

THE USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN
EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

By

WILLIAM RICHARD BROWN

Bachelor of Arts

Phillips University

Enid, Oklahoma

1952

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of
the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 1957


OKLAHOMA
AGRICULTURAL & MECHANICAL COLLEGE
LIBRARY
AUG 12 1957


THE USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN
EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

Thesis Approved:



Thesis Adviser





Dean of the Graduate School

383038

PREFACE

Though critics differ about the significance of Edith Wharton's material, they are agreed that she is a consummate literary craftsman, a "disciple of form." This study of her fiction is limited to one aspect of her literary virtuosity, her use of dramatic irony to contribute to the form in her fiction.

Such a study presents a two-fold problem. In the first place, the writer must show how dramatic irony can contribute to form; thus, he must involve himself in aesthetics, a study very difficult to document. In the second place, he must show that dramatic irony contributed to the form of Edith Wharton's fiction. In order to deal with this two-headed problem in a unified essay, I decided that the best approach would be to give a short explanation of my idea that dramatic irony can contribute to form and then to illustrate the explanation by giving specific examples from Mrs. Wharton's fiction. By such means, I would support both ideas at the same time.

Such an approach, however, raised another problem--the danger of monotony of treatment. I was unable to escape some monotony, but I believe the variety and narrative power of Mrs. Wharton's fiction, even in solution, will constitute a saving grace.

I want to express my warmest gratitude to Mr. Alton Juhlin, for providing me with needed material not available in the college library; to Dr. Hans H. Andersen, for the discipline in thesis writing which he imposed in his course in graduate studies; to Dr. Agnes Berrigan, for

her stimulating conversations on irony and form; to Dr. D. Judson Milburn, for acting as my second reader; and especially to Dr. Cecil B. Williams, my major adviser, whose guiding hands were always firm without being heavy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. DRAMATIC IRONY AS FORM	1
Definition of Form	2
Irony as Form	2
Dramatic Irony as Form	5
The Problem	7
Scope of the Study	8
II. USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN SHORT STORIES	9
<u>The Greater Inclination</u>	9
<u>Crucial Instances</u>	14
<u>The Descent of Man, and Other Stories</u>	19
<u>The Hermit and the Wild Woman</u>	25
<u>Tales of Men and Ghosts</u>	27
<u>Kingu and Other Stories</u>	33
Summary	39
III. USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN THE MAJOR NOVELS	41
<u>The House of Mirth</u>	41
<u>Ethan Frome</u>	49
<u>The Reef</u>	52
<u>The Custom of the Country</u>	60
<u>The Age of Innocence</u>	68
Summary	75
IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS	78
Use of Dramatic Irony in Minor Fiction	78
Evaluation of Wharton's Use of Dramatic Irony	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

CHAPTER I

DRAMATIC IRONY AS FORM

In Edith Wharton's The Reef (1912), George Darrow—handsome, vain, sophisticated fiance of Anna Leath—sits in judgment on Miss Sophy Viner, the beautiful and gay fiancee of Anna Leath's stepson, Owen. The reader senses that Darrow's opinion will tip the scales one way or the other regarding Miss Viner's suitability for membership in the fine old family. Important as is the decision, though, it is not the uppermost thing in the reader's mind. Rather, the reader is more sensitively aware of the fact that George Darrow himself has been the seducer of Miss Viner and, more important, that neither Anna Leath nor Owen knows it. At this point in the novel, the reader watches Anna and Owen with piercing interest, with a new-found knowledge of the importance of that meeting between Darrow and Miss Viner during that rainy crossing of the Channel, and of the importance of that Paris affair with its cabs, its plays, its hotel rooms. At the same time, the reader anticipates what is to happen, knowing that surely Darrow and Miss Viner will betray themselves to Anna and to Owen.

What the writer is suggesting now, and what he will be suggesting in this thesis, is that such an ironic situation as the one in The Reef can contribute to the form of a novel or short story and that irony as form plays an appreciable part in the fiction of Edith Wharton.

"Form" and "structure" have long been thought of as closely related terms. And many critics accept the Aristotelian concept of the structure of a plot:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it.¹

Form, for Aristotle, is thus what he calls a "whole"—a unity.

The use of such phrases as "causal necessity," "naturally follows," and "by necessity or as a rule," indicates that the thread uniting the parts of the Aristotelian "whole" or "structure" is a causal relationship among events. The "whole," the "structure," the form, results from the total of these causally interrelated parts.

Is it not possible, however, for something in addition to causally-related events to produce the interrelationships so vital to the "whole"? Is it not possible that irony, either of situation or speech, might provide a unifying thread among events? Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren believe so. In a paragraph explaining their use of irony as a term of criticism, they explain their view as follows:

Why have the editors lighted upon this particular term?...they felt the need of a term which would have significance in relation both to the completed literary structure and to the process of exploration which would accommodate action, and the like, as well as to the order of ideas and attitudes involved in the work.²

Irony, then, can be considered not only as a figure of speech, but also as a contributing element to structure or form. Brooks and Warren

¹S. H. Butcher, tr., "Poetics," by Aristotle, The Great Critics, An Anthology of Literary Criticism, ed. James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks (3rd ed., New York, 1951), p. 36.

²Understanding Fiction (New York, 1943), pp. xviii, xix. Italics mine.

believe that conflict in fiction provides the unity or form, and that irony is vital to the conflict. The reason that they believe so becomes apparent in the following statement:

A piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful. Its elements are so related that we feel an expressive interpenetration among them, a set of vital relationships.... But the unity which the fictional structure possesses is of a very special kind. It is not the result of a purely genial conspiracy among the constituent elements. There is conflict and tension present, and the structure involves almost as much of vindictive opposition as of congenial conspiracy.... In its most obvious form it conflict concerns a collision of interests in the external world. In a somewhat more subtle and sophisticated form conflict concerns a division of interests or obligations in the self. In an even more subtle and sophisticated form, it concerns the alignment of judgments and sympathies on the part of the author--the problem of his own self-division.... In other words the artist is sporting enough to put the best case possible for the opposition. But this is not mere sportsmanship. The artist realizes that, if the opponent--"villain" or "idea"--is a straw man, the conflict will lack interest.... irony is intended, on the one hand, to intensify the implications of the conflict, and on the other, to raise the issue above the level of merely dogmatic and partisan vilification.³

To illustrate their belief, they point out the emphasis in conflict, i.e., the element providing the unity peculiar to fiction, that results when Richard III, one of the greatest butchers in drama, ironically possesses some of the traits most admired by Elizabethans; they point out the intensification of the conflict by the ironic situation in For Whom the Bell Tolls which closes the book with "the distant figure of the young Fascist lieutenant (whom Hemingway has previously presented as a sympathetic character) caught in the gunsights of the hero."⁴

G. G. Sedgewick, the drama critic, expresses much the same idea about the function of irony: "One use of irony is always the same: it points the significance of the situation, it brings the conflict of

³Ibid., pp. xvii, xviii. Italics mine.

⁴Ibid.

dramatic forces into clearer view, it heightens the sense of pity and terror."⁵

Insofar as structure is dependent upon conflict and insofar as irony may contribute to conflict, irony may be said to be structure. So Mr. Brooks and Mr. Warren reason.

In addition, however, to such a concept of irony as contributing to form by the heightening of conflict, the present writer feels that irony may directly provide the set of interrelationships that is the basis of form; for we have seen that a unity, a whole, constitutes form. Let us return to the situation in The Reef described above. The relationship of the events is not that of causation: Anna Leath does not ask Darrow's help in deciding on Sophy Viner's suitability because Darrow has seduced Sophy; nor is the cause of Anna Leath's discovery of his guilt the mere fact of his judging the girl. And yet there is a relationship among the events, an "interpenetration" that fuses them into an organic whole.

How does this fusing take place? How are the interrelationships made clear? First, we need to remember that Anna Leath believes Darrow to be the one eminently suitable for such a judgment, whereas because of the affair and the danger of Sophy's continued presence, Darrow is not; Owen believes Sophy to be his, yet because of the affair with Darrow, she is not; she still loves Darrow. This is a case of dramatic irony as defined by G. G. Sedgewick:

The spectator knows the facts, the people in the play do not. A character's actual situation is one thing, his idea or interpretation of it is another; the promise things have for him is at variance with their outcome—they are not what they seem.⁶

⁵Of Irony: Especially in Drama (Toronto, 1943), p. 63.

⁶Ibid., p. 25.

Thus, we have dramatic irony because both Anna and Owen speak and act and think in ignorance of the real situation. In drama, the dramatic irony is limited to words or acts; but since the nature of the novel permits the portrayal of consciousness, thoughts and attitudes may be endowed with dramatic irony.

Next, in order to see how dramatic irony provides the basis for interrelationship of events, we must note how it arouses what Sedgwick calls "anticipation" and "reminiscence." "By an irony of reminiscence we are made to recall previous words and acts which are mocked by the words and acts of the present."⁷ So, in the case of The Reef, the irony of a woman unknowingly asking her fiancée to judge the girl he has seduced provides the interrelationship with the affair in Paris. "The ironic sense drives the mind forward from the episode which is engaging its immediate attention."⁸ So, in the case of The Reef, the reader's knowledge of the affair in Paris coupled with the situation of dramatic irony at Mrs. Leath's estate, gives him the anticipation of Darrow's discovery and her and Owen's disillusionment, an ironic contrast with their false security in their loves.

By means, then, of irony of reminiscence and irony of anticipation, the events of the story are woven together. What has gone before--in The Reef, it is the Darrow-Viner affair--has been woven in with what has just occurred--the Darrow-Viner relationship at the Leath estate. What is to come--the discovery of Darrow's guilt--is woven in with what has already happened. Such weaving together is characteristic of form because it contributes to the unity.

⁷Ibid., p. 53.

⁸Ibid., p. 50.

It is important here, while the nature and function of dramatic irony is being considered, to define the use of "mock," since it will be employed from time to time throughout the thesis. "Mock" as used by Sedgewick seems to have two meanings if we judge by the examples he gives of words and acts that "mock" others. First, he uses the verb when words and acts actually imitate other words and acts:

Thus, when the Jew says, "since I am a dog, beware my fangs," the spectator may hear a grim echo of Shylock's review of his borrower's "courtesies." In the temptation scene of *Othello*, Iago reaches even his limit of daring by recalling Brabantio's actual words: "She did deceive her father marrying you."⁹

But Sedgewick also uses the word to name the action which brings previous words and acts into ironical relationship with later words and acts.

And for a last example, the acknowledgement that Caesar's spirit has conquered, thrice repeated, recalls Cassius' sneer at "Immortal Caesar," and Brutus' original purpose which has been foiled: "O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit."¹⁰

The writer of this thesis will use the verb only in the latter sense: to name the action which brings previous words and acts into ironical relationship with later words and acts.

Concerning the effect of dramatic irony on the reader, who corresponds to the playgoer in Sedgewick's book, we are told

By virtue of dramatic irony, immediately or generally felt, the mind of the spectator moves easily forward and backward. It gives him that sense of control which, I have said so often, is the peculiar pleasure of the stage.¹¹

This sense of control, I suggest, is the result of the reader's perception of a unity and a result of the orientation that comes from such a

⁹Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹Ibid., p. 55.

perception. The same sense of control may result from a perception of the unity of a dramatic or Aristotelian plot—with those parts of the unity interrelated causally; the same sense of control may result from a perception of the unity of a formal essay—with those parts of the unity interrelated logically; the same sense of control may result from a perception of the unity in an ironic narrative—with those parts of the unity interrelated ironically. Dramatic irony thus contributes to the form or unity of a narrative by revealing the ironic relationship among the events of the narrative.

What has been said so far about irony and certain passages of Edith Wharton's work indicates that irony—specifically dramatic irony—can play an important part in form and that Edith Wharton sometimes had dramatic irony in her works.

The natural question is, then, how big a part dramatic irony plays in the form or structure of Edith Wharton's fiction. The question becomes all the more fascinating since in her The Writing of Fiction (1925) she dwells far more on such matters of technique as making beginnings and endings and on the use of narration, dialogue, and description than she does on dramatic irony. However, Mrs. Wharton showed that she recognized and appreciated the power of dramatic irony, even though she did not name it as such.

There are many ways of conveying this sense of the footfall of Destiny; and nothing shows the quality of the novelist's imagination more clearly than the incidents he singles out to illuminate the course of events and the inner workings of his people's souls. When Imogen, setting forth to meet her adored Posthumus at Milford Haven, asks his servant Pisanio (who has been ordered by the jealous Posthumus to murder her on the way): "How many score of miles may we well ride 'twixt sun and sun, Madam, 's enough for you, and too much, too," exclaims: "Why, one that rode to 's execution, man, could never go so slow—"....when the swift touch of genius darts such rays on the path to come, /an irony of anticipation/ one is almost tempted to exclaim: There is nothing in

mere "situation"--the whole of the novelist's art lies in the particular way in which he brings the given conjecture home to the imagination!¹²

What part did the use of dramatic irony play in the form of Edith Wharton's fiction? In order to answer the question in some measure, the writer will examine her short stories and novels and attempt to show the presence of dramatic irony and the effect of dramatic irony in unifying the elements of the narratives.

¹²Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York, 1925), pp. 161-162.

CHAPTER II

USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN SHORT STORIES

Four of the seven stories appearing in Mrs. Wharton's first collection, The Greater Inclination,¹ contain dramatic irony used to reveal ironic relationships among events in order to fuse the events into an organic whole.

In the first of these, "A Journey,"² a woman is bringing her consumptive husband back east after an unsuccessful sojourn in Colorado in the hope of curing him. One day's trip away from home, the man dies in his sleep in the Pullman; the wife upon finding the body is struck by the horror of death; but a greater horror is her fear of having the death discovered and being put off the train in some strange place. So she pretends all day that her husband is merely more sick than usual. The reader's knowledge of events is thus superior to the knowledge that the other passengers have; the result is that their words and actions become endowed with dramatic irony. For example, after the porter has been told the lie, he brings milk at intervals through the day for the dead man to drink and continues to ask whether the man should be got up. Another passenger, a woman, asks to see the man for purposes of diagnosis and offers suggestions for nursing him. The wife is tortured terribly by her secret. Then,

¹(New York, 1899).

²Ibid., pp. 27-45.

Later in the day a fat man detached himself from the mist of faces. He had a creased stomach and soft pale lips. As he pressed himself into the seat facing her she noticed that he was dressed in black broadcloth with a soiled white tie.

"Husband's pretty bad this morning, is he?"

"Yes."

"Dear, dear! Now that's terribly distressing, ain't it?" An apostolic smile revealed his gold-filled teeth. "Of course you know there's no such thing as sickness. Ain't that a lovely thought? Death itself is but a delusion of our grosser senses. On'y lay yourself open to the influx of the sperrit, submit yourself passively to the action of the divine force, and disease and dissolution will cease to exist for you. If you could indooce your husband to read this little pamphlet--"³

This speech mocks preceding events: for example, the reality of the husband's death and the horrors the wife has experienced in connection with the death—for one, the persistent vision of her husband's dead face, a waken mask, the eyes open and staring, the skin so dreadfully smooth.

Thus preceding events are brought into ironic relationship with each other.

At the same time, the reader awaits in an irony of anticipation the further horrors which must come for the young wife; and they do come, culminating in the woman's fainting just as the discovery is about to be made at the end of the story.

In "The Pelican,"⁴ young Mrs. Anyot—widowed and forced to support a young son—goes about lecturing like a pelican: her lectures are simply regurgitated masses of reference material on subjects of the broadest nature. She has, though, a great deal of success until she loses part of her youthful beauty and the public's taste in lectures changes to "influence" studies. Then she appeals in the name of her son, Lancelot, who depends on her for his college education, to the narrator—a bona fide critic. For the sake of Lancelot, the man helps her with letters of

³Ibid., p. 40. Italics mine.

⁴Ibid., pp. 49-80.

reference and an outline for a more fashionable lecture, and thus rescues her. The adaptable Mrs. Amyot has renewed success; the narrator moves to Europe for a decade, and then returns to Florida because of his ill health. The scene of central dramatic irony occurs when one of his Florida acquaintances--unaware of the knowledge the narrator and the reader have of Mrs. Amyot--has a conversation with him. The narrator speaks first.

"Of course I would like a ticket--but for what?" I ventured to inquire.

"Oh, that's so good of you--for the lecture this evening. You needn't go, you know; we're none of us going; most of us have been through it already at Aiken and at St. Augustine and at Palm Beach. I've given away my tickets to some new people who've just come from the North, and some of us are going to send our maids, just to fill up the room."

"And May I ask to whom you are going to pay this delicate attention?"

"Oh, I thought you knew--to poor Mrs. Amyot. She's been lecturing all over the South this winter; she's simply haunted me ever since I left New York--and we had six weeks of her at Bar Harbor last summer! One has to take tickets, you know, because she's a widow and does it for her son--to pay for his education. She's so plucky and nice about it, and talks about him in such a touching unaffected way, that everybody is sorry for her, and we all simply ruin ourselves in tickets. I do hope that boy's nearly educated!"

"Mrs. Amyot? Mrs. Amyot?" I repeated. "Is she still educating her son?"

"Oh, do you know about her? Has she been at it long? There's some comfort in that, for I suppose when the boy's provided for the poor thing will be able to take a rest--and give us one!"⁵

This scene of dramatic irony mocks the earlier ones in which people--including the narrator--respond to the appeal of Mrs. Amyot for her son. In an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits the lecture--the never-ending lecture of the pelican--and the discovery of Mrs. Amyot's duplicity. It comes when her son--a thirtyish, successful businessman--arrives on the scene, airs his views on his mother's continued duplicity, and hauls her away.

⁵Ibid., p. 69.

In "Souls Belated,"⁶ Lydia Tillotson has left her husband to become the mistress of Gannett, a writer. She believes herself to be totally free of the obligations placed upon her by conventions, and so she has run off with Gannett in the broad daylight of public knowledge and disapproval, believing that such things do not matter. When the news of her husband's successful suit for divorce comes, she flaunts the idea of marriage to Gannett. After all, their love is recognized by God; why bow to convention just to make herself an honest woman when she already knows she is? The two settle down for a while at a hotel in Italy, register as Mr. and Mrs. Gannett, and gratefully take their place in the social microcosm of the hotel. Then another couple arrives—a couple unacceptable to the hotel group for some unapparent breach of convention. The scene of central dramatic irony occurs when Miss Pinsent takes up the matter of newcomers with Lydia—not knowing, of course, that Lydia is guilty of a serious breach of the code.

Whatever else they had at the Hotel Bellosguardo, they had, as Miss Pinsent said, "a certain tone....It's so important, my dear, forming as we do a little family, that there should be some one to give the tone; and no one could do it better than Lady Susan—an earl's daughter and a person of such determination. Dear Mrs. Ainger now—who really ought, you know, when Lady Susan's away—absolutely refuses to assert herself." Miss Pinsent sniffed derisively. "A bishop's niece!—my dear, I saw her once actually give in to some South Americans—and before us all. She gave up her seat at table to oblige them—such a lack of dignity! Lady Susan spoke to her very plainly about it afterwards....And Lady Susan is so difficult—so very difficult—about new people. One might almost say that she disapproves of them beforehand, on principle. And yet she's had warnings—she very nearly made a dreadful mistake once with the Duchess of Levens, who dyed her hair and—well, swore and smoked. One would have thought that might have been a lesson to Lady Susan....There are exceptions, of course. She took at once to you and Mr. Gannett—it was quite remarkable, really. Oh, I don't mean that either—of course not! It was perfectly natural—we all thought you so charming and interesting from the first day—we knew at once that Mr. Gannett was intellectual, by the magazines you took in; but you know

⁶Ibid., pp. 85-128.

what I mean. Lady Susan is so very---well, I won't say prejudiced as Mrs. Ainger does---but so prepared not to like new people, that her taking to you in that way was a surprise to us all, I confess."⁷

This scene mocks the preceding ones in which Lydia has thrown the conventions to the winds; conventions cannot be disregarded and evaded---even when one is an American hiding from them in Europe. Because the stay at the hotel has been pleasant and because Gannett is the type of man who needs social stimulation before he can write, the reader waits in an irony of anticipation for Lydia's surrender to conventions---specifically marriage. And after she makes an abortive attempt to leave Gannett rather than surrender, she does so---an outcome that she certainly had not expected.

As "A Cup of Cold Water"⁸ opens, it is Woburn's last night in New York: he is going to flee the city on the morrow. It is a case of his having wanted more than his finances would allow. Among his desires, the chief has been Miss Talcott, a beautiful society girl whom he has known that he could not win permanently without a great deal of money. So Woburn has "borrowed" \$50,000 from his employers in order to speculate in Wall Street and has lost the money. With the examiners due on the morrow, Woburn has booked passage for London on a steamer. On impulse, though, he cannot face the loneliness of his cabin, and after a last glimpse of Miss Talcott at a ball, he takes a hotel room. There he discovers a young woman about to commit suicide because she has been deserted by the man who won her away from her husband. Woburn lends her his sailing money to send her back to a forgiving husband. The scene of

⁷Ibid., pp. 102-104.

⁸Ibid., pp. 183-226.

central dramatic irony occurs as the grateful woman praises Woburn, ignorant of the crime Woburn has committed and of the flight that he intends to make. "I never heard a voice like yours; it's so strong and kind. You must be a very good man; you remind me of Joe; I'm sure you've got just such a nature; and Joe is the best man I've ever seen."⁹ Then the woman tells how Joe's honesty kept him from taking credit for preventing a railway wreck when a helper had actually done it—even though the helper had died in the interval before the reward was offered. Then Ruby speaks again:

"Wasn't it beautiful of him? Ain't he a real hero?" she said. "And I'm sure you'd behave just like him; you'd be just as gentle about little things, and you'd never move an inch about big ones. You'd never do a mean action, but you'd be sorry for people who did; I can see it in your face; that's why I trusted you right off."¹⁰

Her praise mocks Woburn's past. At the same time, the reader realizes in an irony of anticipation that Woburn must give himself up to his employers because of the paradoxical truth about his character spoken by the girl, Ruby. This scene is Woburn's cup of cold water; the next day he gives himself up voluntarily.

In Mrs. Wharton's second collection of short stories, Crucial Instances, seven tales appear. Of these seven dramatic irony appears as form in four: "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Rembrandt," "The Moving Finger," and "The Recovery."

In "The Duchess at Prayer,"¹¹ a beautiful young Duchess reconciles herself to being married to a yellow, persimmon-like fellow by entertaining

⁹Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 218-219.

¹¹Edith Wharton, Crucial Instances (New York, 1901), pp. 1-32.

her lover, the Duke's cousin, under the guise of prayers and devotions; she uses a crypt as a place of concealment for her lover when there is danger of their being discovered. The situation of central dramatic irony occurs when the Duke arrives unexpectedly at Easter time, to find his wife dressed in a gown of shot silver and wearing pearls draped over her bare shoulders; she has been entertaining her lover, who is hidden in the crypt when the Duke approaches. As the meeting progresses, the reader realizes that the Duke believes his wife to have a lover and that the Duchess does not know of the Duke's suspicions.

"A moment later the door opened and there stood the Duchess. She held her rosary in one hand and had drawn a scarf over her shoulders; but they shone through it like the moon in a mist, and her countenance sparkled with beauty.

"The Duke took her hand with a bow. 'Madam,' he said, 'I could have no greater pleasure than thus to surprise you at your devotions.'

"My own happiness,' she replied, 'would have been greater had your excellency prolonged it by giving me notice of your arrival.'

"Had you expected me, Madam' said he, 'your appearance could scarcely have been more fitted to the occasion. Few ladies of your youth and beauty array themselves to venerate a saint as they would welcome a lover.'

"Sir,' she answered, 'having never enjoyed the latter opportunity, I am constrained to make the most of the former.--What's that?' she cried, falling back, and the rosary dropped from her hand.

"There was a loud noise at the other end of the saloon, as of an object being dragged down the passage; and presently a dozen men were seen hauling across the threshold the shrouded thing from the cart. The Duke waved his hand toward it. 'That,' said he, 'Madam, is a tribute to your extraordinary piety. I have heard with peculiar satisfaction of your devotion to the blessed relics in this chapel, and to commemorate a zeal which neither the rigors of winter nor the sultriness of summer could abate I have ordered a sculptured image of you...to be placed before the altar over the entrance to the crypt.'¹²

The Duke's double-edged language mocks the preceding events: the beautiful friendship between the Duchess and Ascanio, the Duke's cousin; the termination of that friendship; the sudden development of the Duchess' piety; her almost morbid secretiveness in prayer, with the maid Nencia

¹²Ibid., pp. 21-22. Italics mine.

posted as guard against the chaplain, who is the Duke's spy. Because of this mockery, an irony of reminiscence occurs and provides interrelationship of events—form. At the same time, as the Duke reveals the statue, his double-edged language mocks the tragic end the reader senses is to come to the lover: he will be buried alive in the crypt. Irony of anticipation has woven in what is to come with what has happened.

In "The Rembrandt,"¹³ a curator of an art museum places an exorbitant evaluation of \$1,000 upon a worthless imitation of a Rembrandt painting owned by an old lady in need of funds. The curator does so for two reasons: to avoid shattering the illusions of Mrs. Fontage, the owner, and to get the price high enough that he may have an excuse for not buying the picture. At this point, Jefferson Rose, a young bank clerk in love with the curator's charity-minded niece, approaches the curator at his club.

"Miss Copt tells me you value it at a thousand dollars."

There was no denying this, and I grunted a reluctant assent.

"Of course," he went on earnestly, "your valuation is based on the fact that the picture isn't signed—Mrs. Fontage explained that; and it does make a difference, certainly. But the thing is—if the picture's really good—ought one to take advantage—? I mean—one can see that Mrs. Fontage is in a tight place, and I wouldn't for the world—"

My astonished stare arrested him.

"You wouldn't—"

"I mean—you see, it's just this way"; he coughed and blushed: "I can't give more than a thousand dollars myself—it's as big a sum as I can manage to scrape together—but before I make the offer I want to be sure I'm not standing in the way of her getting more money."¹⁴

And so, Jefferson talks on, not knowing his real situation, that the picture he thinks is such a bargain—the one he worries about stealing at a thousand dollars—is a worthless one.

¹³Ibid., pp. 123-149.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 139-140.

Such a situation of dramatic irony mocks the preceding events: the curator's visit to Mrs. Fontage's apartment and his evaluation; his refusal to buy the picture for the museum on the grounds that Rembrandt had not signed it. Thus the ironical relationship of preceding events is made clear by an irony of reminiscence. At the same time, as the reader sees Jefferson Rose about to throw away his money because of the curator's action, an irony of anticipation weaves in the future: either Jefferson will buy the picture—a worthless one made valuable to him by a false estimate, or the curator must find a way to buy it—in spite of his earlier efforts to avoid buying it, or Mrs. Fontage must be told the truth—an outcome certainly in ironic contrast to her personal evaluation of the picture. Any one of these endings will be bound to the rest of the story by an ironical relationship. As it happens, the curator feels obligated to buy the picture.

After ten years of marriage to the artist Kenniston in "The Recovery,"¹⁵ Claudia Day Kenniston knows that her husband is not the great artist that many think him to be, among them Mrs. Davant—a rich young patroness—and Kenniston, himself. The situation is perfect for dramatic irony.

Mrs. Davant glanced reverentially about the studio. "I have always said," she murmured, "That they [Kenniston's paintings] ought to be seen in Europe."

Mrs. Davant was young, credulous and emotionally extravagant: she reminded Claudia of her earlier self—the self that ten years before, had first set an awe-struck foot on that very threshold.

"Not for his sake," Mrs. Davant continued, "but for Europe's."
Claudia smiled.¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 65-96.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 73.

Kenniston, too, feels that it is time to storm Europe, and after Mrs. Davant departs, he pays her this compliment: "She has a tremendous feeling for art—the keenest I ever knew in a woman."¹⁷

This spectacle of Mrs. Davant and Kenniston acting in ignorance of the real situation contrasts ironically with earlier events and reveals the ironic relationship: there is the spectacle, early in the story, of people buying Kenniston's paintings eagerly; of articles being written to interpret the man and his work; the picture of the young Claudia Day, herself, being awe-struck at the possibility of meeting the artist. At the same time, "...for Europe's sake" raises the irony of anticipation, because the reader senses that if he goes to Europe, Kenniston is to be undeceived at last—very much in ironic contrast with his present state of self-satisfaction, "his unperturbed air of finishing each picture as though he had dispatched a masterpiece to posterity."¹⁸ In this tale, as in the others, ironic relationship of events provides the basis of form.

In "The Moving Finger,"¹⁹ we meet Grancy, who has the delusion that his dead wife's spirit somehow inhabits the portrait of her painted by the artist Claydon. In order to feel at home with the picture, Grancy has asked Claydon to age it from time to time so that the couple can grow old together. So strong is Grancy's fixation that it seems to control his life. In the scene of central dramatic irony, the narrator visits Grancy, who has been desperately ill but who seems to be recovering.

"Ah," he said, "I'm an old man now and no mistake. I suppose we shall have to go half-speed after this; but we shan't need towing just yet!"

¹⁷Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 153-178.

The plural pronoun struck me, and involuntarily I looked up at Mrs. Grancy's portrait. It was the face of a woman who knows that her husband is dying. My heart stood still at the thought of what Claydon had done.

Grancy had followed my glance. "Yes, it's changed her," he said quietly. "For months, you know, it was touch and go with me--we had a long fight of it, and it was worse for her than for me." After a pause he added: "Claydon has been very kind; he's so busy nowadays that I seldom see him, but when I sent for him the other day he came at once."²⁰

Grancy's reference to Claydon's kindness mocks the earlier events--for Claydon has capitalized on the delusion in order to age and kill Grancy; the situation mocks earlier events, when Claydon first painted the portrait by commission of Grancy and fell in love with the wife; when the little group met intimately on weekends at Grancy's country place. By an irony of anticipation, the reader knows that Grancy is to die--very much in ironic contrast with Grancy's optimism in the scene. The events of the story are ironically related.

In her next collection of short stories, The Descent of Man, four out of a total of eight stories have dramatic irony for form: "The Descent of Man," "The Other Two," "The Reckoning," and "Expiation."

In "The Descent of Man,"²¹ we watch a noted entomologist plan to satirize both pseudo-scientific writing that "proves" faith and the public for such writing by doing a book that so heaps "platitude on platitude, fallacy on fallacy, false analogy on false analogy,"²² that even the ignorant public would sense the satire and laugh at the prophets of pseudo-science--a book that would be "the trumpet-blast bringing down the

²⁰Ibid., p. 171.

²¹Edith Wharton, The Descent of Man, and Other Stories (New York, 1904), pp. 1-34.

²²Ibid., p. 7.

walls of ignorance, or at least the little stone striking the giant between the eyes."²³

The scene of central dramatic irony, however, mocks this undertaking. The book is written and sent to the publisher Harviss, who as a college friend knew and understood Linyard's rebellious and unorthodox ideas. Linyard has come for a conference after Harviss has had time to read the book.

He was bowed into the office like a successful novelist, and Harviss grasped him with both hands.

"Well—do you mean to take it?" he asked with a lingering coquetry.

"Take it? Take it, my dear fellow? It's in press already—you'll excuse my not waiting to consult you? There will be no difficulty about terms, I assure you, and we had barely time to catch the autumn market. My dear Linyard, why didn't you tell me?" His voice sank to a reproachful solemnity, and he pushed forward his own arm-chair.

The Professor dropped into it with a chuckle. "And miss the joy of letting you find out?"

"Well—it was a joy." Harviss held out a box of his best cigars. "I don't know when I've had a bigger sensation. It was so deucedly unexpected—and, my dear fellow, you've brought it so exactly to the right shop."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said the Professor modestly.

Harviss laughed in rich appreciation. "I don't suppose you had a doubt of it; but of course I was quite unprepared. And it's so extraordinarily out of your line—"

The Professor took off his glasses and rubbed them with a slow smile.

"Would you have thought it so—at college?"

Harviss stared. "At college?—Why, you were the most iconoclastic devil—"

There was a perceptible pause. The professor restored his glasses and looked at his friend. "Well—?" he said simply.

"Well—?" echoed the other, still staring. "Ah—I see; you mean that's what explains it. The swing of the pendulum, and so forth. Well I admit it's not an uncommon phenomenon. I've conformed myself, for example; most of our crowd have, I believe; but somehow I hadn't expected it of you."

The close observer might have detected a faint sadness under the official congratulation of his tone: but the professor was too amazed to have an ear for such fine shades.

"Expected it of me? Expected what of me?" he gasped. "What in heaven do you think this thing is?" And he struck his fist on the manuscript which lay between them.

²³Ibid., p. 8.

Harviss had recovered his optimistic creases. He rested a benevolent eye on the document.

"Why your apologia—your confession of faith, I should call it. You surely must have seen which way you were going? You can't have written it in your sleep?"

"Oh, no, I was wide awake enough," said the Professor faintly.²⁴

Not only does the misreading by Harviss mock the undertaking and thus bring about an irony of reminiscence and an ironical relationship between the events, but the reader also senses through an irony of anticipation that the Professor is to be misunderstood by all his readers and that he is to become—ironically enough—one of the very figures that he wished to satirize.

In "The Other Two,"²⁵ Waythorn—a wealthy bachelor just past thirty-five—marries Alice Varick, a twice-divorced, utterly charming woman. And Waythorn is surprised to find himself boyishly thrilled at the prospect of possessing completely such a woman. It is true that she has been married to a cognac-and-coffee-loving gastronome, Gus Varick; but all that is past—she belongs exclusively to Waythorn; she is Alice Waythorn now. The little scene of central dramatic irony is a quiet, domestic one—in keeping with the theme of the story. The couple are in the library, for after-dinner coffee.

She set down the coffee-pot and reaching for the decanter of cognac, measured off a liqueur-glass and poured it into his cup.

Waythorn uttered a sudden exclamation.

"What is the matter?" she said, startled.

"Nothing; only—I don't take cognac in my coffee."

"Oh, how stupid of me," she cried.

Their eyes met, and she blushed a sudden agonised red.²⁶

Mrs. Waythorn's unconscious bringing of this little bit of her union

²⁴Ibid., pp. 11-13.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 71-105.

²⁶Ibid., p. 83.

with Varick to this marriage mocks the expectations of Waythorn; it stands in ironic contrast to the previous meeting of Waythorn and Varick—and so it draws these events together with an ironical thread. At the same time, the little scene shows the reader and Waythorn that Mrs. Waythorn's previous marriages are an inseparable part of her life and this causes an irony of anticipation—for Waythorn is to discover more fully in some way this truth, that he can never be the sole proprietor of this woman. He does realize such, of course, and the story ends with Mrs. Waythorn serving tea to all three men in Waythorn's library—certainly an ironic ending to her husband's illusions at the beginning of the story.

Julia Westall in "The Reckoning"²⁷ has been a rebel against the galling chains of marriage, but now is happily married to a man who proclaims the doctrine of fidelity to self rather than to marriage at Saturday afternoon gatherings at the Van Siderens' and who practices those doctrines by being quite obviously interested in Una, the daughter of the Van Siderens'. The scene of dramatic irony is a situation revealed in a flashback to the years of Julia's first marriage, in which Julia propounds and acts the same doctrines of freedom from conventional restraints of marriage, unconscious of the fact that her revolt will come home to her in the form of her husband's acting on her principles.

If marriage was the slow life-long acquittal of a debt contracted in ignorance, then marriage was a crime against human nature. She, for one, would have no share in maintaining the pretence that a man and a woman, forced into the narrowest of personal relations, must remain there till the end, though they may have outgrown the span of each other's natures as the mature tree outgrows the iron brace about the sapling.

It was in the first heat of her moral indignation that she had met Clement Westall. She had seen at once that he was "interested," and had

²⁷Ibid., pp. 201-239.

fought off the discovery, dreading any influence that should draw her back into the bondage of conventional relations. To ward off the peril she had, with an almost crude precipitancy, revealed her opinions to him. To her surprise, she found that he shared them. She was attracted by the frankness of a suitor who, while pressing his suit, admitted that he did not believe in marriage....People grew at varying rates, and the yoke that was an easy fit for the one might soon become galling to the other. That was what divorce was for: the readjustment of personal relations....There would be no further need of the ignoble concessions and connivances, the perpetual sacrifice of personal delicacy and moral pride, by means of which imperfect marriages were now held together....The only necessary condition to a harmonious marriage was a frank recognition of this truth, and a solemn agreement between the contracting parties to keep faith with themselves, and not live together for a moment after complete accord had ceased to exist between them. The new adultery was unfaithfulness to self.²⁸

This spectacle of Julia acting in ignorance of what is to befall her causes an irony of reminiscence over events told earlier in the story: the flashback mocks her growing conventionality toward marriage; it mocks Clement's continued proclamation of fidelity to self at the Van Sideren gatherings; it mocks Julia's irritation at young Una Van Sideren's eager espousal of such dogma; it mocks Julia's jealousy of her husband's attentions to Una; it mocks Julia's sense of security in her husband's love. At the same time, an irony of anticipation occurs when the reader senses from a flashback that Julia Westall is going to lose her happiness by means of the very thing that gave it to her--her doctrine of fidelity to self. As is expected, Clement Westall claims the freedom guaranteed by their agreement before their marriage and leaves Julia for Una. Again, the ironic relationship of events, revealed through dramatic irony, is the basis of form in the fiction of Edith Wharton.

In "Expiation,"²⁹ Paula Fetherel, a discontented young wife who feels that her husband has stifled her emotional life, has written an indictment

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 175-177.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 201-239.

of marriage and society in her first novel, Fast and Loose. She dreads the reviews, sure that her book is going to be denounced; she is perturbed by her husband's interest in the book and the reviews, but she feels secure in the denseness of her husband's mind; she dreads especially the reaction of her uncle, Bishop of Ossining, who is also an unsuccessful novelist because—as he says—his novels have not been denounced.

These events are mocked by an irony of reminiscence in the scene of central dramatic irony. Paula's worst fears seem about to come true as her husband—unconscious of the book's theme and of Paula's fears—comes in to read the first review in the presence of the Bishop.

"Here, listen to this, ladies and gentleman: 'In this age of festering pessimism and decadent depravity, it is no surprise to the nauseated reviewer to open one more volume saturated with the fetid emanations of the sewer—'"

Fetherel, who was not in the habit of reading aloud, paused with a gasp, and the Bishop glanced sharply at his niece, who kept her gaze fixed on the tea-cup she had not yet succeeded in transferring to his hand.

"'Of the sewer,'" her husband resumed; "'but his wonder is proportionately great when he lights on a novel as sweetly inoffensive as Paula Fetherel's Fast and Loose." Mrs. Fetherel is, we believe, a new hand at fiction, and her work reveals frequent traces of inexperience; but these are more than atoned for by her pure fresh view of life and her altogether unfashionable regard for the reader's moral susceptibilities. Let no one be induced by its distinctly misleading title to forego the enjoyment of this pleasant picture of domestic life, which, in spite of a total lack of force in character-drawing and of consecutiveness of incident, may be described as a distinctly pretty story.'"³⁰

Not only does this little scene bring preceding events into ironic relationship with each other, but an irony of anticipation leads the reader to sense that the book is not to have a good sale until it is denounced, if ever—the very thing Paula dreaded most. The book does have

³⁰Ibid., pp. 220-221.

a good sale, though--after Paula has arranged to trade her uncle his much-wanted chantry window (the "Expiation")--for his denunciation.

Only two of the seven stories in The Hermit and the Wild Woman make use of dramatic irony to contribute to form.

The first of these is "In Trust."³¹ Paul Ambrose, a consumptive young dilettante, has visionary plans to found an American Academy of Art in order to restore "The sense of beauty to those unhappy millions of our fellow-countrymen who, as Ambrose movingly pointed out, now live and die in surroundings of unperceived and unmitigated ugliness."³² But Paul Ambrose cannot force himself to let go of the necessary money; he postpones actually starting the thing from time to time; finally he meets a beautiful young American woman while he is in Paris studying art and marries her. The girl professes to be vastly interested in Paul's philanthropic enterprise, and she manifests her interest by buying new draperies for the drawing room, by improving the quality of Ambrose's cigars, by having huge dinners for a set of people whose stock in conversation is Wall Street and sporting events, and by a flight to Europe the first summer after their marriage. Ambrose dies in Italy the following winter, leaving his entire fortune to the widow. Later, Ned Halidon, a young adventurer who always ardently seconded Paul's plan, meets and marries the widow, resolving that they together shall carry out Paul's plan.

The scene of central dramatic irony occurs when the newly-married Halidon, not knowing the personality of his wife as the reader does, talks

³¹Edith Wharton, The Hermit and the Wild Woman (New York, 1908), pp. 97-126.

³²Ibid., p. 97.

of his wife's dedication to Paul's plan for the academy.

"My wife," Halidon continued, his eyes following mine, "my wife feels it too, even more strongly. You know a woman's sensitiveness. There's nothing she wouldn't do for his memory--because--in other ways....You understand," he added, lowering his tone as she drew nearer, "that as soon as the child is born we mean to go home for good, and take up his work--Paul's work."³³

This scene brings into ironic contrast the earlier events which prove Mrs. Halidon's lack of interest and her insensitiveness; it leads the reader forward to the ironic anticipation that Halidon, the eager one, will be no more successful in putting the program into action than was his predecessor--which is what happens. Halidon becomes thickly prosperous, becomes conscience-stricken, and leaves the country, dying as a governor of one of our newly-acquired island groups. Mrs. Halidon, meanwhile, continues living in the luxury to which she has become accustomed.

In "The Potboiler,"³⁴ Stanwell is a starving young artist who has the ability to adapt his style to any taste and is potentially, therefore, a successful pot-boiler. Because of his love for Kate Arran, he does a pot-boiling portrait in the style of Mungold, the society painter (who really does the best he can, but who is limited in vision); with the money, Stanwell orders--unknown to any of the other characters--the unmarketable, inartistic allegorical group done by Caspar, Kate's talentless brother--all so that Caspar can regain his ego strength and his health and thus be able to condemn those who prostitute their art. The scene of central dramatic irony occurs when Stanwell proposes to Kate,

³³Ibid., p. 113.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 195-237.

who turns him down because he has compromised his talent, unaware that he has done so for her sake.

"Ah, don't joke about it," she murmured. "Don't triumph in it."

"I see no reason to at present," said Stanwell drily. "But I won't pretend to be ashamed when I'm not. I think there are occasions when a man is justified in doing what I've done.

She looked at him solemnly. "What occasions?"

"Why, when he wants money, hang it!"

She drew a deep breath. "Money—money? Has Caspar's example been nothing to you then?"

"It hasn't proved to me that I must starve while Mungold lives on truffles!"

Again her face changed and she stirred, uneasily, and then rose to her feet.

"There's no occasion which can justify an artist's sacrificing his convictions!" she exclaimed.³⁵

This spectacle of Kate's acting in ignorance of the real situation brings into ironic relationship the preceding events and leads the reader on to the anticipation of the end, when—ironically enough—Stanwell loses Kate to Mungold because of the thing that Stanwell had done to help her and her brother.

Five of the ten stories appearing in Tales of Men and Ghosts have dramatic irony to reveal ironic relationship of events and thus contribute to form.

In the first of these, "The Bolted Door,"³⁶ Hubert Granice, tired of life and sick at his failure as a playwright, decides to end his own life, not by suicide—because he cannot force himself to do the actual deed—but rather by confessing to a murder that he had committed some ten years before in order to inherit the money that would give him the leisure to write. His intentions are mocked, however, by the ensuing events. After Granice confesses to his friend Robert Denver, who is a

³⁵Ibid., p. 235.

³⁶Edith Wharton, Tales of Men and Ghosts (New York, 1910), pp. 1-70.

newspaper editor, Denver makes this statement that shows his ignorance of the real situation: "If somebody else had accused you, the story might have been worth looking into. As it is, a child could have invented it. It doesn't do much credit to your ingenuity."³⁷

Denver's words of dramatic irony mock--by an irony of reminiscence--the details of the ingenious, perfect murder; they mock Granice's resolve to make a full confession of the affair; they mock Granice's abortive attempt at suicide. Thus irony unites the events. By an irony of anticipation, the reader senses that Granice, a murderer, will be unsuccessful in convincing people of his guilt. In fact, so unsuccessful is Granice that he ends up in a mental institution--a different sort of end from the merciful execution he had wanted at the beginning.

"The Debt,"³⁸ the next story containing dramatic irony as form, has as its subject the replacement of old scientific truths with new ones. We know from the beginning of the story that a theory of Galen Dredge's is to supplant the one of his patron, Professor Lanfear. The situation of central dramatic irony occurs when the Professor says, after his theory has come under attack by some German scientists,

"If I hadn't Galen I should feel the game was up," he said to me once, in a fit of half-real, half-mocking despondency. "But he'll do what I haven't time to do myself, and what my boy can't do for me."

That meant that he would answer the critics, and triumphantly reaffirm Lanfear's theory, which had been rudely shaken, but not dislodged.³⁹

The Professor's blind confidence in his pupil, coupled with the knowledge the reader has of what Dredge is going to do, mocks preceding

³⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 127-150.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

events in the story, when Lanfear takes the young man from East Lethe, New York, into the laboratory to learn all that the Professor has to offer; when the Professor finances further education in Germany for Dredge--nearly ruining himself financially in doing so. At the same time, the reader, stimulated by an irony of anticipation, awaits Dredge's announcement of his own theory, which comes, of course--thereby repaying his debt by honestly seeking the truth, wherever it leads him. Again we see that the thread of irony unites events and gives them the "expressive interpenetration" that Brooks and Warren feel is so important to form.

In "Full Circle,"⁴⁰ we meet best-selling author Geoffrey Betton, whose latest book, "Abundance," has already--before its appearance--sold out the first edition of 150,000 copies. Acting as though he is in living dread of the deluge of fan mail that he expects, he hires a secretary--an old college friend and unsuccessful writer, Duncan Vyse--to handle the unwanted correspondence. At first, the flood comes, as predicted. Then it decreases to the point that the volume is negligible; the novel is not a success. Betton, saying to himself that Vyse needs the work, begins to write letters to himself. In the scene of central dramatic irony Vyse, unconscious of the discovery he has made, speaks to his employer.

"Look here--I believe all these letters are a hoax," he broke out.

Betton stared at him with a face that turned slowly red and angry.

"What are you talking about? All what letters?"

"These I've spread out here: I've been comparing them. And I believe they're all written by one man."

Betton's redness turned to a purple that made his ruddy moustache seem pale. "What the devil are you driving at?" he asked.

"Well, just look at it," Vyse persisted, still bent above the letters. "I've been studying them carefully--those that have come within the last two or three weeks--and there's a queer likeness in the writing of some of them. The g's are all like cork-screws. And the same

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 153-191.

phrases keep recurring--the Ann Arbor news-agent uses the same expressions as the President of the Girl's College at Euphorbia, Maine."

Betton laughed. "Aren't the critics always groaning over the shrinkage of the national vocabulary? Of course we all use the same expressions."

"Yes, said Vyse obstinately. "But how about using the same g's?"

Betton laughed again, but Vyse continued without heeding him:

"Look here, Betton--could Strett [the valet] have written them?"

"Strett?" Betton roared. "Strett?" He threw himself into his arm-chair to shake out his mirth at greater ease.⁴¹

Betton's rage tells the reader--even though Vyse is still unconscious of the author's part in the hoax--that the letters have been written for the sake of the author's vanity. The scene mocks the ones preceding in which Betton repeatedly expressed his disdain for fan mail; it mocks the one in which he decides to write the letters secretly (the secret is out); at the same time, the reader knows now that Betton cannot continue to write the letters and that he is dependent upon the mail for the satisfaction of his own ego. In an irony of anticipation, the reader senses that the letters must continue somehow--and they do. Vyse writes them, because he needs the work. At the end we see the spectacle of a man--Betton--dependent upon the fan mail that he so decried at the beginning of the story.

In "The Legend,"⁴² John Pellerin, a philosopher whose greatness has become apparent after his disappearance and presumed death, reappears as John Winterman. Pellerin--or Winterman, as all but one of the characters know him throughout the story--finds refuge on the estate of Howland Wade, the fatuous "interpreter" of Pellerinism. If anything, the years of Pellerin's self-imposed exile in the Far East have matured his wisdom. As a result, "Winterman" has hopes of publishing a sort of supplement to

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 176-177.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 195-240.

his work—in fact, he has the thing written. At about the same time, Arthur Bernald—a very perceptive student of Pellerinism—discovers "Winterman's" secret by reading the supplement and seeing the tremendous development that Pellerin's original idea has undergone. The scene of central dramatic irony comes about when Dr. Bob Wade—a kindly but naive brother of Howland's—describes to Bernald the reading by Howland of the supplement to see whether the new work is worth publishing. The scene mocks the preceding events of Dr. Bob's "discovery" of this interesting man, Winterman; of Howland's maneuvers to put off the meeting with Winterman; of Howland's whole ministry as the apostle of Pellerinism; and of Bernald's discovery itself. Bernald speaks first.

"Then Howland hasn't seen Winterman yet?"

"No. He said: 'Before you let him loose on me I'll go over the stuff, and see if it's at all worth while.'"

Bernald drew a freer breath. "And he found it wasn't?"

"Between ourselves, he found it was of no account at all. Queer, isn't it, when the man...but of course literature's another proposition. Howland says it's one of the cases where an idea might seem original and striking if one didn't happen to be able to trace its descent. And this is straight out of bosh—by Pellerin..Yes; Pellerin. It seems that everything in the article that isn't pure nonsense is just Pellerinism. Howland thinks Winterman must have been tremendously struck by Pellerin's writings, and have lived too much out of the world to know that they've become the textbooks of modern thought. Otherwise, of course, he'd have taken more trouble to disguise his plagiarisms."

"I see," Bernald mused. "Yet, you say there is an original element?"

"Yes; but unluckily it's no good."

"It's not—conceivably—in any sense a development of Pellerin's idea: a logical step farther?"

"Logical? Howland says it's twaddle at white heat."⁴³

Not only are preceding events thus brought into ironical relationship with one another, but the reader also senses in an irony of anticipation that "Winterman" is to go unrecognized through the rest of the story—and that is what happens; the disciples of Pellerinism do not know their prophet.

⁴³Ibid., p. 220.

In "Afterward,"⁴⁴ Ned and Mary Boyne, Americans made wealthy through a mining venture, seek out an old Tudor house called Lyng in Dorsetshire for their place of retirement. The house has all the attractions of an old English country estate, except that of the traditional ghost; Lyng's ghost is an indeterminate one--no one knows that he has seen it until long afterward. But the Boynes move in and settle down to a placid, happy existence--except for the fact that Ned is visibly worried about a court suit against him by his former partner, Bob Elwell. In the suit, Elwell accuses Ned of defrauding him of his rightful share of the mine, a charge that seems to have some ground if judged by Ned's worry. Then everything seems to clear up; the suit is dropped, suddenly and mysteriously. The situation of central dramatic irony comes about when the reader knows that a visitor to Lyng is the avenging ghost of Elwell, unknown, of course, to Mary; she is seeing the ghost of Lyng; true to the legend, she will not know him as such until "afterward."

She heard steps behind her, and turned, expecting to see the gardener accompanied by the engineer from Dorchester. But only one figure was in sight, that of a youngish slightly built man, who, for reasons she could not on the spot have given, did not remotely resemble her notion of an authority on hot-house boilers. The new-comer, on seeing her, lifted his hat, and paused with the air of a gentleman--perhaps a traveller--who wishes to make it known that his intrusion is involuntary....after a moment she asked, in a tone responding to the courteous hesitation of his attitude: "Is there any one you wish to see?"

"I came to see Mr. Boyne," he answered. His intonation, rather than his accent, was faintly American, and Mary, at the note, looked at him more closely. The brim of his soft felt hat cast a shade on his face, which thus obscured, wore to her short-sighted gaze a look of seriousness, as of a person arriving "on business," and civilly but firmly aware of his rights.

Past experience had made her equally jealous of her husband's morning hours, and doubtful of his having given any one the right to intrude on them.

"Have you an appointment with my husband?" she asked.

The visitor hesitated, as if unprepared for the question.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 323-373.

"I think he expects me," he replied.

It was Mary's turn to hesitate. "You see this is his time for work: he never sees any one in the morning."

He looked at her a moment without answering; then, as if accepting her decision, he began to move away. As he turned, Mary saw him pause and glance up at the peaceful house-front. Something in his air suggested weariness and disappointment, the dejection of the traveller who has come from far off and whose hours are limited by the time-table. It occurred to her that if this were the case her refusal might have made his errand vain, and a sense of compunction caused her to hasten after him.

"May I ask if you have come a long way?"

He gave her the same grave look. "Yes---I have come a long way."⁴⁵

This sight of Mary Boyne acting in ignorance of her situation causes an irony of reminiscence because it mocks the Boynes' early interest in getting a house with a ghost; it mocks the peaceful, secure life at Lyng with Mary's flowers and Ned's book on the economic basis of culture; it mocks Ned's telling Mary that since the suit has been dropped, everything will be all right. An irony of anticipation leads the reader's mind forward to the time that Mary will--as the story of Lyng's ghost goes--realize afterward that she has seen the ghost of Lyng. Her recognition does come about--after Ned's disappearance (presumably taken by the ghost) the same day of the "visitor's" arrival and after Mary sees a photograph of the late Bob Elwell and realizes that he was the man who appeared at Lyng on that day that Elwell died. She has seen her ghost of Lyng, but not the sort of ghost she expected.

In Xingu and Other Stories, three stories out of eight contain dramatic irony for form: "Xingu," "Triumph of Night," and "Bunner Sisters."

"Xingu"⁴⁶ is the story of the Lunch Club, composed of a group of snobbish women "...who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 346-347. Italics mine.

⁴⁶Edith Wharton, Xingu and Other Stories (New York, 1916), pp. 3-41.

dangerous to meet alone."⁴⁷ These orthodox members have little use for bright-haired Fanny Roby who admits that she "reads for the story."⁴⁸ In fact, Mrs. Roby seemingly has so little respect for the finer things that she has never read a novel by Osric Dane—best-selling woman novelist. She had started to read one while on a boating trip in South America, but the project was cut short when the novel was thrown overboard in a high-spirited sham battle among the yachting guests. The scene of central dramatic irony occurs when the ladies of the Lunch Club find themselves at a total loss as to how to entertain Osric Dane, who is very contemptuous and disdainful of their feeble attempts at "cultural" conversation. Mrs. Roby comes to the rescue with the Xingu, a river in South America. Osric Dane's tone of superiority disappears, and the Lunch Club members are able to take part in the conversation by following the lead of Mrs. Roby. She speaks to the novelist.

"...but as you have shown us that—so very naturally!--you don't care to talk of your own things, we really can't let you off from telling us exactly what you think about Xingu: especially," she added, with a still more persuasive smile, "as some people say that one of your last books was saturated with it."

It was an it, then--the assurance sped like fire through the parched minds of the other members. In their eagerness to gain the least little clue to Xingu they almost forgot the joy of assisting at the discomfiture of Mrs. Dane.

The latter reddened nervously under her antagonist's challenge. "May I ask," she faltered out, "to which of my books you refer?"

"...That's just what I want you to tell us; because, though I was present, I didn't actually take part."

"Present at what?" Mrs. Dane took her up....

"...Mrs. Roby explained herself gaily: "At the discussion, of course. And we're so dreadfully anxious to know just how it was that you went into the Xingu."

"...Ah—you say the Xingu, do you?"

Mrs. Roby smiled undauntedly. "It is a shade pedantic, isn't it? Personally, I always drop the article; but I don't know how the other

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 8.

members feel about it...." Mrs. Roby after a bright glance about the group, went on: "They probably think, as I do that nothing really matters except the thing itself---except Xingu."

...Mrs. Ballinger gathered courage to say: "surely every one must feel that about Xingu."

Mrs. Plinth came to her support with a heavy murmur of assent, and Laura Glyde sighed out emotionally: "I have known cases where it has changed a whole life."

"It has done me worlds of good," Mrs. Leveret interjected, seeming to herself to remember that she had either taken it or read it the winter before.

"Of course," Mrs. Roby admitted, "the difficulty is that one must give up so much time to it. It's very long."

"I can't imagine," said Mrs. Van Vluyck, "grudging the time given to such a subject."

"And deep in places," Mrs. Roby pursued; (so then it was a book!) and it isn't easy to skip."

"I never skip," said Mrs. Plinth dogmatically.

"Ah, it's dangerous to, in Xingu. Even at the start there are places where one can't. One must just wade through."

"I should hardly call it wading," said Mrs. Ballinger sarcastically.

Mrs. Roby sent her a look of interest. "Ah---you always found it went swimmingly?"

Mrs. Ballinger hesitated. "Of course there are difficult passages," she conceded.⁴⁹

This scene mocks previous events: The members' "knowledge" of fields, their ability to keep up with the "book of the day," their placing Mrs. Roby on probation, their elaborate preparation to entertain the novelist. At the same time, by an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits the interesting spectacle of watching the Lunch Club members discover that they have been made to look foolish. Such an ironic relationship of events---again revealed by the use of dramatic irony---provides the basis for form.

In "The Triumph of Night,"⁵⁰ George Faxon, private secretary to a forgetful society matron, arrives at Northridge, New Hampshire, on a cold and snowy night, only to discover that his employer has not remembered

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 21-23.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 251-280.

to meet him. He is rescued from the prospect of a freezing night in the station by young Frank Rainier, who has come to meet some friends arriving to celebrate his coming of age and to write his will. The terrible thing is that young Frank suffers from tuberculosis in its final stages; but he is sure that he is better: the last of his doctors has told him that he can regain his health without changing to a warmer, drier climate. The party arrives safely at the luxurious country estate belonging to Frank's Uncle John Lavington, fabulous financier, art connoisseur, and guardian to Frank. Later, as Faxon is acting as witness to the will, he sees a sinister ghost-like image of Lavington standing next to Lavington himself; the presence glowers hate at Frank, while its double, Lavington, beams his love to the boy. Thus through the perception of Faxon, the reader understands the real situation while all the characters except Faxon act in ignorance of it: Lavington intends to let Frank die and to benefit from the will; the other characters do not know it. Dramatic irony arises out of their words and acts that mock the real situation, and out of the double-edged language used by Lavington. In the scene of central dramatic irony, the birthday celebration is in progress; the will has been executed. Mrs. Grisben, who is one of the lawyers and a friend of the family, speaks.

"Lavington! What have we been thinking of? We haven't drunk Frank's health!"

Mr. Lavington reseated himself. "My dear boy!...Peters, another bottle...." He turned to his nephew. "After such a sin of omission I don't presume to propose the toast myself--but Frank knows...Go ahead, Grisben!"

The boy shone on his uncle. "No, no, Uncle Jack! Mr. Grisben won't mind. Nobody but you--today!"

The butler was replenishing the glasses. He filled Mr. Lavington's last, and Mr. Lavington put out his small hand to raise it....As he did so Faxon looked away.

"Well, then--All the good I've wished you in all the past years....

I put it into the prayer that the coming ones may be healthy and happy and many...and many, dear boy!"⁵¹

Such a scene of dramatic irony brings into ironic contrast the preceding events: the story of how John Lavington has been the devoted guardian to his nephew; Lavington's deep concern for the boy's health, as shown by his constantly seeking to find a doctor that could help Frank (and the latest one—by advising against a change of climate—has done just what Lavington wanted him to do for Frank); Lavington's treatment of the will as a mere formality, not a functional legal instrument; Frank's naming his uncle as beneficiary—as a mere formality, of course. At the same time, the reader through an irony of anticipation—awaits what surely must be the end of Frank Rainier and the consequent enrichment of his bosom enemy, John Lavington. Dramatic irony has again provided the basis of form by making clear the ironic interrelationship of events.

In "Bunner Sisters,"⁵² the purchase of a cheap alarm clock by Ann Eliza Bunner provides a pretext for the sisters' acquaintance with the German clockmaker, Herman Rany. Rany is middle-aged and lonely; both of the Bunner sisters are middle-aged and lonely—even though they fill up their lives by running a little millinery shop. Ann Eliza, older and less attractive than Evelina, can't avoid dreaming that she and Rany might someday be married. But after Evelina carries the clock to be repaired by the German, he seems to settle on the younger sister. Ann Eliza, believing that such is the case, renounces any hopes, and channels her energies into making her sister happy. Rany proposes, all right, but to Ann Eliza—who is thrilled but who refuses him for the sake of

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 266-267. Italics mine.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 309-436.

Evelina. Rany adapts well to the refusal, pays serious court to Evelina, and all seems well when he proposes to her. But a further roadblock lies in the way of Evelina's happiness: the couple hasn't enough money to get to St. Louis, where Rany has the promise of a good job. So Ann Eliza gives them her half of the sisters' slender savings; the two marry and move to St. Louis, leaving Ann Elizabeth to the ache of loneliness that only the one left behind can feel.

The situation of central dramatic irony occurs when Evelina--smug in her possession of the man and blind to the sacrifices Ann Eliza has made to give him to her--writes this letter:

"My dear Sister," she wrote, in her pinched Spencerian hand, "it seems strange to be in this great City so far from home alone with him I have chosen for life, but marriage has its solemn duties which those who are not can never hope to understand, and happier perhaps for this reason, life for them has only simple tasks and pleasures, but those who must take thought for others must be prepared to do their duty in whatever station it has pleased the Almighty to call them. Not that I have cause to complain, my dear Husband is all love and devotion, but being absent all day at his business how can I help but feel lonesome at times, as the poet says it is hard for they that love to live apart, and I often wonder, my dear Sister, how you are getting along alone in the store, may you never experience the feelings of solitude I have underwent since I came here. We are boarding now, but soon expect to find rooms and change our place of Residence, then I shall have all the care of a household to bear, but such is the fate of those who join their Lot with others, they cannot hope to escape from the burdens of Life, nor would I ask it, I would not live always, but while I live would always pray for strength to do my duty....I hope I should not repine, such never was my nature, and they who exchange their independence for the sweet name of Wife must be prepared to find all is not gold that glitters, nor I would not expect like you to drift down the stream of Life unfettered and serene as a Summer cloud, such is not my fate, but come what may will always find in me a resigned and prayerful Spirit, and hoping this finds you as well as it leaves me, I remain, my dear Sister

"Yours truly,
"Evelina B. Rany."⁵³

This letter, replete with dramatic irony because of the younger sister's blindness to the sacrifices made and the heartaches suffered by

⁵³Ibid., pp. 386-387.

Ann Eliza for Evelina's sake, mocks the preceding events of the story: all the ways that Ann Eliza "gave up" to Evelina--the habitual saving for her of the largest piece of pie, the giving of the clock, the renunciation of her hopes of marriage, the giving of all the savings, the terrible loneliness of Ann Eliza after the wedding. Thus a thread of irony runs through the preceding events and unites them. At the same time, the reader's sense of irony anticipates further misery and unhappiness for the sister who is supposed to be as "unfettered and free as a Summer cloud."

In conclusion, of the forty-seven stories appearing in these four volumes, twenty-two contain dramatic irony used to contribute to form.⁵⁴ In these tales, Mrs. Wharton consistently uses at least one scene of dramatic irony to light up preceding events with what she calls "a single retrospective flash"⁵⁵ and to convey at the same time what she calls "the footfall of Destiny"⁵⁶ concerning future events. By such means, the ironic relationship of events becomes clear, thus forming the basis of form.

In the short stories, Mrs. Wharton usually provides for the reader the superior knowledge of events so vital to dramatic irony by means of a literary frame, or an actual scene, or some sort of supernatural element in the story. In "The Debt," for example, we get the knowledge in the frame that Dredge's theory has replaced the Lanfear theory; in the following flashback, we have a knowledge superior to the characters', so

⁵⁴The writer does not mean to suggest, however, that the other stories do not contain irony and ironic situations; the difference in them lies in the fact that Mrs. Wharton does not make use of dramatic irony in order to reveal ironic relationships among events.

⁵⁵Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 43.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 161.

that dramatic irony arises. In "Bunner Sisters" the reader knows of the scene of Ann Eliza's heart-rending renunciation of Herman Rany; Evelina does not know; so she acts in ignorance of the real situation, writing to Ann Eliza that an unmarried woman can never know the joys and sorrows of love. And, in such stories as "Triumph of Night" and "Afterward," the appearance of ghosts gives the reader knowledge superior to that of the characters, thus creating dramatic irony.

CHAPTER III

USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN THE MAJOR NOVELS

The student of Edith Wharton's fiction sees her use of dramatic irony in a novel for the first time in The House of Mirth (1905), which is considered her first great success.¹

In this story, Lily Bart—a girl whose only accomplishments are her beauty and an embryo sensibility regarding spiritual values—is pursued as relentlessly by a materialistic society as a Sophoclean hero by the gods. At the beginning of the novel, Lily seems to hold bright promise before her: she moves freely in the social circle composed of the second generation of the Civil War rich; she is beautiful and desirable and has promise of making a marriage that will restore the lost fortunes of her family. At the end of the novel, however, Lily lies dead in a tawdry slum boarding house, the victim of her society and an

¹Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948) II, p. 1209. According to this source, The House of Mirth is "Her first important novel...." Frederick J. Hoffman, in The Modern Novel in America, 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1941), p. 13, apparently ranks the novel as her first important one when he sets its date, 1905, as the beginning of her principal novels; he sets 1920, the date of The Age of Innocence, as the other limit. Blake Nevius, in Edith Wharton (Berkeley, 1953), p. 54, reports that Mrs. Wharton felt the novel to be the first real test of her powers. Edmund Wilson, in "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, XCV (1938), 209, says, "It was only with 'The House of Mirth,' published in 1905, that Edith Wharton emerged as a historian of the American society of her time. For a period of fifteen years or more, she produced work of considerable interest both for its realism and its intensity." F. L. Pattee, in The New American Literature, 1890-1930 (New York, 1930), p. 252, ranks this novel second only to The Age of Innocence.

overdose of sleeping potion. Between these two points, a pattern of action develops in which Lily falls successively lower and lower in her social milieu.

It is precisely at these points in the pattern--at the brinks of the descents--that Edith Wharton makes use of dramatic irony. The irony results when Lily, acting in ignorance of her true situation, believes that she has power to cope successfully with the threats to her position--when actually, as the reader knows, she is powerless. The pattern of the novel thus becomes one of successive threats, dramatic ironies, and falls.

To begin with, we know that Lily is not the adept with men that she thinks she is. At the beginning of the novel, she goes foolishly in daylight to the rooms of Lawrence Selden; caught by the shrewd Jewish owner of the building, Rosedale, as she leaves Selden's rooms, she lies stupidly when she says that she has been to visit her dressmaker; the lie--as she afterward realizes--could start a scandal. Then she lets her quarry in the marriage chase--the rich and utterly stolid Percy Gryce--escape when in a moment of weakness she drops him for the companionship of the charming but unwealthy Lawrence Selden. Moreover, we learn that she has previously let other rich marriages slip through her hands; yet, in spite of these lapses, she overestimates her own powers.

And she had no doubts as to the extent of her power...How should she have distrusted her powers? Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She felt she could trust it to carry her through to the end.²

The first serious threat to Lily's position within her group and to

²The House of Mirth (New York, 1905), p. 49.

her hopes of a secure, rich marriage comes when Gus Trenor, a red-faced, beef-bull type of man, offers to rescue Lily from gambling debts and milliners' debts by giving her tips in the stock market, by which Lily may increase the earnings of her small inheritance. The fatal danger, of course, is that Lily will be betrayed into the scandal of an affair with Trenor; the reader knows from preceding foreshadowing and events that Lily does not handle men as skillfully as she thinks. Yet, when she and Trenor are alone in a buggy, she has the following thoughts, which are dramatic irony because of Lily's ignorance of her inability to cope with crises:

Again she felt the lightening of her load, and with it the release of repressed activities. Her immediate worries conjured, it was easy to resolve that she would never again find herself in such straits, and as the need of economy and self-denial receded from her foreground she felt herself ready to meet any other demand which life might make. Even the immediate one of letting Trenor, as they drove homeward, lean a little nearer and rest his hand reassuringly on hers, cost her only a momentary shiver of reluctance. It was part of the game to make him feel that her appeal had been an uncalculated impulse, provoked by the liking he inspired; and the renewed sense of power in handling men, while it consoled her wounded vanity, helped also to obscure the thought of the claim at which his manner hinted...surely, to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side.³

At this point in the novel, the ironic spectacle of Lily's self-assurance brings about an irony of reminiscence concerning Lily's previous failures--failures when she was no less beautiful and no less confident than now. And in an irony of anticipation, the reader waits for what seems to him must come, the scandal about her and Trenor which will blast her hopes. And, of course, the scandal comes. After investing several thousands of his good dollars in Miss Bart, Gus Trenor begins to express his desire for dividends. Lily finds herself in his company at the opera.

³Ibid., p. 85. Italics mine.

Then, tricked by Trenor into believing that his wife, Judy, has come to town, Lily meets him alone, late at night, in his sprawling New York mansion--and though she escapes with her chastity, Lawrence Selden sees her leave the house, and others of the set know that she went there.

It is from these ruins that her hopes rise, phoenix-like, when she receives an invitation from the promiscuous Bertha Dorset to go on a Mediterranean cruise. The cruise offers her a chance to escape New York for a while and to re-instate herself with the Dorsets, who are an important part of Lily's set. But at the same time, Lily is aware that she is to be a diversion for George Dorset while Bertha makes love with Ned Silverton, a young poet; the role itself is indicative of the fall that Lily has experienced. What is worse, there is the very real danger of another scandal about Lily. The risk of the undertaking, though, is underestimated by Lily, who trusts as implicitly as ever in her powers of handling such situations. After two months of the cruise,

If she was faintly aware of fresh difficulties ahead, she was sure of her ability to meet them: it was characteristic of her to feel that the only problems she could not solve were those with which she was familiar.⁴

The reader has seen this spectacle before; in an irony of reminiscence, he remembers her previously ungrounded confidence. In an irony of anticipation--for the pattern has, by this time, become very apparent--the reader awaits Lily's next descent. It comes when Bertha quite obviously spends a night in Nice with Ned Silverton and salvages her marriage and reputation by accusing Lily in public of consorting with the dyspeptic George.

As a result, Lily descends to the level of the social-climbing rich.

⁴Ibid., pp. 196-197.

Ignored completely by society and cut off with only a pittance in her rich aunt's will, she drifts into the position of social adviser to Mrs. Mattie Gormer, who is just about ready to make the assault on the citadel of New York society. But the reader and Lily sense that even this barely-visible toehold on her world is endangered when Bertha Dorset, still Lily's implacable foe, influences the Gormers against Lily. Falsely confident as ever that she can meet the challenge and recoup her fortunes, Lily decides that she will snare the previously-despised Sim Rosedale; with his money and her own charms she can--she believes--still win the game.

But other memories importuned her also; the recollection of similar situations, as skilfully led up to, but through some malice of fortune, of her own unsteadiness of purpose, always failing of the intended result. Well, her purpose was steady enough now. She saw that the whole weary work of rehabilitation must begin again, and against far greater odds, if Bertha Dorset should succeed in breaking up her friendship with the Gormers; and her longing for shelter and security was intensified by the passionate desire to triumph over Bertha, as only wealth and predominance could triumph over her. As the wife of Rosedale--the Rosedale she felt it in her power to create--she would at least present an invulnerable front to her enemy.⁵

But true to the pattern, Lily has overestimated her powers; Rosedale, like the others that have slipped Lily's tether, will not marry her in the position that she holds. And so, the reader anticipates the next fall awaiting Lily at a moment when she believes that she can prevent it. Of course, Mrs. Dorset alienates the Gormers. Lily finds herself sinking lower and lower until by the aid of the notorious Carrie Fisher (who nevertheless has the privilege of Society) she is placed in a milliner's fashionable shop as a hat trimmer. There, totally out of the world for which she was bred, she suffers so much humiliation and nervous exhaustion

⁵Ibid., p. 253.

that she has to resort to Chloral, a dangerous sleeping potion. After an accidental overdose, she dies. The struggle--in which Lily Bart has been victimized by society--is finished.⁶

Within this general framework of dramatic irony provided by the spectacle of Lily's overestimating her own powers, Edith Wharton uses dramatic irony to point up a situation, to add emphasis and perspective to it. Such a function of pointing the significance of a situation can be considered a part of form in Edith Wharton's works, since she defines form as "...the order, in time and importance, in which the incidents of the narrative are grouped..."⁷

For example, after she has realized the consequences of her relationship with Trenor, Lily flies to the sheltering bosom of Gertie Farish, who--unknown to Lily--that very evening has known the anguish of seeing her hopes of winning Lawrence Selden extinguished by the discovery that Selden loves Lily.

"Oh, Gerty, the furies...you know the noise of their wings--alone, at night, in the dark? But you don't know--there is nothing to make the dark dreadful to you--"

The words, flashing back on Gerty's last hours, struck from her a faint derisive murmur; but Lily, in the blaze of her own misery, was blinded to everything beside it.⁸

And during the same trial, Lily--not knowing that Lawrence Selden, like the rest of New York, is convinced of her guilt in an affair with Trenor--awaits his aid and his coming to see her.

⁶For opinion supporting this seemingly naturalistic view of the novel, see Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley, 1953), pp. 56-58. Cf. Frederic Taber Cooper, Some American Story Tellers (New York, 1911), p. 173: "Mrs. Wharton may or may not be conscious of it, but there is a great deal of predestination in the philosophy of her stories. Nearly all her heroes and heroines seem foreordained to failure."

⁷The Writing of Fiction (New York, 1925), pp. 22-23.

⁸The House of Mirth, p. 164. Italics mine.

"She felt herself once more the alert and competent moulder of emergencies, and the remembrance of her power over Selden flushed her with sudden confidence."⁹ Then, when the second crisis in Lily's life is impending, after she has misinterpreted Bertha Dorset's ominous insinuations as "...the tracked creature's attempt to cloud the medium through which it was fleeing,"¹⁰ and after she still believes that her position in the rupture between the Dorsets is that of mediator, not scapegoat, Lawrence Selden tries to warn her.

"I stopped over to see you—to beg of you to leave the yacht."
 The eyes she turned on him showed a quick gleam of her former fear. "To leave—? What do you mean? What has happened?"
 "Nothing. But if anything should why be in the way of it?"
 "...Nothing will, I am sure; but while there's even a doubt left, how can you think I would leave Bertha?"¹¹

Finally, when Lily has fallen from the heights and is on the point of complete ruin, she happens to meet a young working woman, Nettie Struther, whom she had rescued—in a charitable and more prosperous moment—from tuberculosis and a bad reputation. The young woman is happily married, has a baby, and is completely ignorant of Lily's plight. She has no idea of the contrast between her words and the real situation: "Work girls are n't looked after the way you are, and they don't always know how to look after themselves."¹² This is the irony of the book, for Lily has not known how to take care of herself, either. Later in the conversation, Nettie expresses—in words that stand in ironic contrast to the real situation—her fondest hopes for her baby daughter.

⁹Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 208.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 214-215. Italics mine.

¹²Ibid., p. 315.

"Would n't it be too lovely for anything if she could grow up to be just like you? Of course I know she never could--but mothers are always dreaming the craziest things for their children."¹³

There remains a consideration of a kind of pervading dramatic irony in the novel. Throughout the story, Lily, unknown to either Selden or to Bertha Dorset, has in her possession love letters written by Bertha to Selden during a flirtation. These letters represent a real power on the part of Lily to control her fate; yet Lawrence Selden remains to the end unconscious of the sacrifice that Lily makes for him by not using the letters. Viewed in this light, Selden's almost pharisaical avoidance of Lily during her hours of trial becomes endowed with dramatic irony: he abandons her to Gus Trenor; he leaves her to shift for herself when Bertha Dorset destroys her; he makes only a half-hearted attempt to help her escape the Gormer milieu--and makes that only at the insistence of his cousin, Gerty Farish; finally, when Lily has reached the end of her resources and is in Madame Regina's shop, Selden does absolutely nothing. Concomitantly, Bertha Dorset--unaware that she is reducing Lily to the very circumstances that might force her to use her real power--makes Lily the scapegoat in the Nice affair, persistently uses her influence to bar Lily's re-entry into society, and systematically sets about to cut her off from any help that might come from the Gormer set.

The result of the use of dramatic irony in The House of Mirth is that it provides the basic pattern for the plot; it serves to heighten the significance of events important to the pattern; it serves to produce a general ironic relationship among events and thus to tie them together into the organic whole that is characteristic of form.

¹³Ibid.

Following Madame de Treymes (1907), a run-of-the-mill novelette,¹⁴ and Fruit of the Tree (1907), an unsuccessful venture into the muck-raking novel,¹⁵ Edith Wharton produced Ethan Frome, a work ranked by Henry Seidel Canby as one of her three greatest.¹⁶

In Ethan Frome, Edith Wharton lays the groundwork for dramatic irony by giving the reader the necessary foreknowledge of the outcome in a literary frame and then by telling the story in a long flashback. The result, of course, is that the reader has a knowledge of coming events that is superior to that of the characters' as their story unfolds in the flashback.

At the beginning, for example, the reader learns that although Ethan Frome is one of the "smart ones," he has never escaped Starkfield; the reader learns that Ethan has survived a crippling smash-up some twenty-four years ago and that the wreck occurred near the Varnum house, at the bend of the Corbury Road.¹⁷

Accordingly, the situation in the first scene of the flashback is one of dramatic irony as Ethan and Mattie Silver stand near the Varnum

¹⁴Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction, pp. 131-132.

¹⁵Blake Nevius, "Ethan Frome and the Themes of Edith Wharton's Fiction," New England Quarterly, XXIV (1951), 200.

¹⁶"Edith Wharton," Saturday Review, XVI (August 21, 1937), p. 7. Cf. George D. Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798-1947 (New York, 1947), p. 165: "In 1911 she published Ethan Frome, which remains without doubt her best work"; Osbert Burdett, "Edith Wharton," Contemporary American Authors, ed. J. C. Squire (New York, 1928), p. 165: "...'Ethan Frome'...is generally thought to be her best book"; Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel (New York, 1935), p. 91: Ethan Frome is "...one of the few undisputed classics in the twentieth century"; and F. B. Millett, Contemporary American Authors (New York, 1949), p. 24: Ethan Frome "...is as surely a classic as any of her fiction."

¹⁷Ethan Frome (New York, 1922), pp. 4-12.

house at the bend of the Corbury Road and talk of a sled-coasting party. Mattie speaks first.

"Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum came just as near running into the big elm at the bottom. We were all sure they were killed." Her shiver ran down his arm. "Wouldn't it have been too awful? They're so happy!"

"Oh, Ned ain't much at steering. I guess I can take you down all right!" he said disdainfully....

"The elm is dangerous, though. It ought to be cut down," she insisted.

"Would you be afraid of it, with me?"

"I told you I ain't the kind to be afraid," she tossed back, almost indifferently....¹⁸

The reader, equipped with a knowledge superior to that of the characters', sees them acting in ignorance of their situation and senses an ironic contrast between the situation as it appears to them and the situation as it appears to him. By an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits what he is sure will come, the wreck. In this particular case, Edith Wharton is using dramatic irony to accomplish one of her ideals of form: "...the first page of the novel ought to contain the germ of the whole...."¹⁹ The result of such use of dramatic irony is that events are drawn together into an organic whole.

With the book thus started, all of Ethan's actions designed to lead to his escape become imbued with dramatic irony. After the querulous Zeena has set the conflict in motion with her announcement that Mattie must go, Ethan's sense of rebellion is full of dramatic irony because the reader knows it to be futile:

Confused motions of rebellion stormed in him. He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 50-51.

¹⁹The Writing of Fiction, p. 51.

bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her. The one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste....²⁰

At this point, Ethan initiates a series of acts to free himself—all doomed to be futile, but he does not know this. He remembers another man who had left his wife and who had gone west with his love—a man who had found happiness. He even goes so far as to write a letter of farewell in which he expresses the hope to Zeena that "...both of us will do better separate."²¹ He goes to the builder Andrew Hale, hoping to get enough payment on a debt for lumber so that he can go west with Mattie. At this point, Mrs. Wharton emphasizes the situation with a touch of verbal dramatic irony. Mrs. Hale is talking to Ethan, unaware of his plan to desert Zeena—unaware, also, of how her words burn in the breast of Frome.

Beaming maternally on Ethan, she bent over to add: "I on'y just heard from Mr. Hale 'bout Zeena's going over to Bettsbridge to see that new doctor. I'm real sorry she's feeling so bad again! I hope he thinks he can do something for her? I don't know anybody round here 's had more sickness than Zeena. I always tell Mr. Hale I don't know what she'd 'a' done if she hadn't 'a' had you to look after her...."²²

Thwarted in this plan by not being able to see Hale, he returns apparently to resign himself to Mattie's leaving without him. But when the two realize at the bend of the Corbury road that they cannot part, they believe—ignorant of the true situation—that they can escape together in death.

The spruces swathed them in blackness and silence. They might have been in their coffins underground. He said to himself: "Perhaps

²⁰ Ethan Frome, p. 142.

²¹ Ibid., p. 144.

²² Ibid., pp. 153-154.

it'll feel like this..." and then again: "After this I sha'n't feel anything...."²³

Then, a few minutes later, having reached the top of the coasting hill, they start down—with Ethan aiming the sled for the murderous elm at the bend of the Corbury road, believing erroneously—as the reader knows—that escape through death lies ahead.

Just as they started he heard the sorrel's whinny again, and the familiar wistful call, and all the confused images it brought with it, went with him down the first reach of the road. Half-way down there was a sudden drop, then a rise, and after that another long delirious descent. As they took wing for this it seemed to him that they were flying indeed, flying up into the cloudy night, with Starkfield immeasurable below them, falling away like a speck in space....Then the big elm shot up ahead, lying in wait for them at the bend of the road, and he said between his teeth: "We can fetch it; I know we can fetch it—"²⁴

But they survive, and Ethan Frome wears "out all his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman," Mattie Silver, who is made so by the spinal injury she suffers in the wreck.

In this exquisitely-wrought piece, the foreknowledge of the wreck casts a brooding shadow over all the events of the story; from this shadow comes dramatic irony—the spectacle of the character Ethan Frome acting in ignorance of what is to befall him; the dramatic irony reveals to the reader an ironic relationship among events—a relationship that fuses the incidents into one organic unity.

In 1912, Mrs. Wharton produced The Reef, another major novel.²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 181.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 183-184.

²⁵Catherine Gilbertson, in "Mrs. Wharton," Century, CXIX (1929), 114, believes The Reef is Wharton's best novel. Cf. also Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America, 1900-1950, p. 11: "...it is a brilliantly successful novel in the Jamesian mode." Van Wyck Brooks, in The Confident Years, 1885-1915 (New York, 1952), p. 299, places The Reef as one of Wharton's two good novels before 1920. The other was The House of Mirth.

As is the case in Ethan Frome, the author at the beginning of the story gives the reader knowledge of events that is superior to the knowledge possessed by the protagonist—in this case, Mrs. Anna Leath, who is an ironical mixture of worldliness and naïveté, of resoluteness of character and uncertainty, of searching sensitivity and blindness. Instead, however, of making use of the literary frame as in Ethan Frome, Mrs. Wharton dramatizes the information in the form of a long preliminary section of the novel; she lets us see the growth of the intimacy between Sophy Viner and George Darrow in their affair in springtime Paris. It is the knowledge of this intimacy that is withheld from Anna Leath and her stepson, Owen Leath, who becomes Sophy's fiance; their acting in ignorance of the liaison gives rise to the central dramatic irony in the novel.

The novel opens with the accidental meeting of Darrow and Sophy on a rain-and-wind-swept pier as they await passage to France. At the moment, Darrow's masculine vanity is tortured by the fact that Anna Leath has just telegraphed him, without explanation, not to come to her; with the vindictive stubbornness of a small boy, he resolves to go on to Paris to spite Mrs. Leath; at the same time, Sophy is leaving her impossible employer without her month's pay; besides being penniless, she has lost track of her trunk. So Darrow, conscious all the time of the girl's beauty—the flutter of a long eyelash on her cheek, a wanton curl behind a soft, pink ear—becomes her Lord Protector. He invents pretexts for keeping the girl in Paris; he dazzles her with gay restaurants, with long drives, with classic tragedy, and with the great actress, Cerdine. All the while he rationalizes the acts by saying that the girl deserves something to relieve the drabness of her life; but always in his consciousness are his sense of her beauty and his hurt because of Anna Leath. So—

after Darrow feels sure that Anna is not going to change her mind and send for him--the reader knows that his invitation to Sophy to spend another week in Paris is the beginning of an intimate adventure for him. Sophy, however, does not.

For a moment he fancied she was crying; but the next she was on her feet and had swept round on him a face she must have turned away only to hide the first rush of her pleasure....

"Is it true? Is it really true? Is it really going to happen to me?"

He felt like answering: "You're the very creature to whom it was bound to happen"; but the words had a double sense that made him wince, and instead he caught her proffered hands and stood looking at her across the length of her arms....

He ended by giving her back a laugh as frank as her own, and declaring, as he dropped her hands: "All that and more too--you'll see!"²⁶

This touch of dramatic irony brings into ironic relationship events such as Darrow's departure from the American Embassy--with his destination being Anna Leath--and his acts of kindness to Sophy. In an irony of anticipation, the reader sees what lies ahead for this girl barely out of her teens and this man approaching forty. At this point, the first movement of the book is finished. The stage is set for the central dramatic irony.

From this point on, the spectacle of Anna Leath acting in ignorance of the situation flashes an ironic light backward and forward; the reader is keenly alive to the fact that the situation is not what it seems to Anna. After Darrow has come to her at Givre in the fall of the year, Anna wonders about his reason for not answering her letter which explained her asking him to postpone his visit. She has learned that he was in Paris; but she does not dream how close she is to the truth of his infidelity when she says, "If I thought that at that

²⁶The Reef, pp. 71-72. Italics mine.

moment...when you were on your way here, almost—"27 Nor does she know the extent to which Darrow is qualified to reply: "Yes, yes—I understand."²⁸

The next day, Darrow meets Sophy Viner again, in a new role: she is the governess of Effie, Anna's little girl.

"I think Miss Viner and I have met already—several years ago in London."

"I remember," said Sophy Viner, in the same clear voice.

"How charming! Then we're all friends....," said Mrs. Leath.²⁹

That afternoon, Anna Leath begins to ask Darrow for information about Sophy; she wants to be sure that Effie will be in good hands after she and Darrow sail for South America. As she proceeds, she is unaware that she is asking Darrow to answer questions that would ruin their lives.

"I'd no idea you knew Miss Viner," she said, as he helped her into her long coat.

"It came back to me, luckily, that I'd seen her two or three times in London, several years ago. She was secretary, or something of the sort, in the background of a house where I used to dine...."

"Was she really? You must tell me all about it—tell me exactly how she struck you. I'm so glad it turns out that you know her."

"'Know' is rather exaggerated: we used to pass each other on the stairs."

Madame de Chantelle and Owen appeared together as he spoke, and Anna, gathering up her wraps, said: "You'll tell me about that, then. Try and remember everything you can."³⁰

And that evening, she presses Darrow again for information; by this time the reader knows that Anna is interested in Sophy, not only as governess, but as a prospective daughter-in-law. But she is unaware of the double meaning in her words that is apparent to the reader when she says, "It's

²⁷Ibid., p. 114.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., p. 141.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 142-143. Italics mine.

important, naturally," she explained, "that I should find out all I can about her before I leave."³¹ And when Darrow continues to give evasive answers and vague generalizations, to the effect that Sophy is "nice," the reader watches Anna flirt with her fate when she asks, "You don't, at any rate, know anything specific to the contrary?"³² And after Darrow assures her that he does not, she is unconscious of the ironic contrast between her words and the situation as it really is: "You don't know how glad I am that your impression's on the whole so good. I particularly wanted you to like her."³³

And so Anna Leath is lulled into a sense of false security. Mrs. Wharton heightens the ironic contrast by first letting Sophy and Darrow meet and have a conversation that underlines the precariousness of the situation. Sophy, using double-edged language, hints at her engagement to Owen—about which Darrow is still in the dark. She has just refused Darrow's offer to help her get a start on the stage.

Then she held out her hand. "Well, then, thank you—and let me relieve your fears. I sha'n't be Effie's governess much longer."

At the announcement, Darrow tried to merge his look of relief into the expression of friendly interest with which he grasped her hand. "You really do agree with me, then? And you'll give me a chance to talk things over with you?"

She shook her head with a faint smile. "I'm not thinking of the stage. I've had another offer: that's all."

The relief was hardly less great. After all, his personal responsibility ceased with her departure from Givre.

"You'll tell me about that, then—won't you?"

Her smile flickered up. "Oh, you'll hear about it soon...."³⁴

At this point Owen walks up on them as they stand looking at each other

³¹Ibid., p. 156. Italics mine.

³²Ibid., p. 159.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 174.

without speaking. Then,

Anna Leath, from the terrace, watched the return of the little group.

She looked down on them, as they advanced across the garden, from the serene height of her unassailable happiness. There they were, coming toward her in the mild morning light, her child, her step-son, her promised husband: the three beings who filled her life. She smiled a little at the happy picture they presented, Effie's gambols encircling it in a moving frame within which the two men came slowly forward in the silence of friendly understanding. It seemed part of the deep intimacy of the scene that they should not be talking to each other, and it did not till afterward strike her as odd that neither of them apparently felt it necessary to address a word to Sophy Viner.³⁵

The irony of the situation in the novel is underlined in a scene of dramatic irony between Darrow and Owen's grandmother, Madame de Chantelle—who objects strenuously to the Owen-Sophy match. Madame de Chantelle, like Anna and Owen, is ignorant of the Paris affair. Madame de Chantelle speaks first.

"And I ask you as a friend, I ask you as one of us, to tell me if you think a girl who has had to knock about the world in that kind of position, and at the orders of all kinds of people, is fitted to be Owen's wife....tell me frankly and fairly—and quite between ourselves—your personal opinion of Miss Viner, since you've known her so much longer than we have."

He protested that, if he had known her longer, he had known her much less well, and that he had already, on this point, convinced Anna of his inability to pronounce an opinion.

Madame de Chantelle drew a deep sigh of intelligence. "Your opinion of Mrs. Murret is enough! I don't suppose you pretend to conceal that? And heaven knows what other unspeakable people she's been mixed up with."³⁶

With the screw of the ironical situation thus turned to the tightest, the reader awaits in an irony of anticipation the discovery of Darrow's guilt and the ruin of Anna's hopes that must come. Anna herself, while the grandmother is still opposing the marriage, utters words of dramatic irony that have a prophetic meaning to the reader: "I don't know," she

³⁵Ibid., p. 177.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 189-190.

suddenly confessed; "but, somehow, if they're not happy I feel as if we shouldn't be."³⁷ The discovery of Darrow's guilt does come—by very gradual means. Sophy, realizing that she still loves Darrow, cannot bring herself to marry Owen and thus become the step-daughter-in-law of the man she loves. When she tries to find a pretext for leaving Givre—even after Madame de Chantelle has surrendered and the way is open for the marriage—Owen's suspicions, growing out of the silent looks he had seen Darrow and Sophy exchange, flare into the open. He believes that Darrow has won Sophy's heart during his few days' stay at the chateau. The discovery is almost made; but Sophy Viner manages to effect a diversion by giving as her excuse for leaving the harrowing inspections she had just been put through and by saying that she naturally desires to spend her time with her friends the Farlows while making the preparations for the wedding. But Darrow betrays himself; his look of pain and guilt betrays him when suddenly confronted with Anna's own joy at the explanation. Once the fact is out that he and Sophy were together in Paris, he tries to explain his silence about the affair by saying that he had not wanted the Farlows to know for fear of endangering Sophy's chances of employment. The lie is a clumsy one, and Anna sees that there would be no point in such continued silence. And at this point, Anna believes that she has discovered the secret; even this is dramatic irony, though, for she does not guess yet of the intimacy.

That was his secret, then, their secret: he had met the girl in Paris and helped her in her straits—lent her money, Anna vaguely conjectured—and she had fallen in love with him, and on meeting him again had been suddenly overmastered by her passion. Anna, dropping back into her sofa-corner, sat staring these facts in the face.³⁸

³⁷Ibid., p. 214.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 278-279.

And then Owen enters, reassured by Sophy's ruse, sure of Darrow's complete innocence: "'Look here,' he cried, 'if Darrow wants to call me a damned ass too you're not to stop him!'"³⁹ Anna is not completely undeceived about Darrow's guilt until, in a final scene with Sophy Viner, she learns the extent of the affair in Paris.

Then, her passion for Darrow in conflict with her pride and her responsibility to Owen, Anna struggles between renunciation and forgiveness of Darrow, who is willing--apparently--to have it either way. In the end, Anna surrenders. Sophy Viner--by renouncing Owen and departing into an insecure future--seems the strongest character.⁴⁰

In summary, the spectacle of Anna Leath and Owen acting in ignorance throws into ironic light the events in the first part of the novel: the meeting of Darrow and Sophy, the innocent pleasure in Paris, the brief moment when Owen meets Darrow in the theatre (without seeing anything of Sophy but her pink cloak), and the intimacy itself. The dramatic irony flashes red warning lights of what is to come and provides an ironic relationship between such events as the planning of the Darrow-Leath marriage, the announcement of Sophy and Owen's engagement, and the acceptance of Sophy by the very conservative Madame de Chantelle. Dramatic irony is the very stuff of which the plot is woven.

In 1913, the year just preceding the horror of World War I, which

³⁹Ibid., p. 280.

⁴⁰Cf. Frederic Taber Cooper, quoted in Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton (New York, 1925), p. 27: "...nobody does anything worthy of the situation." Sophy, at least, has the strength of character to carry out her intended renunciation; Owen flees, Anna surrenders, and Darrow complacently awaits the issue.

was virtually to paralyze her creative powers,⁴¹ Edith Wharton finished The Custom of the Country, a novel generally ranked as one of her finest.⁴²

Once again, as in the cases of The House of Mirth and The Reef, a woman becomes the main character of the story; but there is an important difference. Instead of a Lily Bart or an Anna Leath with whom the reader can sympathize, the central figure in The Custom of the Country is a beautiful barbarian from the Middle West, Undine Spragg, in whom Edmund Wilson sees the prototype of the "cocktail bitch" of later fiction.⁴³

At the beginning of the novel, Undine is a raw but enticing adventuress in New York, not long divorced from Elmer Moffatt; at the end of the story she is the wife of the new millionaire, Elmer Moffatt, in Paris; in between, she has married into the remains of the old Washington square elite in New York and she has married into the French aristocracy of the Faubourg St. Germain. The action of the novel thus consists of Undine's coming full circle after conquering the castle keeps in New York and Paris. The pattern of the novel is thus of the same general sort as that in The House of Mirth, except that the heroine has a series of ascents instead of descents. And just as Edith Wharton used dramatic irony to reveal the ironic relationship among the descents of Lily Bart, she uses dramatic irony to reveal the ironic relationships among the ascents of Undine Spragg.

⁴¹For Mrs. Wharton's own account of the effect of the war on her writing, see A Backward Glance (New York, 1934), pp. 338-358.

⁴²Pattee, The New American Literature, 1809-1930, p. 252, places the novel among Wharton's three best. Grant Overton, writing in The Women Who Make Our Novels (New York, 1931), p. 329, considers The Custom of the Country to be one of Wharton's major novels.

⁴³Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," p. 211.

The central dramatic irony in the novel grows out of the contrast between what the reader knows Undine to be and what she thinks herself to be. For example, the reader knows that Undine--no matter what her conquests may be--can never be content. As a child, she had been conscious of her superiority by virtue of dwelling in a hotel called the Mealey House until she learned that some of the girls' parents took them for the summers to California, or to the Great Lakes, or to the East. Then she had sucked lemons, had drunk bitter coffee, and had chewed slate in order to look sallow and trap her parents into taking her to a hotel near one of the Great Lakes. There she had basked for a time in her feelings of superiority, only to have a southern lady reveal to her that a more romantic society existed in the New England resorts along the Atlantic seaboard. There she had dragged her dotting parents the next summer, only to resolve that the only society which offered what she wanted was that of New York.⁴⁴ And so the reader knows that for Undine there is something always just beyond her grasp. This is what the reader knows Undine to be. The central dramatic irony results when Undine remains unconscious of the pattern and feels herself--every time that she is ready to make an ascent--at the entry gate to Xanadu; the reader knows that she is not.

Dramatic irony occurs, for example, when Undine is about to overthrow Washington Square by marrying Ralph Marvell. "She was sure, for instance, that she was on what Mrs. Heeny called 'the right tack' at last...."⁴⁵ It is dramatic irony, too, when, just before her marriage to Ralph and

⁴⁴Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York, 1913), pp. 52-56.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 57.

thereby the remnants of the old colonial, mercantile aristocracy, deluded in her idea that it will be gilded heaven, she pleads with Elmer Moffatt not to destroy her chances by revealing their former marriage: "Oh, Elmer, it's my first chance—I can't lose it!"⁴⁶ This sight of her brings about an irony of reminiscence concerning other times that she was just as sure that she had happiness within her grasp. In an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits the disillusionment that he—not Undine—knows must come. And so, after the European honeymoon (financed by Mr. Spragg by a deal with Moffatt to betray Rolliver, a corrupt politician),

There were moments after Undine's return to New York when she was tempted to class her marriage with the hateful early mistakes from the memories of which she had hoped it would free her. Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame on Ralph. She found a poignant pleasure, at this stage of her career, in the question: "What does a young girl know of life?"⁴⁷

Again, the reader is aware of a disparity between the situation as it is and as Undine sees it when she tires of the Marvell marriage and is sure that with the position she now holds she could find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. She talks to her father.

"I know just what I could do if I were free. I could marry the right man," she murmured boldly.

He met her with a murmur of helpless irony. "The right man? The right man? Haven't you had enough of trying for him yet?"⁴⁸

Then, in Paris, whence she has fled from Marvell to try to land Peter Van Degen, one of the rich "Invaders" of New York Society, she meets a French nobleman and has another vision that is filled with

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 193-194.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 243.

dramatic irony; the reader knows that the vision is just another door to delusion for her. She does not know.

Chelles, at once immensely "taken," had not only shown his eagerness to share in the helter-skelter motions of Undine's party, but had given her glimpses of another, still more brilliant existence, that life of the inaccessible "Faubourg" of which the first tantalizing hints had but lately reached her. Hitherto she had assumed that Paris existed for the stranger, that its native life was merely an obscure foundation for the dazzling superstructure of hotels and restaurants in which her compatriots disported themselves. But lately she had begun to hear about other American women, the women who had married into the French aristocracy, and who led, in the high-walled houses beyond the Seine which she had once thought so dull and dingy, a life that made her own seem as undistinguished as the social existence of the Mealey House.⁴⁹

And so, at the point that she contemplates her second ascent, Undine is deceived again as to her true situation, thus providing dramatic irony. Her delusion brings about an ironic relationship with those situations at the Mealey House, at the Great Lakes, at Richmond, at Skog Harbour, and at New York. In an irony of anticipation the reader waits for the pattern to work itself out again. After being freed in the eyes of the Catholic church from the first marriage by the suicide of Marvell, she marries Raymond de Chelles. For a time,

She was persuaded that, under her influence, Raymond would soon convert his parents to more modern ideas, and meanwhile she was still in the flush of a completer well-being than she had ever known, and disposed, for the moment, to make light of any inconveniences connected with it. The three months since her marriage had been more nearly like what she had dreamed of than any of her previous experiments in happiness. At last she had what she wanted, and for the first time the glow of triumph was warmed by a deeper feeling.⁵⁰

By virtue of the reader's superior knowledge of Undine's real situation, the reader knows even at this moment of the overflowing of the cup that Undine will drink the bitter dregs. And she does. She is isolated from

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 286.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 480.

Paris and forced to live in the ducal chateau without the glitter, gaiety and glamour that she thrives on. As a part of a dying aristocracy, she suffers the same lack of material wealth that she had suffered with Ralph Marvell. Then she learns that Raymond has other women, and the final blow to her pride falls.

And then, by coincidence, she finds Elmer Moffatt when he comes in answer to an advertisement she has placed offering the family tapestries for sale. Attracted by his casual manner and glittering millions, she continues to see him in Paris after Raymond and she go up for their annual spring and early summer visit. And then, still unconscious of her insatiability, she pauses at the point of her decision to re-marry Elmer Moffatt, and thinks.

All her own attempts to get what she wanted had come to nothing; but she had always attributed her lack of success to the fact that she had no one to second her. It was strange that Elmer Moffatt...should give her...the sense of being able to succeed where she had failed.⁵¹

Again the reader awaits in an irony of anticipation the inevitable disenchantment. After her elopement with him to Reno and a quick divorce and marriage, after she has mansions in Paris and New York, this is her feeling:

Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them. And there had been moments lately when she had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into the picture.⁵²

The novel closes with a last touch of the central dramatic irony growing out of Undine's self deception. Undine has just heard that one of her acquaintances, Chivers, has been appointed Ambassador to Great

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 555.

⁵² Ibid., p. 591.

Britain; her own sudden hopes of a similar appointment have been dashed by the news that no man who has married a divorced woman may be eligible for the position. She must have one final, ironic vision: "She would never be an ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for."⁵³

A foil for this central dramatic irony is dramatic irony on the part of both Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles.

Ralph's actions stand in ironic contrast to the real situation for two reasons: he mistakenly believes that he can call forth the higher nature in Undine--a nature the reader knows does not exist; in the second place, he remains ignorant almost to the end of his life about Undine's earlier marriage to Moffatt--and this ignorance provides strong ironic contrast at times. To begin with, then, it is dramatic irony as Ralph envisions the effect of his loving and marrying Undine:

He seemed to see her--as he sat there, pressing his fists into his temples--he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse--just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce--to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue...⁵⁴

So Ralph marries her and takes her to Italy, where he tries to open her eyes to the beauty of old villas, of cathedrals, of Italian sun, sky, and mountain. But Undine remains insensitive to anything but the summer heat. Even so, Ralph is still not undeceived. "The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience; and he would not yet own to himself that her pliancy and variety

⁵³Ibid., p. 594.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 84.

were imitative rather than spontaneous."⁵⁵ At St. Moritz, Undine finds a thrill-bent group headed by a renegade Italian count and a disreputable Polish countess; she abandons herself to gay parties. At this point, with her desires satisfied and her pouts absent temporarily, Ralph thinks that "...she showed qualities of a comradeship that seemed the promise of a deeper understanding."⁵⁶ Even after their return to New York and Ralph has been ground down by Undine's incessant demands for money—even after she has all but abandoned their son in order to luxuriate in parties of the Van Degen set—Ralph is still deceived.

But his thoughts were not all dark. Undine's moods still infected him, and when she was happy he felt an answering lightness. Even when her amusements were too primitive to be shared he could enjoy their reflection in her face. Only, as he looked back, he was struck by the evanescence, the lack of substance, in their moments of sympathy, and by the permanent marks left by each breach between them. Yet he still fancied that some day the balance might be reversed, and that as she acquired a finer sense of values the depths in her would find a voice.⁵⁷

And then, while Undine is in Paris trying to entrap Peter Van Degen and also getting a peep at the world of Raymond de Chelles, Ralph is at home, still dreaming of the day when he will awaken Undine's higher nature.

Looking back at their four years of marriage he began to ask himself if he had done all he could to draw her half-formed spirit from its sleep. Had he not expected too much at first, and grown too indifferent in the sequel? After all, she was still in the toy age; and perhaps the very extravagance of his love had retarded her growth, helped to imprison her in a little circle of frivolous illusions. But the last months had made a man of him, and when she came back he would know how to lift her to the height of his experience.⁵⁸

Then, too, Ralph's actions in ignorance of the first Undine-Moffatt match give rise to dramatic irony. For example, Undine has just returned

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 158.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 182.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 309.

from her meeting with Moffatt to beg him to keep the secret of their marriage; she is shocked to see Marvell waiting for her. He speaks.

"Yes; you told me not to come--and here I am." He lifted her hand to his lips as his eyes tried to find hers through the veil.

She drew back with a nervous gesture. "I told you I'd be awfully late."

"I know--trying on! And you're horribly tired, and wishing with all your might I wasn't here."

"I'm not so sure I'm not!" she rejoined, trying to hide her vexation with a smile.⁵⁹

And then still unaware of the relationship between his wife and Moffatt, Ralph meets him years later, likes him, and makes the business deal with him which enables Undine to escape to Paris, never to return to him.

This dramatic irony continues even after Undine has divorced Ralph. He goes to Moffatt, hoping to get business advice that will enable him to ransom his son from Undine, who hopes to use the money to buy a Catholic annulment of their marriage and then marry de Chelles; Moffatt makes a remark about Undine that to Ralph seems out of taste. "Look here, Moffatt," he said, getting to his feet, "the fact that I've been divorced from Mrs. Marvell doesn't authorize anyone to take that tone in speaking of her."⁶⁰

Raymond de Chelles, unaware of the series of messes and entanglements from which Undine has come to him, says to her while talking about what he thinks are the American taboos regarding the marriage of his wild young brother to an American: "Your compatriots' views on such matters are so rigid--and it's all to their credit--that the marriage would have fallen through at once if the least hint of Hubert's mess had got out...."⁶¹

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 116. Italics mine.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 465.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 499.

The result of such dramatic irony on the part of the husbands is that Undine's frantic marital peregrinations are thrown into high relief, thus making the basic pattern of the novel--Undine's series of ascents--more apparent. The irony arising out of Undine's self-deception provides an ironical relationship among the events in which she seeks fulfillment of her dreams. Insofar as the dramatic irony serves such a function, it contributes to the form of the novel.

After spending her energies in World War I primarily in refugee relief work and in writing to further this work, Edith Wharton produced, in 1920, The Age of Innocence, her last major novel.⁶²

This is the story of Newland Archer, a young man born into the old colonial bourgeois aristocracy; he is a very conventional young man.

For example, it is his habit to arrive late at the opera because

...it was "not the thing" to arrive early at the opera; and what was or was not "the thing" played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his fore-fathers thousands of years ago.⁶³

His life is moulded on conventions, even such trivial ones as using monogrammed silver hair brushes and wearing a carnation whenever in

⁶²Two critics, Hoffman and Wilson (Cf. the first footnote of this chapter) set the publication of The Age of Innocence as the end of her major work. Hoffman says further, in The Modern Novel in America, 1900-1950, p. 18, "Subsequently, she published a great number of novels, but they seem an almost annual testimony to the decline of her powers...." Cf. also Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), p. 566: "It was in The Age of Innocence (1920) that Mrs. Wharton rose serenely to the unquestionable priority among the novelists writing in English during the twentieth century"; Percy H. Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans (Chicago, 1924), p. 96: "After writing of this world [New York society] for twenty years, Mrs. Wharton has done best of all with it in...The Age of Innocence"; Overton, p. 331: This is Mrs. Wharton's most important novel. It is also her best." The LHUS, on p. 1210, calls it Wharton's greatest novel.

⁶³The Age of Innocence (New York, 1920), p. 2.

society.⁶⁴ On a larger scale, "Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against 'Taste,' that far-off divinity of whom 'form' was the mere visible representative and vicegerent."⁶⁵ He is shocked by an invitation to tea by another woman than his betrothed; he feels that the other woman ought to know that engaged men do not call on married women.⁶⁶ When the Mingott clan rallies bravely behind their scandalized cousin, Ellen Olenska, to the extent that they produce her publicly, Archer feels that they lack taste and go too far in their support of the young woman.⁶⁷ And when Ellen Olenska violates taste by making a flippant remark about New York, he distinctly dislikes the reflection on his world.⁶⁸ Another instance of his conventionality is his attitude toward divorce: "Theoretically, the idea of divorce was almost as distasteful to him as to his mother...."⁶⁹ He adopts his class's conventional attitude that work is unsuitable to a gentleman, that only a profession—not practiced too arduously—is the proper pursuit for a gentleman; and he is sure that politics is no field for a gentleman. In short, Newland Archer is conventional almost to the point of being a prude.

Dramatic irony results, then, when the reader sees Newland Archer airing unconventional ideas, unaware of the ironic contrast between

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 72.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 91.

his words and his real self. For example, the reader sees this conservative, prudish young man holding forth on the subject of Ellen Olenska's making herself conspicuous in New York:

"Why shouldn't she be conspicuous if she chooses? Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? She's 'poor Ellen' certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit."⁷⁰

The reader is aware too of an ironic contrast between the liberal words of the speaker and the prudish speaker himself, as Archer advances an even more unconventional idea: "'Women ought to be free--as free as we are,' he declared...."⁷¹ And he continues in the same vein, when--still talking about the case of Ellen Olenska, he says, "'I feel that each case must be judged individually, on its own merits...irrespective of stupid conventionalities...'"⁷² It is significant that Newland Archer is deceived about his own freedom from conventional restraints when he talks about Ellen Olenska: such self-deception provides the story of the novel.

The pattern of the novel consists of Archer's attempts to break away from the code that controls him. He falls in love with a woman who has been scandalized by running away from her blackguard husband with his secretary. Three times Newland Archer draws near to Ellen Olenska in his attempts to defy the code: once, just before he is supposed to be married to another woman; again, after his marriage when Ellen is leaving for Europe, never to return; and finally, thirty years later, when as a

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 37-38.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 39.

⁷²Ibid., p. 149.

widower he is free to go to her. At the point of each approach, Newland Archer--unconscious of the control of the gods of convention--is sure that he is "...scornful of arbitrary restraints."⁷³ Dramatic irony results from the contrast between what the reader knows Newland Archer to be and what he considers himself to be.

Specifically, the reader, knowing how much Archer is the slave of convention, is aware of the dramatic irony in the words of Archer when he tries to defy the code the first time. He and Ellen Olenska have just confessed their love for one another.

"Ellen! What madness! Why are you crying? Nothing's done that can't be undone. I'm still free, and you're going to be." He had her in his arms, her face like a wet flower at his lips, and all their vain terrors shrivelling up like ghosts at sunrise.⁷⁴

By an irony of reminiscence, preceding events that show Archer to be so ruled by the taboos of his society are brought into ironical relationship; in an irony of anticipation, the reader waits for Archer to do the conventional thing--marry his fiance, May Welland. True to expectations, May sends him a telegram the very evening of his avowal to Ellen, in which May agrees--as he had asked--to an early wedding date; one week after Easter, Newland Archer and May Welland are married.

By the second time that Archer tries to break away and take Ellen, the reader knows--though Archer does not--that he is too much the product of his society ever to defy convention; Archer, however, does not know his true situation. He speaks of his intended flight to Ellen, who is unaware of the real meaning of his words; the words mock him, too: the reader knows that he cannot break away. He is saying goodbye to Ellen

⁷³Ibid., p. 140.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 170.

before she sails. "'Good-bye—but I shall see you soon in Paris,' he answered aloud—it seemed to him that he shouted it."⁷⁵ To which Ellen replies, "'Oh,...if you and May could come—.'"⁷⁶ He speaks in double-edged language to May about his intended escape. In an act symbolic of this desire, he has just raised a window in the dead of winter. May speaks first:

"Newland! Are you ill?"

He shook his head and turned toward his arm-chair. She bent over her work-frame, and as he passed he laid his hand on her hair. "Poor May!" he said.

"Poor? Why poor?" she echoed with a strained laugh.

"Because I shall never be able to open a window without worrying you," he rejoined, laughing also.

For a moment she was silent; then she said very low, her head bowed her work: "I shall never worry if you're happy."

"Ah, my dear; and I shall never be happy unless I can open the windows!"⁷⁷

This dramatic irony illuminates the ironical relationship between the second attempt and the first. In an irony of anticipation, the reader waits for Newland Archer to do the conventional thing—stay with his wife. As was the case with the last minute telegram in the first instance, May confronts him with another appeal to his adherence to conventions: she reveals her pregnancy. Archer stays.

In the epilogue to the novel, Archer has one opportunity to see Ellen Olenska again. A quarter of a century has passed; May is dead and Archer is free to go to Ellen, who has lived in Paris all these years. Dramatic irony results as Archer, in Paris on business with his son, is picturing himself erroneously as being able to go to Ellen at last.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 244.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 299.

A few streets away, a few hours away, Ellen Olenska waited. She had never gone back to her husband, and when he had died, some years before, she had made no change in her way of living. There was nothing now to keep her and Archer apart—and that afternoon he was to see her.

He got up and walked across the Place de la Concorde and the Tuileries gardens to the Louvre. She had once told him that she often went there, and he had a fancy to spend the intervening time in a place where he could think of her as perhaps having lately been. For an hour or more he wandered from gallery to gallery through the dazzle of afternoon light, and one by one the pictures burst on him in their half-forgotten splendour, filling his soul with the long echoes of beauty. After all, his life had been too starved....

Suddenly, before an effulgent Titian, he found himself saying: "But I'm only fifty-seven—" and then he turned away. For such summer dreams it was too late; but surely not for a quiet harvest of friendship, of comradeship, in the blessed hush of her nearness.⁷⁸

There is dramatic irony in these autumn hopes, for the reader knows that Newland Archer is unable to break through convention and habit. In an irony of anticipation, he waits for Archer himself to make the discovery. It comes as he and his son reach the doorway to the apartment house where Madame Olenska lives.

The father glanced away at an empty bench under the trees.

"I believe I'll sit there a moment," he said.

"Why—aren't you well?" his son exclaimed.

"Oh, perfectly. But I should like you please, to go up without me."

Dallas paused before him visibly bewildered. "But, I say, Dad: do you mean you won't come up at all?"

"I don't know," said Archer slowly.

"If you don't she won't understand."

"Go, my boy; perhaps I shall follow you."

Dallas gave him a long look through the twilight.

"But what on earth shall I say?"

"My dear fellow, don't you always know what to say?" his father rejoined with a smile.

"Very well. I shall say you're old-fashioned, and prefer walking up the five flights because you don't like lifts."

His father smiled again. "Say I'm old-fashioned: that's enough."⁷⁹

Thus, the pattern of the novel is that of a series of attempts on the part of Newland Archer to break away from the code. The spectacle of his acting in ignorance of the force of the tribal code upon him gives

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 360-361.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 363-364. Italics mine.

rise to dramatic irony as surely as does the spectacle of a man acting in ignorance of what the gods have decreed for him. For there are gods controlling the destiny of these characters, the gods of convention and code.

Dramatic irony in the novel arises also out of Archer's ignorance, until the very end, that May and the family know about his affair with Ellen. Just after his wedding, Archer is unaware of the double meaning in May's words after he says.

"...But you did keep me waiting, you know! I had time to think of every horror that might possibly happen."

She surprised him by turning, in full Fifth Avenue, and flinging her arms about his neck. "But none ever can happen now, can it, Newland, as long as we two are together?"⁸⁰

And then, when the lovers met again after more than a year's separation, Archer is thinking about his and Ellen's behavior: "He knew that there was no calculated coquetry in her words; she was fighting her fate as he had fought his, and clinging desperately to her resolve that they should not break faith with the people who trusted them."⁸¹ And then, on the night that Archer has resolved to tell May of his love, he is unaware of the double meanings in May's language when she asks about his expressed desire to speak of Madame Olenska. "Her face remained calm. 'Is it really worth while, dear? I know I've been unfair to her at times—perhaps we all have. You've understood her, no doubt, better than we did: you've always been kind to her.'"⁸² Further, Archer is unaware of the double meanings attached to May's words after she has told him that Ellen is leaving for Europe. May is telling about the conversation

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 187.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 307. Italics mine.

⁸²Ibid., p. 327. Italics mine.

that she and Ellen had after which Ellen decided to leave.

"I told her I was afraid I hadn't been fair to her—hadn't always understood how hard it must have been for her here, alone among so many people who were relations and yet strangers; who felt the right to criticize, and yet didn't always know the circumstances." She paused. "I knew you'd been the one friend she could always count on; and I wanted her to know that you and I were the same—in all our feelings."

She hesitated, as if waiting for him to speak, and then added slowly: "She understood my wishing to tell her this. I think she understands everything."⁸³

Because of such dramatic irony occurring at the crucial moments of the novel, the impression is re-enforced in the reader that Archer is trapped, at a time when Newland himself does not realize it. The reader knows, as Archer does not, that May will do everything to keep her husband. As he expects to do, the reader finds out that May has kept Newland—as she did in the first instance by sending the telegram—by revealing her pregnancy to Ellen. So all through the novel, Newland Archer fancies that he is carrying out his destiny with Ellen Olenska without opposition either from conventions or from others; actually, he is predestined by his nature to fail; and the quiet eyes of his wife and the wiles of his wife and family are there to help assure his failure. Because of such dramatic irony, the events that picture Archer's struggle are endowed with an ironic interrelationship, one with another. Thus fused by an ironic thread, they become a total, a unity, a whole.

In summary, Edith Wharton provides the basis for dramatic irony in her novels by giving the reader the requisite superior knowledge by means of a literary frame—as in the case of Ethan Frome; or by dramatizing the necessary information—as in the case of The Reef and the Darrow-Viner intimacy; or by characterization that contrasts ironically with what the

⁸³Ibid., p. 329. Italics mine.

character believes himself to be (self-deception)--as in The House of Mirth, Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence.

At this point, certain differences appear between Wharton's use of dramatic irony in the short stories and her use of it in the major novels.

In the first place, there is sometimes a difference between the short stories and the major novels in the way by which Mrs. Wharton provides the element so necessary to dramatic irony: the reader's superior knowledge of a situation as compared to a character's knowledge of the same situation. Very few of the short stories contain the irony of self-deception, that is, the dramatic irony resulting when a character acts in ignorance of what he really is like. The probable reason for the difference is that Mrs. Wharton considered the plot, rather than character, to be of paramount importance in the short story.⁸⁴ With less emphasis on character, it would seem natural that so few short stories employ the irony of self-deception.

In the second place, the short stories usually contain only one scene which makes use of dramatic irony, with such a scene arousing ironies of reminiscence and anticipation which bind together the elements of the story. In the novels, on the other hand, the situation involving the basic or central dramatic irony is used over and over to form a pattern in itself (since the nature of pattern implies repetition) and is used also as a sort of chain of ironies, each one of which arouses ironies of reminiscence and anticipation. As an illustration of the use of dramatic irony in the short story, there is the single scene of dramatic irony in "Afterward" in which Mary Boyne talks to the ghost of Bob Elwell, unaware of Elwell's double-edged language and unaware that she is seeing

⁸⁴The Writing of Fiction, p. 43.

the ghost of Lyng; a glow of irony arises over all the events of the story and makes of them a total, a unity. On the other hand, in a novel like The Custom of the Country, the dramatic irony central to the book lies in Undine's constantly being ignorant of her illusions, as the reader is not. This irony is used at the point of her marriage to Ralph Marvell; it is used at the point of her marriage to Raymond de Chelles; it is used at the point of her marriage to Moffatt; by repetition, it becomes a pattern. At the same time, however, each use of the dramatic irony arouses ironies of reminiscence and anticipation, thus producing a unity in the same sense that the short stories possess the ironic unity. In The Reef, though the repetition of the central dramatic irony does not thus form a pattern in itself, the irony resulting from Anna and Owen's ignorance of Darrow's seduction of Sophy is used over and over; each time, ironies of reminiscence and anticipation occur and draw together the elements of the narrative.

In the third place, the short stories usually do not contain any dramatic irony other than the central or basic one. In the novels, Mrs. Wharton uses the ignorance of a Lawrence Selden, a Bertha Dorset, a Mrs. Hale, a Ralph Marvell, or an Owen Leath to provide emphasis to an important juncture in the novel or to provide a kind of interlocking irony with the basic or central dramatic irony which resides in the main character. The effect of such intensification of the irony in a long piece of fiction is that the narrative becomes more unified, more a totality.

CHAPTER IV

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Edith Wharton's most extensive and important use of dramatic irony as form appears in the short stories and novels analyzed in Chapters II and III of this thesis. However, for the sake of completeness, fourteen of her minor novels and novelettes have also been examined. Of these, six contain dramatic irony used to contribute to form: The Glimpses of the Moon, A Son at the Front, Old New York, The Mother's Recompense, Twilight Sleep, and The Children.

In The Glimpses of the Moon¹ Nick and Susy Lansing marry with the agreement to separate when either has the opportunity to make a rich marriage; they then have what they think is a temporary separation because of Nick's scruples about taking money from the rich for aiding them in their wickedness. The separation once achieved, dramatic irony arises when both Nick and Susy, judging from appearances only, believe the other to be making the rich marriage provided for in their agreement. As the reader watches each acting in ignorance of the other's true situation, ironies of reminiscence arise concerning the original agreement and the true feelings of the two partners; ironies of anticipation develop as the reader senses how each partner is to misinterpret in the future the actions of the other partner; in an irony of anticipation the reader waits for the meeting between the two, which--though each thinks the other

¹(New York, 1922).

desires it for legal purposes regarding their divorce—is to prove to be the reconciliation.

In A Son at the Front, dramatic irony results when John Campton, an American expatriate in France during World War I, mistakenly believes his son to be safe in a behind-the-lines desk job; actually, the boy is at the front. Campton's ignorance of the truth endows with irony his sense of security; in an irony of anticipation the reader waits for the wounding or killing of the son; the boy is killed.

Again, Mrs. Wharton used dramatic irony to contribute to the form in False Dawn, one of the four novelettes which together comprise Old New York.³ In False Dawn, the dramatic irony comes from the ignorance that the characters have of the destined fame and influence of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. The family of Lewis Raycie condemns him for wasting his father's money to buy an art collection under the guidance of Ruskin, himself. This spectacle causes an irony of reminiscence concerning such elements in the story as the hopes of the father to start a distinguished collection of paintings; young Raycie's hopeful start of his trip; and his rapture at discovering what for him is a new kind of beauty; in an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits the recognition sure to come for the collection—which does come, but only after Lewis Raycie has died and the collection has been nearly forgotten.

The central dramatic irony in The Mother's Recompense⁴ arises out of Ann Clephane's ignorance of the fact that the man she is to marry has

²(New York, 1923).

³(New York, 1924) 4 vols.

⁴(New York, 1925).

once been the lover of her own mother. This sheds an ironic light over all the major events of the novel: Ann's making a home for her long-exiled mother and rival; her attempts to make her mother and Chris Fenno better acquainted; her forcing her mother to acquiesce in the marriage; her planning to buy the next-door house so that the three can live virtually under the same roof; and the flight of the mother from New York, the daughter still ignorant of the true situation.

In Twilight Sleep,⁵ so-named because the main character ignores unpleasantness and thus keeps herself in a placid state similar to that of the semi-conscious person in twilight sleep, the central dramatic irony arises out of Pauline Manford's ignorance of an affair between her second husband and her daughter-in-law, Lita. In an irony of reminiscence, the reader recalls Pauline's scandalized attitude toward other families' troubles and her social activities at which she prides herself on the stability of her own family in such chaotic times as the roaring twenties. In an irony of anticipation, the reader awaits the explosion of the scandal, which comes when Pauline's first husband, possessing the sense of honor of Old New York, attempts to avenge the cuckolding of his and Pauline's son. But Pauline Manford insulates herself against the facts, accepts the explanation of the attempted killing as an accident, and remains in her comfortable state of twilight sleep.

The central dramatic irony in The Children⁶ arises out of middle-aged Martin Boyne's self-deception regarding his infatuation with a girl of sixteen, Judith Wheeler. As the reader sees such scenes as Boyne's

⁵(New York, 1927).

⁶(New York, 1928).

denunciation of affairs between middle-aged men and young girls, or his swearing to his betrothed, Mrs. Sellars, that he has nothing but a paternal interest in Judith, an irony of reminiscence occurs, bringing into ironical relationship Boyne's long wait to marry Mrs. Sellars and his planning to do so; in an irony of anticipation, the reader waits for Boyne to make the discovery that he does love Judith and then to make a fool of himself-- which he does.

Finally, of eighteen collected stories which were published after 1920 and which were studied by the writer, six made use of dramatic irony to contribute to form. In "After Holbein,"⁷ dramatic irony arises when two survivors of old New York remain unconscious of their own senility and re-live events of their dead past. In "The Refugees,"⁸ dramatic irony occurs when an American professor, returning from France in the early days of World War I, is mistaken for a refugee by some well-meaning English philanthropists. The dramatic irony in "Mr. Jones"⁹ comes about when the reader--knowing that Mr. Jones, the mysterious caretaker of an old English country house, is a ghost--sees the new mistress of the house acting in ignorance of the fact. In "Her Son,"¹⁰ the knowledge that the protagonist's long-lost son is an impostor is withheld from the mother and thus generates the unifying dramatic irony in the story. In "Diagnosis,"¹¹ the dramatic irony arises when the protagonist accidentally

⁷Edith Wharton, Certain People (New York, 1930), pp. 63-101.

⁸Ibid., pp. 141-187.

⁹Ibid., pp. 188-232.

¹⁰Edith Wharton, Human Nature (New York, 1933), pp. 1-104.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 214-249.

reads the doctors' diagnosis of another patient's fatal disease and acts in ignorance of his own safety. In "The Looking Glass,"¹² the knowledge is withheld from the protagonist that the messages to her from her dead lover are hoaxes, and unifying dramatic irony follows as a consequence.

Detailed analysis of her works in the preceding pages has shown that dramatic irony plays an important part, quantity-wise, in the fiction of Edith Wharton. Nearly one-half of the short stories studied exhibit it; nearly one-half of the minor novels and novelettes studied make use of it; and each of the five major novels employs it. But such an arithmetical conclusion is only part of the answer to the question of the part that dramatic irony plays in Mrs. Wharton's fiction. There remains the question of the aesthetic contribution—aside from that of unifying story elements and thus contributing to form—of dramatic irony to the stories and novels. Does its use in fiction give rise to any special difficulties? If so, to the extent that the difficulties are unsuccessfully met, the use of dramatic irony in fiction may be a liability aesthetically; on the other hand, to the extent that the difficulties are overcome by the artist, the use of dramatic irony may be an asset aesthetically in another sense than contributing to form.

The chief difficulty in utilizing dramatic irony in modern fiction is the problem of giving the reader a superior knowledge of the situation as compared with the knowledge on the part of the people in the story. The classic Greek tragedians, who made such striking use of dramatic irony, did not face such difficulty. The stories they dramatized were well known to the audience before a performance was presented even for

¹²Edith Wharton, The World Over (New York, 1936), pp. 243-277.

the first time. The superior knowledge on the part of the audience could thus be taken for granted or be refreshed with a prologue to the play; the playwright could make his characters utter words of ironic or double meaning and be certain that the audience would perceive the meaning because its members possessed the necessary information to do so.¹³ The result was that a Greek play was often prized not so much for the story it dramatized as for the particular handling of the story; and dramatic irony could play an important part in the handling. "...It is quite obvious that dramatically ironic language and situation are part of the very bone of Greek dramatic art."¹⁴ On the other hand, the story to be told in modern fiction is almost necessarily an unfamiliar one. Moreover, the modern reader would feel cheated if the argument of the plot were rehearsed for him in the form of a prologue. The modern writer must give the information by means of literary frames and flashbacks, or by supernatural elements invisible to some or all the characters in a story, or by dramatizing the necessary information and presenting it in a scene preceding the crucial part of the story, or by some other means.

In presenting the needed information in such ways or in utilizing the information to create dramatic irony, the writer runs the risk of ineffective use of the irony. Effective use of such irony, as explained by Geneva Smith in her analysis of Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd, lies in "...logical sequence of events, the likely probability of coincidence, and the touching poignance of mental anguish...."¹⁵ Use of

¹³Sedgewick, Of Irony: Especially in Drama, p. 63.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵"Dramatic Irony: Some Views of Its Uses in the Novels of Thomas Hardy" (unpub. M. A. thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1938), p. 51.

coincidence to provide the complication of a story is permissible; on the other hand, a concatenation of coincidences in order to start a story seems contrived. Moreover, if coincidence is used to resolve the plot, the story does not maintain logical sequence of events.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in her efforts to produce a situation of dramatic irony, Edith Wharton sometimes strains the likelihood of coincidence or weakens what should be the logical sequence of events. Her doing so may account for some critics' objections to her work as being too "clever." Edith Wharton's straining of plausibility to achieve ironic effects may also trouble the reader: "Edith Wharton had a fatal weakness for the anecdote, for the situation capable of taking a surprising turn or of lending itself to an ironic or merely amusing treatment."¹⁷

A discussion of the straining of plausibility to provide dramatic irony in some of Mrs. Wharton's fiction should illustrate such weakness in her use of the irony. In "The Refugees," for example, the necessary information that Charles Durand is an American professor fleeing France in World War I comes naturally enough; but in utilizing the situation to provide dramatic irony, Edith Wharton has to ring in the following formidable array of coincidences: in order for Durand to be mistaken for a refugee, he happens to be traveling with a group of England-bound French refugees; he happens to have an old foot injury aggravated so that he appears to be the victim of German atrocities; he happens to have a French name; the calling card which he presents happens to be one that he has had printed in French and happens to exclude mention of his American

¹⁶Brooks and Warren, Understanding Fiction, p. 602.

¹⁷Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction, p. 28.

degrees and to include mention only of his honorary degree from a French university, which happens to have been one overrun by the Germans; Durand also happens to be a professor of romance languages--so that his French is fluent and authentic-sounding; then, in order to make plausible his participation in the case of mistaken identity, he happens to meet at the receiving depot in London the only English noblewoman that he can mistake for another refugee: she is small, old, helpless-looking, and shabbily dressed; moreover, she speaks French, and just happens to have returned a short while before from a visit to France. Thus the setting up of the dramatic irony in the story by not one coincidence but rather by more than half a dozen seems strained. Moreover, in the denouement of the piece, logical sequence of events is violated in order to maintain the dramatic irony: a coincidence is again necessary for the professor--years later--to meet his benefactress in a swarming refugee depot in France so that her continued ignorance of his real identity can provide a parting shot of dramatic irony.

The overdependence upon coincidence to provide dramatic irony also weakens such a story as "The Pelican," in which it is necessary to have a coincidental meeting distant in both place and time from the first meetings (which give the reader the information necessary for the dramatic irony and which also require the use of coincidences); "The Pelican" also requires the coincidental arrival of the long-educated, long-suffering son to provide the reader's anticipated exposure of Mrs. Amyot. Again, a horde of coincidences is necessary in "The Legend" in order to place the returning philosopher, John Pellerin, in the home of his most famous and most fatuous interpreter, Howland Wade--all in order that Wade's ignorance of Pellerin's true identity can give rise to dramatic irony.

Finally, in a novel of such reputation as The Reef, the succession of coincidences used to provide the basis for the central dramatic irony in the book is truly staggering: Darrow happens to meet not just any girl, but a girl he has known slightly; he meets her at the very moment that he is most disillusioned about Mrs. Leath; even so, the meeting would have no sequel, except that the girl has just happened to lose her trunk and is without both money and clothes. Even so, the intimacy could not have developed had not the girl's friends and protectors, the Farlows, have coincidentally left their habitual residence in Paris, thus leaving Sophy with no one to turn to in Paris; then, of course, there is the crowning coincidence in Sophy's becoming a governess and fiancée in the very same family into which Darrow is about to marry. All of these coincidences are used to set up the dramatic irony. The result is that the reader may feel that somewhat too much credibility has been sacrificed to the creation of dramatic irony in the novel.

Once such a thing happens, it becomes increasingly difficult for Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" to occur; and the reader's belief in the plausibility of the story is all-important to the success of fiction.

Fortunately for Edith Wharton, however, such straining to produce dramatic irony is the exception rather than the rule. In the greater part of her fiction, she managed to provide the basis for dramatic irony in skillful ways. In "The Bolted Door," for example, Mrs. Wharton does not have to rely on coincidence at all; a man has simply committed such a perfectly-executed crime that he can convince no one that he is guilty. Misunderstanding an author's intent by the masses is so common that the dramatic irony resulting from a misreading of Linyard's parody arises

naturally and deliciously in "The Descent of Man." In "The Reckoning" dramatic irony is provided for skillfully by the use of a literary frame to give the reader a knowledge of the future denied the protagonist in the flashback. Again, it is the use of a literary frame in Ethan Frome which lets the reader know that Ethan's attempts to win freedom are doomed before Ethan himself knows. The resulting dramatic irony makes poignant Ethan's dreams of escaping with Mattie, his blundering attempts to find a way to escape from Starkfield, his struggle within himself regarding his duty to Zeena, and finally--that desperate attempt at suicide.

Further, in providing dramatic irony through a character's self-deception, Edith Wharton utilized a common human phenomenon: we have all had the consciousness of the irony inherent in the words and actions of people who are not aware that their behavior contrasts ironically with their fundamental character. Thus dramatic irony arises when Lily Bart thinks and acts in ignorance of her own inability to meet the crises in her social world. It arises when Undine Spragg relentlessly pursues wealth, honors, and position, ignorant all the while that she will never find her nirvana. It arises when Newland Archer proclaims his liberalism and plots his revolt, ignorant all the while that at the springs of his behavior he is a conformist, a slave to the totems of respectability among his tribe. In all of these cases, the reader--by virtue of his superior knowledge--occupies a position somewhat like that of the gods, for he knows, like the gods, the fate of the characters.

Wilson and Helen Follett, in Some Modern Novelists, ask this question about Mrs. Wharton's fiction:

How account, then, for the extraordinary vibrancy and tenseness of Mrs. Wharton's novels, their complete freedom from insipidity?...they

strike us with the poignant and acid tang of the full orchestra, an instrument which owes part of its effectiveness to the fact that it can never be ideally in tune.¹⁸

The question is a crucial one, for in spite of the fact that Mrs. Wharton's stories are genteel in treatment, leisurely in movement, and generally quiet in setting and action (much of the conflict, for instance, consists of verbal fencing), the best of them are so poignant and tangy that the reader must savor them slowly in order to appreciate them. In the opinion of this writer, the vibrancy and tenseness noted by the Folletts is the direct result of the stimulation produced in the reader by dramatic irony; the orchestral effect marked by the impossibility of being ideally in tune is the result of the clash or disparity between things as they seem to be and things as they really are.

It can be seen, then, that the use of dramatic irony is highly significant in Mrs. Wharton's fiction. Its significance lies in something more than the fact that its incidence is high in Mrs. Wharton's writing. Dramatic irony contributes to the form in that it contributes to the unity of the narratives. Moreover, when its use does not involve over-reliance on coincidence, it adds poignancy to the ironic whole. As is the case with Sterne's delightful indirection, or Jane Austen's cameo-exquisite treatment, or Scott's massive monumental approach, or Cooper's mastery of the chase, or Hardy's adaptation of Greek drama forms, Mrs. Wharton's use of dramatic irony becomes the hallmark of her fiction.

¹⁸Wilson and Helen Follett, Some Modern Novelists (New York, 1918), p. 295.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources: Edith Wharton's Works

- The Age of Innocence. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1920
- A Backward Glance. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934.
- The Buccaneers. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938.
- Certain People. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1930.
- The Children. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1928.
- Crucial Instances. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.
- The Custom of the Country. London: Macmillan and Co., 1913.
- The Descent of Man, and Other Stories. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904.
- Ethan Frome. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- The Fruit of the Tree. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.
- The Glimpses of the Moon. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1922.
- The Gods Arrive. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1932.
- The Greater Inclination. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899.
- The Hermit and the Wild Woman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.
- The House of Mirth. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
- Hudson River Bracketed. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1929.
- Human Nature. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1933.
- Madame de Treymes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.
- The Marne. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918.
- The Mother's Recompense. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1925.
- Old New York: False Dawn (The 'Forties); The Old Maid (The 'Fifties); The Spark (The 'Sixties); New Year's Day (The 'Seventies). New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1924. 4 vols.

- The Reef. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1912.
- A Son at the Front. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923.
- Summer. London: Macmillan and Co., 1917.
- Tales of Men and Ghosts. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910.
- Twilight Sleep. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1927.
- The Valley of Decision. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.
- The World Over. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936.
- The Writing of Fiction. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- Xingu and Other Stories. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916.

Secondary Sources

- Boynton, Percy Holmes. Some Contemporary Americans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924.
- Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. Understanding Fiction. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1943.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. The Confident Years, 1885-1915. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952.
- Butcher, S. H., tr. "Poetics," by Aristotle. The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism. Ed. James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1951. 3rd ed.
- Canby, Henry S. "Edith Wharton." Saturday Review, XVI (August 21, 1937), 6-7.
- Cooper, Frederick Taber. Some American Story Tellers. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911.
- Cross, Wilbur. "Edith Wharton." Bookman, LXIII (1926), 641-646.
- Follett, Helen T. and Wilson. Some Modern Novelists. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1918.
- Follett, Wilson. "What Edith Wharton Did—And Might Have Done." New York Times Book Review (September 5, 1937), 2, 14.
- Gilbertson, Catherine. "Mrs. Wharton." Century, CXIX (Autumn, 1929), 112-119.
- Hatcher, Harlan. Creating the Modern American Novel. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1935.

- Hoffman, Frederick J. The Modern Novel in America, 1900-1950. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951.
- _____. The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade. New York: Viking, 1955.
- Kazin, Alfred. "The Lady and The Tiger: Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser." Virginia Quarterly Review, XVII (Winter, 1941), 101-119.
- Lerman, Leo. "The Gilded Era of Edith Wharton." New York Times Book Review (August 27, 1950), 1, 21.
- Lovett, Robert Morss. Edith Wharton. New York: R. M. McBride and Co., 1925.
- Lubbock, Percy. Portrait of Edith Wharton. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1947.
- McCole, C. J. "Some Notes on Edith Wharton." Catholic World, CXLVI (January, 1938), 425-431.
- Millett, Fred B. Contemporary American Authors. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944.
- Mudrick, Marvin. Jane Austen: Irony As Defense and Discovery. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.
- Nevius, Blake. Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953.
- _____. "Ethan Frome and the Themes of Edith Wharton's Fiction." New England Quarterly, XXIV (June, 1951), 197-207.
- Overton, Grant. The Women Who Make Our Novels. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1931.
- Patee, Fred Lewis. The New American Literature, 1809-1930. New York: The Century Co., 1930.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936.
- Sedgewick, G. G. Of Irony: Especially in Drama. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948. 2nd ed.
- Smith, Geneva. "Dramatic Irony: Some Views of Its Uses in the Novels of Thomas Hardy" (unpub. M. A. thesis, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College), 1938.
- Snell, George Dixon. The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798-1947. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1947.
- Spiller, Robert E., Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry S. Canby, eds. Literary History of the United States. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1948. Vol. II.

Squire, John Collings. Contemporary American Authors. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1928.

Thompson, Alan Reynolds. The Dry Mock: A Study of Irony in Drama. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948.

Wilson, Edmund. "Justice to Edith Wharton." New Republic, ECV (1938), 209-213.

VITA

William Richard Brown

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: THE USE OF DRAMATIC IRONY IN EDITH WHARTON'S FICTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal data: Born in Clinton, Oklahoma, June 19, 1929, son of Harry H. and Carrie L. Brown.

Education: Attended grade school in Seiling, Oklahoma; graduated from Seiling High School in 1947; received the Bachelor of Arts Degree from Phillips University, Enid, Oklahoma, in May, 1952, with a major in English; completed requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in May, 1957.

Professional Experience: Taught high school English and journalism in Seiling High School, Seiling, Oklahoma, 1951-1955; graduate assistant in English at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1955-1956; temporary instructor in English at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1956-1957.