as dark a problem as the Atonement - life & art
seemed equally beset with difficulties for a little girl! And whenever
I took to poetry myself, I found the lawless "redundant syllables" slipping
in - & I generally let them stay. But it was one thing to write for
one's own pleasure, another to appear in print; & knowing that the Editor
of the World would probably have a sharp eye for metrical irregularities
I was much troubled by the loose construction of my poem on the little boy.
Yet my deepest instinct told me that it was right as it was, & after much
debate I finally enclosed with it a note to the Editor in which I carefully
explained that "I knew the rules of English versification", but that I
put in the extra syllables on purpose! I received a kind note, in which
my course was fully approved; & the poem was \[43\] published in all its
native redundancy! It must have been at about the same time that Allan
Rice, a friend of my brother Harry's, & at that time Editor of the North
American Review, took a friendly interest in my scribblings, & sent some
of them to Longfellow, who wrote in reply that they "showed promise," or
some equally non-committal phrase. On the strength of this my friend
sent them to Mr Howells, who was then Editor of the Atlantic, & Mr Howells
politely published them. I can't remember what the poems were about, or
when they appeared.
At this point my literary activity was checked by a much more important event: I "came out". Conventionally speaking - & everything in our family life was ordered according to convention - this important experience should have been postponed till I was eighteen; but (as I learned afterwards) my parents were alarmed at my growing shyness, at my passion for study, & my indifference to the companionship of young people of my own age, and it was therefore decided that, contrary to all precedent, I should be taken into the world at seventeen. The step decided on, there followed a feverish period of dress-making; & at last one evening, with my shoulders bare, & my head coiffue, for the first time, I followed my father & mother to a ball at the house of Mrs L.P.Merton (the mother of the Duchesse de Valencay.) I had hardly crossed the threshold of the ball-room before three men asked me to dance; I refused the first two in an agony of shyness, but consented to dance the Cortillieu with the third, because he was "much older", & I had always known him. That evening was a pink blur of emotion - but after it was over my mother had no fears for me! For the rest of the winter, I don't think I missed a ball; & wherever I went I had all the dancers I wanted. There was nothing wonderful in this, for I had grown up among my brother Harry's friends, handsome gay young men some ten or twelve years older than I, & all of them among the leading "valseurs" of fashionable New York. It amused them to be kind of their friend's young sister, & as plenty of youths of my own age were naturally soon added to the group, I tasted all the sweets of popularity. Oh, how I loved it all - my pretty frocks, the flowers, the music, the sense that everybody "liked" me & wanted to talk to me & dance with me! But I was not asked only to balls - I was invited constantly to dinners, with "the older girls" & the young married women. In those days the young married women ruled New York society, & the girl who found favour in their eyes, & was taken into their intimate circle, had a lot far more agreeable & interesting than that of
the average "debutante". This good luck befell me at once - partly, no
doubt, owing to the fact that my handsome brother Harry was at that time
one of the most popular men in society - & I thus passed immediately from
the pink-and-white anonymity of the girl in her first season into the
group of the specific & the chosen.

In spite of these privileges, no very brilliant adventures happened
to me. As it had been in my little-girlhood, so it was now: I led, I
dominated, I was conscious of "counting" wherever I went - but I inspired
no romantic passions! It may be added that I felt none, & that the two
or three young men who - in the natural course of things - honoured me
with their devotion, inspired me with no feelings, but [46] that of a
friendly liking. I did not fall in love till I was twenty-one.

It was as well for me that I was allowed this premature dip into
the world, for the following summer my dear kind father fell ill, & it
was decreed by the Doctors that he must spend the winter in a warm
climate ... So we were going back to Europe at last! During our seven
years at home, through all my others interests & emotions, the longing
to return had persisted; & now all the delights of society - & heaven
knows I didn't underrate them! - were as nothing to the joy of knowing that
my wish was to be fulfilled. Without a pang I gave up the prospect of
a "gay" winter, & turned my back on the various pretendants who had
occupied my leisure without stirring my heart. I was going to see pictures
& beautiful things again, & odd contradictory creature that I was, I went
without a backward glance!

... I remember, as distinctly as if it were all happening to me now,
the emotions with which I found myself standing in the Salon Caree, soon
after our arrival in Paris. I had [47] spent rapturous hours in the
National Gallery, on our way through London, & had made there a memorable
acquaintance - that of Franciabigio's Knight of Malta, whose motto, Tar
Ublia chi bien eima, I had written down in my diary - but, vividly as I
remember my first moments there, they came back to me with less intensity than that first rush of sensation before the Giorgione, the Titian & the Mona Lisa. I felt as if all the great waves of the sea of Beauty were breaking over me at once - & at the same time remember being conscious of the notice of the persons about me, & wondering whether I should be "thought pretty in Paris"!

From that day I never had a pang of regret for "society" - I was drunk with seeing & learning! We went to Cannes in December, & settled ourselves there for the winter, & the mild climate & open-air life did my father so much good that we became hopeful of his complete recovery. At Cannes we were met by my mother's old friends, The Countesse de Banuelar (mother of the Countesse de Sugaunet & the Countesse d'Alcedo), & her sister, the Countesse de Sartiges (mother of Mrs Lee-Childe.) Through these friends I was taken into the little set of amiable & hospitable French & English families constituting Cannes "society" - the Duchesse de Luynes, the Duchesse de Vallembosa, Lady K (?), Lady Blance Baillie, Admiral Gly & his son & daughter, (now Lord Wolverton & Lady Nosseys) the Comte de St Priest, & others whom I have forgotten. The most agreeable house at Cannes was the villa Luynes, & there I went constantly, & made friends with the group of young girls - cousins of the Duchess's - who were always to be found there; & more especially with Yvonne de Contades (now the Marquise de Montboissier), Marie de Contades, (Ctesse Arthur de Vague), & the Pesse Jeanne de Poliquae (Ctesse d'Williamson.) The Prince de Poix, & the present Duc de Luynes & his sister (The Duchesse de Nosilles) were the youngest members of the band - & we all used to be together constantly, playing tennis, going on picnics, etc. I mention this because it is rather curious that, after losing sight of this little group for over twenty years, I came back to Paris & took up my friendships with them all - except the Pes de Poix, who was dead. It was all very pleasant, but it was not intellectually stimulating, & in
regard to "les choses de l'esprit" I was no better off than I had been at home. In fact, all my keenest pleasure in Cannes came from my joy in the scenery & the flowers, & in the wonderful white poodle, "Mouton", whom my father had bought for me in Paris. Two of the young men who had wanted to marry me in New York the previous years, appeared in the course of the winter; but though I found them agreeable companions on our trips to Monte Carlo, I felt no wish to unite myself with either of them.

In the spring my father was better, & we started on a trip to Italy. I had been saturated in Ruskin, & the result was that, at least, I saw many things which the average Baedeker-led tourist of that day certainly missed. When I remember the hours I spent at San Guipio dei Schiavoni, when I recall my thrill of delight at the first night of "Ilaria del Caretto" at Luccas, & the joy of puzzling out the stories of the frescoes at Santa Maria Novella & in the Spanish Chapel, I cannot disown my debt to Ruskin. To Florence & Venice his little volumes gave a meaning, a sense of organic relation, which no other books attainable by me at that time could possibly have conveyed. Even if I had known of Burchhardt's Cultur der Renaissance in Italian I doubt if its compact form & serried array of facts would not have discouraged me, & if Ruskin was not the best possible preparation for the enjoyment of the authors who afterward led me away from him. My father, who had a vague enjoyment in "sight seeing", unaccompanied by any artistic or intellectual curiosity, or any sense of the relations of things to each other, was delighted to take me about, & with a Ruskin in hand we explored every corner of Florence & Venice. Milan I did not appreciate till later, & I don't think we saw many of the smaller towns; at any rate, later visits have effaced my first impressions of all save Pisa & Lucca.

In the Summer we went to Germany, to Mildbad & Hamburg, where my parents took the cure. Here I was rather bored, & tried to distract myself by the only "flirtation" which I have ever indulged in. Among our
acquaintances at Hamburg was the Livingston family, of New York. The daughter, a dull & rather solemn girl of about my age was engaged to a very good-looking & amusing young man (Geraloyn R.-) also of New York, who was known to be in pursuit of an heiress. The engagement was not announced, (I believe because the L. parents wanted a richer pretendant), & the young lady, who was desperately eprise, was therefore unable to assert any exclusive right to her fiancé's society. It was visible at a glance that she bored him, & the situation appealed to my sense of humour, as one which it might be amusing to complicate a little. I had never cared for "flirting", since I was totally indifferent ...............
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No declaration forms provided. Degree was awarded
Edith Wharton was an American writer who believed that the aesthetic and moral are inextricably bound together. She thought that one responsive to beauty in nature and art would thereby be the more morally perceptive. Informed by this passionate belief she came to identify the beautiful with the good and ugliness with evil. In her nineteenth-century childhood she travelled with her family through England, France, Germany, Spain and Italy; during these visits she began to identify Europe with the beautiful because of its heritage of architectural and other cultural riches. The drabness of America came to be a figure of ugliness from which she hoped to escape.

Through personal study she learned to admire two different writers, her fellow American and traveller Henry James and her neighbour in Italy, the eccentric Vernon Lee. These two authors reinforced her belief in aesthetic morality. James had left America because of his conscious desire to be an artist; he found his native land lacking in the variety of institutions which embodied a civilization — it had neither a heritage of artistic achievement nor a refined leisure class to enjoy it. Nevertheless, he saw clearly that Americans possessed a vigorous moral ardour and a hunger for the beauties of Europe. Mrs Wharton accepts and enlarges this belief.

Vernon Lee wrote of the glories of classical eighteenth-century Italy typified by restraint, elegance and refinement, three qualities Mrs Wharton took as essential to the civilized mind. Vernon Lee had explored and popularized the ideas of her friend Walter Pater concerning the centrality of intense aesthetic experience in the personal realm which might be combined with moral purpose. Edith Wharton admired James and Vernon Lee as writers and became intimate
friends of both after she moved permanently to Paris.

In all Mrs Wharton's forty books, from The Greater Inclination (1899) to The Buccaneers (1937) she explores exhaustively this relationship between beauty and morality. In this dissertation her concern for that relationship is examined in detail, and is shown to be the central and most important element in her work.