EDITH WHARTON'S TRAGIC VISION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SUPPRESSED SPIRIT IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH, THE AGE OF INNOCENCE AND ETHAN FROME

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ABSTRACT

In her fiction, Edtih Wharton sets up a conflict between the individual and society: a clash between a character's personal ideals and the entrenched social code. The individual, in varying degrees, is overwhelmed by the will of society. Repeatedly, Wharton's characters sacrifice self to the more powerful collective. Within this sacrifice lie the elements of modern tragedy.

This thesis explores Wharton's tragic vision by examining the lives of three of her protagonists and their failed attempts to fulfill their personal desires: Lily Bart in The House of Mirth; Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence; and Ethan Frome in Ethan Frome. All three novels are considered to be among her major works of fiction. Each novel represents a different period in Wharton's writing career and thus reveals a continuity of thought. And while the short novel Ethan Frome does not share the same setting as the other two, the upper class world of old New York, it provides an interesting comparison. It shares the same tragic story of the individual battling the overwhelming forces of society in a Promethean-like battle of endurance. It deals with Wharton's themes of entrapment and psychological alienation but dressed up in overalls instead of evening attire.

There is a certain futility built into each of the protagonists' lives from birth. They are ill-equipped to

effect any type of change because they have been raised in environments that suppress individuality. Inevitably, Lily, Newland and Ethan reluctantly accept a compromise that leads them to live out a painful life sentence of mediocrity which can be relieved only through death.

The pathos of the protagonist's life is deepened because each character privately longs to fulfill his or her personal, if not romantic, idealization of life. However, neither Lily, Newland nor Ethan is able to realize their full potential, partly because their expectations are unrealistic and partly because each suffers from and ambiguous sense of purpose. This ambiguity all but extinguishes the opportunity for personal growth. Lily Bart is like a lost child dependent on the guidance and charity of those around her. Yet, Lily lives in a merciless world in which the citizens have little regard for the needs of individual members. Ethan Frome and Newland Archer are men with an adolescent-like sense of self. They cannot experience fulfilling relationships with the women who love them because they cannot direct their own lives.

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Alexandra Kraft-Willson

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INTRODUCTION

> 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 (A Backward Glance 207).

This was Edith Wharton's premise for writing what would become her first major novel, The House of Mirth (1905), based on the decline of her heroine, Lily Bart. Wharton had found her métier as a writer. Here, in the world she had been "steeped in from infancy" (207), were the materials and impetus to write a story of substance. Like many of Wharton's protagonists, Lily's spirit is crushed by the conventions and expectations of her closed society.

In her best known fiction, Edith Wharton deals with a fascinating yet fading part of American culture. She provides her audience with a glimpse into the insular and now obsolete leisure class world of old New York, the society into which she was born in 1862.

Wharton's fiction lifts the decorative veil off the drawing rooms, opera boxes and dinner parties of Fifth Avenue culture, and exposes the vices and follies of a class

supposedly above comment. Her writing curiously but adeptly blends biting social commentary with a reverence for the "old ways".

Yet, her gaze is not limited to the upper class. In short stories like "The Bunner Sisters" and in her critically acclaimed novel Ethan Frome, Wharton realistically depicts the world of the poor and impoverished, a world with which she had little contact. What enabled Wharton to do this was a belief that "[any society's] tragic implications [lie] in its power of debasing people and ideals" (A Backward Glance 69), a condition not restricted to the frivolous alone.

Wharton's view in her fiction is tragic, not in the classical sense of the term, but in the modern sense. Her tragedy captures the grief, misery and even the disasters of the individuals who inhabit her turn of the century, leisure class settings. Her fiction reflects the psychological drama of the sensitive individual acting in relation to his or her environment. Her characters are not kings or queens possessed by one tragic flaw. They are ordinary citizens directly affected by a societal malaise that represses independent thought. They possess distinct qualities that set them apart from others in their group, yet these attributes are not sufficient enough to save them from their victimization.

There is a predominance of "unhappy" endings, particularly in her longer fiction. Wharton sets up a

struggle between the individual and society: a clash between a character's personal desires and the entrenched social code. The individual, in varying degrees, is overpowered by the will of society. Repeatedly, Wharton's characters sacrifice self to the more powerful collective. Within this sacrifice lie the elements of modern tragedy. An overwhelming aspect of Wharton's tragic vision is the element of hopelessness and inevitability built into her fiction, right from the opening pages of her novels. Tied to this aspect is Wharton's capacity to excite sympathy and pity for her characters.

In the following chapters, I will explore Wharton's tragic vision by examining the lives of three of her protagonists and their failed attempts to fulfill their personal desires: Lily Bart in The House of Mirth; Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence; and Ethan Frome in Ethan Frome. All three novels are considered to be among her major works of fiction. Each novel represents a different period in Wharton's writing career and thus reveals a continuity of thought. And while the short novel Ethan Frome does not share the same setting as the other two--the upper class world of old New York--it will provide a valuable comparison. Beyond the outer trappings of setting and class, it shares the same tragic story of the individual battling the overwhelming forces of the culture in a Promethean-like battle of endurance. Like the other novels, it is a story about society. It deals with Wharton's themes

of entrapment and psychological alienation but dressed up in overalls instead of evening attire. Ethan Frome not only illustrates Wharton's versatility with subject matter and setting, it also reveals the universality of her social commentary: men and women are social creatures, facing the same psychological conflicts regardless of social station.

In each novel, the main character is more psychologically developed than the two-dimensional caricatures they are set against. For one reason or another, Lily, Newland and Ethan question the limitations of their society's codes. They are more sensitive, more intellectually and aesthetically aware than the others in the novel. When confronted by the possibility of a romantic union that falls outside the acceptable bounds of convention, each character finds him- or herself confused and deeply troubled. Within each novel, the protagonist is psychologically trapped. Although they yearn to fulfill their personal desires, they find themselves immobilized by a greater external force. The three characters are unable to reconcile their individual longings with the prescribed social code.

There is a certain futility built into each of their lives from birth. They are ill-equipped to effect any type of change because they have been raised in environments that suppress individuality. Inevitably, Lily, Newland and Ethan reluctantly accept a compromise that leads them to live out a painful life sentence of mediocrity which can be relieved only through death.

The pathos of the protagonist's life is deepened because each character privately longs to fulfill his or her personal, if not romantic, idealization of life. However, neither Lily, Newland nor Ethan is able to realize their full potential, partly because their expectations are unrealistic and partly because each suffers from an ambiguous sense of purpose. This ambiguity all but extinguishes the opportunity for personal growth. Lily Bart is like a lost child dependent on the guidance and charity of those around her. Yet, Lily lives in a merciless world in which the citizens have little regard for the needs of individual members. Ethan Frome and Newland Archer are men with an adolescent-like sense of self. They cannot experience fulfilling relationships with the women who love them because they cannot direct their own lives.

Nevertheless, each character experiences a kind of bittersweet redemption in the end. Before her death, Lily takes responsibility for the debts she has unwittingly assumed and ties up the loose ends of her life in a morally dignifying manner. After her death, Lawrence Selden realizes the truth of Lily's life and is deeply moved by the sacrifices that she has made. Similarily, in The Age of Innocence and Ethan Frome, other characters recognize the self-sacrifice of both Newland Archer and Ethan Frome. Newland discovers, after her death, that his wife May had known and understood the painful sacrifice he had made by giving up Madame Olenska. Likewise, the Hales knew Ethan's

life-long sacrifice and Mrs. Hale in particular pitied him for the conditions of life that he endured alongside the two harpies with whom he co-habited. She recognized that beneath his lifeless exterior lay a "warm and sentient" nature. She felt the tragic implications of his life-long sacrifice.

The theme of self-sacrifice in these three novels is a fictional projection of Wharton's own experience. She struggled for years to release her "warm and sentient" nature and develop her artistic voice which was a difficult task in upper class New York. Many in her class considered book writing "as something between black art and a form of manual labor" (A Backward Glance 69). Wharton was considered somewhat eccentric and was alienated by her family and social circle as a result.

The theme of self-sacrifice is also derived from Wharton's marriage to Teddy Wharton. While Teddy was a good-natured man, he was an ineffectual mate. The two shared an enjoyment of the outdoors, fine dining and travelling abroad- the outward pleasures of life in the leisure class, yet they did not share an intimacy of spirit. Teddy remained unresponsive to aesthetic pursuits. Edith remained married to Teddy out of both a sense of duty and guilt. She felt trapped and spiritually drained.

However, Wharton's perceived self-sacrifice played an important role in her creative life. During the first thirty years of her writing career, in which The House of

Mirth, The Age of Innocence and Ethan Frome represent critical high points, her disastrous marriage found expression. According to her biographer R.W.B. Lewis, "In those [years] she had concentrated primarily on courtship, youthful love affairs, marital relations and disillusionment, adultery. They had been mainly stirred into being by the single most consequential event of her life: her marriage to Teddy Wharton" (457). Like her characters, Lily Bart, Newland Archer and Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton knew first-hand the painful sacrifice of the suppressed spirit and the tragic implications of a life so lived.

CHAPTER ONE

"A Waste of Good Material": The Tragic Story of Lily Bart

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> And I applaud, I mean I value, I egg you on in, your study of American life that surrounds you. Let yourself go in it and at it--it's an untouched field really: the folk who try, over there, don't come within miles of any civilized, however superficially, any "evolved" life. And use to the full your ironic and satiric gifts; they form a most valuable (I hold) and beneficent engine.
> --Henry James to Edith Wharton, 26 October 1900

> All the same Do New York! The 1st-hand account is precious.
> --Henry James to Edith Wharton, 17 August 1902.

So Edith Wharton did New York like she had never done it before. She harnessed all her "ironic and satiric gifts" to write her first major novel, The House of Mirth, which was published in 1905 to rave reviews and critical acclaim: an author's dream come true. Within the pages of the novel she reveals the vice and frivolity of New York's leisure class world at the turn of the century. At the centre of this story we witness the spiralling decline and the eventual demise of its female protagonist, Lily Bart.

In many ways Lily is well-suited for this world. She is beautiful and well trained in the arts of womanhood, the ways of society. Yet Lily is ill-equipped to raise herself

above the dinginess and servitude she abhors. In the end, Lily finds herself a social outcast, living in a miserable flat from which her only escape is death.

Lily is a failure because she does not succeed in her one true vocation, the only vocation open to her: marriage to a wealthy male member of her society. Early on, Lily wonders: "Why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?" (25). Yet, neither she nor destiny is to blame; rather, Lily is the tragic victim of the repressive society that produced her. The upper class world of old New York is responsible for her death because it moulded Lily into a "futile shape" (7). The men and women, the friends and family, the sum total of those who inhabit The House of Mirth, collectively participate in the creation and tragic destruction of Lily Bart.

Wharton places the blame squarely on the shoulders of Lily's society. In her memoir, A Backward Glance, Wharton explains the reason for writing this novel about "fashionable New York":

> The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have on the "old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through

> what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer in short was my heroine Lily Bart (207).

Wharton also implies by these comments that there is nothing new about Lily's tragedy. It is part of a literary experience that is archetypal. Throughout literary history, we can find examples of the individual battling, on some level, with the greater society, from Homer's Odyssey to Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and onwards. It is a matter of personal morality challenging the hypocritical and oppressive dictates of society. What makes The House of Mirth a distinctive member of this literary tradition, is that it is Wharton's upper class world pinned under the lens of the microscope, a world that is accustomed to its privacy. In this insular world, where membership is tightly monitored, the conflict seems particularly heightened. The demands of society are greater because the codes of conduct are more definitive. The individual, therefore, must give up more personal freedom to balance the social equation.

In The House of Mirth, as in most of Wharton's major fiction, there is an appropriate way to behave and an inappropriate way, with little grey area between. An individual like Lily Bart who feels an overwhelming urge to act spontaneously- to act "inappropriately"- "must pay dearly for her least escape from routine" (15) because

individual liberty threatens the collective. Since her society is so rigidly defined and set apart from the rest of American civilization, someone like Lily whose behavior threatens to erode its structure is forced out. However, she is helpless anywhere but in high society. Beyond the leisure class boundaries she is unable to survive.

Lily's tragedy is also indicative of a social disorder, a kind of spiritual and moral disease that has infected most of the characters in The House of Mirth. The strict conventions and social isolation of the community inside this "great gilt cage" (45) actually help to perpetuate the disease. Its exclusive nature allows society to develop perceptions that have veered from the traditional centre line. Old New York, the New York of Wharton's childhood in the 1860's and '70's, was made up of the families descended from the original Dutch and British merchants who settled New York. These people were honorable in business, predictable in behavior, and they represented the moral foundation of Fifth Avenue culture. They spent their lives maintaining a dignified state of equilibrium. However, by the early 1900's when Wharton conceived and was writing The House of Mirth, she had noted a behavioral change within the ranks of the new generation. Their outlook, while rooted in the old world, had strayed from its moral centre. This part of her society was developing an excessive preoccupation

with pleasure. In a letter of response to an admirer of The House of Mirth, Wharton claims that her book was a "criticism of life" (The Letters of Edith Wharton 99). As social satirist, Wharton was protesting the vanity and frivolity that had "debased her people and their ideals". It was not so much the possession of large sums of money that concerned her, since Wharton unequivocally believed in a class system; rather it was a concern over the irresponsibility of the people who possess that money. She states in that same letter:

> Social conditions as they are just now in our new world, where the sudden possession of money has come without inherited obligations or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes, is a vast and absorbing field for the novelist, and I wish a great master could arise to deal with it (99).

Wharton, of course, takes her own mildly self-deprecating advice, and does just that in most of her fiction.

Wharton makes an explicit reference to the Old Testament that deepens her treatment of the social malaise corrupting her characters. The title of the novel is taken directly from Ecclesiastes: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; The heart of the fool is in the house of mirth" (7:4). Ecclesiastes consists of a series of

sermons written presumably by King Solomon. Together they act as a "how-to" book on living a rewarding life. The sermons, like Wharton's novel, are largely based on paradox, implying that the notions we often value most, like pleasure and wealth, are in fact of least importance. Repeatedly it preaches that without wisdom or a sense of righteousness, the pursuit of such vain ambitions is as futile as "striving after wind". Wharton's story is a fictional adaptation of Ecclesiastes applied to the New York leisure class.

Within the novel we meet the citizens who are the fools who inhabit the House of Mirth (when the phrase "House of Mirth" appears without underlining, it is a direct reference to its Biblical origins and not Wharton's title). With the exception of Lily Bart and to a lesser extent characters like Lawrence Selden and Gertie Farish, these individuals are more like two-dimensional caricatures than complex character studies. They are the seekers of pleasure and frivolity whose feasting and merriment is devoid of any spiritual motivation. Their focus is society and their ambition is to maintain it. As Lawrence Selden believes, they see society as an end in itself:

> 'These people who take society as an escape from work are putting it to its proper use; but when it becomes the thing worked for it distorts all the relations of life'...'Good heavens!'...'I don't underrate the decorative side of life. It seems

> to me the sense of splendour has justified itself by what it has produced. The worst of it is that so much human nature is used up in the process. If we're all the raw stuff of the cosmic effects, one would rather be the fire that tempers the sword than the fish that dyes a purple cloak. And a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple' (56).

Selden's preachy discourse echoes the message of Solomon in Ecclesiastes. The fools in the House of Mirth have a distorted perspective. Their pursuit of society as an end in itself is a vain illusion, like "striving after wind". The real life tragedy is the "waste of good material", like the young poet Ned Silverton, or more to the point, "good material" like Lily Bart. To deal more directly with this tragedy, I would like to examine the character of Lily Bart and then show how society brought about her destruction.

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Lily is a beautiful and fashionable woman living on the fringes of her society. While she is accustomed to the lifestyle of the very rich, she lacks the financial means to fully participate in it except through the charity of her friends like Judy Trenor and her aunt, Mrs. Peniston. A part of Lily despises the "dinginess" of her present circumstances and longs to participate as a full member of

society. She is well aware that the only way to accomplish this is to marry a man who can provide her with financial security. However, time after time, Lily finds herself resisting a marriage of convenience. This aspect of Lily's character demonstrates a greater moral discrimination. Lily knows that a marriage to a dull man like Percy Gryce or an ambitious man like Simon Rosedale would be a spiritual dead end. As the novel progresses, Lily finds herself sacrificing all her opportunities to marry. These missed opportunities are not so much the result of a determined sense of moral righteousness, as they are the result of a paralyzing indecisiveness. While on some level Lily is aware of the futility of her situation, she cannot help but perpetuate it.

Her indecisiveness makes it difficult to clearly define Lily's character because it is not one that is black or white. Instead, hers is a character shrouded in ambiguity. Lily's contradictory nature makes one wonder who the real Lily is. During the opening scene we are introduced to one aspect of Lily's paradoxical nature, and like Selden are beguiled:

> [Lily] paused before the mantelpiece, studying herself in the mirror while she adjusted her veil. The attitude revealed the long slope of her slender sides, which gave a kind of wild-wood grace to her outline- as though she were a

> captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room; and Selden reflected that it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savour to her artificiality (12).

As Selden notes, her character melds together aspects of the natural and the highly artificial. In the same scene Wharton depicts Lily as a creature who is "highly specialized" (6) and set apart from the rest of her race. Selden considers "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" (7). Nor is her artificial gloss limited to her physical mold. Lily's internal motivations are often very much contrived; "her simplest acts seemed the result of far reaching intentions" (5). When considering "Miss Bart" Selden shrewdly adopts the "argument from design" (6).

However, that argument is flawed. Just when you think Lily is going to act a certain way, she acts instead without premeditation. There are times when we see Lily in delightful moments of spontaneity. Most often these times involve flirtatious encounters with Lawrence Selden. For instance, in the scene in the sylvan glade beyond the Trenor mansion both Lily and Lawrence experience an exhilarating moment of escape from their routine. At moments like these, Wharton's Lily Bart brings to mind Henry James' Daisy Miller. Both characters possess a refreshing outlook, if only

fleeting in Lily's case, that is particularly endearing in contrast to the staid deportment of other members of society. Both embody a natural kind of beauty symbolized by the flowers that are their names.

Another example of Lily's romantic nature, which includes her desire to escape, is the symbol found on her seal: "--a grey seal with 'Beyond!' beneath a flying ship" (122). This motto reflects Lily's spontaneous nature and appeals to Selden's reverence for the unconventional. In a later episode, Selden imagines that he, like Perseus rescuing Andromeda (125), will take Lily "beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul" (122).

Sentimentality aside, Selden at times has a clear understanding of Lily's real situation. Like Winterbourne with Daisy Miller, Selden's judgements are clearest when alone with Lily because the mask of society has dropped away. At these times he senses the pathos of her real life. Selden realizes that Lily's moments of real liberty and spontaneity are rare. When they do occur they are like a tonic to her troubled soul, a soul often split in two. The narrator explains "There were in her ... two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison house of fears" (52). Lily spends most of her time in her "prison house" rather than in the House of Mirth, trying to suppress her greatest preoccupation: her fear of financial instability. More than anything, Lily wants "freedom", which to her means

freedom from having to think about money. She childishly believes that "the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it" (56). As Selden points out, her ambition is naive. In response to Lily he likens money to air:

> 'You might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breathe. That is true enough in a sense; but your lungs are thinking about air, if you are not. And so it is with your rich people--they may not be thinking of money, but they are breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp!' (56)

Wharton implies that freedom through money is not freedom at all but a form of dependence akin to slavery, a kind of financial bondage. It is simply the reverse side of the same coin that has on its face Lily's "little black prison-house of fears" (52).

From this, one may deduce that Lily Bart's ambition is tragically ironic. She desires personal freedom, but the premise by which she desires it is contradictory and therefore self-defeating. It is this paradoxical condition that intrigued Wharton. In The House of Mirth, Wharton set out to write a story about a woman who despises the very thing she desires most. Carrie Fisher, one of the many

fools in the House of Mirth, is a divorcee who lives parasitically off the alimony of her ex-husbands. One of Carrie's noteworthy talents is an ability to get to the heart of a matter. She is one of the few characters who speaks directly, if not "brutally" (177) at times. Near the beginning of Book II, she provides both Selden and the reader with a revelation into Lily's real character. She acts as the mouthpiece for Wharton when she explains why Lily is so compelling:

> 'Sometimes...I think it's just flightiness- and sometimes I think it's because, at heart [Lily] despises the very things she is trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her an interesting study' (148).

What also makes her interesting, if not irritating at times, is that Lily rarely exercises any serious self-scrutiny because the results are often too unpleasant to confront. According to the narrator "When [Lily] made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open" (66). Lily habitually lives from moment to moment so that she does not have to face the unpleasantness of her situation. The only exceptions are in moments of crises when she is suffering from the very real consequences of her passivity, and those "certain doors" burst open involuntarily.

After taking money from Gus Trenor, for example, Lily

finds herself at the centre of a scandal that alienates her from her Bellomont circle and leaves her position compromised. In a moment of genuine compassion combined with a natural attraction to Lily, Gus Trenor privately enables Lily's "modest investments...to be mysteriously multiplied without any risk to herself" (68). Lily accepts Gus' "hazy" explanation and takes his offer "with the trustfulness of a child." Lily's child-like naivetĕ does not prepare her for the consequences of such a transaction. Lily does not confront the fact that she is, in effect, a "kept woman" of a married man. Gus soon turns from compassionate patron to offensive brute when Lily makes no effort to "settle the score" (116). "Hang it, the man who pays for dinner is generally allowed a seat at table" (114), he lecherously claims. Lily is genuinely shocked and appalled by her situation. But her awareness comes too late. At this point Lily is cast out of society, off her safe island refuge, into unfriendly waters: "Over and over her the sea of humiliation broke- wave crashing on wave so close that the moral shame was one with physical dread" (116). Lily experiences the full weight of her situation and momentarily submerges. According to the narrator "[Gus Trenor's] touch was a shock to her drowning consciousness" (116). Despairingly, Lily discovers another pair of selves within her. "She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (117).

Predictably, Lily's self-awareness is short-lived. Over the next few days and nights, she manages to drift through three critical experiences: a denial from her Aunt Julia Peniston of a financial bail-out; a marriage proposal from businessman Simon Rosedale; an overt snub from Lawrence Selden. Instead of making amends Lily escapes from her immediate predicament and joins the Dorsets on a Mediterranean cruise, living again for the moment. Presumably she considers, as she does later on, that "Analysis and introspection might come later" (212).

Lily's mood throughout Book I is unstable. It can abruptly change from gaiety often to pride and inevitably to despair, only to swing back again. In her prideful moments she is frustrated by her lack of movement up the social ladder. These feelings are heightened at the dinner parties and other social events where other women are recklessly enjoying the life that Lily desires and fantasizes about. In her fantasy Lily imagines that:

> She would have smarter gowns than Judy Trenor, and far, far more jewels than Bertha Dorset. She would be free forever from the shifts, the expedients, the humiliations of the relatively poor. Instead of being grateful, she would receive thanks. There were old scores she could pay off as well as old benefits she could return.

> And she had no doubt as to the extent of her power (41).

In this state Lily reveals an inclination toward haughtiness and excessive pride, not unlike hubris. But Lily's depiction is more complex than Greek tragedy. Her downfall is not the result of one character flaw. While Lily can be haughty about her place in society at one moment, she can just as easily be disgusted by it, the next. Suddenly, Lily saw the petty vanity of the same society in which she imagined herself at the apex earlier that day:

> How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement (45).

Lily seems incapable of deciding what she wants. The two forces at work in her negate one another and prevent forward movement.

There are two recurring images in the novel. The image of entrapment dominates Book I and the image of drowning dominates Book II. These images illuminate Lily's situation and enhance her characterization. In Book I

entrapment best describes Lily's prevailing condition. She is often depicted, for instance, as a hapless victim ensnared by fate. Selden notices this in the opening scene. The sight of her bracelet triggers a mental response that reveals the futility of Lily's situation:

> As [Selden] watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate (8).

With powerful images like this, Wharton lets the reader in on the tragic irony of which Lily is seemingly unaware. Simultaneously, she removes the blame from Lily, making her the victim and society the transgressor. This brief comment enables the reader to respond sympathetically to a situation that otherwise may have provoked our scorn. Wharton does not linger over these insights, however. Instead, they are subtly incorporated into the story and reward careful reading. Such sharp and penetrating discernments into situation and behavior are Wharton's stylistic trademark.

Even though Lily spends most of her time ignoring her

situation, there are times when she senses that all is not well. Another image that evokes entrapment occurs when Lily imagines a "great gilt cage" (45) holding all citizens captive in the House of Mirth:

> How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom (45).

Lily knows that the cage is just an illusion created by deep-seated social expectations that have been ingrained in her since childhood. They have caused a kind of paralysis that perpetuates the illusion and keeps Lily in a passive state.

Other images of entrapment in Book I reveal Lily in moments of slavish dependency. At one point, Lily is overcome by self-pity and thinks:

> She had long enough been in bondage to other people's pleasure to be considerate of those who depended on hers, and in her bitter moods it sometimes struck her that she and her maid were in the same position, except the latter received her wages more regularly (24).

Bondage means that someone is exploited by another as the result of a power struggle. When Lily finds herself in one of her miserable moods, she instinctively asserts her own exploitative power over people, particularly over men. Power feeds her ego. It gives her a false sense of superiority and is a temporary antidote for her feelings of dependence.

There are various forms of power in The House of Mirth. Money and social "correctness" are two such types that combine to form an unshakable power base. Lily possesses her own brand of power, though, that keeps her in contention for most of Book I. With her exceptional beauty and her talent to charm, Lily restores her right to belong. Lily's mother saw her daughter's beauty as "the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (29).

Frequently we see Lily studying herself in a mirror. At times she seems to be anxiously reaffirming the existence of her last asset; at other times she willfully manipulates her features to suit a given situation. The latter pre-occupation is best demonstrated in the tableaux vivants scene in which she breathtakingly portrays "Mrs. Lloyd" from a painting by Reynolds. After this triumphant presentation Lily felt "an intoxicating sense of recovered power" (107). But once again Lily is deluded by her success. It is only a "quick fix" and does not signify any real sense of recovery.

Selden is dazzled by her beauty but, unlike the other spectators, sees beyond the momentary triumph into the pathos of Lily's life and is drawn sexually and sentimentally toward her:

> In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again (107).

When Selden confesses his love to Lily at the end of this scene, she responds typically: "Ah, love me, love me- but don't tell me so" (109). The voice of her worldly desires does not match the voice of her inner spirit. This tragic lament is the best that her divided soul can ever utter.

iii

In Book II the tone of the novel dramatically shifts. Lily's focus is not so much on fulfilling her desires as it is on surviving. Lily has been scandalized in New York through her alleged "involvement" with Gus Trenor. Those who know about it, including Lawrence Selden, have accepted

the adulterous appearances of the situation. Choosing leisure over responsibility, Lily goes off for yet another season of parties, this time in Europe. It soon becomes apparent that Lily was simply the sacrificial lamb in Bertha Dorset's grand scheme. Lily ignored Judy Trenor's sound advice and unknowingly set herself up for disaster. At Bellomont, Judy warned Lily: "Everyone knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants, in the long run, commend me to a nasty woman" (37).

True to the warning, Bertha gets nasty. She turns the table on her husband George by falsely implying that he and Lily are having an affair. Bertha is triumphant because both George and Lily are powerless against her. Even though everyone knows that Lily is " a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha" and that Bertha is brazenly manipulating the scene to her advantage, her party quickly fall in line behind her and cast Lily out. Like the fools that they are, they return to make merry in their House of Mirth without moral sense to account for their behavior.

Lily's hold is becoming tenuous. Her spiralling decline begins to accelerate as the circles of the gyro grow smaller and smaller. She returns to New York to find out that her aunt is dead. In a surprising last minute maneuver, Aunt Julia leaves her estate to cousin Grace Stepney and only a small legacy to Lily (the result of rumors she heard about Lily's European exploits). Lily's

hopes for success are effectively quashed. But Lily, in the face of immediate crisis, draws upon a reserve of nobility; she confronts her disgrace with an air of dignity. As she did with Bertha Dorset, Lily faces her adversary Grace Stepney and graciously accepts her fate. Lily is instinctively dignified at such times but cannot sustain the effort.

Lily is as helpless as a child lost in a "familiar alien" (117) world. Her two remaining friends come to her rescue and guide Lily through the last stages of her life. Gerty Farish, the "social worker," provides Lily with a momentary respite for her troubled soul, while Carrie Fisher, the "social director," brings Lily back into a mock society and helps her find work in a milliner's shop. Their efforts are made in vain, however, because Lily was simply not created to live in a world, to use Selden's metaphor, without money and society- her air to breathe. Lily is left to squirm and gasp until she eventually expires.

Images involving suffocation and drowning dominate the pages of Book II as Lily's hopes turn to bleak despair. For example, "Lily had the doomed sense of the castaway who has signalled in vain to fleeing sails" (179). Near the end Lily discovered that "it was indeed miserable to be poor- ...But there was something more miserable still" (248). At this low point, Lily looks back at her life and is struck by its tragic futility:

> it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now- the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them (248).

Lily sees herself as a hapless victim of the world that created her. As insignificant spin-drift, Lily's life has been nothing but a futile struggle against the overwhelming will of society. Like a small child Lily is emotionally unfit to attach the "poor little tentacles of self" to anything secure. The pathetic irony is that while emotionally naive, Lily is physically a grown woman living in an adult world where vanity, jealousy and excessive greed are guiding principles. By not living according to these principles, Lily forfeits her opportunities to live in the House of Mirth. She is doomed to spend her last days in a dingy world reprehensible to her sensibilities.

Yet beyond the House of Mirth, Lily's life has not been a complete failure, nor are her final days entirely miserable. In this final stage, near rock bottom, Lily has unintentionally stumbled upon another aspect of her highly complex and contradictory nature. Not unlike Howells' Silas

Lapham, Lily experiences a kind of spiritual "rise" in her poverty. In four different episodes, Lily ties up the loose ends of her life and discovers a serenity that enables her to drift peacefully into her final repose.

In these episodes Lily experiences a spiritual awakening. The first episode involves Lily in her final encounters with Simon Rosedale. After he offers to help her pay back Gus Trenor, Lily recognizes something about Rosedale that she had previously overlooked. Her attitude toward Rosedale softens; she feels a sincere gratitude in return for his concern. In the end she firmly refuses his offer on principle:

> 'Not that I don't appreciate your kindness- that I'm not grateful for it. But a business arrangement between us would in any case be impossible, because I shall have no security to give when my debt to Gus Trenor has been paid' (233).

For the first time, Lily demonstrates financial prudence and makes a responsible choice.

In the second instance, Lily chooses compassion over personal gain. Her feelings of love for Selden compel her to protect his interests. In her possession are the incriminating love letters sent from Bertha Dorset to Lawrence Selden. These letters could be used against

Bertha, which would shake her power base and jeopardize her social position. Lily could buy Bertha's support by blackmailing her with the letters. Then, by marrying Simon Rosedale, who suggested this alternative to her, Lily would return to the House of Mirth, not to live on its fringe but to live as a powerful central figure. However, Lily chooses not to. She discreetly burns the love letters in Selden's apartment, because the letters were more than just a powerful weapon in her hands. While the letters could buy Lily a ticket back into society, they would do so at a painful expense to Lawrence Selden. Lily could not live with this choice. By burning the letters, Lily destroys her last opportunity to re-enter high society. Her action, while spontaneous, is completely selfless.

The third encounter reveals to Lily "the central truth of existence" (248). She discovers through love and forgiveness that even "on the grim edge of poverty," Nettie Struthers and her family could secure their "nest" and "hang safely over the abyss" (248). Yet she also realizes that this truth does not apply to her because she is a social aberration. She is like some rare hybrid able to survive only in her old environment:

> every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it. She was like some rare flower grown for

> exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty (246-7).

Even with this new vision it would be difficult for Lily to "keep her footing" because she was still weak-willed: "She knew the strength of the opposing impulses- she could feel the countless hands of habit dragging her back into some fresh compromise with fate" (249). In her decline, Lily has discovered another part of herself; a wisdom that raises her out of the House of Mirth and redeems her spiritually. Through Lily, Wharton reaffirms the notion that "The heart of the wise lies in the house of mourning". Having lost the only world she knows, the only world she desires, Lily instinctively realizes that "The end of a matter is better than its beginning" (Ecclesiastes 7:8). Quickly she decides, in the fourth episode, to pay off Gus Trenor before the "countless hands of habit drag her back into some fresh compromise with fate." Her debt to him is over. All scores are even. She longs for her "life to end now- end on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities, which gave her a sense of kinship with all the loving and foregoing in the world" (250).

World weary, on the "verge of delirium" Lily increases the regular dose of her sleeping drug in order to "procure for her the rest she so desperately needed" (250). After taking the drug, her longing was satisfied. Lily fell into

a sleep from which she never awoke. Ironically, only through death did Lily find a way to sail "Beyond!" the dinginess, the bondage, the hypocrisy of life in the House of Mirth, thus fulfilling the paradoxical judgement of King Solomon: "the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth" (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

iv

We can expect that there will be little notice of Lily Bart's death back in the House of Mirth. Once in a while, someone may suddenly recall that they have not seen Lily's name in the society column for some time. They may even wonder where she has gone; but little more. The serious questions, the questions at the heart of the matter, will never be asked. Why is Lily gone? How could someone with such potential die so miserably? Who is responsible? Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden may ponder these questions, though, since they were with Lily during her final days. We know that Selden in particular feels the weight of her death, having loved her too late. He understood the truth about Lily in the end, as did Winterbourne with Daisy Miller. Finally, in death, Selden was able to love her:

> It was this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction; which in her, had reached out to

> him in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings, and in him, had kept alive the faith that now drew him penitent and reconciled to her side (256).

Yet this "fleeting victory" is no victory at all. It is simply a pathetic irony that allows Selden to ignore his responsibility. Like the others, he played his role in bringing down Lily Bart. Yet blame cannot be placed on any one person alone. The issue is far too subtle and insidious to do that. You cannot say Selden killed Lily by not loving her sooner. Nor can you say that Aunt Julia killed Lily by disinheriting her or that Bertha Dorset and Gus Trenor killed Lily by exploiting her. No one person killed Lily; it was a silent conspiracy. Collectively the citizens of the House of Mirth, without premeditation, exerted a force so powerful that it destroyed Lily Bart. To understand this, one has to go back to Lily's beginnings and perhaps even beyond that as Lily does in response to Gerty's querries about the Dorset scandal:

> '...I want you to tell me exactly what happened from the beginning.'
> 'From the beginning?'...'Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have! Why the beginning was in my cradle I suppose- in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to

> care for. Or no- I won't blame anybody for my faults: I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses! (176).

Beyond her facetious response, Lily realizes that she was doomed to fail right from birth. Wharton believes that the course of one's life is rooted in childhood. Frequently in her fiction she provides a biographical framework by which one can more fully appreciate her protagonists' motivations. In the case of The House of Mirth, Lily was a child whose "vigorous and determined" (25) mother was a "wonderful manager" who ruled the "turbulent element called home". Mrs. Bart believed that "there was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one's bank-book denoted" (26). She despised the thought of having to "live like a pig" (26). Hudson Bart was Lily's "neutral-tinted father" who "filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks" (25).

Wharton's depiction of Lily's parents is partially autobiographical. Wharton felt a resentment toward her family for suppressing her artistic nature, particularly toward her mother. Edith felt that Lucretia Rhinelander Jones was a cold, "matter-of-fact" woman who openly discouraged her literary efforts. There was no love lost

between them. She felt more drawn toward her father. Like Hudson Bart, he was a "hazy" figure, yet he seemed to possess something more sensitive than her mother's rigid demeanor. Like Hudson, "There was about [George Frederic Jones], his daughter always felt, something repressed, an air of some larger opportunity lost. In the world where he played his carefully prescribed part, there was no way to nourish the slender romantic streak of his young manhood" (Edith Wharton: A Biography 24). Just as Lucretia suppressed George's "baffled sense of poetry" (24), so does Mrs. Bart suppress Hudson: "It had been among the lady's grievances that her husband- in the early days, before he was too tired- had wasted his evenings in what she vaguely described as "reading poetry" (The House of Mirth 30).

R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton's biographer, states that:

> The relationship between George Frederic and Lucretia, in their daughter's version of it, provided Edith Wharton with the first and most compelling instance of what would become one of her central themes: the larger spirit subdued and defeated by the smaller one (24).

One need only consider Undine Spragg in Wharton's The Custom of the Country, and recall the casualties that fell in her wake, to see one of the best examples of this theme in action.

When Hudson Bart fell into financial ruin, "he had become extinct" to his wife because "he ceased to fulfill his purpose" (28). Lily felt more sympathy: "she pitied him in a frightened ineffectual way" (28). When he died "it was a relief to Lily" (29) (who was about Wharton's age when her father died) because it ended a relationship that had been sustained only by her mother's "burning resentment." Upon Hudson Bart's death, Mrs. Bart gave up managing because "the effort was no longer worth making" (29). "After two years of hungry roaming Mrs. Bart had died-died of a deep disgust. She hated dinginess, and it was her fate to be dingy" (30). This last statement ironically foreshadows the fate of her own daughter. Before she died, however, she offered Lily some guiding principles to live by. The first was that Lily's beauty was "the last asset in their fortunes" and that Lily must use it to make a wise and fruitful match. Secondly, she so strongly advised Lily against a "love-match" that it made Lily wonder if "her own marriage had been of that nature" (29-30). Finally, she counseled Lily that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (30).

This was Lily's crude legacy. Her parents did not provide her with a moral centre or a strong sense of self. They did not teach her how to think for herself. Instead, they filled her head with vain notions and frivolous ideals. Her model of home and family life had left her with a

distorted perspective. She understood that home was a place where one entertained lavishly, that the father is not so much an individual but a means by which one could spend, and that the mother was someone who could cleverly direct the social calendar.

The basis of Lily's financial imprudence was also developed at home. She learned early that one responded in haste to social invitations but could ignore one's bills and leave them to "gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar" (25). The result of this lesson was that Lily continually mismanaged her money and got herself into compromising positions of debt.

Lily's ideas of marriage were formed by the disastrous union of her two parents and the crude ambitions of her mother. She was taught that marriage was a business partnership barren of love and spiritual fellowship. It is not difficult to imagine why Lily fails to bring herself to the threshold of marriage since her own version of it is so disagreeable. Still, when Selden offers his love to Lily, she is incapable of accepting it, though she is in love with him. In the back of her mind she may recall her mother's warning against a "love match" (29-30).

Orphaned at an impressionable age, Lily became the "centre of her family council" (31). The people that make up her extended family feel little desire for Lily's company, due in part to Mrs. Bart's snobbery. They were "composed of the wealthy relatives whom [Lily] had been

taught to despise for living like pigs" (31). However, the "uprooted lily" is eventually taken in by one of her aunts, the widowed Julia Peniston. In a moment of brilliant satire, the narrator bitingly reveals: "Every one was surprised, but one and all concealed their surprise, lest Mrs. Peniston should be alarmed by it into reconsidering her decision" (31). However, Aunt Julia's decision was not entirely altruistic; in fact it was quite the contrary. Her act of charity was the type that needed an audience. As the narrator states:

> It would have been impossible for Mrs. Peniston to be heroic on a desert island, but with the eyes of her little world upon her she took a certain pleasure in her act (31).

The action, or rather the inaction, of Lily's family reveals the kind of tacit conspiracy battling against her. The power of the group is overwhelming. As a young impressionable woman without a mother or father to guide her, Lily's chances of survival are remote. Lily has been thrust into a hazardous world, in her own words, as "mere spin-drift," left alone to try and direct her life, with an insubstantial foundation from which to do so. She is not educated, nor is she "trainable" for any type of career except as a Fifth Avenue wife and hostess. And the ultimate irony is that even marriage is not a reasonable option for

Lily given her warped understanding of it and her contradictory desires.

Opposing impulses begin to direct her life because of her ambiguous personality. Lily is like a lost child dependent on the guidance and nurturing of others. But the others, people like the Penistons and Stepneys, are waiting for Lily to either marry or meet with disaster. In either instance they will wash their hands of her. When the half-truths of the Dorset scandal are revealed and Lily is disinherited, her family does not take pity on her. No one tries to learn her story; the tragedy that began years before, in her cradle. Instead, like frightened birds, they take flight back to Newport or Long Island, their safe island refuge within their insular world.

For a time, there is another subgroup within the collective who are beguiled by Lily's charm and beauty. They accept her into their homes as one would accept a spring bouquet: people like the Trenors, the Welly-Brys, even the Sam Gormers. But Lily's usefulness to them eventually wanes and they replace her with some new "nosegay." Lily acknowledges her expendability in the opening scene when she states: "...my best friends--well, they use me and abuse me: but they don't care a straw what happens to me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry" (10).

By not marrying, Lily is not conforming to the age-old custom of her world. And by not conforming, Lily implies

that there is something wrong with the system; that its conventions do not meet her needs (in her case, Lily's spiritual needs). However, the powerful players are not interested in change; they like things just as they are. As a non-conformist, Lily threatens the community which is their power base. Yet Lily is powerless to effect any kind of change. As a penniless woman in the House of Mirth, she is an easy target for scandal and illwill, especially because of her beauty. These attributes threaten the stronghold of the married woman who wields all the social power in this society. Lily experiences the full effect of the power when she is snubbed entirely by her former circle of friends. As the narrator states: "Where Judy Trenor led, all the world would follow" (179). Lily realized at this point that she was no longer "amusing or useful to Judy"; she had been officially discarded.

It is an elementary case of social Darwinism. Lily has developed into a highly specialized breed and has adapted herself right out of the race. She is the prey on which other women feed in order to secure their own survival. Lily is easy prey; in fact she is often compliant. Looking back on the Dorset scandal Lily admits that "she had suffered for the very faithfulness with which she had carried out her part of the tacit compact" (177).

Lily is also easy prey for the men in the House of Mirth. Gus Trenor and George Dorset provide the money source from which their wives operate. That is a man's

power base. But in many ways, these men are otherwise impotent. After marriage they have little or no appeal to their wives except vicariously through their cheque-books. Like Lily's father they are slaves to their families. In return, they receive little respect for their hard work. As Gus Trenor reveals to Lily when they "settled down into the rare enjoyment of a confidential talk":

> 'you don't know how a fellow has to hustle to keep this kind of thing going'...'The women all think- I mean Judy thinks- I've got nothing to do but to go down town once a month and cut off coupons, but the truth is it takes a devilish lot of hard work to keep the machinery running' (65).

As charming confidante, Lily provides stimulation to the otherwise dull lives of men like Gus Trenor. Her attention is translated into attraction. Gus uses his power to exploit Lily. He expects to trade money for sex. Lily naively accepts his money but is unaware of her part in the "tacit compact." When she does not comply, Gus' wounded ego enables him to perpetuate the scandal surrounding both their names. He knows that he has nothing to lose and that Lily has everything. "The truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for" (176). Even though Lily is innocent, Gus says nothing and allows her to fall because he is a moral coward.

George Dorset is also a coward. He is one of the few men who could defend Lily's reputation by standing up to his manipulative wife. But he has enabled Bertha to reduce him to a whining, hypochondriachal fool who can barely look after himself, let alone anyone else.

Another man who could defend Lily's reputation is Lawrence Selden. Selden, however, is not a hero either. "[H]e was, as much as Lily, the victim of his environment" (120). And like Lily, his whole outlook was based on contradictory notions. "It was from [his mother] that he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them" (121).

While he wanted to inhabit his "republic of the spirit" (55), a place free "from everything- from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (55), his epicurean nature drew him toward the "material accidents." He was inspired by womanly beauty, but his confused moral/aesthetic sense convinced him that his ideal woman should be both beautiful and the possessor of a strong moral center. He was incapable of seeing the hypocrisy of his beliefs. When Lily did not live up to his confused moral standards, which no human being could, he abandoned her and let the society he ridiculed determine his opinions. Selden's moral uprightness was just a shell disguising his morally ambivalent self. Ironically, this was the very ambivalence he criticized in Lily. Even while

providing Lily with some of her most liberating moments in the novel, he was incapable of sustaining the effort. Selden could not guide Lily to his "republic" because he did not know the way there himself.

V

What makes The House of Mirth a powerful novel is Wharton's portrayal of Lily Bart. Creating Lily was not an easy task considering her paradoxical child/woman nature. In the hands of a less skilled writer, readers might have loathed Lily's moral cowardice. Yet instead, we feel the pathos of her situation. We see her as the tragic victim of the society that created her.

After reading the novel, Henry James' response was somewhat lukewarm, except for his comments on Lily. In a letter to Wharton he stated that he was considering delivering a lecture on the "novel of manners in America- its deadly difficulty." He goes on to say: "But when I do that I shall work in a tribute to the great success and large portrayal, of your Lily B[art]. She is very big and true- and very difficult to have kept true- and big" (Henry James and Edith Wharton Letters 53).

Wharton's penetrating gaze revealed to the world a part of American civilization not previously seen. However, it was never her intent to imply that her entire society was represented in the pages of The House of Mirth. In fact she emphatically states in one of her letters:

> I must protest and emphatically, against the suggestion that I have "stripped" New York society. New York society is still amply clad, and that little corner of its garment that I lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ--the group of idle and dull people--that exists in any big and wealthy social body (The Letters of Edith Wharton 96-97).

In the next chapter, we will get another glimpse into a corner of Wharton's world; a glimpse into the old New York of Wharton's childhood captured in The Age of Innocence.

CHAPTER TWO

The Last Old New Yorker: A Study of Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence

i

By the time Edith Wharton published her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Age of Innocence, in 1920, many things in her life and in the world had changed dramatically from the publication date of her first major novel, The House of Mirth. In that fifteen year period, she had given up life in America and taken up residence in Europe. She had sold the Mount, her beloved home in Lenox, Massachusetts and was living independently after divorcing her husband, Teddy Wharton.

In more recent years she had experienced the horrors of war first hand in Paris where she tirelessly provided aid to Belgian refugees fleeing from their homeland. In her memoir, A Backward Glance, she claimed that working on The Age of Innocence provided a welcome distraction from the devastation of the war years and their emotionally trying aftermath. She said, "I found a momentary escape [from the present] in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote The Age of Innocence"(369). Writing the novel seemed to have been an attempt to recapture some of the innocence that the events of World War I had mercilessly destroyed.

Her novel is a fictional return to a time that was seemingly more secure and untroubled. While this nostalgic return to the New York and Newport of her childhood warmed her normally stinging satire, it did not dull her typically insightful analysis of human behavior. On the contrary,

Wharton's "backward glance" seems to have heightened her analysis. The novel is a social reconstruction of a time and place now long forgotten. As the self-appointed anthropologist of her people, Wharton has carefully recorded the rituals, attitudes and behaviors belonging to the tribe of men and women who inhabited Fifth Avenue in the 1860's and '70's; the leisure class clan of old New York. For this reason, Wharton's fiction not only has literary significance, it is a valuable piece of American social history.

In the war's aftermath, Wharton also noticed that a new and "gutsier" generation of writers was changing the face of American literature. She nicknamed these writers les Jeunes. Included in this group was Sinclair Lewis, whose novel, Main Street, had been the original choice for the Pulitzer Prize in 1920. (However, his novel was passed over in favor of Mrs. Wharton's novel- "for uplifting American morals"- because Main Street "had 'offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West'" [The Letters of Edith Wharton 445]). While Wharton admired the work of the new generation and had great optimism for what they could attain, she felt out of step with these young men and women. Even with her hand on the pulse of contemporary literary culture, she realized that her own literary tradition was firmly set in a former time, a time belonging to writers like William Dean Howells and Henry James. So while her thoughts moved in a forward direction with the flow of time,

her literary tradition placed her alongside writers of the past. This backward/forward dichotomy is one reason why Wharton is often considered a transitional author. It is this same dichotomy that makes Newland Archer, her protagonist in The Age of Innocence, such an interesting study.

In The Age of Innocence Wharton happened to capture a society in transition. While the rest of the Western world was moving at full speed toward the twentieth century, her upper-class New York steadfastly hung onto the traditions and attitudes established by long dead tribal ancestors, resolutely defying change. Yet its shell was not impermeable. New fashions, trends, "foreign" people and ideas found their way into "each new crack in its surface," and, like "strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables" (214), they took hold. Newland Archer, the protagonist of the story, considers the ironic way his society dealt with change:

> It was thus, Archer reflected, that New York managed its transitions: conspiring to ignore them till they were well over, and then, in all good faith, imagining that they had taken place in a preceding age. There was always a traitor in the citadel; and after he (or generally she) had surrendered the keys, what was the use of pretending that it was impregnable? (217)

Yet pretend they did, even Newland Archer who was spokesman for the tribe. Like the rest, Archer was bound to his world and could not shake off its conventions. He was all too aware of its traditions and often of the irony in them, but was unable to commit himself to any kind of tangible reform.

Within his moral impotence are the seeds of Newland Archer's tragedy. While dreaming of a new order, Newland is imprisoned by his old world habits. He is a transitional figure caught between two worlds, unable to find fulfillment in either. He feels stifled by the old world of New York, yet does not know the language of the new world. Like an over-pruned shrub, he suffers from the long-term effects of stunted growth. Newland Archer's story represents the real human cost of social insularity and societal "over-pruning." Through years of habit and social conditioning, the old New York clan adapted itself and its members right out of existence. Newland Archer was a dissatisfied clansman of a dying breed.

There are similar images in both Wharton's The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth. The images are of stunted growth and over-pruning with which Newland Archer and The House of Mirth's protagonist, Lily Bart, seem tragically associated. As we recall in The House of Mirth, Wharton described Lily as "some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (The House of Mirth 246-47). If Lily is a delicate hothouse flower unable to

survive independently outside the walls of her greenhouse-- unable to survive without marriage-- then Newland Archer, her male counterpart, is like an ornamental Bonsai plant limited to life in some corner of the study or dining room within his Brownstone home. Outwardly, Newland is immaculate and painstakingly trimmed: a model citizen of old New York. Yet, inwardly he lacks the means to thrive as an active member in modern America.

Like Lily Bart, Newland is an ambiguous character. While on one level he and Lily are innately artificial, on another, they possess a streak of nature uncharacteristic of their breed. As we saw in Chapter One, Lily is a blend of artifice and nature. She possesses a "streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savor to her artificiality" (The House of Mirth 12). Likewise, Newland, who is very much the product of his class, tends to be more "contemplative" than the rest of society, which is very troubling, even scandalous , both to the clan and to himself. R.W.B. Lewis describes the theme that grows out of this ambiguity as "the stirrings of rebellious individuality within conventional society" (Edith Wharton: A Biography 144). This theme dominates the lives of many of Wharton's main characters besides Lily and Newland. Its origin is autobiographical. It reflects Wharton's personal struggle to shake off the conventions of old New York that threatened her own artistic freedom.

Yet unlike Edith Wharton, Newland cannot shake off the

deeply entrenched conventions that have moulded him. After a futile struggle, Newland finds himself resigned to the "dull duty" associated with being "a good citizen" (289). That was the best Newland Archer could achieve. But in so doing, he missed something greater. By succumbing to the social dictates he abhorred and by keeping his visions of a new world order locked up in his mind, Newland Archer missed "the flower of life" (289). Just as Lily Bart was tragically destroyed by the selfish motivations of her frivolous world, Newland Archer's society forced him to accept a second-rate life. And this is his tragedy.

ii

When we first meet Newland Archer, he is an engaging young man full of the vanity and self-confidence of youth, excited by the possibilities of life and well versed in the conventions of his deeply established upper-class world. Newland, as an exemplary member of his aristocratic clique, always knows what to do and when to do it, even down to the most trifling of details: "such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole" (8). As Wharton the anthropologist makes clear, "what was or was not 'the thing' to do played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (8).

Newland is a lawyer by profession. As was tacitly expected of a young man in his position, he could not lie idle and simply cash in the dividends of the family wealth. Open frivolity was a serious offense in old New York (102), far more serious than in Lily Bart's world a generation later. While "money-making" on Wall Street was considered a "crude" ambition, the law or at least the guise of the law was considered a "gentlemanly" pursuit.

Newland Archer is employed by one of the "old fashion legal firms" that took on "well-off" young men "for a certain number of hours of each day" to sit at their desks "accomplishing trivial tasks, or simply reading the newspapers" (107). There was little desire or need for ambition among these young men because of their financial security. Ironically, they were expected to maintain the pretext of a profession but they were not expected to work. Actual work implied a vulgar need that fell below the fashionable expectations of society.

Nevertheless, while not openly critical of the tribe's sham work ethic, Newland feels uneasy about the arrangement. He felt more uneasy than other men over whom the "green mould of the perfunctory was already spreading" (108). What seemed to make Newland different from the rest of the clansmen was his more keenly developed sensibilities. Compared to men like Julius Beaufort, the crudely ambitious "arriviste" or Lawrence Lefferts, Wharton's satirically rendered "authority on 'form'," Newland is a renaissance man, or at least he is in his own mind.

In truth, Newland is more a renaissance man in the contemplative domain of thought than in the public world of action. In a revealing moment of caustic satire, bordering on sarcasm, the narrator states: "(Newland) had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante; but he had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in; and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride" (289), that great man being the governor of New York. The governor said to Newland, "Hang the professional politician! You're the kind of man the country wants, Archer. If the stable's ever to be cleaned out, men like you have got to lend a hand in the cleaning" (288). Newland's call to clean house fizzles inevitably into apathetic oblivion. He does not possess the passionate drive to put his ideas into motion. Newland's visionary self is a weak shell that superficially disguises his deeply rooted tribal self. He can never really roll up his sleeves to clean up the muck because society has conditioned him to keep his sleeves buttoned and leave the muck for the liveryman.

As representative of his generation, Newland, by his very name, suggests the hope of a new world order, a more enlightened way of life. Yet Newland "the archer," ironically, misses his target. As a casualty of social evolution, Newland becomes a societal anachronism instead of the revolutionary chieftain who leads his tribe into the modern era. Tragically, Newland craves the new world but

cannot prevent the "green mould of the perfunctory from spreading" all over himself, as it has over the others whom he silently ridicules.

One begins to realize that Newland has learned to compromise his self to the more powerful collective long before the story began. To unlearn an attitude so deeply entrenched is too daunting a task. In the scene where Newland, as the legal mediator representing his law firm and the family, is sent to dissuade Madame Ellen Olenska (the black sheep of the family) from seeking a divorce, he finds himself in the unusual situation of being forced to act. While he feels the weight of his tribal responsibility, he also begins to sense Madame Olenska's desire to take leave of her husband once and for all and he begins to sympathize with her. However, such "hard facts" are difficult for Newland to confront. He instinctively reverts to traditional clichés and standard tribal responses. While acutely aware of this, he is unable to prevent the overflow of "stock response." At one point the narrator states: "How little practice he had had in dealing with unusual situations! Their very vocabulary was unfamiliar to him, and seemed to belong to fiction and the stage" (93).

Newland's compromise is another example of the personal ambiguity that weaves its way through the fabric of Wharton's fiction. As do so many of her main characters, including Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden, Newland has only a vague understanding of what he desires. His hazy sense of

self leads him unproductively in opposite directions. Like a pendulum, Newland moves back and forth between his desire for change and his desire for tradition. While this emotional indecision expends considerable energy, it leads him nowhere. His ambiguous nature is best represented by the two women with whom he is involved, the two women from very different worlds between whom he vacillates.

May Welland is one of these women. As the "terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything" (39), May represents the old world and its associated qualities, "peace, stability, comradeship and the steadying sense of unescapable duty" (174). A union with her would be an infallible match for "the good citizen." It would reinforce the expectations of the tribe whose sentiments are articulated by his own mother who tells him, "dear May is my ideal" (129). However, by marrying May, Newland would and does make the "right choice" for the "wrong reason." He marries May, not out of love or even passion, but out of a sense of obligation and duty. May, who represents the old world ideals, inevitably comes to represent entrapment to Newland Archer. Their marriage turns into a life sentence ironically maintained in exemplary tribal fashion.

May's cousin, Ellen Olenska, is Newland Archer's other female interest. When we first meet her, she is recently separated from her husband, the licentious Count Olenski. Ellen has returned home to New York to find "peace and

freedom" (145) among her family and former acquaintances. What soon becomes apparent, if not immediately to her, is that she is "different" from the rest of the clan. She has become Europeanized and therefore "foreign." Her foreignness unsettles Newland at first because it threatens the validity of his way of life. Yet her charm and unusual manner soon enchant Newland and he finds himself mysteriously drawn to her and her liberating ways. If May represents the ideal of the old order, Ellen Olenska represents the possibilities of a new order. Where May is staid and decorous, Ellen is unconventional and forthright. Where May is fashionable and unoriginal, Ellen craves "des quartiers excentriques" (65). She shares Archer's enthusiasm for literature and the arts and she ignites Newland's burning passion for life. Through his brief yet volatile encounters with Ellen, Newland sees the limitations of old New York and is able to envision some vague, new way of life. Ellen Olenska is his "miracle of fire and ice" (11). She comes to represent unattainable freedom.

Ellen remains unattainable because Newland's perception of her is not rooted in the real world. She is part of his cultivated and "contemplative" vision of life. Newland thinks of Ellen "abstractly, serenely as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture" (289). As Wharton implies, Ellen is part of his ivory tower world that is isolated from the rest of old New York. This is Newland Archer's "secret garden" where he explores his books and

imagines life in some fantastic world. Just as the young Edith Wharton escaped to her father's library "and dragged out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion" (A Backward Glance 69), Newland escapes from his tightly monitored society through his imagination and through the liberating power of the arts. However, Wharton was a child when she sought refuge in her "secret garden," while Newland does so as a grown man.

If one extended Wharton's house metaphor--the house as a living social being--to The Age of Innocence, the libraries of the Archer homes represent Newland's inner sanctum. They are his physical ivory tower where he frequently explores his innermost thoughts in safety, beyond the watchful and penetrating gaze of the tribal collective. Yet even the sanctity of this room is not entirely safe from outsider penetration, as we see in the scene preceding the dinner in which May and the other women conspire to give Ellen "a handsome send-off" (274) and thus cast her out of the tribe. Newland notes that even his study had been "ruthlessly tidied" for the dinner party to a point that "the room looked at him like an alien countenance composed into a polite grimace" (274). He is powerless against the will of the collective and even his inner world is vulnerable.

While certain notions reveal a deeply sensitive mind, Newland's contemplative world is vulnerable because it is ultimately derived from an adolescent-like sense of self.

Like Lawrence Selden and Ralph Marvell, other Wharton men with keen sensibilities, Newland has a strong sense of personal pride bordering on social haughtiness. He feels himself better than his tribesmen, yet ironically he is no different. "In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number" (11). That being so, Newland is still incapable of affecting any type of substantial change because he lacks the skill and depth of experience. For instance, in the library scene with Sillerton Jackson, "the old anecdotist" of the tribe, Newland defends Ellen's right to do as she pleases: " 'Women ought to be free--as free as we are', making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences" (39). At moments such as these, he is compelled to break from tradition and deliver an unbridled and heartfelt statement. And upon doing so, he is usually overcome by its powerful implications. Like an adolescent he has the independence of mind to put on a bold front and make passionate claims, yet does not have the experience to turn his statement into action and give his ardent front any depth.

Ellen is generally the motivating force behind his unguarded eloquence. In private conversation with curious spectators or with tribal gossips, Newland has the courage

to be Ellen's outspoken champion. Under the guise of familial solidarity, which his relationship to May Welland permits, Newland defends Ellen's way of life. With his sister, the tribal "old maid", who questions the propriety of inviting Ellen to dine with the respected tribal elders, Mr. and Mrs. van der Luyden, Newland defends Ellen by saying: "Well--what harm was there in inviting her? She was the best-looking woman in the room; she made the dinner a little less funereal than the usual van der Luyden banquet" (75).

Newland, in fact, has been influenced by Ellen's forthright attitude. In an earlier scene at her home in the "Bohemian quarter", Newland is both shocked and exhilarated by Ellen's insightful honesty. Through a simple yet penetrating remark she burst the long-standing van der Luyden bubble: "Isn't that perhaps the reason?...For their great influence; that [the van der Luydens] make themselves so rare" (66). After accepting the veracity of her comment Newland passionately proclaims: "It's you who are telling me; opening my eyes to things I'd looked at so long that I'd ceased to see them" (66). Ellen has a liberating effect on Newland. She enables him to look at his "native city" and tribe "objectively." "Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, [New York] looked disconcertingly small and distant" (67) to a young and an electrified Newland Archer.

In another episode, with his journalistic friend, the failed man of letters Ned Winsett, Newland enthusiastically

defends Ellen's choice to live like Winsett in "the almost unmapped quarter inhabited by artists, musicians and 'people who wrote'" (87), a seemingly unfashionable choice for a New York "blue-blood." Winsett asks Newland, "'I wonder,' ...'how a Countess happens to live in our slum?'" Newland, "with a secret pride in his own picture of her," responds: "'Because she doesn't care a hang about where she lives--or about any of our little sign-posts'" (104-105). However, these comments are as adventurous as Newland dares to be. With Winsett he is reasonably safe from the scrutiny of the tribe but with any other associates Newland must remain guarded, and his feelings for Ellen, the married woman (separated or not), must remain private because he knows "the old New York way...the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes', except the behavior of those who gave rise to them" (280).

Newland finds Ellen alluring and cannot seem to get his fill of her. Repeatedly throughout the story, he is driven by a "singular restlessness" (132) to seek out Madame Olenska. In an early episode, Newland finds himself involuntarily drawn to Madame Olenska's unorthodox home in response to her curious invitation. Once inside, Newland's sense of adventure is piqued because the "atmosphere of [Ellen's] room was so different from any he had ever breathed" (62).

Wharton's depiction of Ellen's firelit drawing room is sensual if not subtly erotic. While waiting for Ellen, Newland wonders what she would think "if she found him sitting there with the air of intimacy implied by waiting alone in the dusk at a lady's fireside" (62). The mood of the narration builds as Newland silently peruses the room taking in all the "foreign" sights and smells: the "two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen)"; "the vague pervading perfume that was not what one put on handkerchiefs, but rather like the scent of some far-off bazaar, a smell made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses" (62). Newland is aroused by the atmosphere of Ellen's inner sanctum.

Yet just as his sexual nature begins to direct his thoughts, his tribal self regains control and fills his mind with habitual distractions. "His mind wandered away to the question of what May's drawing-room would look like." Newland's mood sinks. "The young man felt that his fate was sealed: for the rest of his life he would go up every evening between the cast-iron railings of that greenish-yellow doorstep, and pass through a Pompeian vestibule into a hall with a wainscoting of varnished yellow wood. But beyond that his imagination could not travel" (62-63). Newland seems to have given up the battle without a fight. From his adolescent vantage point, Newland is convinced that May controls his fate, even though he is not married to her at this point. He does not see that his own inaction has long since sealed his fate.

Ellen inevitably becomes the central topic of discussion at tribal functions. Her unconventional lifestyle and her guileless desire not to conform leave her open to the examination of others. Her kinship to the tribe combined with her non-traditional, gypsy-like upbringing make her a tantalizing morsel for dinner discussion. Newland is painfully aware of this and can only predict, not control, the direction of such discourse. During a meal with Sillerton Jackson, Newland noticed that "[Sillerton] looked baffled and hungry, and [Newland] reflected that he would probably finish his meal on Ellen Olenska" (36). Just as Newland sardonically predicts, Sillerton artfully directs the conversation onto Ellen and her latest exploits with Beaufort. Newland must outwardly accept Sillerton's venomous gossip about his paramour, or face tribal ostracism for speaking his mind. Having his eyes opened by Madame Olenska is both a blessing and a curse.

iii

As The Age of Innocence unfolds, Newland's sense of self becomes increasingly blurred. At the beginning of Book I, he is a self-assured young man, certain of his position within the tribe. At first, when Ellen Olenska re-enters his domain, Newland is irritated by her seemingly "misplaced flippancy." He finds comments such as, "this dear old place is heaven" (19), somewhat patronizing and disrespectful. At this point, he does not question the

tribe's double standards. While allowing himself the privilege of poking fun at old New York, he resents anyone else who does so, especially if that person is "foreign."

Nevertheless, Newland finds himself drawn to Ellen in spite of himself. At the van der Luyden's dinner, Newland is instantly captivated by her and he begins to question tribal values:

> In the middle of the room [Ellen] paused, looking about her with a grave mouth and smiling eyes; and in that instant Newland Archer rejected the general verdict on her looks. It was true that her early radiance was gone. The red cheeks had paled; she was thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty. 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 conscious power. At the same time she was simpler in manner than most of the ladies present, and many people...were disappointed that her appearance was not more "stylish"--for stylishness was what New York most valued (54).

Newland begins to see things in a different light. He is observing the world not from the standpoint of the

collective, but as an individual. He is also starting to judge the ways of society more harshly. By implying that his society's preoccupation with haute couture is less significant than Ellen's dignified simplicity, Newland is beginning to question the empty values behind the rigid principles guiding his people.

By the end of Book I, Newland's outlook is dramatically altered. He loves Ellen Olenska and admits to her his passion. With Ellen, he felt that "everything in his old familiar world of habit" (199) receded to the background of his mind. In one of the most powerful, yet subtly rendered, love scenes in the novel, Newland Archer is carried by his romantic nature to a point well beyond the limits of the old New York code. As Ellen "spoke in a low even voice, without tears or visible agitation" expressing her frustrated love to Newland, "He sat bowed over, his head between his hands, staring at the hearth-rug, and at the tip of the satin shoe that showed under her dress. Suddenly he knelt down and kissed the shoe" (145). Through his passion for Ellen, Newland is emancipated. At moments such as these, he is not controlled by fate but is equal to it. He is able to respond naturally, without premeditation. He is the actualized Newland Archer of his visionary world.

Love scenes like the previous one demonstrate Wharton's maturity as a writer and as a woman. When writing The Age of Innocence, Wharton was a cultivated woman able to reflect on the liberating and life-affirming effects of her own

sexual nature. Her relationship with Morton Fullerton in 1908, a few years after the publication of The House of Mirth, provided her with the experience she had only known vicariously, through her sensitive imaginings. In The Age of Innocence the reader is able to feel "the interfusion of spirit and sense, the double nearness, the mingled communion of touch and thought" (Edith Wharton: A Biography 223) between its main characters in a way that one could not in the "pre- Morton Fullerton" era of the The House of Mirth. During private moments between Lily and Selden, the reader is beguiled by the potential of their desires but never witnesses a physical display of love. In the early 1900's, Wharton understood only desire, not sexual love.

However, even in The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer's sexually derived emancipation is short-lived. Ellen regains a realistic perspective on their situation and withdraws from Newland. She tries to make him see the impossibility of their union. They cannot openly enjoy a relationship and remain in good standing with the tribe, at the same time. They must choose between love and tradition. Ellen sensitively tries to balance her love for Newland with the compassion she feels toward her family who have taken her in. When May's telegram arrives, in which she accepts Newland's proposal to move up their wedding date, the lovers are profoundly disheartened. As the narrator explains in the moments preceding the arrival of the telegram: "[Newland] felt as though he had been struggling for hours

up the face of a steep precipice, and now, just as he had fought his way to the top, his hold had given way and he was pitching down head long into darkness" (147).

In both The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth, Book One ends in crisis, with each protagonist lost in the "familiar-alien" (The House of Mirth 117) surroundings of their world. Lily is caught in a detestable scandal with Gus Trenor and Newland finds himself forced into an insufferable union with a woman he no longer loves. Likewise in Book Two, both protagonists enter a stage of denial. In Newland's case, the line between what is real and what is imagined becomes increasingly blurred. During his wedding ceremony, for example, Newland is dazed to the point of performing his part in the age-old ritual on "automatic pilot." His mind and body seemed to have separated. He is having difficulty determining what is real:

> Archer opened his eyes (but could they really have been shut, as he imagined?), and he felt his heart beginning to resume its usual task. The music, the scent of the lilies on the altar, the vision of the cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms floating nearer and nearer, the sight of Mrs. Archer's face suddenly convulsed with happy sobs, the low benedictory murmur of the Rector's voice, the ordered evolutions of the eight pink bridesmaids

> and the eight black ushers: all these sights, sounds and sensations, so familiar in themselves, so unutterably strange and meaningless in his new relation to them, were confusedly mingled in his brain (156).

At one point in the ceremony, Newland seems to have taken complete leave of his senses. He thinks to himself, "And all the while, I suppose,... real people were living somewhere and real things happening to them..." (154). He is denying the reality of his life with May and in so doing, he is denying his responsibility for directing his own life. Like Lily Bart, Newland Archer is avoiding the central issues at the heart of his struggle with society, at the heart of his very existence.

After their marriage, Newland and May's life together takes on the qualities of a "perpetual tepid honeymoon, without the temperature of passion yet with all its exactions" (245), not unlike the early stages of marriage between Edith and Teddy Wharton. Newland seeks refuge in his ivory tower world. He begins to confuse reality with fantasy. Newland

> had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which [Ellen] throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational

> activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgements and visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent - that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there (220).

It is interesting that Wharton calls Newland "absent." One of Henry James' criticisms of The House of Mirth was that "Selden [was] too absent" (Henry James and Edith Wharton Letters 53). It was meant as a criticism, yet James seems to have missed the point. Wharton tends to depict "absent" male characters intentionally, not because she lacks the skills to render them "big and true" (53). She seems to be saying something about the men around her, the intelligent literary men by whom she was surrounded throughout her lifetime. According to R.W.B. Lewis, "Selden was...an emblem of masculinity in Edith's world. Fond as she was of her Walter Berrys, her Egerton Winthrops, her Eliot Gregorys--and Selden has a little of each--she knew they had insufficient blood in their veins and could provide

little of what an intelligent and ardent woman might crave" (Edith Wharton 155)--that is, an intelligent and ardent woman like Edith Wharton or, fictionally projected, like Ellen Olenska. Newland Archer is also an emblem of masculinity with insufficient blood in his veins, like his predecessor Lawrence Selden.

Over the next few years, Newland's life follows a cyclical pattern of fleeting moments of escape followed by long stretches of daily monotony. Ironically, it is the very monotony that the Marchioness Manson, Ellen's eccentric guardian, warns Newland to avoid. Her manner is comically reminiscent of the nurse in Romeo and Juliet as she tells Newland: "To me the only death is monotony. I always say to Ellen: Beware of monotony; it's the mother of all deadly sins" (175-6).

Rather than disdaining the Marchioness' somewhat irreverent style, Newland is struck by her insight. In an attempt to break the daily monotony that seems to have overpowered him, Newland does something unexpected. In order to satisfy his "incessant and undefinable craving" for Ellen, he tries to force a meeting with her at the Blenkers' farm, where she is reported to be staying. However, at the farm he discovers that he has just missed her and he becomes distraught. Disillusioned by his unfortunate timing, Newland experiences a dire premonition in which "His whole future seemed to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man

to whom nothing was ever to happen" (191). Newland's keen sensibilities have enabled him to confront the "hard facts" of his uneventful life. But rather than being a means to personal enlightenment, they have revealed to Newland the miserable truth about his existence: the truth that he is mercilessly bound to his fate, the truth of living each day in the same insignificant way.

What finally breaks the cycle and snaps Newland out of his confused state, is the ritualistic elimination of Ellen from the tribe and May's announcement that she is pregnant. With Ellen gone, Newland can no longer steal away to her side. His ambition to do so is all but eliminated, when his tribal responsibilities as husband and, more significantly, as father are realized. Newland accepts his fate and goes on with life in a dignified yet lackluster fashion.

In her essay "Edith Wharton Reads the Bachelor Type: Her Critique of Modernism's Representative Man," Judith Sensibar examines the character of Martin Boyne in Wharton's novel The Children. Sensibar connects Wharton's "bachelor type" to the Modernist's "new Representative Man," the Prufrock type that came to full fruition in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Sensibar claims that Wharton had an "intimate knowledge and understanding of the emotional and ethical limitations of the Prufrockian sensibility, a knowledge gained partly from her own close friendships with some of the creators of this figure, including Henry James" (575). The Prufrockian sensibility ties in with the notion of the

"absent" male figure in Wharton's fiction. Newland Archer's vision of himself as a "dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen" is an echo of Eliot's lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?/In a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse./ For I have known them all already, known them all--/ Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."

iv

Newland is able to be simultaneously withdrawn from the crowd yet within the crowd as a silent observer. In fact, Newland's reflections, along with the narrator's omniscient perspective, provide the reader with reliable information which recreate the setting and customs of Wharton's lost world. For instance, during the wedding ceremony, Newland notes, in a more lucid moment :

> 'How like a first night at the Opera!' he thought, recognizing all the same faces in the same boxes (no, pews), and wondering if, when the Last Trump sounded, Mrs. Selfridge Merry would be there with the same towering ostrich feathers in her bonnet, and Mrs. Beaufort with the same diamond earrings and the same smile- and whether suitable proscenium seats were already prepared for them, in another world.

> After that there was still time to review, one by one, the familiar countenances in the first rows; the women's sharp with curiosity and excitement, the men's sulky with the obligation of having to put on their frock-coats before luncheon, and fight for food at the wedding-breakfast. (152)

While Newland's perspective is often very insightful and revealing, there are several instances in the novel where it is not. Cleverly, Wharton has adopted the Jamesian technique of restricted point of view. As readers, we have been led to accept Newland's observations because, by his very nature and by insights such as above, he has proven himself to be trustworthy. We have a tendency to believe him even when his observations are not entirely accurate. E.M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, discusses James' use of perspective in The Ambassadors, and his words could just as easily apply to Newland's perspective in The Age of Innocence:

> Strether is the observer who tries to influence the action, and who through his failure to do so gains extra opportunities for observation. And the other characters are such as an observer like Strether is capable of observing--through lenses procured from a rather too first-class oculist. Everything is adjusted to his vision, yet he is

> not a quietist--no, that is the strength of the device; he takes us along with him, we move as well as look on (154).

As with Strether, in The Ambassadors, we move through The Age of Innocence with Newland and see the world through his eyes. Wharton has subtly melded the mind of the reader with the mind of Newland Archer, but not entirely. She leaves room for thoughtful probing by providing us with cunning, if not elusive, clues that reveal the greater perspective beyond Newland's vainly adolescent and somewhat fantastic world-view. For example, as Newland observes Ellen at the van der Luyden's dinner he notes:

> The Countess Olenska was the only young woman at the dinner; yet, as Archer scanned the smooth plump elderly faces between their diamond necklaces and towering ostrich feathers, they struck him as curiously immature compared with hers. It frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes. (55)

Newland is "frightened" because, in tribal terms, a young woman should have the innocent eyes associated with chastity, simplicity and freshness. The narrator sardonically implies that even the elder tribeswomen have maintained that type of "innocence," by not fully developing and maturing into well-rounded adults. Unlike

these women, Ellen has had real life experience and has matured beyond her nearly thirty years. She has "had to look at the Gorgon" yet was not blinded by her stare (240). Instead, her often painful experiences have "opened" her eyes so that she will "never again" live in the "blessed darkness" (242-3). Ellen has developed and matured to a point beyond that of her tribal elders. Yet at this early stage of their relationship, Newland still judges Ellen by the double-standards of the tribe and does not recognize her as a spiritual mate.

Even after taking a feminist posture against members like old Sillerton Jackson ("Women ought to be free- as free as we are") Newland has a hard time giving up traditional views. The reader can see Newland's hypocrisy, even if he cannot. While we may understand the tradition his perspective is born of, the reader does not have to accept it as the only one. One must cautiously evaluate Newland's judgements before accepting their validity.

At no time is that caution more important than when Newland is judging May Welland and Ellen Olenska. He uses extreme judgement when considering both these women. However, the real May and Ellen lie somewhere between the extremes.

Newland tends to idealize Ellen. He is preoccupied by a maudlin vision of life with her in a story-book setting. In a particularly frantic moment, in which Newland felt that he was about to lose Ellen, he displays a fledgling naivete. He says to her:

> 'I want--I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like [mistress]--categories like that--won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.'
>
> She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there? she asked; and as he remained sullenly dumb she went on: 'I know so many who've tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo--and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous.' (242)

By the end of this scene it is clear that Ellen and Newland are at different stages of development. Ellen has evolved into a mature woman while Newland is caught in a transitional world between adolescence and adulthood.

Moreover, Ellen demonstrates that she has her feet firmly planted on the ground and that her perceptions are clear. She is a balance of compassion and level-headedness, and therefore we can trust her judgements. Newland on the other hand is a picture of instability. He is overwhelmed and ill-equipped to "deal with unusual situations," by his

own admission. He is "dazed with inarticulate pain" which make his judgements concerning Ellen suspect.

But his judgement is even more questionable when considering May Welland. Newland has jaundiced impressions of May that reveal a pompous and insensitive streak in his character. His opinions of May are often patronizing, arrogant, and even cruelly damning at times.

Before the arrival of Ellen Olenska, May is everything Newland desires. She is the female embodiment of the old New York "good citizen." In their relationship, Newland perceives himself as the master craftsman and May as the dutiful apprentice. In the opening scene, at the opera, Newland notices May in the Mingott box and is delighted to see her. He is overcome by a sense of pride and "possessorship" and he thinks:

> 'The darling!'...'She doesn't even guess what [the opera is] all about.' And he contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessorship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity. 'We'll read Faust together...by the Italian lakes...' he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride.(10)

Newland imagines himself as the hero of his romantic

delusions, but is in fact, a "negative hero" like Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth. Wharton called Selden "a fraudulent figure whose ideas were not much to be trusted" (Edith Wharton: A Biography 155).

May is not as naive and impressionable as Newland believes. In her greatest scene, chapter 16, May proves that, like Ellen, she is both level-headed and compassionate. [After all, both women are the descendents of the great Catherine Mingott who is "the high and mighty" "matriarch of the line" (14) and who "won her way to success by strength of will and hardness of heart, and a kind of haughty effrontery that was somehow justified by the extreme decency and dignity of her private life" (15)]. When Newland arrives in Florida, unexpectedly, to implore May to move up their wedding date, she is concerned. She asks Newland to "talk frankly" because she had "felt a difference" in him; "especially since [their] "engagement had been announced." She suspects that Newland is interested in another woman and says: "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices--one has one's own feelings and ideas" (126).

Unlike Newland, May is comfortable with her place in society. She gives Newland the opportunity to back out of their engagement honorably so that he may find contentment. She says, "I couldn't have my happiness made out of a wrong- an unfairness- to somebody else. And I want to believe

that it would be the same with you. What sort of life could we build on such foundations?" She goes on to say:

> 'I've wanted to tell you that, when two people really love each other, I understand that there may be situations which make it right that they should--should go against public opinion. And if you feel yourself in any way pledged...pledged to the person we've spoken of... and if there is any way...any way in which you can fulfill your pledge...even by her getting a divorce...Newland, don't give her up because of me!' (126-7)

These are not the observations of a "darling" who "doesn't even guess what [life is] all about." However, Newland has great difficulty responding when the women in his life are forthright. He reverts to empty rhetoric instead of seizing his opportunity. He babbles on about irrelevant issues such as "a woman's right to her liberty," instead of dealing with the real issues at hand. In the end, Newland convinces himself and May that there is no cause for her alarm. May's fears are momentarily subdued and the ruffled veneer of old New York is temporarily smoothed.

After they marry, Newland's romantic notions fade quickly as he discovers that "It was less trouble to conform with tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammeled bachelorhood had

dallied" (164). Even still, May tries wholeheartedly to enter Newland's contemplative domain. But Newland shows no interest in guiding her there. She tries, for example, to show an interest in the poetry that he enjoys. Newland tacitly discourages her because he feels that her opinions are "destructive to his enjoyment of the works commented on" (246). His priggish attitude further illustrates his juvenile vision of the world. His attitude has so colored his perceptions, that he cannot see himself, or anyone else, realistically.[22] It always gets in the way and prevents him from taking an active role in his own life, not to mention what it does to May.

Even after Madame Olenska is no longer a real threat to their relationship, Newland still cannot see May for the woman that she is. He still envisions May as a "type" rather than as an individual. In her essay, "The Unsung Heroine--A Study of May Welland in The Age of Innocence," Gwendolyn Morgan claims that the real tragedy of The Age of Innocence is "the denial of May's great potential by her rigid and unforgiving husband" (39). Undeniably, Newland does not recognize May's "heroic nature" until it is too late. Finally, after her death, their son Dallas reveals to Newland May's immeasurable "sacrifice"--the sacrifice of loving a man who never loved her in return and the sacrifice in sharing the pain of that man's unrealized love. Newland "did not regret Dallas's indiscretion. It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all someone had

guessed and pitied...And that it should be his wife moved him indescribably" (297). Reminiscent of the closing paragraphs of The House of Mirth, the "word" seems to travel miraculously from the grave.

V

Remarkably, through the sacrifice of self, Newland, like Lily Bart, finds redemption in his loss. He discovers that someone understood and pitied him for his great privation. From Newland's limited perspective, he "missed the flower of life" in order to preserve the old New York way, which is the way of saving face even if it means doing the "right thing" for the "wrong reason."

Yet as we have discovered, Newland's loss is also May's loss, and her sacrifice, in many ways, is the greater one. What magnifies their tragedy is Newland's inability to see himself realistically. He suffers from an ambiguous nature. On many occasions he is the clear-eyed spokesman for the tribe, and at other times he is the naive adolescent misguided by the romantic delusions of his ivory tower world.

Newland is caught somewhere between adolescence and manhood. In an essay entitled, "The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Studies of Arrested Development," C.J. Wershoven compares Kate Chopin's and Edith Wharton's novels. Wershoven takes a feminist perspective and explains that the

"novels can be examined together for their comments on a society that arrests the full development of women, making both the reconstruction of self and the formation of genuine relationships nearly impossible" (28). There is truth in what Wershoven says; however, she could extend and amend her thesis to say that Wharton's society tends to arrest the full development of both men and women. Given this amended version, Newland Archer, like Lily Bart, suffers from arrested development in the form, as previously mentioned, of societal "overpruning."

Society prevents its members from developing into well-rounded, independent adults. In fact, individuality must be sacrificed in order to preserve the greater social collective, which is tragically illustrated by the life of Newland Archer. Society inadvertently encourages its women to remain child-like, like Lily Bart, and its men to remain in a transitory stage between adolescence and manhood.

There are many reasons to find fault with Newland's character, yet we are still moved by his tragic sacrifice. There is a component within his story that excites pathos in the reader. Ironically, Newland Archer is the last old New Yorker. To the end, Newland is a social pillar within the community, steadfast in his belief in the traditional ways, even as he longs silently for some idealized existence. Newland is doomed to be the last member of an all but extinct society, and that is a lonely burden. The pathos of his situation is only heightened by May's "heroic"

sacrifice. Both characters sacrifice self in order to preserve the old way to the very end. Yet, ironically, their sacrifice is without reward because when Newland dies, what remained of old New York dies with him.

In the epilogue of the story, which is set thirty years after the main action, we discover what has happened to the Archers and Madame Olenska. The three main characters have lived their lives seemingly separated by a distance that is both geographical and emotional. However, there is a connection between the characters that lies outside the pages of the novel and within the actual life of Edith Wharton. According to R.W.B. Lewis, "Edith Wharton, by the act of writing the novel just the way she did write it, brought together the phases of her life and her nature. Her successive New York and Europeanized selves--their relation, as she had felt, sundered by the Great War--were, for an undeterminate moment in 1919 and 1920, in harmony" (432).

Lewis views Ellen Olenska as a projection of the independent and fully mature Wharton, living life in the Fauborg-St.Germain district of Paris, as the American expatriate (432). Lewis does not make room for May Welland in this scheme. Like many critics, he is not sympathetic to May's position in the love triangle. He describes May as a "lovely, conventional and calculating" (430) young woman. However, Lewis has not been entirely fair to May. In fact, there is a place for her in his thesis. While Ellen

represents a later stage in Wharton's development, May is a projection of Wharton's childhood. In her character, Wharton recaptures part of the lost innocence of old New York; she represents Wharton's "childish memories of long-vanished America" (A Backward Glance 369). May Welland embodies all that is noble, principled and virtuous in Wharton's lost world.

Lewis sees Wharton's earlier New York self in the character of Newland Archer. Newland illustrates Wharton's struggle to come to terms with her artistic nature and her conventional self. Newland Archer is the tragic figure of a man caught in a futile struggle between two women and, more symbolically, he is the representation of a man caught between two worlds. Sadly, Newland Archer's destiny is to be the last old New Yorker.

CHAPTER THREE

Ethan Bound:
The Tragic Tale of Ethan Frome

i

> Her view of life is tragic, but her gods sit not on Olympus but on upholstered furniture in perfectly appointed rooms. And unlike the Greek gods, they have Reason and reasons on their side, which they can summon by the silent raising of a gloved hand.
> (Mary Gordon, "Introduction", Ethan Frome ix)

Mary Gordon's observation is very astute. When we think of Edith Wharton, we conjure up an image of the femme de lettres seated in a world fitted with "upholstered furniture in perfectly appointed rooms" conversing with the literary and academic "who's who" of her day. The novels The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence are artistic projections that developed naturally from the psyche of the woman from this privileged environment.

Both novels are set in upper-class locales, primarily in New York and Newport, and they deal directly with the lives of men and women from the leisure class circle to which Edith Wharton belonged. The tone of these novels is frequently satiric, even comical at times. In contrast, Ethan Frome is set in the symbolic community of Starkfield, Massachusetts, and depicts the lives of the impoverished rural folk who live there. Its tone is overwhelmingly grim and somber, never comical. The question arises, how did the

author of biting social satire convincingly portray the austere life of a dirt-poor farmer in Ethan Frome.

Mary Gordon considers Wharton's ability to write "outside the experiential range of...her own life" as something at which we should truly "marvel." She says, "and I mean marvel literally, as in response to a genuine mystery--at the fact that a woman who spent all her life among the rich and powerful knew to the marrow of her writerly bones how a young man who had had one year at technical college felt when he was cold, and what it was like at a country dance for New England farmers" (xii).

However, Wharton's writing achievement is not at issue here, nor are the apparent contrasts between her "New York" novels and Ethan Frome. I am more concerned with how the three novels are linked, and more specifically, how the life of her protagonist, Ethan Frome, connects with lives of her "New York" protagonists, Lily Bart, who despises anything remotely "dingy," and Newland Archer, the consummate "good citizen" of old world New York.

All three novels are linked thematically. Their similarities transcend setting and class. The House of Mirth, The Age of Innocence, and Ethan Frome all belong to the realistic genre that dominated the American literary scene from the Civil War into the twentieth century. They realistically depict the psychological struggle of their main characters and, most importantly, they depict Wharton's tragic vision of life.

Ethan Frome, like Lily and Newland, is caught in an insurmountable conflict between personal desire and society's conventional dictates. On the one hand, it is seemingly inconsequential that he is poor and uncultured. Regardless of his poverty, he is trapped in a life that he loathes. Like Newland and Lily, Ethan remains spiritually impoverished throughout the story. All three protagonists never realize their personal desires. Instead, they accept a miserable compromise that can only be relieved through death, death that comes sooner to one than to the others.

And yet, Ethan's poverty does matter because it compounds his tragedy. Faced with a miserable burden, Ethan carves out a pitiful existence in an unforgiving world completely removed from the comforts and luxuries that exist, even if they are taken for granted, within the realm of Wharton's old New York. Daily, Ethan faces the nightmare conditions of his life which he is forced to share with two harpy-like women. His life is not only spiritually barren; it is mentally and physically unyielding, as well.

Wharton felt compassion for the underprivileged, even while she believed in a class system. At the end of Ethan Frome, she expresses her compassion through the voice of the narrator: "my heart tightened at the thought of the hard compulsions of the poor" (88). The message implied in these words is that the hardships of the poor are too painful to contemplate and thus are more demanding on the human spirit than the hardships faced by members of the upper class.

From this point of view, Ethan Frome's tragedy is more pitiable than either Newland or Lily's. And so I have left the study of the most tragic character for the last.

ii

Ethan Frome, published in 1911, has very noteworthy origins. The climactic incident of the story was inspired by an actual sledding accident that occurred in March 1904, at the foot of the courthouse hill in Lenox, Massachusetts (Edith Wharton: A Biography 308). The framework of the story was written a few years after, in 1907 or 1908. At that time, Wharton sought out the assistance of a tutor to help improve her French language skills. Part of the tutorial required her to improve her skills through written exercises. And characteristically, "The easiest thing for [Wharton] was to write a story; and thus the French version of 'Ethan Frome' was begun, and carried on for a few weeks" (A Backward Glance 295). However, only a skeletal version of the story exists in those exercises.

It was not until a few years later that the haunting tale of Ethan Frome began to take shape. In those years, Edith and Teddy Wharton enjoyed their summers at the Mount, their home in Lenox. During one of their stays, Wharton claims, "a distant glimpse of Bear Mountain brought Ethan back to my memory, and the following winter in Paris I wrote the tale as it now stands" (295-6).

While the plot emerged in the written exercises in

France, the setting grew out of her experiences in New England, in the area surrounding the Mount. In A Backward Glance she fondly recalls the making of Ethan Frome:

> For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett. In those days the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts were still grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills; and Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors (293-4).

Later in that same passage, she credits Nathaniel Hawthorne, as a writer with whom she felt an artistic kinship in the making of her novel. Wharton is not preoccupied with Hawthornian "sin", however. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Wharton "was interested in the effect of isolation upon the workings of man's emotional life" (A Feast of Words 163). In order for the "effect" to have literary merit the isolation could not work upon the emotional life

of just any man; it had to work upon a morally sensitive man, like Ethan Frome. The symbolic community of Starkfield, with the legacy of its Puritan forefathers still haunting the shadows of its cemeteries, is a fitting backdrop for the grim realism Wharton portrays.

To recount Ethan's tragic tale, Wharton uses the first-person narration technique to enhance the story-telling aspect of the novel and to get around a technical problem. The narrator is really a minor character whose main purpose is to tell his version of the story from the bits and pieces he has inquisitively gathered from Starkfield's reticent citizens. The narrator explains, "I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story" (3). His version is more a "vision" than an actual recounting of events. In fact, at the end of the prologue, the young narrator says, "It was that night I found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this vision of his story" (13; emphasis added). Margaret B. McDowell claims that the narrator "synthesizes [the] complicated and mysterious fragments into a single vision--an imaginative story--that gives order to the myriad of facts and impressions that others have provided" (75). From this point of view, the tale that follows the prologue, in Platonic terms, is not three but at least four times removed from what "actually" happened. Moreover, Cynthia Griffin Wolff warns that the narrator's "vision" is yet another version and "therefore...

has as much claim to the truth as any other" (165). She also says that "The overriding question becomes then--not who is Ethan Frome, but who in the world is this ghastly guide to whom we must submit as we read the tale?" (165).

Wolff raises an interesting question. Yet, whatever else he may be, the narrator is a literary tool: a means by which Wharton can tell her story in the idiom most like her own. The narrator, after all, is a young, scientifically trained gentleman, who finds himself in Starkfield on business, with little else to do in his spare time than to think about the enigmatic Ethan Frome. He is not unlike his own description of Mrs. Hale, the woman to whom the "best parlour" in all of Starkfield belonged. He says, "It was not that Mrs. Ned Hale felt, or affected, any social superiority to the people about her; it was only that the accident of a finer sensibility and a little more education had put just enough distance between herself and her neighbours to enable her to judge them with detachment" (6). The fact that the narrator possesses a "finer sensibility" and a strong command of American Standard English, enables Wharton to get around a technical problem that may have arisen if the story were told from Ethan Frome's point of view.

Ethan is "By nature grave and inarticulate" (34-5). When he does speak to the narrator, his speech usually takes the form of monosyllabic sentence fragments: "That's all right,"; "That's my place,"; "We're kinder side-tracked here

now" (10-11). It would be incongruous to have this same character demonstrate the kind of eloquence expressed in lines such as: "Ethan was aware that, in regard to the important question of surgical intervention, the female opinion of the neighbourhood was divided, some glorifying in the prestige conferred by operations while others shunned them as indelicate " (55). Clearly, this is Wharton speaking through the voice of her educated narrator, and not the voice of the inarticulate Ethan Frome.

The description of Mrs. Hale has an additional relevance. The notion of "the accident of finer sensibility" provides the justification for Mrs. Hale and, less directly, for the narrator, to "distance" themselves, thus enabling them to judge the people of Starkfield with "detachment". But not only does the justification provide support for Mrs. Hale and the narrator, it also provides support for Wharton's own social outlook. The notion of "the accident of finer sensibility" is a fundamental element of Wharton's elitist defense of the class system. With this in mind, let us now turn our attention to the "vision/version" of Ethan Frome.

iii

From the moment the story commences, we find ourselves drawn into this exceptional tale. In the opening scene, Wharton cleverly drops the storyteller's "hook" and immediately reels the reader in for the catch:

> If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post-office. If you know the post-office you must have seen Ethan Frome drive up to it, drop the reins on his hollow-backed bay and drag himself across the brick pavement to the white colonnade: and you must have asked who he was (3; emphasis added).

Our curiosity is piqued, and we are compelled, like the narrator, to implore: Who is Ethan Frome, and what has caused him to " drag himself across the brick pavement?"

Quickly, we learn that Ethan is fifty-two years old. The incident known as "the smash-up" occurred some twenty-four years earlier when he was twenty-eight years old. The prologue and epilogue are set in the present, while the main portion of the novel is set in the days leading up to and including the accident. The narrator discovers that the "smash-up" was responsible for the "red gash across Ethan Frome's forehead" and a "lameness" that "warped his right side" and checked "each step like the jerk of a chain" (3). Despite his disfigurement, Ethan is the "most striking figure in Starkfield" (3). Both physically and symbolically, Ethan stands apart from the rest of Starkfield's citizens, just as Lily Bart and Newland Archer do in their respective societies.

The narrator describes Ethan as a taciturn man with a "grave mien" (4). Later he observes:

> He seemed 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 personal plight, tragic as I guessed that to be, but had in it...the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters (8).

As with Lily and Newland, the surroundings, influences and circumstances affecting Ethan's development control his destiny. The environment that has shaped Ethan Frome has "frozen" him in time. He is cursed to live with his poverty and his physical ailments, in a moral and spiritual wasteland. He is cursed because he can feel. His sensitive nature, ("all that is warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface"), combined with his unmerited grief, evokes from the reader a feeling of deep pity and tenderness. His fate is not only tragic, it is pathetic.

In time, the narrator meets Ethan Frome, by hiring him as a driver. However, he learns little more about Ethan than has already been told to him by others. Then as fate would have it, a snowstorm prevents Ethan and the narrator from completing their regular trek. They have to seek refuge in the Frome household, whereupon the narrator confronts the remaining two characters in the Frome saga.

At this critical moment, Wharton dramatically shifts the setting and the reader is left to wonder at the form and nature of the hideous figures that lie beyond Ethan's threshold. As we turn the page, to the beginning of Chapter I, the narrator nimbly guides us back in time, twenty- eight years, to a deserted street where we meet the "Young" Ethan Frome (14) --a name that vaguely echoes Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown".

Ethan, we learn, had "taken a year's course at a technical college at Worcester" (14). However, "His father's death, and the misfortunes following it, had put a premature end to Ethan's studies" (15). The untimely death of the protagonist's father is a recurring motif in Wharton's fiction. Lily, Newland and Ethan have all suffered, in varying degrees, by the death of their fathers. Lily and Ethan, in particular, find themselves thrown into situations which they had not expected. For these two protagonists, it seems that the death of the father is the inciting force that precipitates the uncontrollable and disastrous effects of their tragedies. If Mr. Bart had not died, Lily and her mother would not have "wasted away" in the dingy squalor they abhorred. If Mr. Frome had survived, Ethan would have completed his studies and his life would have taken a dramatically different course.

The motif has its roots in the autobiographical. Wharton's own father, George Frederic Jones, died when Edith was only twenty. While his death did not alter the family's

financial situation or dramatically change Edith's career path, it did cause Wharton significant emotional grief. When George Frederic Jones died in 1882, Edith lost a spiritual ally and kindred spirit. In A Backward Glance, she lovingly recalls his death:

> I am still haunted by the look in his dear blue eyes, which had followed me so tenderly for nineteen years, and now tried to convey the goodbye messages he could not speak. Twice in my life I have been at the death-bed of some one I dearly loved, who has vainly tried to say a last word to me; and I doubt if life holds a subtler anguish (88).

R.W.B. Lewis points out that Wharton's long-time friend and literary advisor, Walter Berry, was the other "dearly loved" person with whom she shared this poignant experience (Edith Wharton: A Biography 44). Given the emotional impact of the event, it is not surprising that George Frederic's death repeatedly found expression in Wharton's fiction.

After his father's death, Ethan found himself tied to the family farm and mill. As each year passed, he became more withdrawn from the world around him. Then his mother fell ill and "the loneliness of the house grew more oppressive than that of the fields" (35).

Isolation affects Starkfield's inhabitants in different ways. It made Ethan grow silent; it made his mother go mad. Near her death, his mother's voice was seldom heard, even though she had been a "talker in her day" (35). "In the

long winter evenings, when in desperation her son asked her why she didn't 'say something', she would lift a finger and answer: 'Because I'm listening'; and on stormy nights, when the loud wind was about the house, she would complain, if he spoke to her: 'They're talking so out there that I can't hear you" (35).

His cousin, Zenobia Pierce, came to nurse Mrs. Frome in her last days. And with Zenobia came "human speech" (35). Zeena's presence provided a welcome respite from the "mortal silence of his long imprisonment" (35). "The mere fact of obeying [Zeena's] orders, of feeling free to go about his business again and talk with other men, restored [Ethan's] shaken balance and magnified his sense of what he owed her" (35). At this vulnerable time, Ethan has a distorted sense of obligation. He has confused gratitude with servitude.

Like Lily and Newland, Ethan finds himself in situations to which he impulsively reacts. Ethan, like the other protagonists, seeks the "quick-fix" to remedy life's unpleasant scenarios. However, these hasty solutions usually have long-lasting and very damaging effects, like his marriage to Zenobia. He marries her not out of love but out of momentary desperation. After his mother's funeral, "when he saw [Zeena] preparing to go away, he was seized with an unreasoning dread of being left alone on the farm; and before he knew what he was doing he had asked her to stay there with him. He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring

instead of winter..." (35). Ethan is directed by impulse rather than forethought and must live with the painful consequences of poor judgement.

Within a year of their marriage, Zeena, who had "seemed to Ethan the very genius of health," developed "the 'sickliness' which had since made her notable even in a community rich in pathological instances" (36). Ethan notices that, ironically, Zeena's "skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms" (35). As Mary Gordon notes, "The character of Zeena is a brilliant portrayal of the kind of woman whose métier is illness and whose strength comes from the kind of certainty invented by the invalid's unlimited free time and the innocence born of the truth that most wrongdoing requires a physical capacity the invalid lacks or chooses to stifle" (xiii).

Zenobia's imagined illnesses and a fascination with their latest cures are her greatest preoccupations. She is entirely self-absorbed. Her hypochondria is a survival tactic that she developed in order to fight the overwhelming effects of isolation on the farm and the fact that Ethan "never listened." "The [latter] charge was not wholly unfounded. When she spoke it was only to complain, and to complain of things not in [Ethan's] power to remedy; and to check a tendency to impatient retort he had first formed the habit of not answering her, and finally thinking of other things while she talked" (36).

Zenobia's condition might also have its roots in Wharton's life. Like Ethan Frome, Edith found herself imprisoned in a marriage to a spouse with whom she had little in common and who suffered from real and imagined health problems. As Edith grew more successful and independent, Teddy Wharton's mental and physical health declined and his behavior became erratic. In these latter years of marriage, that coincided with the writing and publication of Ethan Frome, Teddy was fighting for his life in the only way he knew how. As R.W.B. Lewis observes, "Behind Teddy's irascibility and tears, his contradictory demands and contentions, his shouting and his no doubt sometimes maddening behavior, it is possible to discern a pattern of motivation that is logical, familiar, and human....[B]y the summer of 1911, Teddy might be said to have been fighting for his life: that is, he was fighting in no very coherent manner for his identity" (Edith Wharton: A Biography 306). Living in the shadow of the indomitable Edith Wharton was, in many ways, a life-threatening experience for a man like Teddy Wharton.

Zenobia, like Teddy, is fighting for her identity. Her "weak" disposition is the outward symptom of a woman with a weak sense of self. Zeena needs to control her environment in order to hang on to what little independence she possesses. If she does not, her fragile hold would be lost. "She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even

Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity " (36).

Zeena's sickness kept Ethan in perpetual servitude just as Teddy's illnesses kept Edith bound to him. As long as the Frome environment remained the same, with Zeena sick and the farm unyielding, Zeena could control Ethan. However, when Mattie Silver came to nurse and keep house for Zenobia, the environment changed. Her arrival "was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth" (17). Mattie Silver's youth and zest for life were variables Zeena could not control. The introduction of Mattie to the Frome household set in motion the central conflict of the story, which is a psychological battle of will between Zeena, who is fighting to keep what little identity she has left, and Ethan Frome, who is struggling to reach all that is "warm and sentient" within him, before it is beyond reach.

iv

In the opening chapter, Ethan has come to Starkfield to "fetch home" Mattie who is in town at a dance for the young people of the village. Even while Ethan was "grave and inarticulate, he admired recklessness and gaiety in others and was warmed to the marrow by friendly human intercourse" (34-35). He could stand outside and watch the dance with satisfaction, even while he did not participate. Ethan

first spies Mattie "in the pure and frosty darkness" (15) through the window of the dance hall that, in contrast, "is seething in a mist of heat" (15).

The narrator draws us into his vision of the night through the eyes of Ethan Frome. We are enchanted by Mattie and by the evocative imagery of the scene through the window. The stoves in the hall looked like "they were heaving with volcanic fires" while the dance floor was "thronged with girls and young men". On the platform at the end of the hall lay the "devastated pie-dishes and ice-cream saucers" of the dancers. Within this inviting scene, Ethan "had been straining for a glimpse" of Mattie's dark head, then he caught sight of her red scarf:

> As she passed down the line [of the Virginia reel], her light figure swinging from hand to hand in circles of increasing swiftness, the scarf flew off her head and stood out behind her shoulders, and Frome, at each turn, caught sight of her laughing panting lips, the cloud of dark hair about her forehead, and the dark eyes which seemed the only fixed points in a maze of flying lines (16).

Ethan is suddenly covetous of Mattie as he watches a young suitor, Dennis Eaddy, "look and touch" her with an air of "impudent ownership" (16). At this moment, we realize that the grave and inarticulate Ethan Frome of the prologue is also a deeply passionate man.

In a moment of brief suspense, as Mattie leaves the dance hall, Ethan wonders if she will accept a ride with Dennis Eady. But when Mattie "nimbly eludes" young Eady, Ethan's "heart, which had swung out over a black void, trembled back to safety" (22).

From Ethan's perspective, Mattie is everything Zeena is not. She is young, beautiful, and still untouched by the hardships of life. She is described in vivid and appealing terms: Mattie had a "trick of sinking her lids slowly when anything charmed or moved her"; she was "quick to learn, but forgetful and dreamy"; and even in the face of adversity Mattie was not "a fretter." Zeena, on the other hand, was old and hardened before her time. She spoke in a constant "flat whine" about her aches and pains. She was "wholly absorbed in her health" and nothing else around her mattered. At one point, Ethan recalls the "distinct sight of his wife lying in their bedroom asleep, her mouth slightly open, her false teeth in a tumbler by the bed..." (26). Perhaps the most notable contrast between the women is expressed in terms of the living and the dead. Mattie is depicted in terms of her life-affirming qualities. After coming in from the brisk winter's night, Ethan notices Mattie with "the colour of the cherry scarf in her fresh lips and cheeks" (27). Zeena's face, however, is usually "drawn and bloodless." Only seven years Ethan's senior, "she was already an old woman" (33), and in most ways was already dead.

For Ethan, the long walk home with Mattie is a rare but intoxicating moment of escape from the merciless monotony of his life and from the unrelenting grip of his wife. During their walks, Ethan noticed that Mattie "had an eye to see and an ear to hear" (17). As do Wharton's other male characters, Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell and Newland Archer, Ethan Frome has the affected attitude that "he could show [his beloved] things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will" (17) because, like the others, Ethan "had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty" (17). In Ethan's case,

> His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments 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 any one else in the world felt as he did, or whether he was the sole victim of this mournful privilege. Then he learned that one other spirit had trembled with the same touch of wonder... (17).

Like her characters, Edith Wharton had felt this same "silent ache." For many difficult and painful years, as she

struggled to develop her literary identity in the artistically barren old New York, she too wondered whether she "was the sole victim of this mournful privilege."

Unable to express his feelings openly to Mattie, Ethan has created a visionary world in which he and she lived, similar to the world Newland Archer creates in The Age of Innocence. Ethan's visionary world seems real to him. On their walk home from the dance, "He let the vision possess him as they climbed the hill to the house. He was never so happy with her as when he abandoned himself to these dreams. Half-way up the slope Mattie stumbled against some unseen obstruction and clutched his sleeve to steady herself. The wave of warmth that went through him was like the prolongation of his vision. For the first time he stole his arm about her, and she did not resist. They walked on as if they were floating on a summer stream" (26). In the middle of a cold Starkfield winter, Ethan could be warmed by the summertime enchantment of his dream world.

Though Ethan and Mattie have not yet expressed their feelings to one another, the ever-astute Zeena, fearful of her uncertain hold on Ethan, has been able to detect a change in his manner, even before Ethan, himself, is conscious of the change. For instance, since Mattie's arrival, Zeena noticed that he has been shaving each morning and that he is cleaning up and churning butter for Mattie who "had no natural turn for housekeeping" (18). Moreover,

she notices that Ethan, who normally ignores her disparaging comments, seems to listen intently to anything she has to say about Mattie. However, "Zenobia's fault finding was of the silent kind, but not the less penetrating for that" (31). Previously, Ethan had been "disquieted by Zenobia's way of letting things happen without seeming to remark them, and then weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences" (20). Like any guilty lover, Ethan is beginning to fear that Zenobia knew the truth of his heart.

But when Zenobia suddenly announces that she is planning a trip to Bettsbridge to stay the night and see the new doctor, Ethan's fears are momentarily subdued. At this point, "there was only one thought on his mind: The fact that, for the first time since Mattie had come to live with them, Zeena was to be away for a night" (33). And he wondered if Mattie "were thinking it too..." (33). Ethan did not realize that this would be his first and last night alone with the woman he loved. Ironically, it would be yet another short-lived victory in the tragic life of Ethan Frome. Like his brief year at technical college, his night with Mattie cruelly enables him to sample life's possibilities but not savour them.

v

Zeena's absence from the household is the calm before the storm. Just before Ethan leaves for work, he notices

how "homelike" his worn-out kitchen looks, with Mattie cheerfully washing dishes in it and Zeena gone. Once again, Ethan finds comfort as he escapes back into his dream world on his drive into Starkfield. In his mind, he envisions the evening with Mattie that lies ahead, during which he and she will "play" at being a happily married couple. "The sweetness of the picture, and the relief of knowing that his fears of 'trouble' with Zeena were unfounded, sent up his spirits with a rush" (34). And the characteristically stoic Ethan Frome "whistled and sang as he drove through the snowy fields. There was in him a slumbering spark of sociability which the long Starkfield winters had not yet extinguished" (34).

As with any pre-storm "calm," there is a sense of subtle foreboding. In particular, two incidents reinforce a feeling of uneasiness in the mind of both the reader and Ethan Frome. In the first incident, Ethan stumbles upon two young lovers, Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum (Mrs. Hale of the prologue and epilogue), who are coincidentally stealing a kiss on the "spot where he and Mattie had stood with such a thirst for each other in their hearts" (39). The "thought that these two need not hide their happiness" is a painful reminder, to Ethan, that he is bound to silence and secrecy. By contrasting this carefree pair of lovers with Mattie and Ethan, Wharton is reinforcing the tragic implications of Ethan's doomed relationship. It is also an expression of the kind of pain Edith must have experienced in her own

doomed love affair with Morton Fullerton, which would still be a very emotional recollection at the time she was writing this novel.

In the second incident, which follows yet another dream vision of Mattie "fixing herself up for supper," Ethan finds himself passing the familiar knoll which is the final resting place of his predecessors. As a boy, Ethan had found one of the older headstones particularly interesting because it "bore his name" (39). The stone reads: "SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF/ETHAN FROME AND ENDURANCE HIS WIFE/WHO DWELLED TOGETHER IN PEACE/FOR FIFTY YEARS" (40). "With a sudden dart of irony" Ethan wonders if "when their turn came, the same epitaph would be written over him and Zeena" (40)-- not Mattie, but Zeena. Deep within his soul, Ethan knows he is doomed to live a long life with "ENDURANCE," but for the moment he wants to prolong the ecstasy of the evening.

When Ethan finally arrives home, everything is as he had imagined, and yet, is somehow even better. Mattie seems "taller, fuller, more womanly in shape and motion" and moves with "something soft and flowing in her gait" (40- 41). The supper has been carefully laid in front of the fire that glows in the stove. And "Ethan was suffocated with the sense of well-being" (41).

However, the tone of the evening dramatically shifts as Zeena's treasured pickle dish is sent crashing to the floor.

The breaking of the dish is the turning point of the story. From this point, Mattie and Ethan's lives begin a downward spiral. To Zeena the dish is not only an irreplaceable keepsake, but it is the only thing of beauty she possesses. Mattie knows that Zeena will never forgive her for using it and is certain to send her away.

However, when Zeena does return, she reveals her plan to send Mattie away, even without knowledge of the broken pickle dish. Her trip had been a smokescreen. She has cleverly disguised her true intentions behind the masks of illness and poverty. She tells Ethan that she has decided to send Mattie away to save them the expense of keeping her. Zeena states, "[Mattie's] a pauper that's hung onto us all after her father'd done his best to ruin us. I've kep' her here a whole year: It's somebody else's turn now" (58). And Zeena makes clear to Ethan, once a clanswoman has done her duty nobody can condemn her, unless they plan on doing their "duty," as well.

This scene is a version of similar scenes played out in both The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence. In The House of Mirth, Lily is systematically disinherited from her Aunt's estate. No one would take her in because of the scandal surrounding her name. Likewise, in The Age of Innocence, Madame Olenska was "ritualistically" removed from the family circle, and sent, in grand style, back to Europe, where she would no longer be a temptation for Newland Archer. In all three scenes, Wharton demonstrates how the

will of the clan is far greater than the will of any one individual, regardless of class.

When Zeena discovers the broken pickle dish, she is victorious. Ethan is left with no room to negotiate. Mattie's fate is sealed. And Zeena, the consummate victimizer, milks the moment for all she can:

> "You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it...If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened," she said; and gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body...(63).

Throughout the crisis, Ethan remained dumbfounded. However, later that evening, after the dust had settled, Ethan went to his makeshift study (Wharton's male characters generally have a "study" which symbolically acts as their inner sanctum, a place of refuge from the outside world). Here, in this room, his wretched situation became all too clear to him: "Confused motions of rebellion stormed in him. He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than

when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste..." (65; emphasis added). Waste: Lily Bart's short life is a waste, a "waste of good material"; Newland Archer wastes both his life and the life of his wife May Welland by not recognizing her for the woman that she truly is; and Ethan Frome is living with a woman who lays waste to all that comes into her path.

The next day, the day of Mattie's departure, Ethan realizes "That which had seemed incredible in the sober light of day had really come to pass, and he was to assist as a helpless spectator at Mattie's banishment. His manhood was humbled by the part he was compelled to play and the thought of what Mattie must think of him" (69). Ethan is powerless.

Zeena, and the impossible situation in which she places Ethan, make him a desparate man. In his mind, death seems to be the only plausible option left. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, "The sled ride is the natural climax to all the themes that have been interwoven throughout the story" (179). The death fantasy of Mattie and Ethan is tied directly to an historically recurring motif. From Tristan and Isolde to Romeo and Juliet, and on, the suicide pacts of lovers who dare to live in harmony with their own beliefs but in conflict with the prescribed social code, feed off the reader's/audience's romantic notions of martyrdom. Because of their courage, innocence, justness or love, the characters are immortalized through their tragic deaths.

However, Ethan Frome is Wharton's novel. She is a realist, not a romantic. She is not concerned with idealization, or rendering things beautiful when they are not. Like Henry James, Wharton is a "biographer of fine consciences" (A Handbook to Literature 392). She, like James, is more concerned with the portrayal of life with fidelity. Ethan and Mattie cannot be immortalized for their tragic deaths. Instead, they are immortalized on the pages of the epilogue, as the miserable and woeful survivors of the accident.

After the accident, in an ironically merciless twist of circumstance, the once beautiful and vital Mattie Silver transforms into a "bloodless and drawn" creature, even more hideous than Zeena Frome. And Zeena has ironically transformed back into the unfailing nurse maid. Ethan's legacy is to live out his life with Mattie and Zeena under the same roof, just as he had originally desired.

In the epilogue, the narrator tells Mrs. Hale that he has spent the night at the Frome household because of the storm. She finds this extraordinary. Mrs. Hale starts to reminisce after the narrator observes "It's horrible for them all":

> "Yes: it's pretty bad. And they ain't any of 'em easy people either. Mattie was, before the accident; I never knew a sweeter nature. But she's suffered too much--that's what I always say when

folks tell me how she's soured. And Zeena, she was always cranky. Not but what she bears with Mattie wonderful--I've seen myself. But sometimes the two of them get going at each other, and then Ethan's face'd break your heart...When I see that, I think it's him that suffers most..." (88).

Ethan ironically survived the accident only to be reminded of his cruel destiny each and every day. He is a prisoner of life. His lameness--both physical and symbolic--caused by the accident, checks "each step like the jerk of a chain" (3). Like Prometheus, Ethan wakes up each day to face the same merciless fate. Because of his inability to direct his life, he tragically remains "Ethan bound" forever in our minds.

vi

The image of "death in life" dominates Ethan Frome. It is neatly summed up by Mrs. Hale in the final lines of the story: "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" (89).

All the major scenes of the novel take place in winter, the season of death, in the small village of Starkfield, symbolically named for its unyielding farm land. Ethan is described by Harman Gow as a man who has "been in Starkfield

for too many winters" (5). The hardships of winter seem to steal the life force from the village's inhabitants. The young narrator observes that the winter "atmosphere...seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield" (5).

The landscape is described as colorless and the "lonely New England farm-houses" seem to make the "landscape lonelier" (10). In keeping with the plot, Ethan's place is the most "oppressive" in all of Starkfield with "all its plaintive ugliness. The black wraith of a deciduous creeper flapped from the porch, and the thin wooden walls, under their worn coat of paint, seemed to shiver in the wind that had risen with the ceasing of the snow" (10-11).

The house is also described as a "house without shades" (26), an image that depicts the blank stare of the dead. When Mattie and Ethan arrive home from their walk, they enter the kitchen "which had the deadly chill of a vault after the dry cold of the night" (27).

Not only is Ethan's house oppressive from the outside, it is oppressive from within. Moreover, Ethan's home lacks the "L" part of the structure which connects the main house with barn and the tool sheds. The "L" is considered to be "the centre, the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm" (11). For Wharton, this is significant because houses in her novels are not just dwellings, but they seem to have lives of their own. From that point of view, Ethan's hearth-less home is both a "dead house" and a "house of the dead".

All three main characters seem to be more dead than alive. As previously discussed, Zeena is described in terms of the dead. Likewise, after the accident, Mattie's face is described as "bloodless and shrivelled, but amber-tinted, with swarthy shadows sharpening the nose and hollowing the temples" (85). Yet, in contrast to his "dead" cohabitants, Ethan, who outwardly seems just as extinguished, still possesses something "warm and sentient" deep within, even after all the long cruel years. For example, Ethan's sad face can still evoke Mrs. Hale's sympathy. In another instance, Ethan displays a flash of curiosity when he is driving the narrator to his train. When Ethan expresses a desire to read through a volume of popular science, the narrator is moved. Ethan may have lived a relentless life alongside "ENDURANCE," but he has not been entirely destroyed by her. There is still a spark of life within him that inspires the pathos of others.

The images of death and isolation serve only to enhance Ethan Frome's tragic story. They tighten the novel into a virtually flawless work of fiction. Wharton states, "It was not until I wrote Ethan Frome that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements" (A Backward Glance 209). Unlike The House of Mirth, which James described as "two books," Ethan Frome is both "well written and composed." In this novel, Wharton is in control of her characters, setting, imagery and structure. It is an effective and unified American classic.

vii

No study of Ethan Frome would be complete without further mention of the autobiographical elements that run through the novel, in addition to those that have already been mentioned. As in all her fiction, aspects of Wharton's life find expression in theme, motif, and characterization in Ethan Frome. And yet, no other Wharton novel seems so obviously autobiographical.

R.W.B. Lewis explains that the "great and durable vitality of the tale comes at last from the personal feelings Edith Wharton invested in it, the feelings by which she lived her narrative" (309). He goes on to say, "Ethan Frome portrays her personal situation, as she had come to appraise it, carried to a far extreme, transplanted to a remote rural scene, and rendered utterly hopeless by circumstance" (309).

The love triangle central in Ethan Frome parallels the real life love triangle involving Edith and Teddy and Morton Fullerton. Just prior to writing Ethan Frome, Wharton, who was in her forties, was engaged in a secret affair with journalist Morton Fullerton. This affair seemed to awaken Wharton's underlying erotic nature. In it, Wharton felt the effects of unbridled love, something she had never experienced in all her years with Teddy. While the relationship lasted only a few years, it affected Wharton deeply. It enhanced her literary range and it added another experiential dimension to her tragic vision of life.

As Lewis points out, Wharton frequently shifted the genders of her characters. In this case, Ethan is Edith and Mattie is Morton, and, audaciously, their names even sound the same. Zeena is a curious blend of the sickly Teddy and the unrelenting Lucretia Rhinelander Jones, Edith's mother and a woman for whom Edith had little affection. Edith was tied to Lucretia in an unpleasant relationship until her seemingly interminable marriage to Teddy. Zeena, who is one of Wharton's most unforgettable characters, on a par with Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country, is an exaggerated depiction of the seemingly callous and implacable blend of the two very real people in Wharton's life. In so many ways, Edith's relationships with Lucretia and Teddy were relentless prison terms, just as Ethan's relationship is with Zeena.

In fact, Ethan repeatedly fantasizes about Zeena's death, just as Edith probably did with Teddy. Like Wharton, Ethan found divorce an "impossible" alternative even to living out a miserable life alongside "ENDURANCE". Zeena's premature death would give Ethan the freedom he longs for. In his visionary world, he hopes to find Zeena miraculously dead. On the evening that he escorts Mattie home from the dance, Ethan finds that Zeena has locked them out of the house. For a brief moment, he wonders "What if tramps have been there--what if..." (26).

In another instance, when Zeena has returned from her journey to Bettsbridge, she announces to Ethan "I'm a great

deal sicker than you think" (54). At that moment, Ethan's dream-world desires overcome his rational thoughts. "Her words fell on his ear with a strange shock of wonder. He had often heard her pronounce them before--what if at last they were true?" (54). What if Zeena is actually going to die? But Ethan knows Zeena better than that. Her complaint is just another attempt to get Ethan's attention and to manipulate the situation.

Ethan cannot free himself from the marriage bonds that tie him to Zeena. Nor could Edith take the momentous step of freeing herself from Teddy, at the time Ethan Frome was written. In many ways, Ethan's story is part of Wharton's nightmare revelation, of what she felt could happen to her. Lewis aptly observes:

> And in the dénouement--where the bountifully healthy and vindictive Zeena commands a household that includes Mattie as a whining invalid and Ethan as the giant wreck of a man --we have Edith Wharton's appalling vision of what her situation might finally have come to (310).

And yet, while Ethan remains crushed in spirit and bound to "ENDURANCE" forever in our minds, Edith Wharton does not. Wharton's life, in contrast, is an exemplary model of the power of the human spirit to overcome the oppressive demands of society.

CONCLUSION

In varying degrees the lives of the protagonists in all three novels examined in this study reflect Wharton's tragic vision of life. The stories built around Lily Bart and Newland Archer, Wharton's New York protagonists, demonstrate how society can suppress and even exstinguish the great potential of the sensitive individual who dares to be independent. In The House of Mirth, Wharton examines the ways in which a frivolous society destroys its individual members who challenge its codes by not conforming. In The Age of Innocence, we witness the painful struggle and subsequent sacrifice of a man caught between the traditional old world and the enlightened new world. And in Ethan Frome, Wharton expresses how poverty, guilt and isolation can destroy the human spirit through insanity, bitterness and silence, to a point at which both the individual, and the landscape surounding him, blend into a drawn and lifeless canvas.

All three protagonists, regardless of setting and class, are the tragic victims of environments that suppress individual spirit. Each reacts impulsively to circumstance rather than exercising prudence or forethought. They suffer from an inability to act and direct their lives because the greater social forces around them have systematically crushed their inner drive. Lily, Newland and Ethan are immobilized and can never develop their full potential.

Their only reaction is to live from moment to moment and escape their unpleasant reality into a private, unreal, visionary world. But their real world and their visionary world never meet. Individual potential is set against societal expectation as the central conflict in Wharton's fiction. The outcome is always the same. It is always tragic. The individual with the most potential is wasted; his or her spirit is crushed in order to maintain the status quo, whether it be on Fifth Avenue or in Starkfield, Massachusetts.

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