"A HABITABLE REGION": MORALITY'S PLACE IN THREE NOVELS BY EDITH WHARTON

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PREFACE

The understated drama and wit of Edith Wharton's prose style have long fascinated me. An avid reader of short stories, I found many of Wharton's to be compact masterpieces in complexity of theme and characterization. But her novels--Ethan Frome, Summer, The House of Mirth, The Fruit of the Tree, and The Age of Innocence--captured my interest most completely. In these longer works, I sensed not only a variety and intensity of characterization, but a morality too distinctive to be dismissed as a mere "strain" or "undercurrent." I noticed that often, this ethical tone in Wharton's novels was more than a mute and passive presence; rather, it served to shape theme and to charge certain characters with a singular animation lacking in others.

Disappointingly, few critics shared my interest in a concept to which, I was convinced, Wharton had devoted a considerable portion of her art. My mission to "discover" the well-kept secrets of her moral creed and the manifestations of that creed in her fiction was well underway, and the results of my search comprise the bulk of this study.

I offer my sincerest thanks to my major advisor, Dr. Linda Leavell, whose wealth of critical suggestions helped to strengthen and improve many segments of this study. I

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CHAPTER I

EDITH WHARTON'S NEW YORK: A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION AND SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Edith Wharton is one of America's most interesting and complex women authors. We find a wide range of human characters sprinkled throughout her fiction, most of whom stubbornly defy easy classification. Clearly, Wharton found stereotypes and two-dimensional characters boring, and both her female and male protagonists attest to her belief in the myriad nature of humankind. Intimately associated with her interest in human complexity is her subtle yet pervasive concern with morality. She shared James's love for the theme of the individual caught in moral dilemmas, but often explored and clarified the nuances of that theme instead of rendering them hopelessly obscure as her contemporary often did. It seems to have been Wharton's deepest conviction that the more complex and fluctuating a society was, the more desperately it needed a stable if accommodating system of values to sustain it. Yet she also seemed to know instinctively that to suspend a string of abstract morals above the heads of confused and searching human beings would do little to fill their lives with lasting meaning. But to vividly apply those abstract

morals to the fictional lives of her characters, she seemed to have felt, would prove more effectively their intrinsic worth. Wharton's insight compelled her to realize this basic truth, and her ardent belief in the importance of a strong, many-faceted moral philosophy for human life incited her to create one within the framework of her fiction. She had certainly chosen a formidable task for herself, because turn-of-the-century New York City was not only complex and fluctuating but also displayed every symptom of a morally decentralized society. The city of Wharton's youth and maturity was the chief American breeding ground for industrial mechanization, literary naturalism, and sexism in the early twentieth century. In Wharton's estimation, these forces adamantly denied the worth of the individual and rendered meaningless a wealth of moral precepts to which she would eventually lend her emphatic literary support.

The New York of the late 1800s and early 1900s heralded a deluge of innovations and luxuries. Huge "steel-cage" buildings sprouted in the downtown business center; the telephone service flourished in the bustling city, furnishing 10,000 New Yorkers with the rough magic of early communication in 1896; and the Edison Company reigned over New York, installing electricity in homes and on the streets at a galloping pace. The downtown aura of splendorous illumination so enraptured visitors that one British journalist remarked in a vein of distinct awe: "The effect of the

light in the squares of the Empire City can scarcely be described . . . so weird and so beautiful it is" (Klein 190). But the canopy of lights and air of happy prosperity which seemed to envelop the city in a fortuitous glow held small fascination for Edith Wharton. She found that not even the rapid spread of modern conveniences could illuminate the bleakness of her society's innermost recesses. Though Wharton is known for the scintillating wit and sophisticated satire of her New York-based novels, only recently have scholars ventured to plumb the depths of her artistic character to discover what trembled beneath that wry and witty facade.

Wharton felt a deep disappointment in the social, intellectual, and spiritual milieus of New York that never abandoned her throughout her lifetime. In her later years, she wrote of the perennial brownstone home which had long represented the prototype of the "good" family's residence: "I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood . . . to think how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades" (qtd. in Klein 188). Wharton never caught a glimpse in the staid circles of well-bred New York society of her "high gods"--those timeless deities of "beauty, passion, and danger" which she saw as guardians of the spiritual essence of life. Reluctantly, she concluded that amidst those interminably expressionless brownstones, the high gods "were automatically excluded" (Klein 188).

The moral, spiritual, and intellectual paralysis of Edith Wharton's New York society manifested itself in a variety of forms--forms with which Wharton herself was intimately familiar and about which literary critics and historians have written with great zest and interest in the past several decades. Both Wharton and many of New York's cultural chroniclers seem to agree that the source of the city's general lassitude at the turn of the century stemmed in part from the mounting force of mechanization which led to the rise of literary naturalism. In addition, the moral and spiritual fibers of human life were rent by an insidious misogyny which infiltrated art, literature, and science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps as a result of the sudden social and cultural upheaval, high society of Wharton's time turned with relief to the invincible bedrock of social convention and traditions--an act that led inevitably to an even greater moral apathy and a collective tendency to hide behind meaningless amenities and mores.

Such was the formidable line of opposition that greeted the simmering novelist in Edith Wharton. Through her own writings and the careful testimony of Wharton scholars, however, we learn that she was not only aware of the many powers that threatened to extinguish the spiritual life of humanity, but resolutely willing to fight against them. She was prepared--single-handedly if need be--to clear the way for the reinstatement of her "high gods" into

the mainstream of American life. And until they were safely ensconced in their thrones at the head of the Empire City, their mortal champion would persist in the battle on their behalf.

Although Wharton's well-known respect for various intellectual and literary philosophies would prevent her from soundly trouncing any one of them, her own spiritual and unabashedly moral perspective on life stands in direct opposition to one of the most prevalent literary styles of her time--naturalistic determinism. Most naturalists adopt a "philosophical pessimism" toward life which entails a rejection of the principle of free will. In addition, naturalists strive to maintain a thorough-going objectivity and distance in narration, and adamantly refuse to pass moral judgment on their characters. As Russell Blankenship observes, naturalists often expend little effort on the expansion, enrichment and complexity of their characters, and very rarely attribute to them enduring and admirable qualities (517). One has only to read a sampling of Edith Wharton's work to discover how clearly she violates the naturalistic code with her frequent theme of the individual's struggle to choose among alternatives, her integration of moral evaluation, her fully-drawn and distinctive characters, and her consistent concern with the spiritual essence of life. Despite a few notable attempts to prove the existence of naturalistic elements in Wharton's fiction, a knowledge of her works as well as the testimony

of her biographers and critics compel us to agree with Anne Friman's contention that naturalism was a philosophy wholly "inconsistent with Edith Wharton's characteristic view of life" (175).

American naturalism flourished on the increasing mechanization of human life and capitalized on the deluge of industrialism which descended upon many American cities at the turn of the century. Despite Stephen Crane's pessimistic view of industrialized life, he could scarcely have written his naturalistic masterpiece, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, in any other setting than the squalid and spiritually -drained slums of New York. But Edith Wharton had no desire to fashion naturalistic masterpieces from the seamy backwaters of New York's industrialized centers. Instead, she was concerned with the worsening moral and intellectual myopia of American life, and disapproved of the dull complacency which characterized so much of the middle- and upper-class life of her society. As Marilyn Lyde notes,

> In a period which the critics like to describe as an age of brute struggle for survival, she continued to concern herself with the nice moral issues which confront the privileged set and have nothing at all to do with the rise of the masses or the union demand for higher wages (XV).

But even Lyde's affirmation of Wharton's moral concerns sounds a condescending note and makes Wharton herself seem

like a prim and aging dowager who had nothing more than a few "nice moral issues" to occupy her time with. Somewhat more liberal in his view of Wharton's ethical code is Geoffrey Walton who claims that she was an advocate for energy and growth, and fervently believed that those with sufficient resources were obliged to utilize them for the benefit of all. But her cries for a renewal of strength and vitality generally went unheard, for the well-bred classes of New York society had plummeted to "a dead level of prosperity, good plumbing, and vapid benevolence" (Walton 164). As a result, Wharton saw nothing but a bleak wasteland of squandered human potential in New York's "middling quality of life," and for the novelist, at least, such subject matter was grossly limited, inadequate, and desperately dull (Walton 164).

Blankenship also discusses Wharton and her scorn for the plodding sameness of her society, remarking that "in the realm of the intellect she condemns gross stupidity no less than the affectation which is so often summoned up to gloss over unintelligence and lack of culture" (503). According to Blankenship, Wharton satirized the foibles of her society not simply in a witty and rueful vein, but with a mournful eye cast upon its moral, intellectual, and spiritual stagnation. Like Walton, Blankenship contends that Wharton's concern for the complacent mediocrity of Old New York (and America as a whole) stemmed from its lack of aristocratic leadership and familial solidarity. He be-

lieves Wharton found most disturbing the fact that "Americans are liable to be drugged by luxuries and great wealth into an unprotesting acceptance of a life that is wholly formless and aimless in its lack of spiritual and social sanctions" (504).

But by far the most eloquent spokesperson for New York's moral malaise and stubborn lack of individuality is Wharton herself. In her autobiography, A Backward Glance, she devotes an entire section to reminiscences of her ancestors, and at one point, remarks that the old society of New York "noblemen" could be characterized by its inexhaustible "social amenity and financial incorruptibility." A decided proponent of the social graces and the importance of personal reputation, Wharton adds with gentle nostalgia that "we have travelled far enough from both to begin to estimate their value" (22). But even in those incorruptible early days, American life was hardly utopian, and Wharton does not attempt to gloss over its limitations. She considered the major weakness of the "Old New York" superstructure (whose foundation had yet to thoroughly collapse by her maturity) to be "a blind dread of innovation, an instinctive shrinking from responsibility" (22). With more than a touch of scorn, Wharton testifies to the dearth of individualistic characters among her forebears, remarking sagely that "conformity is the bane of middle-class communities" (23).

An indication of Wharton's aversion for the conformity

of her society is her sensitive depiction of her father, George Jones. Wharton perceived even as a child that longings for individual expression stirred within her father, outwardly placid and conventional as he appeared. But the band of resistance with which he was everywhere confronted in the forms of prosaic family and friends managed to quell any fires of artistic energy which might have illumined his early years. Wharton was sure that her father remained "haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained" (A Backward Glance 39). She seemed unable to comprehend the studied indolence which afflicted her family's world, for she makes mention of them time and again:

> I have often wondered at such lassitude in the descendants of the men who first cleared a place for themselves in the new world, and then fought for the right to be masters there. What had become of the spirit of the pioneers and the revolutionaries? (55).

Her mystification at her society's sad lack of spirit stayed with her for years, and her persistent questioning of its moral emptiness proves not only the depth of her own opposition to it but also the measure of her singular vitality and verve in the face of it.

But the prevalence of conformity and naturalistic anti-individualism did not constitute the whole of New York's ethical malaise. One of the most blatant evidences

of the erosion of a strong, central value system was the appalling rise of misogyny in turn-of-the-century New York society. Art, literature, and even science were transformed into legitimate channels for the relaying of sordidly sexist messages. But denigration of women was hardly a phenomenon that materialized with the advent of the twentieth century, and in his full-length study of the misogynistic vogue in art and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bram Dijkstra traces the growth of sexism in art as it began in the early 1800s. As early as 1740 and Richardson's publication of Pamela, British and American societies already entertained unhealthy views of women. But not until the 1800s did Pamela's heroine become the prototype for what Dijkstra colorfully calls "the housekeeper of the male soul" (8). This woman was a vision of chastity, compliance, and domestic contentment, and American society of the mid-1800s viewed her with a solemn reverence. But Dijkstra is quick to clarify that man's devout worship of the female only thinly disguised his deep-rooted condescension toward her. Men exalted women and entrusted to them the guardianship of the "minor morals" because they considered them incapable of intellectual and social competence in the world outside their parlors. Furthermore, men's entrapment of women in the domestic sphere apparently had little to do with a desire to shield them from the world's myriad horrors. On the contrary, man's motive in exalting his wife was, paradoxi-

cally, to exalt himself--to delight in the possession of "a woman who would become a mere extension of himself, who would let herself be absorbed completely by him" (20). Dijkstra also periodically remarks that the few leading women of the day often encouraged the degradation of their fellow women by adding their voices to the predominantly male outcry against female education. Sara Ellis, a writer of etiquette in the late 1800s, proclaimed that there was no man "who would not rather his wife should be free from selfishness than to be able to read Virgil" (20). With female supporters as influential as Ellis, the popularity of discrimination and misogyny could only increase.

Darwin's theory of evolution and the subsequent "scientific" postulations of his many supporters gained great popular appeal at the turn of the century. Dijkstra describes evolutionary theory as the most misogynistic doctrine in history and devotes several chapters to proving the validity of his rather wide-sweeping claim. Quite openly, evolutionary theory helped to "prove" what had only been suspected before: women were far inferior to men both intellectually and morally. Craniologists deftly displayed their prowess in the evaluation of skull sizes, and collectively concluded that woman--whose skull was smaller than man's--was physiologically incapable of sustained mental activity. Even more ominous was the "irrefutable scientific evidence" that women (and, for that matter, most of the minority races) had evolved so little that they

could be considered only slightly more advanced than beasts (163). For a time, artists delighted in portraying woman as primitive or savage, incapable of change and "forever stunted in her evolutionary growth" (167).

Before long, scientific and cultural denigration of women escalated into rabid misogyny. The numerous postulations and dogma resulting from evolutionary theory abounded in scientific and social circles everywhere--dogmatic and thoroughly chilling credos of hatred. Otto Weininger, a Jewish advocate of evolution and the theory of inferior peoples (including his own) wrote a book entitled Sex and Character, in which he offers one of the most contemptuous and vicious denunciations of women ever written with the sanction of the scientific world:

> Women have no existence and no essence; they are not, they are nothing. Mankind occurs as male or female, as something or nothing....Woman...is neither moral nor anti-moral; mathematically speaking, she has no sign; she is purposeless, neither good nor bad, neither angel nor devil, never egotistical (and therefore has often been said to be altruistic); she is as non-moral as she is non-logical. But all existence is moral and logical existence. So woman has no existence. (220)

Though Weininger was nothing if not an extremist, his basic views of women coincided with those held by many "learned"

men of the day, and it is hardly surprising that many authors of the time capitalized on the misogynistic vogue in their own writings.

Dijkstra is reluctant to free any turn-of-the-century author of the taint of sexism (including Twain and Hardy), and frequently cites examples of fictional heroines of the period who aptly reflect the image of the feeble and amoral woman. But he does remark that Wharton--whose interest in science was nearly as avid as her interest in literature--appeared to harbor definite doubts about the value of evolutionary theory. In her short story, "The Descent of Man," she conveys her distress at its growing popularity, and as Dijkstra phrases it, viewed it as "a rather suspect form of popular concern" (162).

Judith Montgomery elaborates on the sexist myth of "The American Galatea" and, like Dijkstra, discusses the permeation of society with the essence of a misogynistic, albeit mythical, doctrine. In the Pygmalion/Galatea myth, explains Montgomery, a sculptor fashions the ideal woman from stone and becomes so enraptured by it that the gods bring the statue to life at his kiss. Montgomery discusses the continuing life of the Galatea myth throughout American art and literature, remarking that as the ideal woman is created by man, she is both superior and inferior to him--superior in that she is inspired by supernatural powers, but inferior because only man's touch can call her to life (890). The myth of Galatea, or the idealized but restrict-

ed woman, flourished in America as early as the 1600s in Puritan culture when women were denied active roles in religion, education, law, and economics. Those early restrictions did not decrease significantly throughout the centuries. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, society considered intelligence an "unfeminine" trait in women and decreed it the sole province of the male (891). The inevitable result of such a ruling was the intellectual stagnation of many women and their concomitant acquiescence to the myth of Galatea--the beautiful, passive and flawless woman. Montgomery makes an interesting connection between Darwinism and this particular myth, remarking that, in Darwinian terms, the "specialization" of woman led to her increasing "unfitness for survival" (892). The more idealized she became, the less capable she was of fending for herself in a real world. Montgomery emphasizes the fact that, until Wharton wrote The House of Mirth, no American author had explored the mind and soul of a woman trained to embody the deadly ideal of Galatea. Perhaps more important, Wharton--like most of her male predecessors, except Hawthorne--shed an unflattering light across those male protagonists who most blatantly exhibit "the raw Pygmalion impulse and its crippling effects" (898). For Montgomery, there is no question of Wharton's awareness of and opposition to the sexist trend threading its way through American culture and art.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff is also convinced of Wharton's

opposition to sexism, and in an article entitled "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," she explores yet another nuance of the artistic denigration of women. In turn-of-the-century New York culture, the mural quickly became one of the most popular art forms and women, its most popular subject. Initially, woman was depicted as the chaste and domesticated virgin--the proto-typical "symbol of virtue" in American society (17). But on the heels of the rave for murals, the Art Nouveau movement took shape, advancing a different, but no less restrictive, image of the "American" woman. In the paintings of this vogue, woman is clad in loosely draped folds of shimmering white--the epitome of lovely and slightly sensual fragility. Her primary function is to adorn the homes of men and to satisfy their vaguely aesthetic longings. Before long, such a decorative function constituted many a real woman's chief aim in life. Wolff's thesis is that just such a woman is Lily Bart, and she agrees with Montgomery that "until Wharton wrote The House of Mirth, no one had troubled to detail what it would be like to be the woman thus exalted and ennobled" (39). With the sad unfolding of Lily's life and death, we learn exactly what it would be like and recognize the ideal for the appalling sham that it is.

In a well-developed article dealing with convention in Wharton's fiction, Mary Suzanne Scribner presents a sound, convincing explication of Wharton's literary rejection of sexism and anti-individualism. She contends that Wharton

regarded woman's stifling role within the boundaries of convention as a devastating deterrent to her growth as a human being. In the nineteenth century, marriage alone was considered "the single approved source of her identity and the sole outlet for her energies" (190). In her fiction, Wharton demonstrates the damaging effects on both men and women of the prevailing suffocation of woman's individuality and spirit. Even more important, she illustrates the sober results of an over-reliance on traditional forms of behavior: the discouragement of independent thought and the loss of genuine human understanding (189). In one of Wharton's novels, Twilight Sleep, she depicts the devastation of a once promising life resulting from woman's limited sphere of capability. In other works, Wharton attacks with skillful subtlety her society's refusal to encourage or even to accept a woman's intelligence or complexity of character. In The Touchstone, the hero finds he cannot love a brilliant woman novelist because she is more intelligent than he is; furthermore, he cannot even accept the average intelligence of the woman who later becomes his wife. Intelligence in any degree in a woman threatens a man's very existence, and Scribner highlights passages from the novel which effectively express Wharton's contempt for the unjust egoism of men in her society. She is careful to point out that Wharton herself never fully rejected social conventions and mores, for she believed them to be the cornerstone of a civilized society. However, when those

conventions ceased to be governed by human beings and began to govern them instead, Wharton heartily fought against their deadening effects on human perception and individual expression.

Although she never professed to be an advocate for feminism, and even mirthfully bemoaned the emancipated woman's abandonment of the "household arts" in favor of university degrees (A Backward Glance 115), Wharton's fiction and non-fiction testify to a firm if quiet belief in the equality of men and women. Throughout her literary career, she enjoyed intimate, lasting friendships with men of renown (including Walter Berry and, of course, Henry James), and by all accounts conducted herself coolly and confidently among them, counting herself a worthy member of male-dominated literary circles. R.W.B. Lewis cites her championship of George Eliot and that author's "unwomanly" interest in science and other non-literary fields. In a review of Leslie Stephen's biography of Eliot, Wharton questions the public's acceptance of Milton's and Goethe's interest in science and its rejection of Eliot's: "Is it because these were men, while George Eliot was a woman, that she is thus reproved for venturing on ground they did not fear to tread?" (qtd. in Lewis 108). Lewis himself charges Wharton with the pioneering feminist spirit when he remarks with gallant finality that she "was gathering her forces for a defense of women in an over-whelmingly masculine literary culture" (108).

Wharton's remarks concerning the lives of her ancestresses and the limited range of experience they were compelled to endure offer substantial assurance of her own belief in woman's equality with man. Throughout the early section of her autobiography, she admits to an avid curiosity about her female ancestors, but laments the fact that there is little to be learned of them in the Joneses' personal annals of history. She cites Sir Walter Scott's glib comment that women, to the men of his time, "were 'a toast' and little else," and Wharton adds ruefully that "nothing could be truer" in regard to her own feminine forebears (14). Their activities were restricted to childbearing and a bit of needlework in the off-season, and Wharton's disappointment in the lack of attention they received is poignantly clear. It is interesting to note that, of all her ancestresses, Wharton seemed particularly fond of her great-grandmother, Mary Robart. She knew no more about her than the others, but Mary's "spirited profile" in an oil portrait stood out for her in memorable relief (15). Whether or not she ever publicly blazed feminist trails, Wharton clearly held strong, independent women in the highest esteem.

Indeed, the spirited, hardy individual--male or female --held rich appeal for Wharton, and her stories, novels, essays, and letters attest to her vigorous faith in the potential of the human soul and her ardent desire that the many forces ranged against it--from mechanized inhumanity

to crippling sexism--should never triumph over the hallowed dwelling-place of her "high gods."

In light of New York's spiritual, cultural, and moral stagnation at the turn of the century, and considering Wharton's own vigorous reaction against it, we might assume that Wharton scholars would have eagerly competed to discover and articulate the fundamentals of her alternate moral philosophy. But such has not been the case, and while several critics have conceded the presence of a distinct moral "strain" in Wharton's fiction, few have felt compelled to broach the subject fully. Most scholars adopt stances of bland neutrality, gentle evasion, or sophisticated nonchalance in their discussions of the moral undercurrent in Wharton's writings. Only two critics have set forth detailed and commendable explications of Wharton's ethical "code" and its manifestation in her fiction, and even these attempts fall short of fully-articulated, well-supported explorations.

Marilyn Jones Lyde presents the most thorough study of the moral basis of Wharton's writing and is one of the few Wharton scholars who declares morality an unquestionable component of her work. At the beginning of her study, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, she cites Wharton herself as saying that

> no story teller, however great his gifts, can do great work unbased on some philosophy of life.

> Only the author's own convictions can give that underlying sense of values which lifts anecdote to drama, drama to tragedy. (23)

A rather revealing remark, surely, from an author whom so many critics have dismissed as too genteel to bother with a philosophy of values.

Lyde contends that Wharton's own "philosophy of life' builds upon the three tenets of belief, truth, and beauty. She cogently points out that, although Wharton never declared herself a convert to the Catholic Church, her ardent conviction that human beings cannot live fulfilled existences without some code of belief to guide them compelled her to view religion as "a vital and long-standing concern" (53). Her advocation of "truth" sometimes led her to reject traditional religious dicta, but only in favor of other, more thoughtful guidelines. According to Lyde, Wharton's well-known sensitivity to beauty forms the foundation for the final tenet in her philosophical triumvirate. Lyde's discussions of belief and truth as primary components of Wharton's morality are interesting and often enlight enlightening, in spite of an odd reluctance to trace them in her fiction and non-fiction. But her treatment of the third tenet, "beauty," is rather weak and obscure, and especially so in her opening remark: "Taste as the criterion for morality determines the rightness of an act by judging it aesthetically: the right thing is the beautiful thing, the thing in good taste" (63). In addi-

tion to the fatal obliqueness of that thrice-repeated "thing," Lyde's definition suffers from a lack of substance and clarification. Although she must be given credit for re-opening the rather unpopular subject of morality in literature, her study would have benefited from a more inclusive delineation of Wharton's values and a thorough discussion of their manifestation in her writings.

Lack of textual support and detailed coverage of particular "Whartonian values" are pitfalls which Carol Wershoven, another competent scholar of Wharton, successfully bypasses in her study. The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton is an interesting, well-developed and clearly written feminist appraisal of Wharton's fiction, and in her delineation of the specific functions of what she calls the "female intruder" (a woman who enters society to "teach" its members in various ways), Wershoven clarifies certain moral qualities embodied in that character. She claims that, generally, the female intruder reflects certain values which Wharton herself regarded as crucial for a satisfactory and fulfilling life. They include "open and spontaneous expression of emotion, the courage to face reality, and a receptivity to whatever life offers" (16). Wershoven insightfully remarks that Wharton achieves two goals in narrating a story from the perspective of a female intruder: "She can tell the story of the moral growth of that outsider and she can reveal the moral bankruptcy of the people who reject [her]" (55). Although

Wershoven effectively addresses the issue of morality and its embodiment in the personalities of specific female intruders (Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska included), the bulk of her analysis centers on an exploration of the heroines' effects on the lives of the heroes (14). She appears to view the male and female characters of Wharton's fiction as equally significant, and though her study purports to deal primarily with the heroines, she devotes much of her total analysis to detailed depictions of the male protagonists as well.

The remaining critics who address the moral component of Wharton's fiction do so in a generally half-hearted and perfunctory manner. Those few who, like Blake Nevius and R. W. B. Lewis, conscientiously endeavor to treat the moralist in Wharton with the close attention it deserves often lapse into simplified half-truths and vague aphorisms which, while serving to classify Wharton neatly in a particular philosophical pigeonhole, overlook the complexities and ambiguities of her unique moral philosophy.

Nevius offers an intriguing, albeit limited, appraisal of what he calls Wharton's "moral consciousness" in _Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction_. Throughout her fiction, he discerns an exploration of the question:

> What is the extent of one's moral obligations to those individuals who, legally or within the framework of existing manners, conventions, taboos, apparently have the strictest claim on

one's loyalty? (110).

Wharton's central ethical concern, then, deals with discovering the boundaries of one's responsibilities to others. Nevius describes this concern--rightly, I think--as one rooted in "the Puritan subsoil of Edith Wharton's nature," because, like the Puritans, she felt an all-consuming dread of committing an act whose repercussions would affect the well-being of her fellow humans (111). Therefore, Nevius concludes, those characters who rebel or act from purely personal motivations seldom enjoy Wharton's support. As he explains, "the individual justification is forced to yield to the larger question of the act's effect on the social structure as a whole" (112). Nevius's ultimate evaluation of Wharton's morality is thoroughly Puritan in emphasis. In his view, the doctrine of Original Sin forever influenced her judgment of human nature and forced her to reject the aspirations and inner convictions of the individual for the wider, more inclusive experience of the community (250). Nevius's analysis demonstrates a fine understanding of Wharton's stoically Puritan perspective on moral issues, and represents a sound attempt to illustrate that Puritan consciousness within the framework of her novels. But his discussion of her value system is one that effectively dismisses her dualistic allegiance to society and to the individual; to communal obligations and to the obligations one feels toward the self; to certain aspects of civilized convention and to those many occasions

of necessary non-conformity. In short, Wharton's moral code is much too vari-colored to be rendered in such strict terms, and Nevius's discussion of its Puritan essence offers us only a glimpse into one small interior of the whole.

Lewis, like Nevius, indentifies a powerfully stern Puritan strain throughout Wharton's thought and works. In his biography of the author, he offers an oddly poignant account of Wharton's youthful bouts of brooding over the doctrine of the atonement and her mystification at the idea of God's supreme self-sacrifice. In a moment of intense Puritanic reverie, the young girl Edith wrote to herself: "If I ever have children, I shall deprive them of <u>every pleasure</u> in order to prepare them for the inevitable unhappiness of life" (Lewis 26). Certainly, the existence of a passionately earnest and robust Puritan streak in Wharton's youth can reasonably account for the stern moral cast which hovers between the lines of much of her fiction. But again, the reduction of her repertoire of diversified ideals to one particular philosophy is surely a grave mistake. Lewis makes no effort to address the changing nuances of Wharton's moral and spiritual perspectives as they deepened and enlarged over the years. Worse still, he implies Wharton's complete indifference to the subject of moral doctrines in his claim that she "did not have the slightest desire to found a new system of ethics" (109). Such a wide-sweeping supposition is not only dangerous, but

Lewis renders it blatantly presumptuous when he fails to reinforce it with any specific, supportive citations from Wharton's own writings. At a later point, Lewis even abandons his earlier conviction of Wharton's Puritan consciousness by declaring that ultimately, "it was not some abstract [i.e. Puritan standard of] morality, but rather the civilized order of life" which Wharton felt should never be violated (221). Despite his adept handling of most of Wharton's biography, Lewis succumbs first to the temptation of over-simplification, and second, to that of evasive generalization in his treatment of the moral question in her life and works.

Percy Lubbock, E. K. Brown, Russell Blankenship and Nellie Elizabeth Monroe are united in their alternately blithe and vehement denial of the existence of a sound moral philosophy at the heart of Wharton's fiction. Lubbock offers the briefest comment in regard to Wharton's ethical code when he proclaims that her novels, morally speaking, are quite empty because of "their curious lack of anything that could be disengaged as a philosophy of life, a characteristic synthesis of belief" (60). Smoothly conforming to what appears to be the critical vogue in much Wharton scholarship, Lubbock disdains to elaborate on this all-encompassing statement, simply moving on to his next observation about "the novels of Edith Wharton."

According to Brown, the absence of a clear moral "doctrine" in Wharton's writing is a result of her well-

bred discretion and gentility which forbade her to lay on the literary line her innermost beliefs and ideals. Brown fails to explain why a fairly explicit moral basis for one's writing could legitimately be described as indiscreet or, as he distinctly implies, plebeian and crude. He does admit, however, that Wharton is "profoundly and pertinaceously occupied with moral issues," but her morality, he qualifies, "is not excrescent but inherent" (96). Apparently, then, Brown looks upon a cryptic or otherwise elusive undercurrent of morality as decidedly in character with Wharton's gentility and, moreover, as the only truly proper means of expressing herself. He closes his brief discussion of her moral stance as Lewis did, by vaguely describing it as a result of ordered, civilized society, meekly subject to that society's control.

Blankenship is distinctly more heated in his denial of Wharton's literary morality, and in "Mrs. Edith Wharton," his brief, generalized chapter devoted to her life and works, he claims that her ironic tone and detached wit stand as insuperable barriers to a full understanding of her moral position. Although his claim is hardly scandalous or outrageous and, in fact, exhibits a good deal of reasonable thought, he imperils his evaluation of Wharton's literary character by suggesting that, unlike her many satiric predecessors, she had no other aim in dissecting her aristocratic society than to amuse and delight an appreciative audience. Leaving the interesting question of

the identity of that audience rather conveniently unanswered, Blankenship asserts with great assurance:

> Secure in her superior intelligence and taste, Mrs. Wharton makes a cool diagnosis of our maladies, disdaining utterly to offer any suggestions for the remedying of the offensive conditions. (504)

In her treatment of individuals in direct opposition to society, he claims that she "gives no very definite indication that she particularly approves or disapproves of either the convention or its antagonist" (505).

Monroe aligns herself with many Wharton scholars in her contention that Wharton's major source of moral outrage stemmed from the "dedication of the whole vitality of a people to money making and pleasure" (112). In addition, Wharton's moral inclinations led her to view religious and intellectual activity with the greatest esteem, and her fiction reflects both her fervent support of them and her disappointment at their absence in her society (114). Monroe, like the majority of most early Wharton scholars, sets forth the cavalier and drearily unoriginal pronouncement that Wharton "gives to conventions almost the force of moral laws and surrounds decorum with grace and beauty and seriousness" (115). While such a contention could not have endured the number of years it has without some foundation in truth, the over-used equation of manners with morals in Wharton's fiction has become a thoughtless cliche. But

Monroe goes further still in her penchant for catch-all phrases when she notes that Wharton's moral consciousness is unsupported by "any system of dogma . . . or well-defined ethical code" (119). It seems that Monroe herself harbors a latent fondness for dogma since she finds most reprehensible Wharton's habit of divorcing moral questions "too completely from their dogmatic sanctions," and substituting "a delicate sensitivity for thought as a guide to life" (120). It is at this point, I think, that Monroe's arguments most clearly betray her lack of familiarity with Wharton's life and works, for few scholars fail to overlook that author's celebrated commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and to the necessity of an independent, vigorous intellect as a guide in life.

Carl Van Doren includes a discussion of Wharton in a section of his study of the American novel entitled "Tradition and Transition." Though he is regrettably vague in his treatment of Wharton's moral concerns, he manages indirectly to convey his theory of her value system through an explication of her major themes and literary attitude. He claims--as have countless others--that Wharton's most significant theme concerns the individual versus society. Unable to determine a marked preference on Wharton's behalf, Van Doren simply states that Wharton was flexible, championing either "the individual in his revolt" or "society trying to keep order" (277). In essence, according to Van Doren, Wharton had no particularly strong con-

victions regarding the individual or society and "was generally content to let her fine irony play over the spectacle of their clashes" (278). He remarks that Wharton hated stupidity, affectation and dinginess, and thereby implies her regard for intelligence, honesty, and beauty. Beyond these relatively orthodox and general comments Van Doren's evaluation does not venture.

Of all the critics who reject the notion that Wharton's writing expresses a distinct and well-developed moral code, only Bruce Michelson does so without cloaking his claim with indifference or contempt. He concedes that Wharton's novels serve as exemplars of her earnest exploration of "large-scale aesthetic and moral questions of the time," and he seeks to exonerate her from the stigma of the "haughty-grande-dame-of-mincing-aristocratic-literature" stereotype. He adopts a rather chivalrous stance in his treatment of Wharton, and while he contends that her novels are marked by "a moral self-effacement and impartiality in . . . narrative stance", he admires her for what he sees as her refusal to adhere to a single moral philosophy (201). According to Michelson, novels like The House of Mirth illustrate "the impossibility of devising any system, any 'ism', any scientific or moral or aesthetic approach to social reality" (201). His sincere understanding of Wharton's insight and innate ambiguity in regard to moral questions is a tribute to his own perception and originality. Yet he makes the disturbingly common but generally

false assumption that a finely-drawn value system is synonymous with a rigidly-defined dogma. It is just this commonly-held assumption that I hope to challenge and disprove in the chapters ahead as I endeavor to describe and illustrate the workings of Wharton's moral philosophy--its borrowings from two powerful American philosophies, its rich and varied inclusion of additional values, and its embodiment in three of her most memorable female protagonists.

CHAPTER II

TRADITION AND INNOVATION: THE DUAL FOUNDATION OF WHARTON'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

The word "morality" conjures for many a vision of dull and narrow-hearted plebeians plodding along to prayer-meeting, their hymnals clutched under their arms, their heads uncompromisingly bowed, their range of vision dismally limited by the unimaginative cut of their coats and the unveering straightness of their paths. Certainly, we have subjected the term to unnecessary abuse, and all too often, we reveal our modern prejudice against it by an embarrassed chuckle when anyone refers to it. As modern literary critics, we seldom give to a writer's creed of life the kind of feverish attention which we give to his/her latent hostilities or sexual repressions. Yet if we consider the host of writers throughout literary history who labored happily under the precepts of various moral doctrines and whose individual geniuses often gained powerful inspiration from their adherence to them, we might find it necessary to question our modern antipathy to the word, "morality." For is it possible that a concept so basic to the work of countless literary artists throughout the centuries could have vanished from the heart of later

literature? Wayne Booth, at least, vehemently denies the extinction of morality in modern literature:

> But I am convinced that most novelists today--at least those writing in English--feel an inseparable connection between art and morality, quite apart from what it is popular to say about morality; their artistic vision consists, in part, of a judgment on what they see, and they would ask us to share that judgment as part of the vision. (385)

Indeed, many critics have not denied the existence of a moral undercurrent in Wharton's writings, but to give a scant, evasive, or otherwise generalized account of a concept to which she herself paid a lifelong allegiance seems an injustice to her art. Surely literary critics should not leave chapters of an author's character and life unopened, simply out of a misplaced deference to the current "unpopularity" of a certain idea. Regardless of morality's modern status, a significant portion of Wharton's artistic code concerned itself with the formulation of a clear but not uncomplicated moral philosophy. That most Wharton scholars have avoided an unembarrassed exploration of that philosophy signifies the incompleteness of the available scholarship on her works.

In order to illustrate the workings of Wharton's "moral genius" as it manifests itself in her fiction and, more specifically, in the female protagonists of three of

her major novels, the first and most crucial step is to offer a thorough definition of its fundamental components. Wharton's value system is one that shares affinities with humanism, which revived in the early twentieth century in response to the soulless naturalism of the period. As Irving Babbitt defines it, humanism in its basic sense has altered little from its Greek and Latin origins. Those who advocate the philosophy still view the human as a perfectible being whose potential can best be realized through "a harmonious development of [his] faculties in this world rather than at an other-worldly felicity" (26). To a great degree, Wharton strove to develop such human ideals in her fiction through her use of realism and her concentration on the individual.

In addition to their concern for the development of ethical, un-mystical values, modern humanists avoid the tyranny of a single dogma. Babbitt cites Matthew Arnold as one of the great humanists in history who proclaimed in what the former implies is genuine, humanistic fervor: "I hate . . . all over preponderance of single elements" (30). Indeed, Wharton's unique brand of literary morality owes much of its brilliant diversity to her refusal to emphasize one dogma over another. But like the humanists, she sensed a need for a moral "center" to life, and in her search for that center, she appealed to specifically American moral traditions as well as to the doctrine of humanism.

But Wharton differs from the twentieth-century

humanists in one very significant and dramatic way: her passion for life and the infinite promise it offered her. Contemporary humanists admittedly nurture a great fondness for poise, equilibrium, and decorum, and as Babbitt remarks, "enthusiasm is hard to combine with poise" (42). Sadly, Wharton herself has long been considered an aristocratic woman of cool detachment and emotionless reserve to whom "enthusiasm" and vibrant passion were alien emotions. But such a view of her is almost laughable in its superficiality, and, on the other hand, quite damaging to the memory of one of America's most vital women writers. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, at least, has effectively dispelled the myth of Wharton as the emotionally frigid "grande dame" of literature. Throughout her in-depth biography of Wharton, Wolff draws us closer and closer to a full understanding of that woman's depth of emotion, her energetic range of vision, and her wealth of complexities. Wolff notes that Wharton "grew to love life with the passion of a triumphant warrior . . . . the deepest thing in all of her best work is, finally, her complex and compassionate understanding of human nature" (9). Her innate capacity for invigorating spiritual communion both with others and even with herself reveals itself in her many confidential writings. In 1925, she wrote in her diary:

> I love to be with my friends. With four or five of them I feel my wings; but, oh, when I'm alone

> how good the talk is! . . . Oh, the joy of being alone--alone; of walking about in the garden of my soul! (qtd. in Wolff 378).

But Wharton offers the most eloquent defense of herself when she freely confesses her youthful ardor and energy in an autobiographical essay:

> I was also--and this most of all--the rapt creature who heard the choiring of the spheres, and trembled with a sensuous ecstasy at the sight of beautiful objects, or the sound of noble verse. I was all this in one, and at once, because I was like Egmont's Clarchen, 'now wildly exultant, now deeply downcast,' and always tossed on the waves of a passionate inner life. I never felt anything _calmly_--and I never have to this day! (qtd. in Wolff 17).

Clearly, the dynamic Edith Wharton of this passage would never be content with the brand of trudging and monotonous morality practiced by those prayer-meeting plebeians. Equally clear is that, in light of her unashamed reverence for great traditions and well-conceived guidelines, she would never be content to drop her fictional characters into an amoral and anti-spiritual abyss. Through the formulation of a rich, complex, and diversified human philosophy within the framework of her fiction, Wharton hoped to express, above all, the necessity of a moral code for human growth, and the practical achieva-

bility of such a code in human life. A significant portion of its strength stems from her appreciation of past moral precepts, and her willingness to borrow from two primarily American philosophies those values which she found necessary to a full expression of moral life. In her autotiography, Wharton asserts the viability of those divergent American "doctrines," professing that

> sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country. Even negatively, these traditions have acquired, with the passing of time, an unsuspected value. (5)

It is the "unsuspected value" of American moral philosophies such as Puritanism and Transcendentalism which, I believe, Wharton explores in her creations of Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent. Divergent as these philosophies are, Wharton was able to combine certain elements of both to create three richly memorable characterizations. But her far-sightedness compelled her to recognize both the inadequacy of past moral doctrines in a fluctuating society, and the necessity of innovative and timely additions to dogmas whose essences had dissipated with time. She aligns herself in her awareness of this phenomenon with the humanists once again, and specifically with Babbitt, who contends that a

> humanist is not content to acquiesce inertly in

> tradition. He is aware that there is always entering into life an element of vital novelty and that the wisdom of the past, invaluable though it is, cannot therefore be brought to bear too literally on the present. (42)

As it engenders itself in the forms of her three fictional heroines, Wharton's moral philosophy is one that rejects a single ethical code, and asserts that a philosophy of human morality, if it is to be considered universal, must embrace a number of liberal ideals in addition to the more conservative values of established moral doctrines. Her incorporation of Puritan, Transscendental, and various additional values of her own into her ethical philosophy proves her understanding of the need for a more flexible and encompassing morality than either Puritanism or Transcendentalism could offer alone.

Edith Wharton never considered herself a representative product of the formidable Puritan legacy or a latter-day purveyor of Jonathan Edwards dogma. In fact, she expresses her clear disapproval of the "entravagances of the self-constituted prophets and evangelists" of the Puritan era, who, she pronounces, "rent and harrowed New England" (A Backward Glance 10). She remarks affectionately that her Protestant forebears differed markedly from "the conscience-searching children of the 'Mayflower'" in their easier manners and more frankly pragmatic view of life. "The New York of my youth," she proudly claims, "was

distinctly Episcopalian" (A Backward Glance 10).

Yet it is my belief that no American writer, especially one who hails from the regions surrounding the Massachusetts Bay Colony, has been unequivocally successful in shaking off the tentacles of a Puritan heritage common, in some degree, to us all. In Wharton's case, the remnants of that forsaken philosophy still clung to her, in spite of her open denunciation of them. As I will explain later, much of her revised moral philosophy was quite opposed to that of the "conscience-searching" Puritans; hence, her rejection of Puritanism in this passage rings with a good deal of sincerity. But her reputed reserve and habit of solemnity, her own staunch code of "civilized" behavior, her affinity for the somber cadences of the Bible, and her advocation of certain "Puritan" values as they appear in her own personal writings and in her fiction unite to reveal a woman whose appreciation of her country's traditions prevented her, finally, from a magisterial rejection of them in the course of her life and works.

Molly Haskell, a noted film critic, writes of the Puritan influence on the women of America, and her insightful comments seem particularly appropriate in regard to Edith Wharton:

> Our sexual emancipators and evangelists sometimes miss half of the truth: that if puritanism is the source of our greatest hypocrisies and most crippling illusions, it is . . . . the source of

> much, perhaps most, of our achievement. In movies, as in individuals, the sublimation of the sexual drive can be for some a poisoning influence while for others, it is the source, in compensating energy and action, of creative achievement. (125)

As a woman in turn-of-the-century America, Wharton was most assiduously taught the suffocating but proper rules of conduct suitable for a "lady." That particular form of institutionalized repression--whether one calls it "Puritan" or "Old New York"--seems, fortunately, to have awakened within her the slumbering fires of "creative achievement" which Haskell discusses in this passage. Not only did Wharton possess the vision to fashion a new product from the shambles of the old, but she also had the strength of character to resist the "poisoning influence" of a dogmatic suppression whose roots almost certainly originated with the Puritans.

Blake Nevius and R. W. B. Lewis have provided us with informative interpretations of Wharton's underlying Puritan "subconscious," and although, as I remarked in Chapter 1, their evaluations suffer from varying degrees of oversimplification and limited perspective, both critics succeed in elucidating the sobriety that countered the exuberance of Wharton's lighter, perhaps more public, personality. That subtler, more somber and evasive undercurrent in Wharton's nature is undoubtedly responsible for

her childhood sense of isolation, a sensation that, as Cynthia Wolff thoughtfully explores it, never deserted her. Wharton's allegiance to the sober tenets of Puritan moral philosophy led her to adopt a lifelong reverence for solid, enduring traditions as well as for the virtues of steadiness and prudent moderation that generally accompany such traditions. It is, as she herself says in regard to the traditions of her youth, her desire to salvage a golden morsel of a day irretrievably lost to time that seemed to motivate her adherence to certain Puritan guidelines, and to compel her belief that the "smallest fragments [of that lost day] begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it "(A Backward Glance 7).

Wharton's youthful reading opportunities have been a consistent source of amused speculation for many critics throughout the years, primarily because the Jones family cared little for literary education and did equally little to satisfy the youthful Edith's voracious appetite for books. As a result, she thrived for years on hearty doses of classical literature and the Bible, especially the Old Testament, as the Joneses considered such books to be among the few "acceptable" examples of printed material available. Wharton recalls her childish feasts on such literature in her autobiography, musing with a deep, nostalgic delight: "Ah, the long music-drunken hours on that library floor, with Isaiah and the Song of Solomon and

the Book of Esther . . ." (70). An early exposure to the vigorous portentous verse of the Old Testement books can easily account for Wharton's developing regard for moral traditions, and her penchant for the Old Testament reveals the Puritan cast of her nature. Though the Bible as a whole cannot be equated with Puritan doctrine, the Old Testament was a major source for many of the sterner injunctions which the Puritans adopted. Edward's "Angry God" and the Old Testament's God of Wrath are one and the same, and the guidelines which His people chose to follow would certainly be those stringent enough to appease Him.

Even more significantly--at least in the context of this particular study--Wharton's knowledge of the early books of the Bible seems to have so permeated her literary style that the three novels in which Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent appear bear distinctly Biblical titles. The House of Mirth, of course, takes its title directly from Ecclesiastes 7: 1-12, where vanity and folly are condemned and where we read that it is better to live in "the house of mourning" than in "the house of mirth," because through sorrow, human souls are strengthened. The Age of Innocence, though not a biblical quotation, carries distinct overtones of a prelapsarian state of purity. And The Fruit of the Tree gains its peculiar force and cadence from its direct reference to the Edenic world of Adam and Eve and their human fascination with the "forbidden" fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. That Wharton's most morally and

spiritually developed heroines reside between the covers of her three most biblically-titled novels seems not to be a mere coincidence. Instead, her choice of titles reinforces the essentially moral themes of the novels as well as stressing some fundamentally Puritan features of the protagonists themselves.

If we accept the existence of a Puritan basis to Wharton's moral philosophy and carefully study the thoughts, actions, and beliefs of her three heroines, several distinctly Puritan values will surface and provide us with a clear and well-developed understanding of the specific--and limited--degree to which Wharton approved of that moral doctrine. At this point, a general description of those values and Wharton's appreciation of them will suffice, and thorough explications of their embodiments in Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent will follow in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

First, Wharton echoes an old Puritan refrain in The House of Mirth: through sorrow, our spirits grow. The stoic faith in the human ability to foster patience, wisdom, and endurance from hard experiences translates itself in a variety of ways in the personal and public testimonies of the Puritans. In her Captivity Narrative, for instance, Mary Rowlandson concludes that a life in Christ is virtually meaningless without the ingredients of "sorrow and affliction." She confides that, seeing others grow in spiritual stature through trials and sorrows, she is

"sometimes jealous lest [she] should have [her] portion in this life" (74). Wharton, too followed the tenets of this particular creed, especially acquainting herself with the sorrow of loneliness and the proverbial "dark night of the soul." She felt early on the misery of aloneness, and in the memoirs of her later life, she writes with a stark poignancy rendered eloquent by the very simplicity of her words: "The lonesome time alone is what remains to me; what I recall is a lone life, and what I have gone through has made me alone" (qtd. in Wolff A Feast of Words 10-11). But perhaps even more diligently than the Puritans, Wharton strove for a way out of the bleak desolation and uncertainty of that "dark night," and discovered light, understanding, and a modest degree of wisdom at the close of her journey. "Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death," she writes in the conclusion of A Backward Glance, "yet there are always new countries to see, new books to read (and, I hope to write), a thousand little daily wonders to marvel at and rejoice in, and those magical moments when the mere discovery that 'the woodspurge has a cup of three' brings not despair but delight" (379). Though the source of her reinspired hope might have been quite different in nature than that of the Puritans, she conceded along with them that the powers of darkness would fail ultimately to defeat the human soul.

Along with her belief in the regenerative value of sorrow, Wharton also aligned herself with Puritan phi-

losophy in her well-developed sensitivity to the divine or otherwise moral dictum of personal responsibility for one's fellow human beings. Both Nevius and Lewis have explored this particular trait in Wharton, so a belabored repetition of what we can find quite admirably dealt with in either critical study would be superfluous. However, one point in Lewis' analysis demands attention. He remarks that, in the course of her affair with Fullerton, Wharton experienced (as she often did) the rising dread that her act would harm others--her husband, Edward, and indeed, many of her dearest friends and family members. For a time, she decided that it could not, in fact, hurt anyone and proclaimed that "the anti-social act is the only one that is harmful 'per se'" (qtd. in Lewis 221). Yet Lewis goes on to say, rather inexplicably, that such an intense regard for the feelings of others and for the "civilized order of life" is "anti-puritanical" (221). Lewis might have altered his interpretation had he studied carefully the writings of such Puritan leaders as John Winthrop, William Bradford, and Cotton Mather. These men felt a great concern for the collective well-being of their communities and had an immense regard for the "civilized order of life." Wharton felt the same sense of responsibility for the people she loved that the Puritans felt, and in this and other instances, she attempted to place the well-being of others above the sometimes selfish whims of her individual spirit.

Even more consistent was Wharton's Puritan conscious-

ness of the transience of worldly possessions and their relative meaninglessness in the scheme of human life. Toward the end of her poem, "Contemplations," Anne Bradstreet chastises the worldly "mariner"--"he that saileth in this world of pleasure"--for believing that earthly satisfaction guarantees heavenly happiness. This delusion cannot last because "sad affliction comes and makes him see / here's neither honour, wealth, nor safety; / only above is found all with security" (213). Wharton's refusal to place exorbitant value on material goods, though, did not prevent her from the fullest enjoyment of harmonious and beautiful surroundings, just as the Puritans' similar refusal did not dampen their appreciation of fine things and comfortable homes. Wharton, like the Puritans, took the most reasonable stance in her regard for material luxuries: she did not banish them from her presence and retreat to a life of spartan solitude, but neither did she approve of the common custom of her day to make the collecting and revering of objects into a profession. Throughout her autobiography, Wharton frequently mentions the disagreeable materialism of her time, and without a hint of smugness, confesses her lack of consuming interest in the sport. For quite a while, she and her husband lived in a small, "unfashionable" home which Wharton dearly loved, and she is fond of recalling those friends in her past who "took [her] to task for [her] disregard of society" (94). She reveals with a disarming

candor: "Though . . . I had always lived among the worldly, I had never been much impressed by them," and her refusal to be "impressed" by her cosmopolite neighbors and their cosmopolite belongings was adamant and lifelong (A Backward Glance 93).

Finally, Wharton shared with her Puritan predecessors (in spirit, if not in blood-line) a fervent belief in the importance of acknowledging and confronting the evil in life. Wharton did not find the Transcendentalists' or humanists' happy denial of the existence of evil to be well-founded or in any way convincing, and although her conception of evil was more complex than was the Puritans', she allied herself with them in their proclamations of its potent influence on human nature. Samuel Danforth's "errand into the wilderness" theme was just as timely in 1905 as it was in 1670. In that famous sermon, Danforth urges his backsliding parishioners to re-evaluate their spiritual lives and work together to create a beautiful, enclosed garden of purity in the midst of New England's unsanctified wilderness. In the three novels covered in this study, Wharton reveals her penchant for that particular theme by placing her characters in a wilderness of labyrinthine social strata and demanding of them that they conquer some aspect of that untamed wasteland. Wharton believed, as did the Puritans, that the universe is a teleologically-oriented place, and that a necessary component of human life is the confrontation of antagonistic

forces and the spiritual triumph over them. Without evil, there can be no good, and throughout her own life's unfolding as well as the unfolding of the lives of Lily, Ellen and Justine, Wharton illustrates with bold assurance her belief in both.

Yet Wharton was nothing if not a woman and writer of many depths, and her distinctly Puritan streak is not the only indication in her character of a knowledgable receptivity to American moral traditions. As the range of her experience and concerns broadened with time, Wharton's moral "alter ego" surfaced more and more frequently. In the course of her tumultuous involvement with Morton Fullerton between the years of 1906 and 1909, she learned to embrace attitudes alien to those she had espoused earlier and would still continue to hold dear to a great extent. Although no critic has referred to the philosophical source of Wharton's developing appreciation for the self as "Transcendental," the term aptly describes the gradual sense of self-exploration that reveals itself in her personal writings and, more vividly, in her sensitive characterizations of Lily, Ellen, and Justine. Of the three novels, only <u>The House of Mirth</u> was published before this critical three-year period, and <u>The Fruit of the Tree</u> was published two years later in 1907, the year Wharton and Fullerton became intimate. But in her vibrant characterizations of Lily and Justine, Wharton's longings for emotional and self-release were already surfacing.

Few critics would deny the transformation of Wharton's painfully inhibited youth into its brilliant and passionate maturity during this period. Her middle age constituted what, in essence, became a second life for her. Resolutely casting off the accumulated inhibitions and "bugbears" of her quiet youth, she stepped forward to greet the life she knew she had somehow bypassed along the way. In the course of that second life, she discovered the vari-colored joys of a passionate sexual involvement and a revived sensitivity to her own emotions that often--as in the Love Diary, which both Lewis and Wolff discuss thoroughly--amounted to an adolescent fascination with what she had before only vaguely imagined. During this juncture in Wharton's life, Lewis comments on the "deeper pulsations" trembling beneath her cool facade and discusses her search for self-completion (167). In an early passage of the Love Diary, Wharton addresses Fullerton:

> Sometimes I am . . . satisfied in the thought of you . . . At such moments, I feel as though all the mysticism in me--the Transcendentalism that in other women turns to religion--were poured into my feeling for you, giving me a sense . . , of inseparableness from you (quoted in Lewis 211).

Not surprisingly, Wharton began to read a great deal of Donne at this time, and also delved into an enthusiastic study of one of her favorite American poets, Walt Whitman,

whose debt to Emerson and Transcendentalism is well-known. The transcendent union of body and soul so creatively rendered by these poets fascinated Wharton. The Love Diary, feverishly juvenile as it reads at times, recalls the intensity of Donne, the jubliation of Whitman, and the eloquence of Emerson.

Though Wharton repeatedly proved her allegiance to the orthodox values of life, her three-year involvement with Fullerton allowed her an outlet for the frustrations and doubts about those values which had always plagued her. Never again would she touch the pinnacle of exuberant abandon which she crested in those few, unforgettable years, but never again would she retreat to the confining refuge of a single, orthodox perspective of life. Consciously or unconsciously, she had taken a small but enlivening portion of the Transcendentalist feast of self and soul, and refused to surrender her well-earned morsel. What she gained from her "second life" with Morton Fullerton was an understanding of the need for self-acceptance, a gift which she valued so dearly that neither time nor the bitterness of age and loneliness could dim her appreciation of it. In her advancing years, she recalls the luminous beauty of that experience in terms so tranquil that one is assured of her faithful, unembittered allegiance to its memory: "I have drunk the wine of life at last. I have known the thing best worth knowing, I have been warmed through and through never to grow quite cold

again till the end . . ." (qtd. in Wolff A Feast of Words 160).

Though evident in a study of her life and thoughts, Wharton's regard for essentially Trancendental values manifests itself even more clearly and concretely within the framework of her fiction. But before presenting these values as they are embodied in her three heroines, I will offer a brief, general explanation of Wharton's own espousal of them.

Self-truth combined with honesty in one's dealings with others are two very closely related "Transcendental" values, descriptions of which can easily overlap. Wharton's personal writings eloquently attest to her credo of self-directed and other-directed truth. Her letters and diaries especially reveal to us the heart and mind of a woman to whom open self-confession was ordinarily a fearful trial of endurance, but to whom the values of self-knowledge and truth represented moral exigencies. Throughout her life, Wharton struggled against paralyzing codes of convention, and in the passionate lives of some of her fictional characters--especially Lily, Ellen, and Justine--one senses an instinctive recoil from what Emerson has vehemently described as "lying hospitality and lying affection" ("Self Reliance" 273). Much of Wharton's life had beem consumed by the blatant hypocrisy of her society, and the sudden emergence of spiritual vigor and depth in her middle years seemed to inspire her to assert her in-

dividuality, her passion, and perhaps most importantly, her capability for honest action. Her affair with Fullerton not only released the captive soul within her, but also taught her the necessity for truth. Only a few years later, she and her husband divorced. Divorce in the early 1900s was hardly an accepted solution for marital difficulities, but endowed with her new awareness of the deeper course of human life which provided no room for hypocrisy or subversion, Wharton determinedly carried through with what she felt was the _only_ acceptable solution to hers and Edward's loveless marriage. Without a doubt, Wharton would appreciate Thoreau's description of truth as a wine more pure and life-giving than any older "wines" of fame, money, or knowledge. Such a vintage, he reverently declares, cannot be purchased for any human price (294).

Non-conformity is another Transcendental value for which Wharton seemed to feel a special affinity. Her society was certainly not one founded on the precepts of bold and revolutionary behavior, and her rueful incredulity over its lack of spirit pervades her autobiographical writings, discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 1. One hears a distinct echo of Wharton's voice in Emerson's memorable evaluation of nineteenth-century society: "We are parlor soldiers. We shun the rugged battle of fate where strength is born" ("Self-Reliance" 275). The "rugged battle of fate" was for Wharton one of life's imperative sojourns, and to a great extent, she followed

the Transcendentalists' creed which proclaimed: "Unless the action is necessary, unless it is adequate, I do not wish to perform it. I do not wish to do one thing but once. I do not love routine" (Emerson "The Transcendentalist" 204). With every bit of Emerson's fervor but with a less magisterial manner, Wharton forged a non-conformist path of her own through her staid and uninspiring surroundings. "Caprice is as ruinous as routine," she shrewdly points out in the opening sentences of A Backward Glance. "Habit is necessary; it is the habit of having habits, of turning a trail into a rut, that must be incessantly fought against if one is to remain alive" (vii). It is just this unique ability to strike a delicate balance between unreasonable extremes that not only characterizes Wharton's attitude toward the specific Transcendental tenet of non-conformity, but also--and more importantly --her position in regard to the seemingly irreconcilable philosophies of Puritanism and Transcendentalism. Any behavioral tendency or pattern of thought risks the threat of stagnation if it is practiced or followed with a dogged singleness of purpose. In her distinction between "habit" and "having habits," Wharton most insightfully expresses the wisdom of avoiding extremes of any kind.

The final Transcendental tenet to which Wharton paid both personal and literary homage comprises a triad of sorts. The values of self-reliance, individuality, and spiritual freedom are more or less linked by their connec-

tion with the soul and its moral significance in the Transcendental doctrine of human life. Wharton's alternating periods of joyous revelry and mute enchantment in regard to the less tangible aspects of life thread their way throughout her personal writings. Though I have already devoted a great deal of space to the exploration of her vibrant and individualistic nature, I do not believe that I can overemphasize the significant role which these Transcendental values play in an interpretation of Wharton and her works. Even in regard to her art, she was obliged to address the spiritual aspect, for she claims that a writer's work must be a reflection of his/her soul (A Backward Glance 115). Throughout her autobiography, Wharton makes numerous references to the "things of the spirit," and her enjoyment of literature as well as the stimulating company of literary people often sent her into raptures of delight. At one point, she recalls her early longing to break away from the world of fashion and to be with [her] own spiritual kin" (A Backward Glance 123). Her longing was not assuaged until she finally felt herself in possession of that special band of spiritual freedom.

But the fact remains that the stolid virtue of Puritanism and the lofty ethereality of Transcendentalism, even when their essences are united, cannot stand as a representative and achievable ideal of morality. Each philosophy is inherently opposed to the other, and both are essentially radical and dogmatic by nature. Without a

stabilizing set of values to act as a kind of collective mediator between these two rigid codes of belief, any attempt to depict an ethical and workable model for human life through the medium of literature would flounder in the midst of divergent distinctions and conflicting messages. In the framework of her fiction, Wharton created a middle ground where the often conflicting injunctions of each philosophy might meet and compromise. In devising an additional moral "philosophy" of her own, she tempered and rendered rational a good deal of the ranting intolerance which characterizes both Puritanism and Transcendentalism. Above all, Wharton's purpose in broadening the scope of her literary ethical doctrine to encompass more liberal guidelines seems to have been to strike a moderate chord in regard to the self. Both Puritanism and Transcendentalism tend to view the self in an equally unhealthy light--the former advocating a fierce and unequivocal obliteration of it, and the latter espousing an unconditional surrender to it. As she worked to integrate more moderating values into her characterizations of Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent, Wharton bent to the task of curbing the drastic impulses of both philosophies and especially worked to stabilize their equally radical views of the self. The "Whartonian" values exemplified in the lives of Lily, Ellen, and Justine include: a willing acceptance of the consequences of one's actions, an active and spontaneous compassion, a natural and unconscious courage and nobility,

a keen insight into human nature as individual and as collective, a genuine and unforced humility, and an eager readiness to act on one's beliefs. As was the case in the earlier discussions of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, these additions are best illustrated in detailed scrutinies of the heroines themselves. For the time being, my purpose is to discuss each addition briefly and with an eye steadily trained on the ways in which all of them work to temper the extremism of Puritan and Transcendental dogma.

In Wharton's moral philosophy, the willing acceptance of the consequences of one's actions represents a strong and central guideline for human maturity. For Wharton--as for Lily, Ellen, and Justine--it is both unreasonable and unethical to displace responsibility for one's actions onto a higher Being in the course of absolution (as in Puritanism), or to blithely dismiss the consequences of one's actions by taking refuge in the virtue of self-conviction (as in Transcendentalism). Wharton's heroines refuse to dodge the burden of personal responsibility by either route. Instead, they assume it willingly and completely, realizing that they can seek no escape from the subsequent results of their actions and still remain worthy and moral human beings.

The kind of human compassion which Wharton and her heroines espouse and exemplify is quite different than the kind professed by the Puritans and denounced by the Transcendentalists. It is not similar to the Puritans'

religious obligation that becomes, through force of habit, a mere knee-jerk response, and, as Sacvan Bercovitch explains, a technique to show ourselves "how drastically 'self is against the good of our neighbors'" (18). Neither is it in any way akin to the Transcendentalists' rabid proclamation that "virtues are penances" or apologies to the world for having the audacity to live in it (Emerson "Self-Reliance" 263). Rather, Wharton's version of compassion has empathy as its basis: an active transference of oneself into the plight of another. Her alternate definition of the term effectively avoids the unhealthy and myopic extremism characteristic of the Puritan and Transcendentalist definitions.

Courage and nobility in the characters of Lily, Ellen, and Justine manifest themselves in a quiet, unobtrusive steadiness of purpose and a natural fineness of spirit. Neither quality can be defined as a hard-line rejection of the self or a pious and public mien of righteousness, as in Puritanism; nor does the ostentatious swagger of the Transcendentalists' answer to Wharton's definition of courage and nobility. Her temperate and subtle conception of both proves far more powerful and enduring than either the restricted Puritan conception or the prideful Transcendentalist conception.

Wharton's own voracious appetite for intellectual stimulation easily accounts for another addition to her moral triad: the importance of insight and intelligence.

Lily, Ellen, and Justine each perceive human ambiguities and depths for more clearly than did most Puritans and Transcendentalists. Unlike the proponents of both moral doctrines, Wharton's heroines often seek to understand the nature of humanity and society without the accompanying reactions of harsh recrimination or zealous reform. Most usually, they succeed in enacting Keats's acclaimed concept of negative capability: they are above all content to perceive and experience the mysteries of life without that "irritable reaching after" fact and explanation common in some degree to both Puritan and Transcendental conceptions of intellect.

In Wharton's heroines, such an easy flow of natural insight aids in the development of an equally natural and unforced humility. Because Lily, Ellen, and Justine are not engaged in rigorous combats to prove themselves in any way, they feel no compulsion toward self-aggrandizement. Instead, they speak freely and candidly, and usually with a great degree of wisdom all the more striking because of the absence of pride in their manners. Humility is, I think, an alien concept to Transdentalist doctrine, and even an anomaly in the writings of the Puritans whose humility is not only belabored and rather tedious, but as Sacvan Bercovitch suggests, "coextensive with personal assertion" (18). The real value of a genuine, unforced humility in Whartonian terms seems to be the vistas of knowledge and experience it unfolds for those who, because they possess

it, can remain forever receptive to new sensations and ideas.

The final and perhaps most important of Wharton's additions is the necessity of acting on one's beliefs. Puritanism certainly holds active faith to be one of the most crucial virtues of the Christian, but the faith or codes of belief espoused by the Puritans reveal themselves through the Word of God and thus, technically, have little to do with individually-generated convictions. Transcendentalism, on the other hand, adamantly acclaims the necessity of fostering individual values and "doctrines" of belief, but its advocates are generally content to orate on the sublimity of those inner convictions without addressing the seemingly obvious and corresponding necessity of concrete action. In his essay entitled "The Transcendentalist," Emerson quite proudly admits to the basic ethereality of his doctrine when he portrays the prototypical Transcendentalist as a man who, "miserable with inaction," cannot find it within himself to work "until the Universe rises up and calls [him] to work," and until he can enjoy "the highest command" (204). If we recall the ready willingness and vigor with which Wharton's heroines support abstract belief with concrete action, we will conclude that Wharton had little patience with either the mechanically-based moral perspective of the Puritans, or the precarious abstraction of the Transcendentalists. For her and for Lily, Ellen, and Justine, one's innermost con-

victions cannot be confused with one's adherence to an established and collective code of behavior, nor can they survive on a regimen of empty rhetoric.

Beneath Wharton's vivid depictions of morality in the characters of Lily, Ellen, and Justine lies an often unarticulated but clear conviction of woman's essential equality with men. In Puritanism, such a conviction would be nothing short of blasphemy, a view which Wharton herself would be sure to find exasperating and unsupportable. In Transcendentalism, the issue of women's rights or even the prototype of a female Emersonian figure is most decidedly absent from essays, lectures, and philosophical treatises. Wharton doubtlessly viewed such an omission from Transce-dentalist doctrine as characteristic of the dangerous, other-worldly aura surrounding it, and rather typical of the Transcendentalists' aversion for the problems and potentialities of their own world. Her portrayals of three female protagonists as complex, sometimes ambiguous, but always morally responsible and intellectually capable individuals represent her conscious effort to counteract both the demoralization of women in turn-of-the-century thought, and their subjection by earlier but still influ ential Puritan and Transcendentalist spokesmen.

As well as representing the comparable worth of women to men, Lily, Ellen, and Justine each exemplify differing conceptions of womanhood, and thus prove the myriad shape and design of women's individual natures. Lily Bart is a

woman whose intense but fragile loveliness conceals a spirit infinitely stronger and more resilient than either she or her acquaintances would have imagined; Ellen Olenka, not as beautiful or as seemingly fragile as Lily, yet sheds her own peculiar allure of dusky unorthdoxy and sagacity; and finally, Justine Brent, Wharton's "professional" heroine, combines a vigorous intelligence with an intense moral awareness and sincerity. Through her diversified creations of female characters, Wharton proves that women with the most fundamental personality differences can yet achieve equal stature and distinction, even in the eyes of an audience trained to look upon them as rather undif-ferentiated.

To say that Lily, Ellen, and Justine reflect with differing emphases the core of Wharton's ethical philosophy is not to say that they are moralizing pedants. On the contrary, if we were to encounter these three heroines in actual life today and were to inform them of their peculiar claim to literary fame, each of them would be sure to greet our pronouncement with varying degrees of astonishment. It is difficult, indeed, to imagine three literary characters more unconscious of their spiritual caliber than are these three female protagonists. They proclaim no final answers to life's perplexities because absolute certainty is not a human possibility, despite the well-meaning attempts of various Puritans and Transcendentalists to prove otherwise. In addition, each of Wharton's heroines achieves her

particular brand of moral worth and spiritual superiority, paradoxically, through an acceptance of her imperfections, a gracious concession to her limitations. As Wharton herself claims, "Authentic human nature" lies somewhere between the two extremes of "irresponsible criminals" and "Puritan marionettes" which have plagued the realm of characterization for centuries (A Backward Glance 127). Her own heroines refuse to be idolized and because of their essential humility, they succeed in rendering for us humanly achievable "models" of moral life.

Though Lily, Ellen, and Justine are, in different ways, quelled and victimized by their societies, they are defeated only in the most literal and superficial of ways. That they are, in a sense, sacrificed at the close of each novel only serves to enhance the basic triumph of their spirits. When people with high principles and far-sighted vision gain a secure foothold in the mainstream of society, all too often they must compromise for the favor of that foothold by a lowering of those principles and a narrowing of that vision. Wharton's heroines remain forever uncompromised; hence, when they find themselves overcome by the scourge of their societies, it is then that we witness the counteracting triumph of their spirits over the lesser force of societal oppression.

Finally, an integral part of the moral triumph which Wharton's heroines experience concerns their conscious or unconscious rejection of the men they love. Each woman

genuinely believes that she has found a soul-mate and a moral guide in Lawrence Selden, Newland Archer, or John Amherst, and is, at the outset, willing to submit happily to a power stronger and more fundamentally "pure" than her own. But the most significant ability which Wharton gives her heroines is individual choice, an ability that can cause as much agony as joy. It is this force which Wharton's heroines must wield in their ultimate decisions to break from the men they love. One of the most difficult trials for all of them is the struggle to accept the moral and spiritual inadequacies of these men, to overcome their dependence on them, and finally, to stand with grace and quiet confidence on their own.

Because they fail to embody the various values of Wharton's moral philosophy, Selden, Archer, and Amherst function primarily as foils to the heroines of The House of Mirth, The Age of Innocence, and The Fruit of the Tree, respectively. Their weaknesses and shortcomings serve to illuminate the strengths and achievements of Lily, Ellen, and Justine. Through the course of their relationships with the heroines, the "heroes" grow less and less capable of acquiring the unique blend of moral awareness and spiritual maturity which the female protagonists ultimately earn for themselves.

Wharton herself is quite open about her feelings for "dilettantes"--the cultured, learned men of a high-class society, who, like Selden, Archer, and to a certain extent,

Amherst, embrace philosophical and unorthodox views in the comfort of their personal libraries. First of all, Wharton expresses her sympathy for them by remarking that "in our hurried world too little value is attached to the part of the connoisseur and dilettante." But she goes on to say that a comfortable home and a placid society contrive to keep such armchair philosophers "out of the struggle of life, and consequently out of its experiences" (A Backward Glance 150). In another passage of her autobiography, her frustrated impatience with dilettantes strikes one even more dramatically, as she discourses on the wasted talent of various acquaintances, whose "weakness was that, save in a few cases, they made so little use of their abilities . . . . too many . . . lived in dilettantish leisure" (95).

Northrop Frye has discussed the medieval distinction between "allegorical" and "moral"--the former referring to "what one believes," and the latter, to "what one does" (116). Whether or not Wharton was aware of that ancient distinction is a matter for debate, but that she would whole-heartedly agree with it if she did is practically indisputable. For it is just such a difference in ethical perspective that most clearly separates Lily, Ellen, and Justine from Selden, Archer, and Amherst. The heroes view life from an abstract, remote, "allegorical" position, and the heroines, from a concrete, actively involved, "moral" standpoint. Just as the complete moral triumph of the heroines hinges on their ability and readiness to act on

their innermost beliefs, so too does the ultimate defeat of the heroes ride on their inability to match eloquent word with decisive action.

Lawrence Selden declaims ardently over his philosophical doctrine, the "Republic of the Spirit." He passionately denounces wealth, snobbishness, and social preoccupations, and declares that only those souls free of the manacles of these evils can gain membership into his exclusive "Republic." But Selden himself fails to shake off those manacles in the end and, more significantly still, never fully realizes how firm is the tie that tethers him to the debased and anti-spiritual round of New York society. Newland Archer, too, possesses an understanding of the essence of life which compels him to trounce tradition and scoff at the meaningless gilding of his "proper" lifestyle. But he, too, finds the winds of change and freedom too bracing for indefinite exposure and finally retreats meekly to the spirit-proof cocoon of his earlier existence. John Amherst, the most promising of Wharton's three heroes, initially takes life firmly by the lapels and blazes a reformer's path through its ugly placidity, working with disinterested zeal to improve the plight of the people around him. But his philanthropic energies ultimately quench the fires of his private, spiritual existence. When confronted with the opportunity to activate an abstractly-held conviction, he shrinks in fear from the portent of the moment and thereby, forfeits

his claim to genuine moral distinction.

Mary Suzanne Scribner paraphrases Marilyn Lyde's evaluation of Wharton's moral view, remarking that in Wharton's fiction, "responsible departures from the paths of convention are reserved for exceptionally perceptive and strong characters who are prepared to suffer social ostracism for morality's sake" (197). Clearly, Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent most admirably meet Wharton's qualifications for moral life and growth. Not only do they prove themselves capable of enduring the loneliness of the moral life, but they also prove the inherent connection between morality and life. Selden, Archer, and Amherst merely dabble at it; Lily, Ellen, and Justine plunge into it with every tremor of their beings, and only after they "drain it to the lees" do they discover that the active road of life and the idealistic path of the heart are one and the same.

CHAPTER III

A STUDY IN MORAL COMPLEXITY: LILY BART IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Lily Bart, the lovely and ephemeral heroine of The House of Mirth, has proven one of Wharton's most memorable and controversial characterizations. While several critics of recent years have rallied to the defense of the frequently scourged Lily, too many scholars still patronize and even comdemn her and would proclaim that such a "vapid" or "self-deceitful" female protagonist could never be seriously considered Wharton's "moral mouthpiece."[1] Certainly, Wharton's elucidation of Lily's shortcomings reflects her own maxim that the "eager and enquiring [people] are seldom serenely and unquestioningly good" (A Backward Glance 159). Much of Lily's appeal, though, stems from her intriguing balance of exasperating and redeeming qualities. She is at times insufferably snobbish, hateful, and vain. But primarily, she is a woman of rare sensitivity and warmth who repeatedly rises above her own limitations and proves the compatibility of moral purity and human fallibility. The Puritan and Transcendental values revered by Wharton find their incarnation in her dynamic heroine who succeeds beautifully in embodying all the values of Wharton's moral

philosophy in her sad sojourn through "Old" New York society. Those critics who deny the superior caliber and even the immense likableness of Wharton's vivacious heroine overlook not only Lily's numerous displays of moral strength, but also Wharton's own efforts to forge a bond of sympathy between the readers and Lily Bart herself. Several qualities of Lily's character, apart from the values inherent in Wharton's literary philosophy, manifest themselves throughout the novel and serve to incline our sympathies and affections most emphatically toward her.

First of all, Lily suffers from frequent and intense bouts of self-recrimination which, though often unjustifiably fierce, alert us to the depth and genuineness of her integrity. Even in the opening pages of the novel in her conversation with Lawrence Selden, Lily lightly condemns herself in favor of Gerty Farish, Selden's earnest and plodding young cousin: "She likes being good, and I like being happy" (7). Although she is hardly advocating Gerty's brand of unimaginative self-effacement as the ideal of "goodness," a great deal of laughing self-scorn reverberates in Lily's comment and conveys quite clearly her own rather negative self-image. Later, in rueful contemplation of her failure to achieve status through marriage to Gryce, she delivers a heart-rending indictment of herself, saying, "She knew herself by heart--and was sick of the old story" (100). Wharton offers us numerous examples of Lily's basic "goodness" which bely her heroine's self-reproaches, but at

one point, she specifically indicates that we are to spare the chastising rod with Lily. As she struggles to find herself in the bleakness of her final days, Lily searches for reasons that might account for what she believes has been her life's failure; though she cannot disclaim full personal responsibility, the narrator confides that "she was perhaps less to blame than she believed" (301). Few sensitive readers, I think, could hold out against this simple yet poignant appeal to their compassion.

Another facet of Lily's personality which carries an instinctive charm for us is her energetic impetuosity. Despite her own disgust with her lack of forethought, Lily's impulsive gestures and spontaneous flights of fancy only elevate her in our estimation, for no lurking fiends of cold calculation could survive for long within the soul of "the brilliant and unreliable Lily" (101). When she acts with the least amount of predictability, as in her refusal of Gryce's offer to attend church with him and her concomitant acceptance of Selden's "unprofitable" company, we applaud her for her persistent loyalty to the dictates of her spirit. Though she often berates herself for what she calls her "flightiness," it is difficult to feel anything but unqualified admiration for a woman who readily admits her greatest violation of social etiquette--she is liable to "forget" to fabricate a story of her thoughts and movements for her own protection (226).

Finally, Lily's appalling isolation proves one of the

most effective means through which Wharton demands our sympathy for her heroine. On many occasions, Wharton illustrates for us Lily's essential and absolute aloneness, the chilling fact that, in almost every endeavor, she "had no heart to lean on" (148). Following the scene in which Gus Trenor nearly rapes her, the full impact of her horrible isolation strikes her forcibly: "Alone!" The word resounds like a death knell in Lily's mind because "it was the loneliness that frightened her" (148). And much later, as she confronts with near desperation the dreary spectacle of her future spreading out before her, she concludes that "there was something more miserable still--it was the clutch of solitude at her heart . . ." (319). That sense of increasing isolation from the warm center of human existence is surely one that strikes a responsive chord in most hearts, and Lily's lonely travellings find their parallel in the windings of our own thoughts and, perhaps, of our own lives as well. The collective voice of humanity also echoes Lily's shrewd but wistful insight that "it was easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region" (261-62). Lily's is an alienated and optionless existence, and Wharton implies that, without the touchstone of a moral center to give life a lasting meaning, a spirit as refined as her heroine's is not likely to discover a truly "habitable" or less lonely world.

With a sensitivity that never lapses into maudlin

sentimentality, Wharton follows Lily through one travail after another until her heroine finally frees herself from her cheerless existence. But contrary to the general critical consensus, Lily does not win her freedom solely through the time-worn avenue of death; instead, she earns it as she gradually recognizes and accepts herself as a morally sound and spiritually complete human being. Ultimately, she disproves Gerty Farish's characteristically tiresome and uninspired conviction that "Lily was not one of those to whom privation teaches the unimportance of what they have lost" (262-63). In many respects, Lily's personality carries overtones of Puritanism--e.g. her anguished bouts of self-flagellation and her heightened sensitivity to the terrors of isolation. But even more specifically, her fictional life embodies the Puritan conception of sorrow as the chief purveyor of wisdom and spiritual growth--a conception that intensifies the significance of the remaining Puritan values and their similar reflections in her character. Wharton herself clearly indicates the degree of moral growth that accompanies Lily's material decline when she points out that only in luxurious surroundings does Lily experience an enervating "moral lassitude." As she draws further away from her cushioned early environment, those periods of lassitude grow much less frequent. One of the most explicit statements of the connection between Lily's enhanced moral understanding and her buffetings by experience and ill fortune occurs near

the beginning of Chapter 6, Book II, when Wharton intervenes in the narrative to inform us that Lily's "fibres had been softened by suffering" (244). Clearly, sorrow acts as a stern taskmaster for Lily, but the lessons of gentleness and spiritual vision which she learns as a result of her intimacy with hardship aid in her development as a morally secure human being.

Similarly, Lily's personal sense of responsibility toward others gains intensity as she finds herself in more straitened circumstances. Gradually learning to accept the inevitability of her own loss of favor in New York's hierarchical society, she discovers solace in helping others to achieve what she no longer can. At one point, Lawrence Selden expresses his perplexity at Lily's heightened concern for the problems of others: "You have yourself to think of you know--," and Lily responds "with a strange fall of sadness in her voice . . . 'If you knew how little difference that makes!'" (215). Unconsciously, Lily seems intent on burying her own troubles by immersing herself in those of others, and also seems to feel that she can prove her worth as a human being through her active ministrations for friends and acquaintances. Whatever her latent motivations, Lily's deepening concern for the welfare of others informs more and more of her actions as the novel progresses. In Book I, when she finds herself in possession of a packet of letters that implicates both Selden and Bertha Dorset in an early, indiscreet alliance, her

decision not to use the letters against Bertha (whom, most would agree, deserves infinitely worse punishment than mere blackmail) is motivated by her scrupulous aversion for under-handedness and her desire to shield Selden from the breath of scandal. Her capacity for deep devotion and her intense regard for the well-being of others not only influence her affectionate protection of Selden but also her relations with those less close to her emotionally. In regard to Ned, Bertha's young and rather naive boyfriend, her concern manifests itself in a surge of sisterly obligation. "His case made a peculiar appeal to her sympathies," so Lily's only recourse, as far as she can see, is to do everything in her power to help disengage him from Bertha's grasping clutch (205).

Strangely enough, however, Lily feels even more responsible for Bertha, harboring a distinct sense of obligation "the heavier for having so little personal liking to sustain it" (205). Indeed, the enforced and unsolicited nature of that sense of responsibility echoes the Puritans' stern edict of unfailing and undiscriminating "duty" to others. Such a stringent, self-denying code of behavior, though, certainly has its gentler aspects, and Lily's overwhelming concern for the fate of the broken George Dorset stands as a poignant example of that more tender form of obligation: "But for her, what ear would have been open to his cries? And what hand but hers could drag him up again to a footing of sanity and self-respect?" (203). The warm

vitality of Lily's nature has the power to embrace even the coldest tenet of Puritanism in a comforting and luminous glow of humanity.

For a character so often scorned for her pleasure in lush surroundings and her delight in beautiful things, Lily displays early on a surprising inattention to material detail and a barely disguised skepticism of the enduring value of possessions and social conventions. Though she takes a sensual delight in certain extravagances such as fresh flowers and fine garments, her life is not consumed by the avid materialism that consumes her high-class friends. In fact, her nonchalant attitude toward the wealth of minutiae with which her acquaintances are so entranced seems to indicate that "at heart, she despises the things she's trying for," as the mercenary but not unkind Carry Fisher shrewdly remarks (189). Even when Lily indulges in the most sumptuous of materialistic repasts, she remains decidedly more lucid and detached than do most of her giddy companions, and when her aunt eagerly asks her for an account of the Van Osburgh wedding early in the novel, Lily admits that she "had been deplorably careless in noting the particulars of the entertainment" (108). Furthermore, and in direct contrast to what might be expected, Lily's fall from societal grace does not trigger within her a ravenous desire to scramble her way back into the hallowed circles of New York society. On the contrary, she grows less and less attuned to the lure of her old

world, a point well illustrated when we learn that Lily, who listens impassively to Carry's reports of her popularity index, "had never directly invited her confidence" (238).

As she moves further from the hectic center of prestigious society, Lily experiences a simultaneous and, at times, unpleasant awareness of the ephemeral quality of life's privileges. She reflects with a resigned but vaguely wistful air that

> society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by . . . , letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour. (262)

With this most painful of realizations, Lily successfully makes the transition between material entrapment and spiritual liberation. Despite her frequent surges of repulsion for her increasingly rank surroundings, her clear-eyed insight into the spiritually empty and meaningless caverns of her society forbids her return to them. In that final and most memorable conversation between Lily and Selden, Lily proves her acclimation to the deeper and unspoken course of human communication which can only surface when one goes beyond the superficiality of social discourse. As a result of her heightened sensitivity, she finds it remarkable that Selden proves incapable of transcending the accepted amenities as well: "It seemed incredible that anyone should think it necessary to linger in the conven-

tional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (306). Lily's rejection of material values and social concerns is hard-won because of her instinctive sensitivity to beauty and finery. Yet that very refinement of sensibility proves the measure of her strength in resisting the lulling influences of immoderate luxury and in shunning the spiritual barrenness of her world.

Finally, Lily's triumph over the evils of societal dogma and human meanness is one that might strike us as the most remarkable and admirable of her moral strengths, for Lily has no real reason not to succumb to these evils. Not one character in the entire novel exemplifies an effectual, worthwhile, and wholly positive model of goodness and moral strength; hence, Lily's personal victory over the ugliness of her society springs from her own inner resources, rather than from any invigorating examples set by her friends. Because the source of her triumph is internal and unaffected by transient external factors, it is that much more likely to endure.

One of Lily's first exposures to evil in her world occurs when the cleaning woman who finds Selden's letters from Bertha attempts to implicate her in the scandal and force her into blackmail. As she listens to the woman's "terms" in horrified silence, Lily "felt herself in the presence of something vile . . . which she had never thought of as touching her own life" (103). This scene serves to depict her initiation into a dark world whose

vestiges had indeed never touched her life before, and though she only shrinks instinctively from them here, she learns to deal with them much more effectively later. Though the temptation to use the letters against Bertha is an almost irresistible one, Lily persistently rises above it, and even the simple act of speaking with the cleaning woman while holding the letters in her hand fills her with a galling "sense . . . of personal contamination" (104).

Later, George Dorset's appeal to Lily to use the letters against his wife in order to secure his freedom lights up "great golden vistas of peace and safety" for Lily, whom he promises to reward (244). But "fear suddenly possessed her--fear of herself, and the terrible force of the temptation" (245). Once again, Lily's inner code of unyielding principles forbids her to act on Dorset's suggestion. She cannot reconcile those principles to the degradation of such an act, however poetically justified it might be. For the third and final time, someone urges Lily to use Bertha's letters against her--this time, Simon Rosedale. And, as Lily admits to herself, "it was not . . . the horror of the idea that held her spell-bound . . . ; it was rather its subtle affinity to her own inmost cravings" (257). Lily is a human being to whom desires for revenge are certainly not alien. As her defenses against that particular evil are persistently broken down, it is hardly surprising that she falters. But yet again, "the essential baseness of the act" strikes her anew, and she

successfully overcomes her own natural but morally unacceptable inclinations, as well as those of the people around her.

When Judy Trenor leaves home for the weekend and her husband, Gus, manipulates matters in order to get Lily alone with him, Lily must confront a man she no longer knows and an evil more blatant than most. For a moment, she freezes in the face of his lecherous advances, and feels "suddenly weak and defenseless." Yet at the same time, she feels a force of her own rising within her and "another self . . . sharpening her to vigilance" (145). Finally, having regathered every ounce of her flagging strength, she confronts Trenor squarely and steadily: "I am here alone with you . . . What more have you to say?" (147) Her steely calm and seeming acquiescence paradoxically serve to deflate and defeat the unscrupulous Trenor, and she leaves him, assured of her victory.

Another memorable instance of Lily's steady confrontation with evil occurs at the close of Chapter 2, Book II. In the face of Bertha's calculated betrayal of her, Lily takes one of her most admirable stances against that woman's particular brand of brazen evil. She does not retreat from it in wild, incoherent fear, and she does not rail against it in a frenzy of blind passion. Instead, she "sat silent, taking the brunt of [Bertha's insolent smile] quietly, letting it spend itself on her to the last drop of its accumulated falseness" (208-09). It seems that Lily's

primary aim in acknowledging and overcoming each of her "evils" is to imprint their images indelibly across her memory, to indulge in a long, unwavering contemplation of them, one by one. Only after she drinks deeply of that worst kind of knowledge and assures herself that she will recognize it if it should cast its shadow across her path again can she allow herself, "without a word," to walk away from it (209).

Lily Bart is without a doubt the most self-conscious of Wharton's three heroines. Her potent degree of self-truth, while perhaps more adamant than the "typical" Transcendentalist's, effectively elevates her above the petty ignorance of her many acquaintances. She harbors few illusions about herself, and so cannot convincingly be categorized as a vain, self-blinded creature of luxury. "Self-deceptive" has become the fashionable adjective to apply to Lily, yet the readiness of otherwise astute scholars to regard her in such a light is truly puzzling, considering Wharton's numerous efforts to convey Lily's uncompromising brand of self-understanding. Early on in the novel, as Lily tries valiantly to convince herself of the merits of gainful employment, she stops herself short with a stern resignation: "Ah, no--she was too intelligent not to be honest with herself" (39). She is fully aware of her limitations, and the pursuit of a career has never represented one of her chief aims in life. Even at a point in Lily's ruminations when her thoughts might incline us to

take a disapproving view of her, her basic incapacity for wiliness and self-deceit--"Miss Bart was a keen reader of her own heart"--compels our admiration once again (54).

Later, as Lily grows more and more uncomfortable with the repercussions of hers and Trenor's "business" transaction, she blames herself for her too-easy and blind trust in her friend's husband, confessing that she "had in fact been treading a devious way." But, as Wharton is quick to clarify, "none of her critics could have been more alive to the fact than herself" (127). Indeed, Lily is her own harshest critic, for even when her merciless "friends" set her adrift in the outer reaches of society, she never blames anyone but herself and the vagaries of fate for her loss of favor. Toward the close of Book II when Lily finds work for a time in a millinery, she listens with a mixture of horror and deepening understanding as the other working girls nonchalantly gossip about her former set of friends:

> She had never before suspected the mixture of insatiable curiosity and contemptuous freedom with which she and her kind were discussed in the underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence. (286)

At this point, Lily's vision of herself and her past has so sharpened that she is able to look squarely at her own previous attitudes and actions, seeing them in their full garb of pettiness and ludicrous unreality.

In addition to her deep capacity for self-knowledge,

Lily also harbors within her an unquestioning trust in "The Truth," a sublimely innocent conviction in its power to transcend all falsehoods and travesties of its essence. With a grand and guileless fervor, Lily responds to Rosedale's account of the "stories" circulating about her: "If they are not true, doesn't that alter the situation?" (256). Truth is hardly a relative term in Lily's mind. At one point in the novel when she must "explain" herself and defend her actions to an audience already intent on her indictment, she offers her explanation, confident that everyone will accept it because it is the truth: "Miss Bart made this announcement in the tone of one who presents, with careless assurance, a complete vindication" (200). Her childlike allegiance to the sanctity of truth is at once endearing and gravely dangerous--dangerous because an unsuspecting victim is twice as vulnerable to attack than one who is armed and prepared, and Lily's attackers are even more ruthless than most. But even treachery and assault cannot sully the pristine clarity of Lily's reverence for rightness, and when she meets with Selden for the last time, that same principle for which she has paid so heavily in the course of the novel impels her to speak to him without fear or hesitation. She wants him to see her completely, to "make him understand that she ha[s] saved herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life" (307). Her manner is neither desperate nor hysterical, and she does not plead with him to accept her explana-

tions unequivocally. More important to Lily than a full "pardon" from Selden is the simple relief of dispensing with falsehoods and evasions. Her one motivation is truth, and in spite of Selden's eternal reluctance to open his own heart and being for her, Lily finally resolves to open hers--freely and eagerly--for him.

Lily's espousal of another Transcendental tenet, non-conformity, manifests itself in a singularly subtle and modulated tendency to frustrate those thoroughgoing conformists around her. She is no blazing radical, but she emanates a quiet yet palpable resistance to convention and traditional enforcement which gradually alienates her from her "set" and deters her from her more material, original goals. Her impatience with the dull, well-trodden path of marriage in her society is most evident when she balks at the attitude of perfect piety which Percy Gryce requires of a wife: "No sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of resistance. A small spark was enough to kindle Lily's imagination . . . " (57). While part of Lily yearns to melt into the moneyed circles of New York society, another increasingly significant part of her rejects that society's demands for strict uniformity. Its dull, preconceived notions of behavior are basically alien to a spirit as ebullient as Lily's, much as she tries to convince herself otherwise. Her superior resolve in refusing to dehumanize herself through the paths of conformity continually thwarts her in her attempts to

"suceed." Yet before the intolerant members of her society banish her from their midst, Lily makes her most profound statement in favor of non-conformity when she mutely defies tradition in the tableau scene. Instead of concealing or rendering artificial the sensual lines of her body in the current voluminous fashion, Lily dons a gown of clinging, diaphanous white which, while it rouses a stir of matronly disapproval in the audience, yet succeeds in giving her the coveted status of stardom for the evening. She well knows that a moderate degree of non-conformity is the surest path toward startling and memorable individuality.

And Lily is nothing if not original and individual. Hand in hand with her distaste for mindless conformity goes her persistent desire for spiritual freedom. She expresses this desire poignantly in her contemplations of a self-reliant life outside the dreary round of loveless marriages and "civilized" discourse. On impulse, Lily walks with Selden to his home at the outset of the novel, desirous of his company and of the chance to foster a strong and enduring friendship with him. But when she leaves and accidentally meets a suspicious and leering Rosedale, Lily's moment of tranquil freedom vanishes, and she demands of no one in particular: "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (12). Lily struggles against the suffocating strictures of her world, feeling early on an undeniable dissatisfaction with the goal she is striving to achieve.

Marrying a wealthy man like Gryce, she muses, "would be a rest from worry, no more" (28). And even in these early stages of her growth, she is keenly aware of the wide vistas that open up beyond the mere "rest-from-weariness" plateau. On more than one occasion, she exults in the beauty and vastness of those vistas as they materialize before her, and at the sight of them, her "free spirit quiver[s] for flight" (64).

As the novel and Lily's own realizations progress, she grows less and less content with the unveering road to material security. In one of her moments of intensest insight, she sees for herself "only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (101). Lily knows how different she is from those around her, and like a proper devotee of Emersonian doctrine, she longs for the opportunity to express her uniqueness.

Lily's singularity and eager clamorings for liberation naturally lead her to embrace another closely-related Emersonian value--self-reliance. Initially, her very individuality forces her to take more and more of her own counsel because of her society's instinctive withdrawal from "different" people like her. When her aunt dies and leaves her only a small part of her estate, she is forced to become more basically self-sufficient than she had been in the past. Along with an inner self-reliance, then, she must foster a modicum of financial independence quite alien

to her upbringing. Lily grows intimately familiar with the stretches of aching loneliness which so often accompany the virtue of self-reliance. But self-sufficiency soon becomes a basic way of life for her, and at the novel's end, she proves to herself and to her readers the strength and durability of her innermost convictions.

One of the first "tests" of Lily's self-sufficiency occurs in the near-rape scene with Trenor. With a superhuman effort, she quells her trembling fears and her inward cries for assistance, sternly telling herself that "she must fight her way out alone" (147). Her swift and certain exercise of will in that situation admirably attests to the strength of her self-dependent powers. As she grows more accustomed to the idea of self-sufficiency and more familiar with the language of her own heart, the long periods of aloneness which she must face grow more endurable: "Little as she was addicted to solitude, there had come to be moments when it seemed a welcome escape from the empty noises of her life" (241). And finally, when even her own resources of energy and strength begin to trickle away for lack of support, her visit with Nettie Struthers provides her with renewed hope and determination to survive on her own. Even self-reliance has its limitations, and the strongest soul will find it difficult to endure hardships indefinitely without human comfort. Only Nettie offers such comfort to Lily, but even her simple words of affection and faith prove sufficient to uplift Wharton's weary

heroine: "She did not mean to pamper herself any longer . . . . Since it was her fate to live in a boarding-house, she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life" (316). Lily's noble resolve and stern, "taking-herself-to-task" tone reflect with a deep poignancy her willingness to begin re-piecing together the loose fragments of her life, even if it means doing so without the benefit of an extra pair of hands.

For Lily, the Whartonian value of assuming responsibility for the consequences of one's actions is very closely allied with the Transcendental tenet of self-truth. Because she refuses to falsify matters even to herself, she finds it equally difficult to displace responsibility for her life's "failure" onto another human being or inexplicable environmental force. While Lily's resolute confrontation of the results of her acts carries with it a great deal of the stern self-recrimination which I discussed earlier, it also conveys a strength and energy of directed will lacking in those previous examples; hence, our admiration for her even outweighs our compassion as we watch her valiantly bear the burden of her own weaknesses. Lily seems to feel the most stringent aversion for the common habit of blaming one's parents or one's upbringing for present-day problems. The luxury of "justifying" herself by implicating her mother's role in the shaping of her character is one which Lily refuses to indulge: "Oh, no--I won't blame anybody for my faults," she assures Gerty

with passionate sincerity, and adds archly, "I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress . . . " (226). Earlier in the novel, Lily staunchly and even contemptuously rejects the naturalistic notion of environmental shaping when she cries out: "I have always had bad people about me. Is that any excuse?" (164). That the majority answer to such a question in her day would undoubtedly be "yes" means next to nothing to a woman who--despite the reigning trends of the time--still holds fast to the tenet of free will and the necessity of personal responsibility.

At another, later point in the novel, Lily ponders over her involvement with the Dorsets, and though she is not foolish enough to dismiss their ill treatment of her, she is hardest on herself for her own unsavory role in their activities: "Her habit of resolutely facing the facts, in her rare moments of introspection, did not allow her to put any false gloss on the situation" (227). Unlike virtually everyone else in her field of acquaintance, Lily is incapable of vindicating herself of personal guilt for collective sins. Not surprisingly, that incapacity for base behavior hastens her social decline.

Lily's displays of active, genuine compassion are much more numerous than, I think, any critic has given her credit for. They serve to enhance her moral and spiritual stature as well as to draw us closer to her as a character. Although her early, impetuous decision to help the poor is

spurred by a latent "Lady Bountiful" impulse rather than diligent humanitarianism, her active transference of self into each one of those unfortunate souls whom she meets strikes me as a much warmer and more human gesture than the mechanical pity of many philanthropists: "She pictured herself leading such a life as theirs . . . and the vision made her shudder sympathetically" (112). While some critics would jeer at Lily's safe, vicarious brand of sympathy, I think it is not unreasonable to point out that the most effective and heartfelt sympathy is based on empathy--the ability to actively imagine oneself in another's place, as Lily does more than once. Her discovery at a later point that the wretched masses around her could, as individuals, share her aspirations and her sensitivities give her "one of those sudden shocks of pity that sometimes decentralize a life" (150). That Lily feels the pity so personally is hardly a measure of her selfishness, but rather an indication of her enlivened power of empathy, which alone transforms mere pity into a vital and potent human force. As Lily grows more and more isolated from former "friends" and driven by her fears of poverty and ignominy, she suddenly recalls her father whose financial ruin hastened his own death: "I see now how he must have suffered, lying alone with his thoughts" (164). Again, Lily's heart goes out to others most completely when she exchanges an active, conscious empathy with them--an uninhibited transference of self which many possess neither the energy nor the imagina-

tion to experience. Certainly, her empathy does not render her streak of self-absorption any less evident, yet the ability to feel so passionately the plight of another is especially commendable in one whose upbringing consistently discouraged regard for others.

Lily's empathy for Bertha awakens so fully when Dorset is perilously close to divorcing her that her one thought is to shield and comfort the "wretched" woman. So actively does she transfer her own finer sensibilities to Bertha that, for a while, she is at a loss to comprehend that woman's ugly schemes for reprisal. Even when Bertha openly accuses her of "seducing" George (which at any other time, might have amused her), Lily is too caught up in what she perceives is her friend's misery to retract her sympathy: "The puerility of [Bertha's] attempt disarmed Lily's indignation: did it not prove how horribly the poor creature was frightened?" (208). Even full knowledge of Bertha's mean-spiritedness proves an insufficient incentive to deter her from her too compassionate course. In a particularly poignant passage, Lily confesses:

> To be of use was what she honestly wanted; and not for her own sake but for the Dorsets'. She had not thought of her own situation at all: she was simply engrossed in trying to put a little order in theirs. (210)

Lily's deep concern for even the most undeserving of people does not illuminate some core of blind obtuseness

within her, as Gerty Farish's persistent and indiscriminate ministrations might do. On the contrary, Lily has tasted the acidity of Bertha's cruelty by this time, and while she does not excuse her for it or proclaim any special affection for her, she has managed to transcend her own limitations by refusing to forsake Bertha because of hers. Lily's empathetic, imaginative brand of compassion is grounded in a clear knowledge of the worst kind of human failings. Yet it is wholly unrestrained by such knowledge, a fact which renders it especially remarkable and exceedingly rare.

Another significant addition to Wharton's moral philosophy is nobility, and in Lily, that value renders itself in a perceptible aura of incorruptibility, a mantle of purity impervious to the ugly forces swarming about her. Often, she draws this mantle tightly about her in self-defense, but we can accept this mild weakness because, first, it is one of the few defenses available to her, and secondly, it is one that helps to characterize most succinctly her peculiar grandness of spirit. Judy Trenor makes an acute observation early in the novel which serves to illustrate the nature of Lily's nobility. She says to Lily: " . . . you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants . . . commend me to a nasty woman" (44). Indeed, Lily's essential nobility and fineness forbid her to play the "nastiest" of societal games, and those same qualities--so rare among the moneyed circles of her New

York society--never cease to perplex her friends and acquaintances. Carry Fisher can hardly conceal her bewilderment at Lily's unwillingness to 'play her cards right' in the marriage market. She confides to Selden that Lily could easily make herself irresistible to George Dorset after he discovers his wife's treachery, but, she sighs resignedly, Lily "is not clever in that way" (190). Later, during the scene of Bertha's public "snubbing" of Lily, the latter's superior spirit and elegant carriage make themselves even more dramatically felt. Lily stands in "admirable erectness" as Bertha makes her announcement, and "the faint disdain of her smile seemed to lift her high above her antagonist's reach" (218). The scene is a formidable ordeal as well as a humiliation for Lily, but her exquisite composure belies the gravity of the situation. She wavers briefly before the scrutiny of the group, but "with the pale bravery of her recovered smile," she proves herself the victor in nobility and quiet dignity. But Lily's nobility must rise up to still greater and more stringent challenges. Upon the shock of discovering herself disowned in her aunt's will, she utilizes it to its most brilliant capacity when she transcends the situation and the small-minded visciousness of the people involved. Determinedly, she rouses herself from a brief moment of paralyzed astonishment: "There was something to be done . . . with all the nobility she knew how to put into such gestures. She advanced . . . and holding out her hand [to

Grace Stepney, the principal beneficiary] said simply: 'Dear Grace, I am so glad'" (223).

Finally, though, Lily is freed of the burden of proving the breadth of her noble character in the public arena, and for her last and most heroic gesture, we the readers comprise her only audience. With Selden in the closing pages of the novel, Lily reaches a pinnacle of moral and spiritual greatness in a variety of ways, perhaps the most poignant of which is her forfeiture of that packet of letters. Quietly, swiftly, and without a long inner debate, she drops them into Selden's fire, casting away her last chance for retribution and release from poverty. That Lily's far-reaching action is executed in the most subtle of manners only enhances its essential nobility. Those who might have claimed that Lily's previous noble gestures were motivated only by her desire for admiration would have little to corroborate that view at this point. No one--not even Selden--witnesses Lily's act, and, more importantly, Lily herself is little affected by the fact. Her action is devoid of ulterior or exterior motivations, and her simple brand of nobility is nowhere else so beautifully exemplified.

Lily's shrewd insight into human nature, like her startling depth of self-perception, is yet another component of her character that should redeem her from the charge of simpering shallowness. Again, her vision and intelligence strike us even more forcibly for their very

lack of external cultivation. Lily has had neither the benefit of a liberal education nor the privilege of regular and enriching contact with worthwhile human beings; instead, her unusual range of understanding springs from within her. The innate keenness of Lily's intelligence alone demands our respect and provides her a place of distinction among Wharton's three heroines.

One of the conversations between Lily and Selden in the first half of Book I offers us a clear testimony of Lily's quick perception, especially as it works with playful vigor to expose Selden's latent hypocrisies. At one point, she breaks through his diatribe against societal gatherings and group values, remarking: "It seems to me . . . that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of" (70). And when Selden trounces New York society for its collective stiflement of Ned Silverton's poetic illusions, Lily responds astutely, ". . . but do you think it is only in society that he is likely to lose them?" (70). Her perception of things is far more practical and far-reaching than Selden's because it will have nothing to do with his lofty rhetoric. Much later, alone with the bitter knowledge that Selden has deserted her when she has beseeched him to come, Lily's understanding of him is unclouded by romantic illusions: "She understood now that he was never coming--that he had gone away because he was afraid that he might come" (179). Certainly, the most unwelcome "fringe benefit" of a natural

intelligence is the ability to see our loved ones in the most unappealing of lights. As Lily's insight penetrates even Selden's oblique heart, the realization of his weakness and faithlessness is hard to bear. But ultimately, her intuitive understanding of human nature plays a crucial role in her spiritual liberation from Selden and in her rejection of the narrow-hearted people around her who fall far short of the standards which, despite her struggle, she finally meets successfully.

Several Wharton scholars who take a disparaging view of Miss Bart as a heroine are likely to blanch at the audacity of including "Lily" and "humble" in the same sentence, because one of that character's idiosyncrasies is her vanity about her physical appearance. But it is certainly rather ludicrous to condemn Lily on the grounds of her self-conscious beauty, especially as we know (through Wharton's narrations and the testimonies of other characters) that her pride is not only natural but entirely well-founded. Yet too many readers have failed to move beyond Lily's superficial vanities to discover her lack of vanity in other areas. Early in the novel, for instance, Lily listens quietly as Selden orates on the virtues of his "Republic of the Spirit" and heavily stresses the stringent qualifications for admission. She responds to this diatribe by drawing her hand away, " . . . as though renouncing something to which she had no claim" (72). Certainly, Selden's mind-reeling plentitude of "have-to's"

in regard to his Republic would impress upon most of us a bleak awareness of our inadequacies, but Lily's unquestioning and almost meek acceptance of her "unworthiness" is an exceptional example of unforced humility. Much later, when Lily successfully counters Rosedale's blackmail offer in regard to Bertha's letters, she sadly notes to herself her inability to breathe "on the heights" for an indefinite period of time (262). She sincerely believes that nothing good can flourish long within her because "nothing in her training" had taught her "to develop any continuity of moral strength" (262). Her reference to her inadequate upbringing is not an attempt to displace responsibility; she simply recalls her past and comments on it calmly and factually. While again, her humility is wholly genuine and even admirable, Lily fails to commend herself for transcending the limitations of her upbringing thus far. And even when she continues to rise above them, her deep-rooted sense of modesty prevents her from seeing what she has achieved.

An ongoing proof of Lily's humility is her response to the innumerable injustices heaped upon her. In the course of her many hardships and public snubbings, Lily shows a graceful propensity to "turn the other cheek"--to refuse to lash out against her oppressors or to consider herself worthy of a fair trial. Even toward the close of the novel when her pathetic conditions might well rouse her to fighting vengeance, she maintains her meekness and poise.

When she is summarily dismissed from the millinery for her slowness, she "did not question the justice of the decision" (297). By itself, this attitude of persistent humility might easily make for a tiresome and colorless character (as it does in the case of Gerty Farish), but combined with the other values in Wharton's literary philosophy, Lily's adoption of it as a single component of her vari-colored personality deserves attention and commendation.

The necessity of acting on one's beliefs is tantamount to Wharton's own code of ethics, and is a value which her three heroines hold in the highest esteem as well. For Lily, more than for Ellen and Justine, that moral necessity often involves an intense struggle between abstract ideals and concrete realities as well as a painful awareness of the discrepancy between the rewards for each. The struggle is fierce because the temptation of the material life is so alluring for Lily; but her final choice of the spirit and the moral path--whose rewards are almost solely intrinsic--is all the more admirable for her human susceptibility to that temptation.

Even in the most basic sense, Lily's vacillations almost always crystallize into substantial action. When she awakens in the morning following her traumatic experience with Trenor, she urges herself "to act, not rave" (169). Her determination to repay him for the money she so trustingly borrowed grows stronger after she learns his

true motive for helping her. Hence, upon receiving the check for her meager legacy at the novel's end, Lily signs it over to Trenor immediately, fiercely willing her idealistic notions of duty, goodness, and dependability into action. In another instance, idealism and materialism battle within her when, after Selden leaves her for the West Indies at the close of Book I, she sits at her desk and reconsiders Simon Rosedale's offer of marriage. She knows that with Rosedale--unappealing and rather crass as she finds him--she will never want for security and wealth. But even as she sets pen to paper, "the words refused to shape themselves," and in this case, the spirit of her idealism triumphs in her very decision not to act (179).

But the most significant proof of her active idealism is her consistent embodiment of Selden's ethereal, philosophical notions. Selden claims to be a noble antagonist of society, self exiled by the strength of his principles and the clarity of his vision. Lily never makes such a claim; she simply becomes a societal antagonist as she grows more spiritually and morally complete. She understands intuitively what Selden never does--that, without a firm basis in active reality, one's beliefs are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Her faithful adherence to a concrete moral code, in spite of her attraction to the code of materialism, renders her idealism more commendable and more believable than Selden's half-hearted and untested brand.

Having overcome both the ugly forces around her and her own susceptibility to their influence, Lily achieves a level of understanding few of us can hope to equal. And she achieves it alone. No one--not Selden or even Nettie Struthers--can take credit for Lily's sudden and dramatic realization of the "continuity" and "solidarity" of human life at the close of the novel. After years of blind groping for something just beyond her reach, Lily exchanges her sense of "rootlessness" for a solid, stable assurance of "the central truth of existence" (319). The tenets of Selden's "Republic of the Spirit"--faith, human contact, and spiritual courage--find their most effectual incarnation in the character of Lily Bart who also captures with memorable success the vari-colored essence of Wharton's moral philosophy.

NOTE

[1]For various negative interpretations of Lily, see Louis Auchincloss, Marie Bristol, Harry Hartwick, Grant Knight, and Jennifer Radeen.

CHAPTER IV

WISDOM IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ELLEN OLENSKA

According to most Wharton scholars, *The Age of Innocence* relates the story of Newland Archer--his initiation into a world ungoverned by rules and conventions and his ultimate retreat from that world. Considered from this particular critical angle, the Countess Ellen Olenska acts as a mere catalyst in the upheaval of Newland's orderly existence--an intriguingly human catalyst, but a catalyst nonetheless.[1] The logic governing the critical subordination of Ellen to Newland is quite clear. Wharton narrates the novel from Newland's point of view, and we as readers are never allowed a similar access to Ellen's thoughts. Though Newland is the novel's major protagonist, however, few of the changes which he undergoes throughout would have been possible without Ellen's subtly influential presence. His function as the main character hardly makes of him an aesthetic or moral ideal, and to ensure our recognition of this basic fact, Wharton created Ellen Olenska. Primarily, Ellen functions as the novel's moral ideal and as Newland's foil. Whereas Newland's character has no real ethical strength and no dynamism to render him appealing otherwise,

Ellen possesses both in abundance. Throughout the novel, Wharton presents Ellen in distinct contrast to Newland, thereby illuminating Newland's deficiencies and assuring her readers of Ellen's unqualified superiority.

Of the three heroines, Ellen is the only one whose mind we cannot know because of Wharton's limited narrative viewpoint. Yet far from distancing us emotionally from Ellen, such a perspective actually enhances the appeal of her personality with its mysterious undercurrents and charges her every word and action with more relevant meaning. To convey the essence of Ellen's character, Wharton emphasized her forthright actions and insightful, almost aphoristic manner of speaking, apparently realizing that these were the most dramatic indications of Ellen's moral integrity. An additional scrutiny of her thoughts, then, would seem ponderous and unnecessary. We do not need to follow the course of Ellen's thoughts and emotions because we discover them in their outward manifestations. She is far more than a catalyst for the "change" in Newland. She is a character who changes and grows in her own right, learning to confront her problems more confidently and to accept herself more completely as the novel progresses. Throughout the novel, she not only serves as a memorable embodiment of Wharton's moral philosophy, but also wins our regard as a richly-drawn and sympathetic character.

Newland himself clarifies one of the primary sources

of Ellen's fascination as a fictional heroine. Much of her appeal, especially for the bemused and romantic Newland, "seemed to be in [her] mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience" (115). That elusive but oddly palpable "faculty" becomes a hallmark of Ellen's personality as the novel progresses, and captivates the undivided interest of those around her. Even as readers, we find ourselves gravitating toward Ellen rather than toward Newland, simply because her air of haunting strangeness and reserve intrigues us much more than does Newland's contrastive open conventionality. More appealing still is Ellen's artless affirmation of human singularity. Her very movements, careless and effortless as they seem, refute systematically the tenets of naturalistic thought. Entranced by the energetic ardor of Ellen's actions, Newland observes: "Chance and circumstance played a small part in shaping people's lots compared with their innate tendency to have things happen to them. This tendency he had felt from the first in Madame Olenska" (115-16). Ellen is no wisp in the wind like Crane's Maggie or Dreiser's Carrie. Her whole nature resists the naturalist's notion that one's life is controlled by inexplicable cosmic or environmental forces. As the novel progresses and we become more acquainted with Ellen's mercurial personality, we share Newland's astonishment at her dynamism. Her dramatic shifts in mood and thought are not examples of her "capriciousness," as

Newland prudely remarks at one point. They are simply evidences of a rare, effervescent spirit which will not allow her to lapse into indolent predictability. Even Newland, decidedly out of his element in the midst of Ellen's whirling bouts of energy, cannot help but revel in them, as he "tasted the pleasurable excitement of being in a world where action followed emotion with such Olympian speed" (164).

Finally, the complexity and color of Ellen's personality demand our admiration and deepen our affection for her as a finely-drawn character. She combines conflicting traits with easy grace, striking a delicate balance between them so that she seldom emphasizes one over another. An example of Ellen's peculiar gift for equalizing emotional opposites is her combination of infectious humor and tragic vision. It is difficult to conceive of two tendencies that oppose one another more adamantly, but Ellen embraces both with a matchless skill. When she first returns to New York and sees her old playmates and friends at the opera, she confesses to Newland: "Ah, how this brings it all back to me--I see everybody here in knickerbockers and pantalettes" (18). Ellen's good-natured lack of respect for New York's "august tribunal" strikes a responsive chord in those of us who share her sentiments for that collection of stiff social butterflies. We applaud her imperviousness to social rites and her willingness to laugh at the absurdity of them. But later, we have other reasons to applaud her,

and her numerous flashes of wisdom provide us with ample opportunity. Toward the end of the novel, Newland bemoans the impossibility of his and Ellen's love and declares childishly that he wants to live in a world "where . . . categories . . . won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other . . . ; and nothing else on earth will matter" (290). Ellen replies with an understanding which Newland, in his limited romantic ardor, can never hope to equal: "Oh my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it . . . and it wasn't at all different from the old world" (290). Like Lily, Ellen seems destined to see with a too-clear vision the limitations of all "worlds," and the impossibility of creating one's own "habitable region" in the midst of them. But she, too, chooses not to surrender to the menace of the outer world and instead, creates a habitable and meaningful world of her own in the sanctum of her soul.

Ellen's adherence to the Puritan notion of growth through sorrow is not as progressive as Lily Bart's. We do not watch as she awakens gradually to a state of enhanced wisdom by virtue of hard experiences; instead, that sense of dearly-bought wisdom is apparent in Ellen from the beginning, and only intensifies as the novel progresses. Even her facial features betray a haunting sobriety which alerts us to her premature intimacy with sorrow. Early in the novel at a dinner party given in her honor, Newland

muses over the aura of inexplicable wisdom that surrounds Ellen and renders the older, chattering women "curiously immature" in comparison. As he gazes at her in mute contemplation, "it frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes" (63). Much later, after Newland's marriage to May, Medora Manson, Ellen's aunt, explains to him the reason for Ellen's absence from societal circles: "My poor child is going through a phase of exaltation, of abhorrence of the world" (208). Though Medora takes real pride in her talent for exaggeration, Ellen almost certainly would feel the need to withdraw from the public arena following Newland's marriage to May--a union which she helped to hasten despite the pain it caused her. While her retreat is compelled by the futility of love, its overtones of monastic purgation distinctly recall the Puritan's lonely self-combat. Through her self-inflicted isolation, Ellen strives to find a faith to sustain her in her return to the world. Eventually, she discovers a way out of her particular dark night that takes her far from Newland and the spiritless city of New York.

Her separation from Newland proves Ellen's greatest sorrow, and that experience deepens the already distinct outline of her maturity. Ellen herself makes an explicit statement concerning the dualistic effects of experience and sorrow on the human soul when, in the latter part of Book II, she urges Newland to accept the futility of their relationship. In response to his earnest observation that

she "look[s] at things as they are," Ellen replies: "Ah, but I've had to. I've had to look at the Gorgon . . . . She doesn't blind one; but she dries up one's tears" (288). And moments later, when Newland reproaches her for what he thinks is her cruelty, she extends the mythic analogy: "It's a delusion to say that she [the Gorgon] blinds people . . . she fastens their eyelids open, so that they're never again in the blessed darkness" (290). With a characteristic shrewdness, Ellen hits upon the strangely perverse Puritan conception of sorrow. It barrels into one's life unsolicited, rendering things so painfully clear that even tearful release is not possible. But sorrow is the only avenue toward genuine, lasting wisdom, and Ellen has learned that in order to possess such wisdom, she must accept the harshest of realities and endure the intensest of sufferings.

Ellen's sense of responsibility for others is another integral part of her generous nature. Quiet, unobtrusive, but no less deep-rooted, that feeling of obligation extends itself with a mute kindness to all the members of the undeserving Mingotts, Ellen's family. On several occasions, Ellen surrenders her own plans and desires for the sake of someone else's because she sincerely believes that she must act in the best interests of others, even when her own are forfeited in the bargain. Although we cannot feel the same loyalty to the Mingotts which Ellen feels (primarily because they are the chief objects of Wharton's satire), we

admire her sacrifices to the family and its "reputation." When Newland asks her to retract her request for a divorce because such a public event would tarnish the family name, Ellen pauses perceptibly, and finally answers: "Very well; I will do what you wish" (113). Even her determination to free herself from her husband, the Count, does not override her sense of responsibility for her family. Later, when the Mingotts hear of Ellen's decision, they breathe a collective sigh of relief, and "turn their eyes from the 'unpleasantness' she had spared them" (119). As in Lily's case, Ellen's noble sense of obligation is all the more commendable because of the gracelessness of her beneficiaries.

Another instance of Ellen's sacrificial tendency occurs when Newland rashly deserts her for May rather than listen to her explanation about Beaufort's presence at Skuytercliff. After she learns that he has literally run back into May's arms, Ellen quells her pain and disappointment, and determines to hasten the couple's union. This, she concludes, is what both genuinely desire; hence, when Newland visits old Mrs. Mingott with a half-formed view to obtain her support, it is Ellen who firmly and graciously intervenes on his behalf, saying: "Surely, Granny, we can persuade them between us to do as he wishes" (155). At the heart of Ellen's selfless action quivers an unwelcome knowledge that her impulsive affection may have caused another pain, and her own guilt impels her to take instant action

to repair the damage. Resolutely, and rather desperately she converts her growing feelings for Newland into a familial devotion toward both May and him.

Ellen's European lifestyle has fostered within her a simple vivacity and a casualness toward material objects and social conventions. Of Wharton's three heroines, Ellen most closely resembles Wharton in her appreciation for beauty and comfort and her concomitant refusal to view material things as ends in themselves. Like Wharton herself, Ellen's lack of emotional investment in worldly trappings is countered by her reverence for the spiritual component of life. Her ongoing communion with that less tangible inner source accounts for her indifference to the more concrete symbols of well-being and prestige. From the beginning, Ellen blissfully violates rule after rigid social rule in the regimented circles of New York high society. At the van der Luydens, she traverses freely, oblivious to one of old New York's sacred customs which relegated women to a strictly sedentary position at social gatherings. Comfortably settling herself next to Newland, "she was apparently unaware of having broken any rule; she sat at perfect ease in a corner of the sofa beside Archer, and looked at him with the kindest eyes" (64). That young man remains in a perpetual state of astonishment at Ellen's wholesale disregard of societal conventions. When the Duke, an old friend of Ellen's, visits her with the scandalously common Mrs. Struthers, a dumb-struck Newland

watches as she greets them with an unembarrassed warmth: "She seemed to have no idea how oddly matched they were, or what a liberty the Duke had taken in bringing his companion . . . " (78).

Not only does Ellen display a startling indifference to timeless social customs, but she also remains consistently unmoved by the lure of wealth. She shows little agitation even when she learns that the Count will not return _her_ money after her desertion of him. Mr. Letterblair, the eminently dull and respectable lawyer assigned to Ellen's "case," remarks with a dry surprise that she "attaches no importance to the money" (99). We learn on several occasions the extent of Ellen's disregard for wealth which naturally proves an unceasing source of amazement to her family:

> She could go without many things which her relatives considered indispensable, and Mrs. Lovell Mingott and Mrs. Welland had often been heard to deplore that anyone who had enjoyed the cosmopolitan luxuries . . . should care so little about 'how things were done. (303)

But the proof of Ellen's integrity and spiritual health is her happy resolve to be unburdened by such cares and to concern herself instead with the contemplation and enforcement of more substantial moral values.

The enforcement of those values is, at times, unpleasant for Ellen, but unavoidable in her "quest" for moral and

spiritual well-being. Her acknowledgment and confrontation of evil certainly provide her with the opportunity to enforce a host of moral abstractions--an enforcement which she successfully effects on more than one occasion. Ellen's triumph over her particular evils entails a valiant opposition to them. She confronts them squarely and openly, wasting little time on covert, defensive strategies. Like the proverbial dragon slayers of old, she brandishes her sword fearlessly in the face of her "enemies," daring them to overpower her. That dragon-slaying ferocity seems also to have characterized the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness"--an offensive and diligent search for the evil that lurked in the dark by-ways of the forests of life. Ellen's affinity for Puritan strategy is especially apparent. When the novel begins and we first meet Ellen, she has just returned from her particular errand into the wilderness. Having fled evil in the form of the Count Olenski, Ellen emerges victorious. Though she never divulges the details of her life with the Count, her numerous and disturbing allusions to it attest to the reality of that evil. While she confronts her evil in this case less forthrightly than in later instances, her desertion of the Count requires both courage and strength. She leaves him with a full knowledge of the potential repercussions of her act--loss of financial security and rejection by friends and family. Even after she learns that New York is not the haven of peace she had imagined it would be, she

persists in her "dragon-slaying" by initiating plans for a divorce. When Newland informs her of the Count's virulent (albeit groundless) accusations against her, Ellen is still loath to surrender her sword. She demands, "What harm could such accusations, even if he made them publicly, do me here?" (110). Her method of moral combat is one which any stalwart Puritan would have been proud to claim; she is ready to meet the Count's attacks with an assurance that stems from her own spiritual superiority and innocence.

Another very different but equally potent evil which Ellen must face is her love for Newland. Because Newland is tied irrevocably to May--first, by an engagement, and later, by marriage--Ellen's integrity prevents her from casting a blind eye to the illicit nature of her relationship with him. Her strength in resisting the feelings she and Newland have for each other informs their every encounter and proves consistently greater than his. In these encounters, we sense a subtle growth in Ellen's confrontation of her problems, for she neither flees from this "evil" nor surrenders to it. Until May indirectly appeals to Ellen's honorable nature by telling her of her pregnancy, Ellen simply faces it with a steady dignity as she promises Newland that she will not leave, "not as long as you hold out. Not as long as we can look straight at each other like this" (243). Ellen's intermediate stance proves her courage in refusing to run from her "evil" and her integrity in refusing to compromise herself or Newland

because she remains.

Since we never enter Ellen's mind and learn first-hand the tenor of her thoughts, an argument for the intense degree of her self-truthfulness would be difficult to substantiate. But the closely related Transcendental value of truth is one that Ellen adheres to with an indisputable tenacity. Her inability to deal with hypocrisy in others as well as in herself distinguishes her from the other characters in the novel who lead lives of studied simulation. Ellen's brand of truth-telling often proves discon-disconcerting to those high-bred, closed-lipped paragons of New York society because it is so frankly brutal. When Newland, awed and overcome by her intimacy with the visiting Duke, ventures to ask her about him, she replies airily: "I think he's the dullest man I ever met" (64). Her candid remark is unmixed with contempt, and there is no twinge of shame or air of conspiracy in her manner as she delivers it. Her nonchalance in the telling of such "hard truths" only lends a more brilliant sheen to her singularity.

But Ellen's love of truth and open, straightforward communication eventually alienates her from those less enamored of plain dealing. In a burst of unleashed frustration near the beginning of Ellen's and Newland's relationship, she cries, "Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!" (78). For

the highly decorous people of Old New York, pretense would surely be the simplest life course. But for Ellen, such a course is wholly alien to her nature, and one that, figuratively speaking, banishes her to a far-off place where she must wander alone with the burden of her "untellable" truth. Though the weight of that burden might become so heavy as to foster resentment within her against her family and "friends," she emphatically rejects such an attitude--a rejection implicit in one of her final conversations with Newland. She tells him that, if he insists on making her his lover, she will go back to the Count, and in response to Newland's scandalized protest, she says simply: "What else is there? I can't stay here and lie to the people who've been good to me" (312). Ellen's generosity and warmth forbid her to acknowledge the less savory qualities of those "good" people, even though she knows the superiority of her own principles. But with Newland, she seems to recognize the necessity of unabashed, even ruthless sincerity as an antidote for his bemused naivete. As he proclaims himself equal to the tide of opposition which would overwhelm them should they make their love publicly known, he insists that he is "beyond" the kind of guilt and obligation which Ellen realizes would accompany such an open rupture. His enthusiasm and childish cant apparently prove too intolerable even for Ellen, because she turns on him with a swift brutality: "No, you're not! You've never been beyond. And _I_ have . . . and I know what it looks

like there" (291). Telling the truth is not always a matter of effortless grace for Ellen, but throughout the novel, it never ceases to be a moral exigency.

Of the three heroines embodying Wharton's moral philosophy, Ellen is the most thoroughgoing Transcendentalist in her non-conformist behavior. She is vibrant, unorthodox, and unquestionably original--the epitome of the Emersonian female which Emerson himself never depicted in any of his male-oriented treatises. Her unconventionality is so appealing because it skillfully blends a conscious boldness with a guileless, unconscious charm. This provocative mixture is nowhere more evident than in Ellen's behavior in the opening scene at the opera. She is dressed in seductive velvet and wears a decidedly un-conservative circlet of diamonds in her hair, all the while "unconscious of the attention [she] was attracting" (9). In this instance, only New York's conservatives recognize Ellen's dress and attitude as scandalously unorthodox. One cannot help but suspect that Ellen herself might have enjoyed the evening so much more had she, too, been aware of her daring violation of the opera dress code.

Ellen's home and belongings themselves exude originality and foreignness, and although the Mingotts disapprove of the exotic overtones of her lifestyle, including her passion for literature, "she herself had no fears of it," as clearly evidenced by "the books scattered about her drawing-room (a part of the house in which books were

usually supposed to be 'out of place')" (104). Unconcerned about her "differentness" as she is, Ellen would doubtless chuckle at the idea that books could be considered "out of place" in any corner of one's home. She is a little less amused, however, when her family objects so strongly to her choice of home that they nearly drive her from it forcibly. When she questions Newland about their objections, he tells her that her street is not "fashionable." In a brief but eloquent burst of Transcendentalist fervor, Ellen exclaims: "Fashionable? Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one's own fashions?" (74). That streak of rebellious individuality in Ellen's character is never really quelled by the stifling counter-force of family and friends. At a much later point in the novel, Ellen laughingly tells Newland about Medora's susceptibility to "new and crazy social schemes," but suddenly reflects more soberly:

> But, do you know, they interest me more than the blind conformity to tradition--somebody else's tradition--that I see among our own friends. It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country. (240)

Incorporate a dash of effusive rhetoric and forgivable bombast, and this passage might well be mistaken for one in Emerson's "The American Scholar," that rousing appeal to America's imitative pedants for a "new" and unconventional style of scholarship.

Closely tied to Ellen's love of the unorthodox is her

desire for spiritual freedom and self-reliance. Her determination to free herself unequivocally from her husband stands as the most dramatic embodiment of that desire. Though her ingrained sense of responsibility for others prevents her finally from divorcing him, she remains adamant in her decision to be free of him in the most literal sense. This crucial choice forms the foundation of her resolve to act on her own resources and to appreciate the benefits of a new, ungoverned lifestyle. Even in the midst of family conflict and her growing but unwelcome love for Newland, Ellen quietly revels in her hard-won freedom of spirit. One senses that her past intimacy with entrapment and subjugation compels her to hold that much more tenaciously to the independence she has suddenly earned. Her hectic life with the Count seems to have given her a rich appreciation for privacy, for she is unashamed to confess to Newland that she loves "being alone" in her own small but comfortable home (74). Her tone and her word choice--the "blessedness" of it all--are distinctly reverent, and certainly the peace she feels in the sanctity of her own home is one that "passeth all understanding." Ellen's yearning for spiritual freedom and self-reliance does not, however, stem solely from a desperate urge to leave her husband. Her motivations run far deeper than a circumstantial need for escape, for--once out of the Count's reach--she is unwilling to be pampered by her most likable relative, Mrs. Manson Mingott. She confides to

Newland that her grandmother "wanted to keep me with her; but I had to be free" (77).

But she soon discovers, much to her consternation, that New York is hardly conducive to a tranquil life-style of happy self-sufficiency. She is especially amazed at the peculiar formalities of the people in their own homes. She cries out her frustration to Newland in a poignant passage:

> Is there nowhere in an American house where one may be by oneself? You're so shy, and yet you're so public. I always feel as if I were in the convent again--or on the stage, before a dreadfully polite audience that never applauds. (132)

Ellen's analogies capture the public nature of Wharton's "American home" with memorable precision. We can sympathize with the vision of an exuberant but introspective woman like Ellen attempting to lead her life before a mutely critical audience of family and acquaintances. Ellen's acquaintance with social affairs and polite conversation has been a long one, both in Europe and again, in New York. Though she never withdraws completely from the public arena, her experiences have impressed upon her the value of those rare moments of solitude.

A determined refusal to agonize over losses or to regret past choices characterizes Ellen's willingness to accept the consequences of her actions. The single most convincing proof of her belief in this Whartonian value is

her attitude following her desertion of the Count. Ellen takes with an imperturbable grace the various consequences of that decision--her fall in position, her lack of contact with stimulating people, and her occasional bouts of loneliness. She does not mar the judicious integrity of her choice with futile regrets or self-recrimination, nor does she publicly air her grievances against the Count. Newland marvels that "she said the words 'my husband' as if no sinister associations were connected with them, and in a tone that seemed almost to sigh over the lost delights of her married life" (106). He fails to understand that Ellen's seeming unconcern is not a result of her shallow nature, but instead an indication of her resolve to start life afresh, casting out feelings of useless resentment and accepting with equanimity those occasional longings for the gaiety of her former lifestyle. Even those sudden yearnings are not sufficient to elicit regret from Ellen, and her cheerful acceptance of her humbler existence attests to her strength in accepting the results of her crucial decision.

Later, when she discovers that awakening love for her rather than the threat to the family's reputation motivated Newland to advise her against a divorce, Ellen confronts the facts squarely. Having already decided against the divorce because Newland had convinced her of its certain repercussions, she refuses to berate herself or Newland even in light of this later revelation. Perceptibly

gathering strength and bracing herself against weakness, Ellen tells him baldly: "It's too late to do anything but what we'd both decided on" (171). She seems to realize that, as long as she acts initially with the best, most thoughtful intentions, she cannot justifiably recriminate herself for her actions later. With a valiant grace alien to Newland and to everyone else in the novel, Ellen bears the sometimes unbearable repercussions of her noblest acts and refuses to waste time reproaching herself or anyone who might have prevented them.

Ellen hasn't a trace of the "Lady Bountiful" impulse in her character, and her brand of active compassion is simply an outgrowth of her intense and emotional nature. Her kindness for others flows from a well-spring of resources within her and manifests itself in the very expression of her eyes and the lilt in her step. That natural compassion is nowhere else as evident as when she sweeps up the newsmen, Ned Winsett's child after a fall. Newland's poor but clever friend describes Ellen's entrance with his child almost as though it had been a supernatural visition:

> She rushed in bareheaded, carrying him in her arms, with his knee all beautifully bandaged, and was so sympathetic and beautiful that my wife was too dazzled to ask her name! (123)

Ellen's enveloping warmth lends to her active ministrations an angelic charm that would, indeed, "dazzle" her recipi-

ents into speechlessness. Yet the energetic brilliance which characterizes her numerous actions is hardly reminiscent of an angel's serene and disinterested kindness, and it is Newland who witnesses her next display of dynamic compassion. On the verge of casting out the Count's "reconciliation" gift of roses in a surge of passionate anger, Ellen pauses in mid-whirl to address her maid:

> But no--it's not the fault of the poor flowers. Tell the boy to carry them to the house three doors away, the house of Mr. Winsett . . . . His wife is ill--they may give her pleasure. (163-64).

The measure of Ellen's compassion is proven by its swift resurfacing in the midst of passionate fury. No latent desire for self-aggrandizement taints her kindness, either, for she fervently commissions her servant, Nastasia, as she leaves with the flowers: "And, as you live, don't say they came from me!" (165). Again and again, Ellen's surges of kindness for others quench any stirrings of anger or pain which she herself might be feeling. When Newland petulantly accuses her of shirking the "bad business" involving her, May, and himself, Ellen responds with quick concern: "Is it a bad business--for May?" Newland, cut short in the heat of his childish raving, is struck by "the wistful tenderness with which she had spoken her cousin's name" (24). Despite her own painful investment in the situation, Ellen is able to transcend it long enough to imagine and

even to experience May's.

That same single-minded empathy with others is evident in her response to Beaufort's financial ruin. While the whole of New York society indulges in a collective quiver of distaste at the news, Ellen reacts with humanity. Upon detailing the disaster to her, Newland "was struck by the softness of her: 'Poor Regina!'" (285). Almost immediately, she offers her warmth and understanding to Beaufort's wife, admirably filling the whole left by Regina's former friends. Her capacity for empathetic involvement in the sorrows of others is yet another tribute to her superior moral stature and to her rare sensitivity.

Ellen's displays of nobility are extemporaneous and effortlessly graceful. Her range of experience envelops her in a cloak of womanly sophistication strangely at odds with her frequent flashes of vulnerability and playful humor. When the van der Luydens emerge from their socially reclusive cocoon to give a dinner party for her, she is neither hurriedly anxious nor indifferent at the prospect of playing center stage:

> She came rather late . . . ; yet she entered without any appearance of haste or embarrassment the drawing-room in which New York's most chosen company was somewhat awfully assembled. (61)

Ellen proves herself more than equal to that "most chosen company" on this and several other occasions. The ease with which she takes on New York's formidable, high-class

masses results in part from her Continental sophistication, but even more clearly, from her un-selfconscious charm.

Not only does she carry that air of natural majesty into public places, but she dons it for her more minor entrances as well. Entering her own sitting room to receive Medora and Newland, "she carried her head high, like a pretty woman challenging a roomful of rivals" (163). A moment later, a wave of swift fury sweeps over her as she catches sight of the prodigious bunch of roses. To her frustration, the Count has managed to invade her new home with his insidious presence. She draws herself up and "a sort of white radiance of anger ran over her like summer lightning" (163). Despite her fondness for beautiful things, Ellen's deeply-rooted pride forbids her to keep the flowers. She cannot separate the innocence of the gift from the guile of the sender.

Not much later, Ellen's nobility proves even more persistent in the face of Newland's passionate entreaties. She tells him simply: "I can't love you unless I give you up," a declaration that attests to her belief in selfless love when any other kind is inconceivable (173). Newland cannot sway her now that she has made her decision and assured herself of its fundamental "rightness." Finally, he surrenders to her greater moral strength almost involuntarily as "she still held him at a distance by something inscrutably aloof in her look and attitude, and by his own awed sense of her sincerity" (174). Ellen's continued

struggle to resist a physical culmination of their love is simply a reflection of her fear that, in succumbing to "baser" instincts, they will lose a precious portion of the fineness that distinguishes them--and especially Ellen--from the baser people around them.

Ellen's shrewd insight into human nature is much like Lily's in its untaught but curiously refined form. It cuts through the hard veneer of New York society's collective facade, penetrating the heart of its hypocrisy with a curious absence of rancor. Her insight is a delicate blend of mischief and sober intuition that alternately shocks and captivates those around her, but always assures us of the clarity of her vision. When she first arrives in New York, she is entranced by its strange lack of reality. She confesses to Newland with all the candid wisdom of the child in her analogy: "Being here is like--like--being taken on a holiday when one has been a good little girl and done all one's lessons" (75). Not surprisingly, Ellen has hit upon the superficial, fairy-tale cast of life in Old New York--a place where "bad" things cannot happen simply because the people refuse to see them happening. They only ask of visitors "to pretend," as Ellen herself learns, and the whole of their lives is consumed in that persistent attitude of pretense.

Later, during the same conversation with Newland, Ellen exposes the more consciously arch side of her sharp perception. In response to his solemn explanation of the

influence of the reclusive van der Luydens, she remarks: "Isn't that perhaps the reason . . . ? For their great influence; that they make themselves so rare" (76). Her rejoinder is even too rich for the earnest Newland to discredit, and after an instant of dumb-founded silence, he "laughed and sacrificed them [the van der Luydens]" (76). Yet Newland himself is not spared the sharp prod of Ellen's intelligence by virtue of her feelings for him, and on several occasions, she belies the old adage about "blind love" in her dealings with him. She understands his weaknesses with a clarity that sometimes proves painful to her, but she does not shrink from accepting her insight, nor does she conceal it from him. When he recklessly vows to tell May that he cannot marry her because of Ellen, claiming that "it's too late to do anything else," Ellen replies bluntly: "You say that because it's the easiest thing to say at this moment--not because it's true" (171). Her feelings for Newland do not cloud her understanding of his vacillating nature.

Finally, Ellen's shrewdness does not dissipate even in the formidable presence of her grandmother, Mrs. Mingott. As Ellen calmly and openly prepares to visit Regina Beaufort (the mention of whose name is counted an irreparable social breach following Beaufort's ruin), she takes with serenity the family matriarch's stream of protests. When Mrs. Mingott finishes her tirade with a dogmatic, "She's the wife of a scoundrel," she unwittingly loses her

argumentative footing, for without a moment's hesitation, Ellen answers her: "Well . . . , and so am I, and yet all my family want me to go back to him" (302). In recounting the story to Newland, Mrs. Mingott beams with filial pride at her granddaughter's spunk, cheerfully confessing that the truth of Ellen's remark "floored" her into acquiescence (302). In almost every instance, Ellen must unite courage with honest insight, and in almost every instance, she effects the union with memorable finesse.

Throughout the novel, Ellen consistently gives credit to Newland for her own noble and moral acts. Though Wharton renders the reasons for this phenomenon deliberately ambiguous, Ellen's humility in her relationship with Newland seems to stem more from a latent desire to "make" him into a strong, decisive man than from a belief that she is his moral thrall. Considered from any angle, however, her grace and humility are sure signs of her unwillingness to flaunt her superiority. In that memorable scene when Ellen and Newland admit their love for each other, Ellen showers him with praise for his part in renewing her faith in loyalty and simple goodness. It is highly doubtful that Ellen's faith in such things needed renewing, but her feelings for Newland can hardly be acceptable to her unless she can believe--at least, momentarily--that he is more than he actually is. "Ah, don't let us undo what you've done!" she cries when he attempts to change her from her course, and underlying that cry trembles a barely acknowledge realiza-

tion that, if he had indeed "done" anything, his integrity would prevent him from "undoing" it now (173). Gradually, Ellen's perception and courage reveal the "real" Newland to her, forcing her to relinquish her dream of the perfect soul-mate to whom she could submit in humble adoration. Her increased awareness of Newland's lack of spiritual vigor does not immediately kill her love for him, but it does impress upon her the knowledge that it is she, rather than Newland, who has the strength necessary for real growth and decisive action.

And at every turn in the narrative of her life, Ellen translates her ethical ideals into decisive action, fulfilling the final, most crucial tenet in Wharton's moral philosophy. The clearest example of her decisiveness is her continued determination to act on the ideals which had initially driven her from the Count Olenski and her former life. Even when he offers her monetary rewards for her return (and despite her show of bravery, Ellen is hardly without money cares in her new home), she refuses to waver, much to the frustration of the Mingotts: "She . . . surprised and inconvenienced them by remaining obdurate to her husband's advances" (259). Ellen does not share the family's untried and unthinking belief in the sanctity of institutions. She realizes that the value of an institution such as marriage lessens considerably when a society invokes its name to discourage individual, active decision-making. On yet another occasion, Ellen is forcefully

reminded of her decision to leave the Count, and encouraged to compromise her standards. One of the Count's emissaries approaches her (against his own better judgment, as we discover later) with the promise that she will obtain the money which the Count had been unlawfully withholding if she would indulge him by "sit[ting] at the head of his table now and then" (231). But for Ellen, these seemingly reasonable conditions carry with them an ominous threat to her freedom and to her self-respect, and yet again, she breathes life into passive principles with her rejection of the Count's terms. "The sum is considerable for me" is the only answer she offers Newland in explanation, feeling no further need to justify her choice (231).

But Ellen's active idealism lends itself to other, more immediate and practical situations as well. Meeting Newland several months after his marriage to May, she explains her earlier decision to leave New York:

> She had grown tired of what people called 'society'; . . . . she had found herself, as she phrased it, too 'different' to care for the things it cared about--and so she had decided to try Washington, where one was supposed to meet more varieties of people and of opinion. (239)

Her unassuming explanation only serves to highlight her resolve to act on her principles even at the loneliest, most distressing times of her life. Ellen is no hothouse flower, and she refuses to languish away beneath the weight

of an oppressive world. Instead, she slips out from under it and makes her way toward a world more accommodating to her spirit's dimensions.

It is infinitely appropriate that our final "glimpse" of Ellen is one that reinforces our impression of her vigorous idealism. Her love and longing for Newland prove too much to bear during their last encounter alone, and she reluctantly agrees to meet him again--this time, as his lover. But immediately following her conversation with him, she unexpectedly meets May who--fully aware of the growing attraction between her cousin and her husband--confidentially tells her of a pregnancy which she herself has not yet confirmed. But the knowledge of what grave, moral injunction she would be transgressing in an affair with Newland is all the incentive Ellen needs to regather her strength and refuse him. She chooses to take a complete departure from his life, knowing well that the time has passed when the two of them could "look straight at each other" with no barriers of mutual guilt between them. In her letter to May, she attaches a general footnote whose deeper meaning, we might assume, eludes all but Newland and the readers who have grown to know Ellen Olenska: "If any of my friends wish to urge me to change my mind, please tell them it would be utterly useless" (326). The love is intact, but the break is complete, and Ellen has found the courage to transcend even her most justifiable human weakness, and to take up her ideals with

a renewed and unhesitating vigor.

Ellen's spiritual and moral triumph at the close of _The Age of Innocence_ is unquestionable. Though we never meet her again after the deliberately grand farewell dinner which May gives for her, we learn that even thirty years later she has successfully resisted the force of a tyrannical husband and has apparently overcome her fruitless love for Newland. She leads a quiet but far from lonely life in a Parisian home which, like her, radiates a warm light that defies extinguishment. In describing her heroine's life-style after so many years, Wharton assures us that Ellen's youthful uncertainties have been replaced by a serene self-acceptance. All of her "combatants"--Count Olenski, New York society, May Welland, Newland Archer--finally fail to squelch her spirit, and though she must endure a certain kind of defeat at the hands of the Mingotts when she leaves New York, it only serves as the first step toward her later and permanent triumph. We do not need to see or hear Ellen in the closing pages of the novel to know that she has finally found her home --a "habitable region" where the intellect and the spirit merge in an indissoluble union, and where the tenets of Wharton's moral philosophy enjoy the freest reign.

NOTE

[1]See Gary Lindberg, R.W.B. Lewis, Blake Nevius, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff for interpretations of Newland Archer as the novel's sole protagonist.

CHAPTER V

WHARTON'S FORGOTTEN TRIUMPH: JUSTINE BRENT IN THE FRUIT OF THE TREE

Justine Brent, the heroine of The Fruit of the Tree, stands as Wharton's clearest embodiment of her moral ideology and its accompanying traits. While several critics agree that Justine represents one of Wharton's best efforts at full-fledged characterization, they tend to minimize her role in the novel and to reduce her complex dimensions as well as those of the novel itself. While certain charges concerning the novel's confused range of subject matter and lack of artistic subtlety are partly valid, critics have generally avoided thorough explorations of its themes and characters. Several scholars dismiss Justine as an initially strong, unconventional heroine who weakens and loses vitality as the novel progresses.[1] Such interpretations fail to appreciate her complex and, indeed, agonizing phases of moral growth as well as her enhanced moral stature at the close of the novel.

Justine is, perhaps, the least ambiguous of Wharton's three female protagonists because Wharton's more intimate perspective illuminates her thoughts, feelings, and motivations with such consistency that we rarely need to probe them ourselves. Clearly, one of Wharton's primary inten-

tions in The Fruit of the Tree is to advocate euthanasia as an acceptable, even moral alternative to prolonged human suffering. In doing so, she would naturally depict Justine, who commits euthanasia, in the most straightforward and heroic terms. As readers, we are more likely to accept the morality of the act if Wharton convinces us of the morality of the "actor." Yet Justine Brent is far too many-faceted a heroine to be regarded in a single, unwavering light, and proves to be more than the mere vehicle through which Wharton expressed her opinion on a controversial subject. An extended scrutiny of her character reveals that she fulfills the many "tenets" of Wharton's moral philosophy with an admirable consistency, and her intriguing depth and complexity succeed in making her a far more memorable literary figure than most authorial "vehicles."

To begin with, Justine is the only one of Wharton's three heroines who works for a living. While a profession does not necessarily afford a person instant appeal, an attractive, well-bred woman in the nursing profession at the turn of the century was a bit of an anomaly. Insofar as the plot of the novel influenced Wharton's "casting" of Justine, her choice of a nursing role for her heroine clearly lends a greater credibility to Justine's crucial connection with a paralyzed woman. But I do not think I am stretching the bounds of believability in asserting another, more subtle but equally significant reason for

Wharton's creation of a professional woman in a turn-of-the-century, American setting. As Bram Dijkstra and other critical scholars have pointed out, misogyny was rife in the early 1900s, and both cultural and scientific forces pitted themselves belligerently against women. At a time when "scientists" considered woman's intellect on a par with that of beasts, Wharton's development of a heroine who not only possesses moral capabilities but intellectual abilities as well is especially worthy of comment. Much of Justine's sense of identity derives from her diligent work as a nurse. Her competence and singularity clearly distinguish her from the weak, amorphous women which so many leading "artists" and "scientists" of the day delighted in portraying. Clearly, Wharton's depiction of her strong-minded heroine symbolizes her creative refutation of those prevailing sexist views.

But Wharton takes us even further into Justine's mind and soul when she describes her heroine's mixed feelings about her life and work. Frequently, Justine confesses the struggle within her between two passionately opposed desires. She wants to make a noble, worthwhile contribution to humanity through her nursing tasks, but she also longs to send her eager soul on a quest for adventure and personal happiness. Her vacillations between these two equally understandable desires deepen our sympathy for her and endow her with a rich, satisfying humanness. In one of her early conversations with a friend, Effie, we see that

conflict enacted in Justine's ardent outburst. Having finished a particularly long and harrowing "case," she feels relieved that her job is over for the time being and, at the same time guilty over her relief. She cries out:

> Oh, Effie, I don't want to be a ministering angel any more--I want to be uncertain, coy and hard to please. I want something dazzling and unaccountable to happen to me--something new and unlived and indescribable! (144-45)

Justine's competence and talent as a trained professional hardly prevent her from yearning for the vibrant life experiences which thus far have eluded her. But they have fostered within her a practicality that forbids her to give those reckless urges full sway. Wharton comments on Justine's intense periods of depression during her early days as a nurse, but goes on to say that "gradually her sound nature passed out of this morbid phase, and she took up her task with deeper pity if less exalted ardor; glad to do her part in the vast impersonal labor of easing the world's misery . . . " (147). In one of his early moments of sensitive insight, John Amherst resolves the paradox that is Justine, likening her to the house-swallow, a bird which Justine herself claims is her aerial soul-mate. He remarks that she is indeed like the house-swallow--"loving long flights, yet happiest in the thick of life" (304). The analogy aptly expresses the different but not irreconcilable impulses that compel Justine both to soar and to

settle contentedly in the midst of those who need her.

Perhaps the quality in Justine's character which carries the most appeal for us is her essentially heroic stature. Of the three heroines, Justine is closest to the tragic dimension, primarily because she possesses a "tragic flaw"--namely, the ability, knowledge, and motivation to act on the gods' behalf. Self-recrimination accompanies her recognition of this "flaw," and she berates herself for assuming that she is still entitled to "mortal pleasures" like love and happiness even after she has defied the world with her "immortal" act. Though Wharton draws her character with too much sympathy for us to share Justine's indictment of herself, her self-denunciation plays a crucial role in enhancing her tragic stature and ensuring her a distinctive place among Wharton's heroines.

Wharton intensifies the tragic nature of Justine's act and her nobility in the course of her fall when, toward the close of the novel, she intervenes in the form of an authorial intrusion:

> Justine had paid, yes--paid to the utmost limit of whatever debt toward society she had contracted by overstepping its laws. And her resolve to discharge the debt had been taken in a flash, as soon as she had seen that man can commit no act alone, whether for good or evil. (605)

Like many tragic protagonists before her, Justine's intense moral flame incites her to pay for her act with "swift un-

flinching resolution" (606). Though the world she belongs to unreservedly pronounces her guilty, the only "flaws" with which Wharton the narrator charges her heroine are the twin faults of moral purity and farsightedness that are, of course, shining virtues. But Justine's society is too enclosed in its limitations to accept them, and in the course of the novel, Wharton assures us that these qualities are simply far too rare for frequent distribution. Only a being of Justine's strength and integrity can bear the burden of possessing them.

Justine Brent is a young woman who at times exhibits a sober maturity far beyond her years. Her earnest adherence to the various Puritan values in Wharton's moral ideology stems from that core of practical wisdom within her which plays such an important part in defining her character. On many occasions, we watch as she struggles against the impulses of self and agonizes when she is unable to repress them completely. When Bessy, in a reckless fit of rage, accuses her of "influencing" her husband, Amherst, Justine's natural compassion for her friend freezes momentarily. She berates herself a moment later, musing that "for one miserable moment she had thought first of herself! Ah, that importunate, irrepressible self--the 'moi haissable' of the Christian--if only one could tear it from one's breast!" (378). That anguished refrain echoes throughout the private writings of many a Puritan divine and Justine is hardly alone in her passionate self-

recrimination. But the battle which wages between one's self and something higher never ceases to be an experience of the most intense loneliness for the individual.

Those who carry within them a part of the Puritan heritage find it a most difficult burden to cast off, and Wharton's heroine tries to carry it with a willing grace. Justine learns early in life the curative value of sorrow and hard experience, and Wharton as narrator clarifies this point when Justine first enters the Amhersts' life as Bessy's nurse-companion: "Adversity has a deft hand at gathering loose strands of impulse into character, and Justine's early contact with different phases of experience had given her a fairly clear view of life in the round . . . " (220). And indeed, Justine herself seems to comply with this invigorating, almost positive view of adversity, at least initially, for she confesses her youthful satisfaction in nursing her mother following her father's death. Memories of her happier childhood

> were after all less dear . . . than the gray years following, when, growing up, she had helped to clear a space in the wilderness for their tiny hearth-fire, when her own efforts had fed the flame and roofed it in from the weather. (146)

Certainly, Justine's youthful hardships did little to embitter her and, in fact, impressed upon her the necessity of sorrow for the growth of one's character.

Her contacts with sorrow and experience, though, grow

more intense and personal as the novel progresses. After her long ordeal with Bessy and her privately-executed act of mercy, Amherst (knowing nothing of that decision) notes that "the crisis through which [Justine] had passed showed itself only in a smoothing of the brow and deepening of the eyes, as though a bloom of experience had veiled without deadening the first brilliancy of youth" (440). More than Amherst realizes, Justine's close communion with the angel of death has indeed left her with a kind of wisdom alien to brilliant youth. But in her merciful confrontation of Bessy's needless suffering, she tastes "the fruit of the tree," and--just as Ellen Olenska's encounter with the Gorgon does not blind her--neither does that fruit poison Justine. The Gorgon and the fruit of the tree of knowledge share the same crucial purpose: they serve to open the eyes to sorrow and human pain so that blissful ignorance is never again possible.

Justine's last sojourn into sorrow is her longest and saddest. While Amherst's emotional rejection of her fails to break her, it pierces her as no other sorrow has up to this point. Through this most eye-opening of experiences, she learns that "life is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties" (624). While Justine remains convinced of the rightness of those "abstract principles" and her decision to act on them, she must accept the bitter aloneness

of her position and Amherst's alignment with the collection of "old beliefs, old charities and frailties" against her. No other piece of wisdom which Justine acquires throughout the novel is quite so dearly-brought as is this final realization.

The Puritan value of communal obligation forms the basis of Justine's profession and continuously informs her own actions. Her early feelings for Bessy, though generously mixed with compassion for her limited spirit and mind, are best described as a maternal sense of responsibility for her weaker friend in whom "the impulse to lean and enlace . . . at once woke in Justine the corresponding instinct of guidance and protection" (166). Justine's sensitivity to others attunes her to their vulnerabilities, and with Bessy, her ministerial inclinations lead her to take on the role of guide with a generous readiness. While her own longings for a life "bathed in the light of the imagination" give her sustenance and occupy her lonelier hours, her feelings of obligation for others continuously check those more personal desires: "She could not conceive of shutting herself into a little citadel of personal well-being while the great tides of existence rolled on unheeded outside" (223). Justine's refusal to forfeit active service in favor of security and personal happiness is surely a matchless sacrifice for a young, passionate woman to make. But she manages to transform the barren path of self-denial into something more fruitful with her energy

and her generous ardor.

Her sense of responsibility for Amherst goes hand in hand with her love for him later in the novel, and when her life of happiness is threatened by Wyant, the morphine-addicted and jobless doctor who suspects her of hastening Bessy's death, it is that fine habit of self-denial that again compels her to act. For if she does not explain to Amherst her role in Bessy's death, and he helps the addicted Wyant to find the medical position he wants, the responsibility for Wyant's certain failure will "fall on Amherst." And for Justine, "that [is] intolerable" (511). That, eventually, the whole awful weight of responsibility will fall on Justine herself is hardly important to her at this point. All of her thoughts and fears are centered on the fate of her husband alone. Her fully-developed concern for the well-being of others--even when she must pay for their well-being with her own--incites the warmest admiration from sympathetic readers.

Throughout the novel, Justine remains unmoved by the lure of leisure and wealth to which Bessy and her set have so clearly succumbed. Her indifference to wealth is testimony to her awareness of its transience and relative meaninglessness. In addition to this unspoken but obvious awareness, Justine also recognizes how deadening such large doses of materialism can be for the human soul. Borrowing an evening gown from her friend, Effie, for a social gathering early in the novel, Justine relates to her "the

fable of the wings under the skin, that sprout when one meets a pair of kindred shoulders" (148). In response to her friend's uncomprehending gaze, Justine laughingly confesses: "I've always been afraid good clothes might keep my wings from sprouting!" (148-49). Later, at the Gaineses' party, Justine is trailed, not by a man with a "pair of kindred shoulders," but by Westy Gaines, the affluent son of the elder Gaines, who takes a great risk in fraternizing with a woman so far beneath him on the social scale. But to his consternation, Justine shows "no consciousness of the risk he had taken!" (157). Even when he attempts to impress her with off-hand remarks about "important" people whom he knows intimately, his efforts go unnoticed. He "watched [Justine's eyes] for the least little blink of awe but her lids never trembled" (157). What Westy and so many of Hanaford's cosmopolite residents do not understand is that Justine's greater range of experience renders her incapable of indulging the petty luxury of social concern.

But worldly possessions and the conventional amenities so revered by those around her do not comprise the whole of the transient world for Justine. Gentler, less tangible things such as happiness and love strike her as far too uncertain and vulnerable to last. After she and Amherst have been married for a few joyful months, Justine takes with great seriousness his playful remark that they should do something to "pay off the jealous gods" for their

immortal happiness. For a time, Justine was able to ignore her feelings of anxiety, and to believe that perhaps, after all, earthly happiness was something that could endure. But now she begins to grow "afraid of her happiness," afraid for the "blazing jewel" of love which she and Amherst have flaunted so freely (475). She begins to distrust such perpetual joy because experience has taught her how rare a commodity it is compared to life's surplus of sorrow. Happiness is no safeguard against the backlash of those "jealous gods," nor does it guarantee one immunity from the world's horrors.

Justine's acknowledgment and confrontation of those horrors are, like Ellen's, forthright and sure. As the novel progresses, the nature of Justine's particular evils darkens, making her successful confrontation of them a more agonizing struggle. One of the major sources of evil for such an energetic woman is the wasteful inactivity which afflicts her small society. Justine proves herself a dynamo of exquisite energy through her work as a nurse and as a "mentor" to the temperamental Bessy. When she does find herself outside the hectic mainstream of life's activity, she reacts with a fierce vigor against the threat of languor which she sometimes feels might claim her. Wandering about the perfectly coiffed grounds of Lynbrook in the early days of her stay with Bessy, she feels utterly useless, and "the need of some strong decentralizing influence, some purifying influx of emotion and activity"

takes possession of her (237). But Justine is practical enough to realize that most opportunities for active ministration do not simply materialize; one must usually seek them out, and her eventual decision to renew her efforts to repair the broken bonds between Bessy and Amherst reflects her recognition of this basic fact.

Naturally, one of the most severe and complicated predicaments in the novel concerns Justine's moral position in regard to euthanasia. Bessy's riding accident, her subsequent paralysis, and her prolonged agony convince Justine of the rightness of death in that woman's miserable case. Her pivotal conversation with the young clergyman Lynde who, in spite of a few flashes of human understanding, supports the medical creed emphatically brings home to her the stark loneliness of her stand against it. She asks him earnestly: "Then you believe that the divine will delights in mere pain--mere meaningless animal suffering--for its own sake?" (407). When he tells her that some spiritual strength might be drawn from the experience, Justine responds with a sensitive yet clearly rational argument which serves as her only verbal defense of her later decision:

> I could understand that view of moral suffering--or even of physical pain moderate enough to leave the mind clear, and to call forth qualities of endurance and renunciation. But where the body has been crushed to a pulp, and the mind is no

> more than a machine for the registering of sense-impressions of physical anguish, of what use can such suffering be to its owner--or to the divine will? (407)

To this eloquent plea, Lynde merely responds with a conventionally stern warning against "touch[ing] on inscrutable things" and a final injunction that Christianity "recognizes no exceptions" to the rule of enforced prolongation of suffering. Justine now finds herself in the midst of a most perplexing dilemma. Not only would she be censured by the medical world if she were to help Bessy die, but Lynde has let her know in no uncertain terms that the doors of Christianity would close against her as well. But the implacable inhumanity of that medical-cum-Christian creed represents a very real evil in Justine's eyes, and the world's advocation of it makes it no less intolerable. Completely alone and guided only by the strength of her convictions, Justine will confront this evil.

Much later in the midst of her new-found happiness with Amherst, Wyant approaches Justine with his "terms" for continued silence about her role in Bessy's death, forcing her to confront one of the most malignant forms of human evil. But she steels herself against it, courageous in the knowledge of her basic innocence and in her assurance of Amherst's loving support:

> . . . now the fear raised its head and looked at her. Well! She would look back at it, then:

> look it straight in the malignant eye. What was it, after all, but a 'bugbear to scare children' --the ghost of the opinion of many? (482)

She deals with the evil of blackmail and Wyant's disgraceful perpetration of it, and even forces him to relinquish his control over her when she decides, in a tense and crucial moment, to tell her husband everything. Though she cannot deny her anxiety, Justine never imagines that Amherst will do anything less than offer her his unequivocal support. But he does not, and though his emotional and spiritual withdrawal from her proves Justine's greatest sorrow, his inability to support in actuality a belief he held in theory represents the most painful "evil" which she faces in the novel. His betrayal of his ideals is equally, if not more, grievous to Justine than his betrayal of her. Not only does she lose her last refuge of strength with his rejection, but she loses her faith in the integrity and sincerity of his character. With a dismal clarity,

> . . . she saw that he would never be able to free himself from the traditional view of her act . . . like many men of emancipated thought, he had remained subject to the old conventions of feeling. (525)

Her recognition of Amherst's weakness and hypocrisy entails the severance of the bond that had so beautifully bound them, body and soul. There is no escaping the portent of this particular evil, and Justine resolutely admits to

herself that "the tie between them was forever stained and debased" (527).

The sober cast of Puritanism which we see in Justine does not obliterate the more vivid shadings of her character, and her numerous displays of Transcendental qualities comprise an integral part of her personality. In particular, she shares Lily Bart's rigorous habit of self-analysis, but to a more just and rational degree. An early example of her capacity for self-truth occurs in Book II, Chapter 15. In the course of her stay with the indefatigably social Bessy, Justine has managed to remain upperturbed by the constant flux of activity and people at Lynbrook. But when Westy Gaines patronizes her, she bristles. Though sympathetic readers understand her anger and pain, Wharton's heroine is less accommodating with herself:

> That she should waste a moment's resentment on the conduct of someone so unimportant as poor Westy, showed her in a flash the intrinsic falseness of her position at Lynbrook. She saw that to disdain the life about her had not kept her intact from it. (237)

Though Justine's self-analysis is a bit unjustified, her endeavor to be more than human when humanness is not enough reflects the vigor of her self-examination.

That sense of self-truth even compels her to scrutinize the motivations for her actions as well as for her

reactions. After Bessy's bout of hysteria upon learning that her funds will not allow for the construction of a giant, recreational "pleasure dome," Justine writes to Amherst, urging him to leave his work to attend to his distraught wife. She feels such satisfaction once she has written to him that she questions her feelings and her reasons for writing: "Why did it make her so happy to write to him? Was it merely the sense of recovered helpfulness, or something warmer, more personal . . . ?" (370). Whether her conscience acquits or condemns her, Justine is prepared to accept the verdict. But even after her resolute self-scrutiny, she finds no real cause for alarm, and can comfortably admit to herself her affection and respect for Amherst. She possesses enough practical objectivity to know that "there were moments when she was so mortally lonely that any sympathetic contact with another life sent a glow into her veins" (370). Her feelings for Amherst at this point are not romantic, and she feels little need for self-flagellation.

Justine's diligent habit of self-truth translates naturally into open, honest dealings with others. When we first meet her, she is ministering to a patient, and Wharton illustrates for us an aspect of her heroine's professional character that reflects a static trait of Justine's own personality. She moves briskly about the room and, as she performs her various duties, "she seem[s] to disdain to cajole or trick the sufferer. Her full young

voice [keeps] its cool note of authority . . . " (4). From the beginning, we know how fervently Justine adheres to the value of truth because she practices it even when deceitful kindness would be the easier course. In fact, all types of deceit are intolerable to her, so when later she is forced to live a lie with her husband for a period of time, she finds even simple discourse with him impossible. Her eventual decision to tell Amherst everything about her ordeal with Bessy frees her from the burden of falsehood. She confesses that "it was a relief" as "she told her story, detail by detail, omitting nothing, exaggerating nothing, speaking slowly, clearly, with precision, aware that the bare facts were her strongest argument" (519). For Justine (as for Lily and Ellen), life is a series of moral dilemmas that often discourages straightforward attack, but in almost every critical instance, "the pressure of truth over[comes] every barrier of expediency" for her (351).

With genuine Emersonian qusto, Justine proclaims the virtues of non-conformity and individuality. She is hardly one to take a persistently gloomy view of the world, especially in the early pages of the novel. At one point, she urges an unresponsive Bessy to find her "real self--the self to be interested in--outside of what we conventionally call 'self': the particular Justine or Bessy who is clamouring for her particular morsel of life" (229). Without a distinct sense of self-identity, Justine realizes how insecure and undifferentiated human beings can feel. In

this passage, she also implies that society works to quell non-conformist tendencies, and that it is the individual's task to struggle against sameness and superficiality. Sadder still for Justine than the scarcity of individual "selves" in her society is the unwillingness of many who possess the resources for self-expression to profit from them as richly as she would. She muses that

> others, without a quiver of wings on their dull shoulders, or a note of music in their hearts, had the whole wide world to range through, and saw in it no more than a frightful emptiness to be shut out with the tight walls of habit . . . (147)

This passage with its Whitmanesque/Emersonian overtones aptly expresses Justine's frustration with her limited opportunities and her unlimited energy and desire for individuality. That anyone could forfeit this freedom for "the tight walls of habit" mystifies a spirit as eager to expand as Justine's.

But much later in the novel, Justine finds an opportunity to activate her ideal of non-conformity when she defies medical and religious dicta in her "crime" of euthanasia. The action carries infinite repercussions, not the least of which is Amherst's rejection of her. But Justine never surrenders her well-earned morsel of Transcendental fare, and she accepts the fact that, as Emerson says, "for non-conformity the world whips you with its

displeasure" (Self-Reliance 264). When Amherst asks if she had considered the opinion of the majority when she had complied with Bessy's plea for death, Justine swiftly replies: "No, for I didn't care for the others--and I believed that, whatever your own feelings were, you would know I had done what I thought right" (521). Amherst is the one who had professed indifference to the "lamiae" or societal "bugbears" in the abstract, but only Justine proves herself equal to their force in reality. Non-conformity in this instance only secondarily functioned as an avenue toward individuality for Justine; most importantly, it represented a moral necessity.

Of the three heroines, Justine is perhaps the only one whose capacity for self-reliance and inner freedom is strong enough to withstand society's scourge. Emerson espouses the necessity of keeping "with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" in the midst of an un-sweet society, and Justine follows that injunction throughout the novel. As a nurse, she has found that, though the work is rewarding, the opportunities for real solitude are all too scarce, and so she developed early on an innovative method to act on Emerson's suggestion:

> Her world, in short, had been chiefly peopled by the dull or the crude, and, hemmed in between the two, she had created for herself an inner kingdom where the fastidiousness she had to set aside in her outward relations recovered its full sway.

(152)

A distinct hallmark of Justine's personality is her quiet confidence in her ability to hold her own in a chaotic world, and that "perfect sweetness of solitude" is amply illustrated at one point when she considers her position at Lynbrook: "She was not seriously afraid of being taken for anything but what she really was, and still less did she fear to become, by force of propinquity and suggestion, the kind of being for whom she might be temporarily taken" (220). The sentiment holds no hint of self-congratulation; rather, it attests to the fineness of Justine's independent character.

Her attitude toward her profession also confirms her fundamentally self-reliant personality. When Westy Gaines bemoans the fact that she should have "had" to stoop to nursing for sustenance, she firmly corrects him: "Oh, _had_ to? . . . It was my choice, you know" (156). She views her profession with respect and performs her tasks with a ready willingness and equanimity that contrasts with the grumbing distaste of those who are forced into them. Lily and Ellen develop self-sufficiency because they must, but Justine fosters it by choice. More so than either of the other heroines, she draws significant pride and satisfaction from her achievement of self-reliance. Without it, she could never face the grim consequences of her decision to help Bessy die. When one by one, her most trusted mainstays give way and leave her isolated, she finds a

significant solace in her long-nurtured self-dependence.

Justine's stalwart acceptance of the consequences of her actions lends credence to a tragic interpretation of her character. When she acts on her principles, she does so with a full awareness of the possible repercussions and of the strength she will need to deal with them. Society as a whole greets Justine's act of euthanasia with displeasure and condemnation--consequences from which she never shrinks. It is not guilt, however, that compels her ready acceptance of these consequences; rather, it is her understanding of the convoluted weavings of human life, of the fact that no one "can commit [an] act alone, whether for good or evil," which makes it impossible for her to ignore society's clamorings for retribution (605). Her decision to explain to Amherst her role in Bessy's death unleashes a stream of bleak consequences. First, she must confront Langhope, Bessy's father, with the truth and endeavor to absolve Amherst of any part in her act. But Langhope's grief is too fresh and his range of understanding too limited to be satisfied solely by Justine's confession. When she herself suggests that she efface herself from his and her step-daughter, Cicely's lives, he promptly insists upon it. That there is no limit to Justine's acceptance of punishment for her fundamentally moral act escapes the attention of all but Maria Ansell, the Langhopes' family friend. Upon learning of Justine's visit and its outcome, she says to Langhope: "But I can't

help seeing that this woman might have saved herself--and that she's chosen to save her husband instead" (553).

But Justine's husband feels little appreciation for her efforts on his behalf and, indeed, proves himself her harshest judge. As the gulf between them widens, Justine gradually realizes that her period of retribution is far from over. By walking quietly out of Amherst's life, she hopes to ease his pain, and in surrendering the man she loves, she hopes to pay her debt in full. She speaks of the "bitterness" of her "expiation" at this point, attuning us to the strength of will necessary for this most painful of retributions (574). Though Amherst eventually comes for her and even offers her his love and "forgiveness," he will not allow his wife's path of penance to come to an end. When he urges her to come back home with him, his initial surge of feeling turns into a mechanical charade as he succumbs to the suggestive influences around him--the "lamiae" which align themselves against Justine in the forms of gossipy, malicious old women. Knowing that their life together will be but a barren shell of its former essence but also knowing that Amherst will give up his work (his reason for existence) if she refuses to go back with him, Justine complies, "pledged to the perpetual expiation of an act for which in the abstract, she still refused to hold herself to blame" (624).

The final act of penance which Justine must execute is the saddest, and, as Wharton describes it, the most

"grotesque and pitiable" (628). Her explanation of and retribution for her role in Bessy's death do not, finally, win Amherst back to her side. Perversely, they commit him instead to a dogged devotion to Bessy's memory which utterly obscures his earlier and clearer view of her. He finds what Justine knows to be Bessy's early plans for a "pleasure palace" for herself and her friends, and celebrates them as a symbol of her humane desire to provide Westmore's workers with peace and relaxation. Justine, already burdened with the weight of past "penances," finds herself faced with a new one to carry. But she does not tell Amherst the truth about his petty, self-absorbed first wife, and instead, says to herself: "It was now at last that she was paying her full price" (632). Her initially compassionate act on Bessy's behalf causes her to be forever haunted by her "small, malicious" ghost (632). Justine's debt has, indeed, been paid in full.

As with Lily and Ellen, Justine's expression of compassion has empathy as its basis. But of the three heroines, only she exhibits a clear understanding of this "Whartonian" value and offers a detailed and thoughtful analysis of it. At one point, she confides in Bessy that she is not motivated by some obscure philanthropic impulse in her concern for the ill, but rather, by an almost psychic immersion in the plight of others. It is just as if, she explains, "I've slipped into their skins . . . it's just as if it had gone wrong with me; and I can't help

trying to rescue myself from <u>their</u> troubles!" (231). Though Justine laughs at what she calls "meddling" into other people's pain, her description of the bond that so strongly ties her to her patients alerts us to the sensitive power of her imagination.

Her ability to view a situation from multiple angles--moral, emotional, and intellectual--enhances her empathetic understanding of human foibles, for when one vantage point fails her, she takes recourse to another. Her relationship with Bessy helps to illustrate both her versatility of perception and her power of empathy. While she cannot accept Bessy's petty revolts and selfish whims on moral or intellectual grounds, she finds a way to do so from an emotional standpoint--a standpoint that fosters humanity and compassion:

> Like all quick spirits she was often intolerant of dulness; yet when the intolerance passed it left a residue of compassion for the very incapacity at which she chafed. (227)

Though the weight of Justine's moral and intellectual judgments inclines toward Amherst at this point, "of the two victims of such a catastrophe [a failed marriage] she felt more for the one whose limitations had probably brought it about" (227). Justine's intelligence and code of ideals, rigorous as they are, never blind her to the necessity of human feeling. Her knowledge of the causes of the Amhersts' broken marriage is clear and complete:

Bessy's limitations coupled with Amherst's intolerance of them has forged a chasm between the two impossible to cross. But again, Justine's heartfelt compassion offers itself most freely to Bessy, a pitiful creature locked in her prison of petty concerns. "How the little parched soul, in solitary confinement for life, must pine and dwindle in its blind cranny of self-love!" she muses, her ardor stemming from her ability to place herself in another's unhappy position (228).

Not surprisingly, it is Justine's heightened sense of compassion which causes her to question and defy the medical maxim which favors the prolongation of human suffering. Listening to the doctors discuss Bessy's agony in the most dispassionate of terms arouses a passionate resistance in Justine. As they commend their patient for her strength in enduring such wrenching pain, Justine is horrified: "Just so a skilled agent of the inquisition might have spoken, calculating how much longer the power of suffering might be artificially preserved in a body broken on the wheel" (401). Later, as she is forced to watch Bessy's body cling stubbornly to life without the support of a spirit, she recognizes the impossibility of her continued role in the process as well as the unforgivable cruelty of that process: "To a compassionate heart there could be no sadder instance of the wastefulness of life than this struggle of the small half-formed soul with a destiny too heavy for its strength" (413-14). Justine's

humanity compels her to realize the importance of the spirit in any physical struggle. For the doctors whose "relentless efforts" concentrate themselves on the prolongation of Bessy's life, every revival of that life is cause for celebration; for Justine whose empathy guides her ministrations for Bessy, every revival is a victory only insofar as it "[wins] Bessy back for fresh suffering" (420). Hence, it is not only Justine's moral superiority but her emotional superiority as well that necessitates her act of euthanasia.

Nobility in Justine renders itself in a clear but not prickly pride in her professional bonds, as well as a graceful confidence in her personal and social identity. Justine's unique position outside the social hierarchy allows her a certain freedom from censure, and she rarely hesitates to utilize her advantage to its fullest degree. She carries herself with a dignity that demands respect, unperturbed by her lack of social standing and unafraid to voice opinions which might jeopardize even her humble status. During her first conversation with Amherst, Justine bridles at his open attack on Dr. Disbrow's integrity. She cuts through his diatribe imperiously: "No, don't go on--if you want me to think well of you" (9). Her loyalty to those who aid her in the sometimes thankless task of medical care prevents her from accepting Amherst's unsupported accusations. Only when she discovers the truth about Disbrow on her own will she relinquish the profes-

sional and moral bonds that initially tied her to him. Later, having accepted the role of nurse/companion to Bessy, Justine feels uprooted and not a little uncomfortable in the midst of Bessy's high-class circle of friends and rounds of pleasure. She thinks to herself that "even if she cared for the diversions . . . at Lynbrook, a certain unavowed pride would have kept her from participating in them on the same footing with Bessy's guests" (220). Though Bessy gives her ample opportunity to share in those diversions, Justine is firm in her refusal. She continues to hold herself aloof, not only because she has no interest in the ongoing pursuit of leisure, but also because she has determined "not to be taken for one of the nomadic damsels who form the camp-followers of the great army of pleasure" (220).

Justine's courage and nobility inform most of her encounters with Amherst as well. When she learns of his intention to leave Lynbrook indefinitely without Bessy's knowledge, she instantly rebukes him for his cowardice, undaunted by the relative formality of their relationship up to this point. "You will go back now to Lynbrook," she commands him, and after a long chastisement, she urges him "not to run away . . . like this!" (334). Nothing else attests to Justine's fine sense of nobility as clearly as do her contempt for cowardice and her courage in confronting people with hard-line truths. But though she never loses her dignity or courage in her personal life, it

is her competence as a nurse that best illustrates her nobility. Caring for Bessy in the days following the riding accident, Justine finds solace and strength in her professional identity. Though she sometimes aches inwardly with fear and misery, outwardly, she "vibrate[s] back and forth, quick, noiseless, self-possessed--sobering, guiding, controlling her confused and panic-stricken world" (391).

Natural insight and acquired intellect are not in-compatible, as we often assume, and in fact, Wharton's characterization of Justine confirms the possibility of their harmonious co-existence. Both shrewd perception and careful, analytical thought characterize Justine's early response to one of Amherst's unwittingly portentous remarks. At the beginning of the novel, Amherst consults with Justine over the fate of Dillon, one of Westmore's workers. Because the man has lost all power to function with the loss of his hand and other complications, Amherst suggests euthanasia in order to "set a poor devil free" (15). When he asks Justine for her opinion, she delib-erates before answering. Finally, she replies: "One might . . . but perhaps the professional instinct to save would always come first" (15). In addition to the irony that it is ultimately Amherst who recoils from this revolutionary stance and Justine who adopts it, her response here illus-trates a thoughtful maturity. She realizes how foolish it is to espouse abstract beliefs or take radical positions without the corresponding benefit of actual experience.

For all her youthful vitality, Justine is no dewy-eyed romantic and she faces life with a practicality that squelches sentiment. Despite her very real desire to find "a pair of kindred shoulders," a man worthy of both her love and admiration, she realizes the improbability of finding him. At one point, she confronts this reality resolutely: "If she must marry without love--and this was growing conceivable--she must at least merge her craving for personal happiness in some view of life in harmony with hers" (224). Justine's regard for the intellectual and moral components of a relationship even exceed her passionate longings for love. Her realization of the importance of those values, especially in a permanent human union, eventually lead her to another, more particular insight. Throughout much of the novel, Justine works diligently to help repair the broken bonds between Bessy and Amherst. Her initial, rather objective position allows her to see more plainly the causes of the emotional and spiritual chasm that separates them. Though ordinarily her cool reserve would prevent her from "solving" a problem marriage, her genuine belief that she can act as a healing communicative link between them inspires her involvement. But finally, her generous enthusiasm does not blind her to the impossibility of their reunion. She must come to terms with the "irreconcilable difference between the two natures she had striven to reunite" (399). Her habit of viewing things in a light unclouded by sentiment compels her to

realize that "that which was the essence of life to one was a meaningless shadow to the other; and the gulf between them was too wide for the imagination of either to bridge" (399). Justine shares with Lily and Ellen a capacity for comprehension too great to allow her to ignore or gloss over unpleasant realities.

Noble pride does not preclude humility in Justine's character, and her natural modesty and self-questioning habit redeem her from a soaring self-confidence. Even in the midst of her euphoric vision of service "mated with the finer forms of enjoying," she stops herself with a reminder of her unworthiness for an ideal life. "But what title had she to share in such an existence?" she asks herself seriously, and promptly answers her own question: "Why, none but her sense of what it was worth--and what did that count for, in a world which used all its resources to barricade itself against all its opportunities?" (223-24). Justine's humility is untainted by a tedious self-effacement. While she cannot count herself worthy of the life she envisions by any concrete, external standards, her good sense insists that a deep appreciation for that life does indeed count for something. Instead of wallowing in self-pity or indulging in useless self-flagellation, Justine wisely turns her attention to the more general source of the problem. It is not so much her individual "unworthiness" that renders her vision of perfect service impossible to achieve; it is instead the world's collective

imperviousness to enlightenment and challenge which stands in opposition of that vision.

Though Justine's greater self-sufficiency and confidence allow her to defer to Amherst less than Lily and Ellen defer to Selden and Newland, she still believes for a time that Amherst is the epitome of strength, integrity, and nobility. Her early attitude toward him is one of quiet admiration and gracious though not grovelling deference. Like Lily and Ellen, Justine often minimizes her own strength, placing her trust in a man whose superiority, she believes, is unquestionable. At one point during her stay with Bessy, Justine admits that "she frankly wanted to see Amherst again--his tone, his view of life, reinforced her own convictions, restored her faith in the reality and importance of all that Lynbrook ignored and excluded" (272). Justine does not discredit herself in favor of Amherst and indeed, seems to need him primarily for his reinforcement of her already firm convictions, but her faith in his ability to "restore" her attests to her belief in his superiority. That belief, however endearing and commendable, prevents her from fully recognizing her own worth until much later.

Justine's superior character, however, is clear to us from the beginning, and perhaps the most convincing proof of it is her fulfillment of Wharton's final philosophical "requirement" for moral life. Justine not only acts on her principles at every turn, but feels uncomfortable discuss-

ing them at length. In fact, she often refuses to espouse any particular "creed," preferring instead to act on it without preliminary, verbal deliberation. Quite early in the novel, Justine betrays her aversion for armchair-philosophy when she tries to aid Bessy in her development of finer sensibilities. She chooses to dispense with overt didacticism because "it was far easier for her to express it in action than in counsel, to grope for the path with her friend than to point the way to it" (229). A perennial participant in life, she feels distinctly out of place in that comfortable armchair; the sedentary role of the mentor holds no appeal for her. Her profession, too, is one that encourages vigorous, unhesitating action and has little to do with passive abstractions. When Bessy refers to her friend's zeal for nursing as a passing "craze for philanthropy," Justine interrupts her with an incredulous, "Philanthropy? I'm not philanthropic. I don't think I ever felt inclined to do good in the abstract" (213). Her entire being seems designed for energetic, concrete action, and she would feel--as many philanthropists would not--the hollowness of compassion unsupported by individual ministration.

Justine's active morality balks at the calculated cruelty that begins to supercede human pity in the doctors assigned to Bessy's case (419). She agonizes that "her skill, her promptness, her gift of divining and interpreting the will she worked with, should be at the service

of this implacable scientific passion!" (421). To act on her convictions at this point is to refuse to act at all. In response to Wyant's plea for more "time" and "incessant vigilance" on her part, she answers with a simple and heartfelt, "Oh, don't ask me! . . . I can't--I can't" (422). At Wyant's look of horror, she conceals her "self-betrayal" by pleading womanly weakness, but both she and the young, ambitious doctor know the intensity of her convictions, and both already suspect the course which she will take.

During Justine's faithful ministrations to Bessy in her final, most agonizing days, the latter pleads with her friend: "I want to die," and on the last day, unable to speak, her eyes continue to beseech Justine. Eventually, even Bessy's eyes glaze with the intensity of the pain, and only her occasional whimperings indicate to Justine how fervent is her desire to be freed of suffering. Though Justine's practical, professional self hears only those small, animal-like sounds, her spirit "heard an inner voice, and its pleading shook her heart. She rose and filled the syringe--and returning with it, bent above the bed . . . " (433). With a calm bred of the finest instincts of human compassion and sensitivity, Justine acts not only to give meaning to her strongest convictions but also to bring peace to her suffering friend and patient. When Wyant enters the room later and she tells him of Bessy's death, "her face was perfectly calm--she could feel

that her lips no longer trembled. She was not in the least afraid of Wyant's scrutiny" (435). For Justine, principles are difficult to maintain only if they are never exercised. But when she decides to enforce her own, she translates amorphous idealism into concrete reality, and the transformation strengthens and makes her whole.

That Justine Brent does not enjoy an unequivocal victory over societal forces at the novel's end seems to trouble certain critics and to generate the idea that her character is less complex and memorable for her failure to win Hanaford's collective regard.[2] Yet Wharton rarely posits public or tangible success as the individual's greatest victory, and for Justine, as for Lily and Ellen, the savor of success is solely intrinsic. Justine does not, as Margaret McDowell suggests, "unconvincingly lose her strength and independence" at the end of the novel, and thereby forfeit her claim to literary distinction (55). On the contrary, her youthful verve crystallizes into a mature and ready resolve to accept herself and her fate--a resolve that requires great resources of strength and which proves the dimensions of her spirit and her character.

The solitary nobility of Justine's moral position at the close of the novel reinforces her tragic stance. As Amherst stands beside her and likens himself to Faust in his determination to triumph at Westmore, we the readers know who better suits that analogy. It is Justine whose moment of "keenest happiness" burst from her bleakest hour

---the long hour of her vigil at Bessy's side. And it is she who, like Faust, possessed the courage to take a portion of immortal knowledge from that forbidden tree. But while greed and self-aggrandizement compel Faust's choice, selfless compassion alone motivates Justine and thus purifies her action. Justine's pinnacle of truth and self-actualization, however, is one which she must enjoy alone. Though her love for Amherst keeps her by his side, his moral inadequacy and his betrayal of her trust have forever severed their spirits. She does not find peace through death, as Lily does, and her ties to Amherst prevent her from striking out in search of "a room of her own," as Ellen does. Indeed, her world offers few "habitable regions" outside its rigid perimeters, and Justine finds that she is irrevocably bound to Westmore and to Amherst. But even in the face of this grim prospect, her spirit does not fail her. When, in the course of her ministrations to a patient whose only desire was to be allowed to die, she chose to pit her forces against "old feelings, old charities, and old tradition," she was already engaged in creating a habitable region for herself. Hence, her ties to that unaccommodating world at the close of the novel are only physical. Assured of the rightness of her moral position and calm in the knowledge of her spirit's wholeness, she finds her habitable region not inside the tangible walls of Westmore, but in the garden of her own mind--a post-Edenic garden of tested innocence and necessary knowledge.

NOTES

[1]See R.W.B Lewis, Margaret McDowell, Geoffrey Walton, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff.

[2]See especially Geoffrey Walton, 93-99.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The world of Edith Wharton's fiction is a fallen one; its spiritual barrenness and ferocious materialism render it irredeemable. But the individual human soul as she reveals it, though buffeted by that world and susceptible to its many tainted influences, yet enjoys the keenest victory over its own limitations. In these three novels, we see the vivid enactment of Wharton's qualified optimism --an optimism which she felt confident enough to express openly only in her later years:

> The world is a welter and has always been one; but though all the cranks and the theorists cannot master the old floundering monster, or force it for long into any of their neat plans of readjustment, here and there a saint or a genius suddenly sends a little ray through the fog, and helps humanity to stumble on, and perhaps up. (*A Backward Glance* 379)

Whether one considers her a saint, a genius, or simply an exceptional writer and human being, Wharton herself sought to uplift and sustain humankind in its quest for enlightenment. In doing so, she refused to soften or sentimentalize

the sordid realities of that "old floundering monster," choosing instead to present them in their naturally dismal garb. We need only recall Lily's hollow, mirthless society of pleasure-seekers, Ellen's spirit-stifling "Old" New York, or Justine's provincial and rigid Hanaford to know how clearly Wharton understood the world's inadequacies. Her fictional societies not only fail to offer avenues toward moral growth and self-fulfillment for her protagonists, but they stand in stubborn opposition to all such liberating aspirations. As a result, the individual in Wharton's fiction who clamors for freedom must move beyond her physical world to find a habitable region of spiritual potential that transcends its inflexible boundaries.

But that region is only habitable for those who genuinely desire to reside there. In the framework of Wharton's three novels, only Lily, Ellen, and Justine convince us of their firm desire to follow morality's seldom-travelled path. Yet to embody the qualities of Wharton's complex and finely-drawn value system requires more than simple desire. More important still are the strength and courage to accept the deprivations as well as the rewards of the moral life. Through the course of their hardships, Wharton's heroines prove their acclimation to that life and their willingness to forfeit more tangible and accessible pleasures for its sake. The basic characteristic of Wharton's moral ideology is its achievability which enhances its universality, but does not preclude the

necessity for diligent effort and thought. Wharton had no wish to create a simple, relaxed code of morality whose individual guidelines could be followed with the greatest of ease. If she had, her "moral" protagonists would doubtless rank among the most colorless and forgettable characterizations. As it is, they rank among the most vibrant and memorable because she chose to instill in each of them an intense, vigorous, and workable idealism which lent strength and individuality to their characters.

Throughout her critical writings, Wharton emphasizes the supreme importance of characterization in the novel. Without dynamic and complex protagonists who are above all "alive," the novel does not live (qtd. in Kennedy 389). James's concept of the "intensity of illusion" was a consistent guiding force in Wharton's essentially realistic writing. As I hope to have proven throughout this study, Wharton's investment in moral concepts was at least as potent and lifelong as her investment in realistic characterization. It is hardly surprising, then, that she would choose the mode of characterization as her primary means of conveying morality. Though a vigorous moral code and strong, complex characterization seldom harmonize in fiction, Wharton rendered them compatible by refusing to divorce any aspect of her moral philosophy from the protagonists themselves. Lily, Ellen, and Justine do not act as mechanical mouthpieces for Wharton's moral edicts.

Rather, they absorb those edicts into the very fabric of their characters.

Because of the versatility of Wharton's moral philosophy, each of her three heroines stands as a unique creation of it. Though all three admirably fulfill the numerous "tenets" of that ideology, their distinctive personalities shed varying lights across their individual embodiments of it. So many moral codes strive to de-individualize human beings and to transform them into carbon copies of one another. Singularity and creativity play no part in doctrines that stress the value of unambiguous uniformity. Wharton's moral ideology avoids the damaging inhumanity of the "typical" ethical code, and in fact, encourages the unique touch of the individual spirit. In her creations of protagonists who are as different as they are similar to one another, Wharton shows us that her philosophy for moral life is not only achievable but actually reliant upon individual differences for its continued growth.

In the course of these three novels, however, Wharton succeeds in a still more profound and far-reaching way. An eternal enemy of dull-spiritedness, moral complacency, and dreary, meaningless conformity, she fought against these potent forces in her own life and in her fiction as well. Lily, Ellen, and Justine give new and vital meaning to the word "morality," a word which I at least will never again associate with dull, myopic church-goers or a grandmother's

tedious maxims for the "good life." But much of the sheer goodness which these heroines so exquisitely exemplify stems from their rejection of those same anti-spiritual forces which their creator refused to surrender to as well. With her creations of Lily Bart, Ellen Olenska, and Justine Brent, Wharton won the battle to which she had given the better part of her life's efforts. Within the timeless and hallowed "region" of the written word, she depicted three women ruled by their ardent spirits, and thus paid her "high gods" of beauty and passionate life the homage they had always deserved.

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VITA 2

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