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NATURAL MAGIC: IRONY AS A UNIFYING STRATEGY IN THE FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

The University of Oklahoma PH.D. 1980

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GRADUATE COLLEGE

NATURAL MAGIC:
IRONY AS A UNIFYING STRATEGY
IN THE FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Carol Miller

Memphis, Tennessee

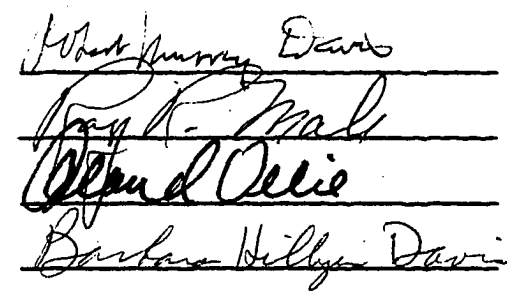
1980

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APPROVED BY



DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

Abstract of

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by

Carol Miller

University of Oklahoma

December, 1980

The recurring consensus of several generations of critics ranging from Edmund Wilson to R. W. B. Lewis has been that the fiction of Edith Wharton has not received a just evaluation. Wharton's reputation in American literature remains uncertain and her achievement elusive, traditionally because of historical and cultural biases which deprecate her aristocratic background, her expatriation to France, and even her gender. More recently, an attitude of critical resistance has arisen from assumptions made by current theorists who view the irony elemental to Wharton's fiction as being at odds with neo-oral, anti-ironic preferences of structuralist analysis. Though these theorists perceive irony as a distancing strategy which increases the alienation of writer and audience, a contention of this study is that irony--the basis of Wharton's art--may be an integrating strategy instead, a

bonding mechanism bringing together writer and audience by establishing affinities of understanding and complicity between writer and reader and requiring them to become co-creators of meaning.

Wharton's ironic method demands that her readers become sensitive receivers of nuance, ambiguity, and multiple meaning--literally, readers upon whom nothing is lost--and her writing assumes its greatest coherence only when her ironic technique is accurately understood. Her most consistent ironic device, and perhaps the one which demands the most sensitivity on the part of her audience, is ironic characterization, varying in degree but almost always involving the protagonist, whose view of himself and his circumstances is at variance with that of the author and reader. Ironies of situation and imagery are also crucial to Wharton's technique, usually fulfilling the general function of contributing to narrative unity by emphasizing theme. And extremely important is Wharton's ironic juxtaposition of elements of romanticism, realism, and naturalism, employed to produce complications of characterization and value.

Though integration rather than alienation is the aim of Wharton's ironic method, alienation <u>is</u> a crucial unifying theme threaded throughout her best work, a motif so insistently explored that it, rather than manners or social

commentary, or any other consideration, is the author's central concern. The problem of alienated consciousness has been an almost obsessive theme of American literature for over two centuries, and Edith Wharton's career-long attention to this theme places her work where it belongs--in the mainstream of American fiction, and gives it relevance which transcends its receding time and place. In Wharton's view, alienation is a pervasive force influencing human behavior. Her characters are not merely fossils of a by-gone social milieu; they are representative beings confronting a destructive reality--the complex loneliness of the human spirit--and they are linked by their shared consciousness of spiritual, emotional, and physical isolation and their often bewildered, often thwarted, attempts to overcome it.

In Wharton's most effective novels, then, which span her long career, the elemental thematic tension is between alienation and integration, a tension exactly reproduced by the form of its expression. They deserve to be viewed as a body of work unified by technique and theme, achieving a fusion of form and purpose which results in that quality of inevitable rightness Wharton called "natural magic."

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Professor Robert Murray Davis for his unfailingly helpful advice and guidance as my director; and to Professors Barbara Davis, Roy R. Male, Alan Velie, and David Levy for consenting to read my dissertation and for suggestions that improved its quality.

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NATURAL MAGIC:
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IN THE FICTION OF EDITH WHARTON

CHAPTER I

It is now over forty years since the death of Edith Wharton in 1937, eighty since the publication of her first collection of short stories;[1] yet her reputation in American literature remains uncertain, the precise nature and merit of her achievement elusive, and most of her novels and stories unread by a contemporary audience. During forty years of effort, she produced a substantial body of work--twenty-one novels and novellas, eleven collections of stories, nine works of non-fiction, including an autobiography, three collections of verse, and numerous articles and reviews. For a period, after the turn of the century, she was perhaps the most popular American novelist, and yet at the time of her death, there were only two book-length studies of her work, one of these in French.[2]

Since that time, Wharton has received a more proportionate share of critical attention, but it has always been

particularly divergent in its pronouncements. In one judgment only has there been recurring consensus, and that is in the echoed declaration first spoken by Edmund Wilson four years after her death that justice has ultimately not been done the work of Edith Wharton.[3] Eleven years later, he repeated this conviction in a review of Percy Lubbock's reminiscence of Wharton: "Her work, I believe, has never been--and was not, even at the time of her greatest success--appreciated or interpreted as it should be . . .,"[4] and he speculated that such appreciation might have to wait for the details of her personal history to be made accessible by the opening of her private papers in 1968. Both Irving Howe, in his collection of critical essays about Wharton,[5] and R. W. B. Lewis, in the definitive biography that has at last given us those surprising details,[6] echo the opinion that justice to Wharton has yet to come.

The reasons why Wharton's fiction has been undervalued are diverse; some of them are subtle and elusively intangible. They are the result, first, of certain historical and cultural biases and, more recently, of an attitude of resistance which arises out of assumptions made by current critical theorists. In the broadest sense, analysts have tended to view it from perspectives that diminish its actual weight and coherence.

By many critics, for example, Wharton has traditionally been seen almost entirely in the shadow of Henry James as

little more than a kind of literary apprentice. Credit for Wharton's successes is often divided between herself and "the master," or her fiction is measured against his and found to be inferior.[7] The friendship between James and Wharton became deep and complex, but he himself implied a master-student relationship when, after seeing a collection of her early stories, he wrote, "I take to her very kindly as regards her diabolical little cleverness, the quantity of her intention and intelligence in her style, and her sharp eye for an interesting kind of subject. They have made me want to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her."[8] James did, of course, influence some of Wharton's writing, but the significance of his influence has been exaggerated and the frequency with which they have been compared is misleading.

Even more pervasively, Wharton's critical reputation has been affected by the tendency to label and reduce her writing, to identify her in terms of exclusive literary categories, and to dismiss those elements of her fiction which do not conform to the requirements of the category. By classifying Wharton as essentially a regionalist (some book jacket blurbs call her a "writer of Old New York"), a determinist, a realist (though when she considered her own "realism," she put the word in quotation marks[9]), or a novelist of manners,[10] critics have defined Wharton in the

original Latin sense of definire--to set bounds--and, it follows, to limit and reduce.

But Wharton never subscribed to any single theory of literature; she never described or proclaimed herself as any kind of "ist." She is not finally a writer whose works may be confined to any single literary category. All writers are, of course, subject to such classification to some degree; it is a means of placing them in order to comprehend their intentions and accomplishments. But Wharton's subjects and forms--like those of most of our major writers--are various enough to exceed the limitations and restrictions of reductive literary labeling. To identify Fitzgerald, for example, as strictly a "chronicler of the Flapper Era," or, to cite extreme examples, to define Faulkner as a "regionalist," or Melville as a writer of adventure stories is, in each case, to sacrifice something of the essence of these writers and to obscure their achievements.

The problem of doing justice to Wharton has, I believe, been further complicated by undue critical attention to, and an often judgmental attitude towards, the circumstances of her life--her personality and social class, her expatriation, and her sex. Wharton was a member of the most elevated rank of society at a time in American history when, for a writer, such standing was not entirely providential. The zeitgeist was democratic and proletarian, and "the man with the dinner pail,"[11] was at the fore. Wharton loved a good picnic, but

she could have had very little experience with dinner pails. The public image she presented, which recent biographical information has significantly altered, was that of late-Victorian grand dame--aristocratic, repressed, part snob, part blue-stocking--finally and fatally conservative in both her public voice and private life. These qualities were consistently discovered, and regretted, in her fiction. What should be clear, distinct critical focus on the writing itself blurs because of peripheral attention to biographical matters. Gore Vidal, hyperbolically ranking her with Henry James as one of the two great American masters of the novel,[12] insists that this error accounts for her relegation by most critics to a minor position in what he calls the "pantheon" of American literature.

When she wrote about the wealthy, advantaged class into which she had been born, she was taxed with being either a snob or out of touch with and superfluous to significant American experience. When she wrote about lower or middle class American life, she risked the accusation that she didn't know what she was talking about. Vernon L. Parrington, in a 1921 article entitled "Our Literary Aristocrat," illustrates the particular narrowness of the former judgment: " . . . When one has said that the craftsmanship is a very great success, why not go further and add that it doesn't make the slightest difference whether one reads the [The Age of Innocence] or not, unless one is a literary epicure who

lives for the savor of things. What do the Van der Luydens mean to us; or what did they or their kind matter a generation ago?"[13] Parrington dismisses one of the most acclaimed of Wharton's novels on the grounds that it does not belong in American literature's main currents because it concerns, in his judgment, an entire social stratum which he finds irrelevant to American experience. His conclusion is implacable: "There is more hope for our literature in the honest crudities of the younger naturalists than in her classic irony; they are at least trying to understand America as it is."[14] His dismissal clearly rests not on her art, her "craftsmanship," but on her class and on the use she made in her books of her aristocratic background. Forty years after Parrington's criticism, Diana Trilling notes and regrets the persistence and significance of this distortion of perspective: "Today, if we attach meaning to her name, it is likely to be only that which lies in what we are pleased to call her snobbery--her pride of birth, her delicate skirting of the common life, her addiction to an outmoded social protocol."[15]

When on the other hand, Wharton writes about middle and lower class characters, she is accused of artificiality and inaccuracy. Alfred Kazin, for example, not only views her career as the result of personal maladjustment, but he indicts her for both snobbishness and ignorance. She was, he writes, a ". . . biting old dowager of American letters who snapped at her lower-class characters and insulted them

so roundly that her very disgust was comic."[16] This despite the fact that her lower-class protagonists--those, for example, in Ethan Frome, Summer, Bunner Sisters, and numerous short stories--are among the most compassionately treated in all Wharton fiction and reflect the general truth that her sympathy for her characters depends less upon their social class than their sensibilities. Despite a generally accepted estimate that ranks Ethan Frome as a minor classic, Kazin charges that "she knew little of the New England common world, and perhaps cared even less . . .".[17] It is an accusation Wharton had defended herself against as early as 1933 in her autobiography, insisting that, after ten years of living in the rural New England of her stories, she ". . . had come to know well the aspect, dialect, and mental and moral attitude . . ."[18] of those she wrote about, but it has been the persistent theme of a number of critical discussions since.[19]

The clear implication is that Wharton's aristocratic background presents an obstacle which has often impeded the accurate appraisal of her writing. The fact of her social class has been perceived by critics as a limitation, and the realm of imagination and invention available as resources to other writers are closed to her. Finally, the horns of her dilemma impale her squarely whether she writes out of her experience or whether she does not.

Another factor that has distracted attention from her

work to her life is Wharton's expatriation to France. It is often seen as either a confirmation of anti-democratic inclinations or a crucial artistic error that cut her off from her native material. Percy Lubbock, her friend and contemporary biographer, writes in his often acidic memoir: "She had all too summarily cut her own roots, and wouldn't admit that you can't do that and continue to draw the sap of sound experience."[20] Louis Auchincloss writes that her expatriation resulted in her having ". . . lost not only her country but her talent,"[21] and sees a resulting diminution of her powers reflected even before such important novels as Custom of the Country and The Age of Innocence. Blake Nevius, who is to a large degree generous to Wharton in his influential study, has called her the ". . . least American of our important novelists,"[22] though her essential subject matter and all her major characters were distinctly American and remained so until the end of her career.

It was in Europe, after all, that she found that fusion of literature and life she had been seeking to counter the anti-intellectualism of the environment in which she had grown up. "In Paris, no one could live without literature," she recalled, "and the fact that I was a professional writer, instead of frightening my fashionable friends, interested them."[23] Though her sense of America is often conveyed in a satiric vein, almost always in an ironic one, her work is no more "not American" than that of other writers, many of

them expatriates, who undertake to prick us when we err. Her portraits of American life may illustrate its weaknesses: its failure to draw on the anchoring influences of tradition, its easy acquiescence to the conforming instinct and group mentality, the darker side of its energy and adventurousness--opportunism and avarice. But her perspective is subversive, undercutting, only in the admonitory way serious art is inevitably so--as an outcry against error and weakness, an exhortation to be better. And her portraits of European culture and character are not idealized, but are fair-handed estimates of strengths and failings. Whether she lost touch with her sources, and ultimately with her gifts, is a question demanding close and exhaustive consideration. But she never really came home again, and while it is one thing to be an expatriate, it is perhaps another to be an expatriate of her unique variety--expatriate and aristocrat--and that Wharton was both these things at the time she was both may finally account for a more marked adversary relation between artist and critic than many other writers experienced.

A less clearly traceable reason for Wharton's ambiguous position in American literature is the degree to which she was penalized as an artist because she was a woman. Gore Vidal believes her sex was a very serious detriment to the objective evaluation of her writing because, "For a very long time, it was an article of faith that no woman could be a major writer."[24] R. W. B. Lewis has also wondered if

her reputation might stand higher if she had been a man.[25] A few women writers, like Jane Austen and George Eliot, have come to be considered "major" literary figures, overcoming perhaps not entirely subconscious male bias in doing so. It is helpful to remember here Henry James' revealing comment cited earlier. From the beginning, in the judgment of her closest literary friend Wharton was subjected to extreme chauvinistic condescension. James praised her, after all, for her "diabolical little cleverness" and looked forward to getting "hold of the little lady" so he could give her the benefit of his wisdom and experience. Anyone examining even recent Wharton criticism must be struck by the frequency of the appearance of the word "little" in discussions of this or that "little" novel or story. The point is significant for its implication that sexism is an intangible but omnipresent factor in the critical response to women in general and to Wharton in particular. Walter J. Ong has suggested that the process of writing itself is a male-polarized activity very different from the "female" nature of oral discourse,[26] an idea which inherently implies resistance to the serious woman writer.

All this is not intended to establish that Wharton has been the victim of deliberately slighting chauvinist criticism. The persistent feeling of critics themselves, however, that she has not been adequately evaluated exists in large measure because her fiction has been viewed in the

distorting light of literary labels or too deeply in the shadow of its relation to her life and circumstances.

Since 1975, however, with the publication of Lewis's biography, the first to have access to extensive and previously inaccessible personal documents, much of what we thought we knew of her circumstances and character has been radically altered. That Wharton was far from being the emotionally repressed woman many thought incapable of experiencing first hand the breadth of sensibility and experience expressed in her novels, that she was an astute and far-sighted judge not only of the writing of others, but perhaps even of her own, that she was more generous to her friends than some of them were to her, at least in their public recollections of her, and that she foresaw and tried to forestall an inaccurate assessment of her life and art--all this has been illuminated by the primary materials and penetrating analysis Lewis has provided.

For a while after the publication of the Lewis biography, there appeared to be a new, albeit temporary, flurry of critical interest in Wharton, a revisionist interest that to some degree avoided many of the traditional predispositions that had clouded previous analysis. Perhaps inevitably, <u>because</u> of the radically altered biographical information Lewis' study revealed, much of this critical scrutiny retained its essential focus on Wharton's life and personality as they are reflected in her work rather than on her writing

as the primary entity. For example, the other most serious and noted recent study, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's A Feast of Words, has such a focus, as may be noted even by the way the book was summarized in the New York Times Book Review: "Wolff's . . . discovery is that the real life--the lonely childhood, the socially correct marriage and disgraceful divorce, the late love affair--not only fed directly into Edith Wharton's work, but that the fictions instructed the novelist's life."[27] Such a study enlarges and qualifies what we know about the connections between the life and the art, but the emphasis is still unbalanced; the connection is the focus, and where the connection between real life and art is tenuous, the work may be misapprehended.

Even if these substantial obstacles to objective analysis were to be overcome, justice to Edith Wharton might remain elusive because of the prevailing attitudes of the most recent critical speculation. At least superficially, Mrs. Wharton's kind of writing is simply not fashionable because it seems at odds with the neo-oral, anti-ironic, open-systemed preferences of the literary-structuralist milieu.

In Interfaces of the Word, Walter J. Ong has articulated in the broad contexts of the evolution of culture and language a fundamental motivating concern of this milieu--an uncomfortable recognition of the pervasive alienation that accompanies technological progress. This alienation seems particularly visible as a result of the inventions of writing,

print, and electronic verbalization--in other words, of all aspects of post-oral literary development. Such developments include not only process but literary technique, not only, for example, the movement from orality to chirography but from mimesis to irony. "The earlier interpretations of literature and of art generally," Ong writes, "are typically mimetic: art imitates nature. The later interpretations are generally ironic: art fends off nature and thus itself becomes suspect, even to itself."[28] Surely this statement implies a value judgment that irony as a technique, because it puts distance between art and nature (and additionally between artist and reader), is somehow dubious. Irony, in other words, is alienating, as are ". . . any technological transformations of the word . . ." which ". . . alienated man from the real word, the living spoken word, and thus from himself."[29]

One of the fundamental contentions of the present study, that Wharton's technique is <u>always</u>, to varying degrees, ironic, may alone explain most current critical resistance to, and subsequent undervaluation of, Wharton's fiction. Although critics have tended to ignore in her work the crucial function of irony as a unifying device (and this has resulted in widely divergent readings of her narratives and uncertainties about their meanings), many critics have noted its presence. Unfortunate for Wharton is Professor Ong's conclusion that, "Despite the high incidence of irony as a

literary technique and as a critical preoccupation, there are signs . . . that we are increasingly critical of irony as a basic strategy of literature and art, and critical of other distancing strategies as well. . . ."[30]

Paradoxically perhaps, irony may be under certain conditions an integrating strategy rather than an alienating one. The contemporary call for a literature which integrates writer and reader rather than dividing them, which breaks down, in the words of Roland Barthes, the ". . . pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader . . ."[31] and casts the reader as creator instead of passive receiver, should not automatically exclude Wharton's fiction from consideration and praise.

For irony, as we shall see concretely in the next chapter, can be a cohering mechanism, a means of interpreting data and establishing values. It may also be a bonding strategy, and in both these contexts its nature is integrative rather than alienating.

In Wharton's sensibility, irony seems very early to have been a significant means of perceiving. Her first novelette, Fast and Loose, written when she was fourteen, is an indication of just how early an ironic vision was already a part of her self-expression.[32] And speaking much later of

her friendship with Henry James, she wrote: "The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humour or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching search-lights."[33] It is unlikely that someone who recognized the value of irony so clearly as a basis of one of the two most important relationships of her life would have been unaware of its potential as a medium of communication to a wider audience, as a bonding mechanism between herself and the readers she wished to reach. The "marriage of true minds" resulting from identically pitched senses of irony implies active and creative participation of both writer and reader, sender and receiver, owner and customer. The techniques that produce this exact pitch of irony, making possible integration and creative complicity of writer and reader in Wharton's work, are the subject of this study.

The richness of irony traditionally results from its power to provide multiple levels of meaning and ambiguities of character and theme. At the most basic level, it does this by surprising juxtapositions of various kinds. One such incongruous juxtaposition--habitual and absolutely unignorable in Wharton's fiction--occurs when a character's view of himself and his circumstances is measured against the author's (and the reader's) view of both. This is classic dramatic irony, and the most striking use of it in Wharton

is its consistent application to the character or characters who represent point of view. The reader is expected to, and in fact must, recognize this ironic element, because the coherence of the work depends on it. This technique is not unlike Robert Browning's in the dramatic monologues, and Wharton herself provides evidence of Browning's influence. Describing in her autobiography the important authors of her adolescence, Wharton says about Browning that he came to be ". . . one of the great Awakeners of my childhood,"[34] and she credits Browning with the plan for the narrative structure of Ethan Frome.[35]

Another "juxtaposition" resulting in ironic effect is the manner and degree in which Wharton commingles elements of romance, realism, and naturalism. She was, after all, writing across decades of a transitional phase of American literature. Ultimately, every American writer was confronted by the often conflicting demands of these attitudes toward life and art. One of the most compelling questions which may be asked of any writer, from Melville and Twain, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, to contemporary novelists, is precisely how and to what degree each is a beneficiary of romanticism, realism, and naturalism--and particularly how they appear and overlap in the fiction of each. In Twain's Huckleberry Finn, for example, all three exist at once, and the tensions among them contribute immeasurably to complexity of theme and technique.

Wharton also employs patterns of ironic imagery to tighten plot and reinforce theme. With her developing artistic control, these patterns become increasingly dense and sophisticated. Primary patterns of such imagery may even be carried over from one book to another. The effectiveness of ironic imagery depends on the close attention of the reader, but at its best in Wharton, this technique closes the weave of the fabric of the narrative and subtly and perhaps even subliminally "surrounds" the reader with the story's context.

These are the basic elements of Wharton's ironic technique, and their identification is a first step in the reader's full participation in and comprehension of her work. They are components that engender creative partnership between writer and reader--not the "divorce" that Barthes and others decry, but the "marriage" that Wharton pursues.

If, however paradoxically, Wharton's ironic method may be viewed as integrative rather than alienating, it does not follow that the concept of alienation has no relevance to her fiction. In fact, a further contention of this study is that alienation is the crucial unifying theme threaded throughout her writing, a motif so insistently explored, in fact, that it, rather than manners or social commentary or any other motivation, is the central concern of the artist. At first glance, this concern might seem almost a cliche since

the concept of alienation is so pervasively present in almost every context of modern life and so constant a part of the zeitgeist of the latter half of twentieth century experience that its very familiarity threatens to diminish its meaning and significance. And yet the very anxieties of contemporary theorists like Ong and Barthes--their discomfited apprehension that alienation, isolating and disjunctive, exists even in the most basic functions of language and consciousness--prove that it is not a cliche but an inevitability.

Very early, Edith Wharton fashioned a body of work around her instinctive sense of the complex and lonely solitude of the human spirit, of the almost unbridgeable distances between individuals alien to one another and to themselves, and of the profound longings of such individuals for continuity and coherence. Her characters are not merely fossils of an interesting but bygone social milieu; they are representatives of the human dilemma, linked most profoundly not by their struggles within confining class structures but by their common and inescapable consciousness of isolation and their often bewildered, often thwarted, attempts to break through it. Language and love, the usual mediums of communication and communion, rarely work for Wharton's characters. But her exploration of alienation as a fact of life, the means of that exploration, and the conclusions she draws are the most promising beginning places if justice to Edith Wharton is to come.

Wharton has not deserved the enduring misapprehension that only two or three of her novels and a few anthologized short stories constitute the consumable distillation of forty years' work, and that the major value even of these lies in their evocation of a bygone social milieu and their identity as social commentary. Also unjust and critically unproductive are the views of some contemporary revisionists that her ironic perspective and the darkness of her vision are limitations of art and sensibility finally not to be overcome. Irving Howe, for example, has taxed her for failing to give ". . . imaginative embodiment to the human will seeking to resist defeat or move beyond it. She lacked James's ultimate serenity . . . his gift for summoning in images of conduct the purity of children and the selflessness of girls. She lacked the vocabulary of happiness."[36] But surely "serenity" and a "vocabulary of happiness" should not be inevitable as measures of artistic achievement, and are not in the cases of other writers. Mrs. Wharton's vision of life and the human condition was prescient, personal, and essentially ironic rather than tragic, and her stories are shifting prisms wherein the reader is presented facet after facet of that vision in the refracted light of altered perspectives.

Her work is unified thematically by her concern with alienation as a fundamental principle to be contended with in the lives of her characters. It is unified formally by

an ironic method that seeks to break down the alienation between writer and reader to make that vision fully accessible. The purpose of this study, focusing on Wharton's most effective novels and novellas spanning the full length of her career, is to trace the nature and development of that coherence of theme and technique and, by pointing out its effectiveness in these works, to provide a more accurate and thereby more generous estimation of Wharton's achievement.

Early in her career, Wharton complained that she was not satisfied with her writing: ". . . There's not a single sentence in the book with natural magic in it--not an inevitable phrase."[37] Finally, she was able to conjure in her writing a good deal of "natural magic"--that quality of inevitable rightness that all good writing has in common.

NOTES

[1] Wharton died on August 11, 1937. Her first book of fiction, The Greater Inclination, appeared in March, 1899, when Wharton was thirty-seven years old.

[2] James W. Tuttleton, "Edith Wharton: An Essay in Bibliography," Resources for American Literary Study, III, (1973), 179. This is an invaluable and comprehensive evaluative checklist of critical and biographical Wharton scholarship.

[3] "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, June 19, 1938, rpt. in The Wound and the Bow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 195.

[4] "Edith Wharton: Memoir by an English Friend," Classics and Commercials (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, Inc., 1950), p. 417.

[5] "Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton," Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 1.

[6] Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. xi-xiv.

[7] Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James' Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton," Scrutiny, December, 1938, is an example of the first tendency. Alfred Kazin's references to James and Wharton in On Native Grounds (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1942), is an example of the other.

[8] Quoted in Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton (1925; rpt. Folcroft, Pennsylvania: The Folcroft Press, 1969), pp. 5-6.

[9] A Backward Glance (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 156.

[10] See Tuttleton's summary, p. 185. Also see Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," The Liberal Imagination (New York: Viking Press, 1951) and Gary Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1975).

[11] "The Great American Novel" Yale Review, July 1927, 652.

[12] "Of Writers and Class: In Praise of Edith Wharton," The Atlantic, February 1978, p. 64.

[13] The Pacific Review, January 1921, rpt. in Howe, p. 152.

[14] Ibid., p. 154.

[15] "The House of Mirth Revisited," Harper's Bazaar 81, December 1947, p. 127.

[16] On Native Grounds, p. 82.

[17] Ibid., p. 81.

[18] A Backward Glance, p. 296.

[19] See Abigail Ann Hamblen, "Edith Wharton in New England," New England Quarterly, June 1965, 239-244; Nancy R. Leach, "New England in the Stories of Edith Wharton," New England Quarterly, March 1957, 90-98; and J. D. Thomas, "Marginalia on Ethan Frome," American Literature, November 1955; 405-409.

[20] Portrait of Edith Wharton (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), p. 151.

[21] "Edith Wharton and Her New Yorkers," Reflections of a Jacobite (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 13.

[22] Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p. 25.

[23] A Backward Glance, p. 261.

[24] "Of Writers and Class: In Praise of Edith Wharton," p. 65.

[25] Edith Wharton: A Biography, p. xiii.

[26] Walter J. Ong, Interfaces of the Word (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 28-29.

[27] Maureen Howard, "Readings of Edith Wharton," New York Times Book Review, April 17, 1977, pp. 14 and 44.

[28] Ong, pp. 48-49.

[29] Ibid., p. 47.

[30] Ibid., p. 301.

[31] S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4.

[32] Redbook, April 1978, pp. 227-242.

[33] A Backward Glance, p. 173.

[34] Ibid., p. 66.

[35] Ethan Frome (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. ix.

[36] Howe, pp. 17-18.

[37] Quoted in Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, p. 82.

CHAPTER II

A closer look at Mrs. Wharton's irony--what it demands of the reader, how it connects form and content--is benefited by some general observations about the nature of irony. D. C. Muecke and Wayne Booth in their full-length studies each recognize its integrative, rather than alienating, potential. Booth notes, for example, that far from being elitist and excluding, irony creates a community of readers who recognize its presence, agree about its significance, and believe that they and the author share the same view. If, to use a simple example, one declares that Nixon is dishonest, those for whom this is too strong a condemnation will refuse to concur and be lost. If, on the other hand, one says that Nixon is as honest as the day is long, almost all will understand the point, accepting in varying degrees Nixon's dishonesty. And a further bond is created by the rewarding self-satisfaction that auditor feels because he has understood the speaker's concealed meaning. Irony, therefore, may foster common ground, approval, understanding, and a community of readers. The ironic author invites the reader into complicity, and the

reader's "alignment" with him is heightened by their observing together in collusion.[1]

Irony may be, in fact, the most pragmatic means of scanning and evaluating an often disturbing reality. D. C. Muecke observes: "Irony may be not merely the natural or merely the best way but perhaps the only way to deal with life. . . . One must separate oneself from a world which is dead, illusory, unmanageable, contradictory, or absurd. But unless one commits suicide, one must also accept it."[2] Muecke's description of the symbiotic tension of separation and integration (the rejection of one perspective of values and the acceptance of another) fundamental to irony as a technique, applies to an identical tension in Wharton's subject matter, for precisely this tension is at the heart of the dilemmas confronted by her characters.

The technique of irony prods Wharton's readers into seeing, with her, life beneath the surface, under the line. They must separate themselves from appearance and accept a new construction in order to understand the writer's concealed meaning. For irony is not only or always satiric; it may also be heuristic,[3] encouraging readers to reach on their own the conclusion that things are not so simple or certain as they appear. Wharton's irony is heuristic in exactly this sense, first overcoming the separation of writer and reader to ultimately help the reader discover and confront within the narratives profound and potentially threat-

ening "separations" which carry over from the fictive lives of the characters into his or her own.

The demands the ironic writer places upon the reader are crucial ones. In fact, the ironist must, as in Henry James' often quoted observation, fictionalize the audience, create the readers he (or she) requires, just as he creates his characters.[4] Like any writer, the ironist not only projects an audience, one that he has, in a sense, inherited from others who have come before him; he may also alter that audience and, altered, pass it forward to writers who will come after him. "Thus it was," says Walter Ong, "that Samuel Clemens in Life on the Mississippi could not merely project the audience that many journalistic writers about the Midwestern rivers had brought into being, but could also shape it to his demands. . . . Mark Twain's reader is asked to take a special kind of hold on himself and on life."[5]

Edith Wharton's audience is inherited from a long tradition of ironic writers, quite consciously from Browning as we have seen, and also from Hawthorne, whose ambiguity forces the reader to balance more precariously than ever before in American fiction between what is said and what is meant, and to choose among a number of constructions that which will provide most reliable access to the author's complex concealed meaning. Wharton projects an audience extraordinarily sensitive to nuance and inflection, to minute and delicately subtle shadings of pitch and tone--to what J. D.

Salinger calls in his own characters the "fine calibrations of personality." Her readers must be simultaneously participants in the fictive life of the text and mere observers of it, drawn into it but remaining separated from it, accepting yet constantly resisting surface reality, so that Wharton's concealed meaning may not be lost on them. In fact, Wharton casts her readers in the role of individuals upon whom nothing is lost. She shapes an audience with acutely developed sensibilities, habitually and consciously attuned to and rewarded by the consistent discovery of intriguing and varied ironic juxtapositions that build toward complex but coherent meaning.

Consistency is crucial here; the reader who responds to such demands and accepts the role the author has projected must not be disappointed by the result. In fact, the author's consistent irony--what Booth calls the "Ironist's voice as context"--creates an appetite for more, which becomes essential to the effect the author intends, and ultimately may lead readers on to work after work even after they have exhausted the best and must plow through inferior material.[6] In this way, too, therefore, irony tends to bond writer and reader rather than alienate them. And in the case of Edith Wharton, it enhances the reader's apprehension of the coherence of her work as a body, a coherence that, as we shall see, derives from theme as well as technique.

In what ways, if at all, does Edith Wharton alter the audience she inherits? Although she has not traditionally

been considered an innovator, Wharton does significantly shape and transform the audience she passes on to later ironic writers by expanding her reader's expectations and assumptions about the connection between realism and irony. Specifically, her commingling of elements of realism and romanticism in particular ways for ironic effect--her combining of the real with the exotic, the mysterious, and the occasionally bizarre--prefigures and prepares the way for the grotesque style later practiced by Sherwood Anderson, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and others. O'Connor will, in fact, later describe the process of fiction itself and the working of the grotesque particularly in the exact terms of that commingling. In her significantly titled collection of essays on writing called Mystery and Manners, O'Connor writes: "There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You can't say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context."[7]

And her description of what constitutes the grotesque, the fundamental ingredient which determines the shape of her own audience half a century after Wharton, recognizes an identical mixture:

> In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the

> ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns toward mystery and the unexpected.[8]

The grotesque is, after all, a specialized mixture of romance and realism, usually relying heavily on irony, and meant to throw the commonplace into sharp relief by distortion and exaggeration. Examples of exactly these conditions show up in a number of Wharton's novels and stories as she experiments with ironic effect (and in so doing, expands the dimensions of those effects and simultaneously the readers' expectations concerning them). Examples may be found in the literally grotesque description of the Mountain and its inhabitants in Summer, in certain bizarre images in Ethan Frome, and in the short stories "Velvet Ear Pads," "The Young Gentlemen," with its dwarf twins, and "After Holbein," an eccentric tale whose senile heroine wears purple hair and orthopedic shoes with the formal dinner gown which is a vestige of her bygone days as a society hostess and whose aged hero suffers a fate almost identical to that of the protagonist of O'Connor's "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." O'Connor and other writers who employ the grotesque as a fundamental device profit from Wharton's earlier excursions onto the terrain.

This facet of Wharton's ironic technique, however, is a fairly mature element of her style. A comparison of two early, consecutively-placed short stories, "The Mission of Jane" and "The Other Two," not only provides clear examples of the nature of her ironic method at the beginning of her career, but also illustrates explicitly the basic demands she makes upon her audience, gives evidence even at this early point of her thematic preoccupation with isolation and alienation, and indicates the potential for critical misreading which becomes possible when the consistent presence of irony is overlooked.

Both stories rely on simple ironies of situation and characterization; in one, the effect is essentially comic, in the other, much more serious. In each case, however, Wharton's primary demand is that the reader must be conscious of the dramatic irony applied to the characters whose points of view "inform" the narrative. From the outset, Wharton provides signs of incongruity between the characters' views of themselves and the writer's (and reader's) view. As Muecke suggests there must be, present in the characterizations of each story is the "double-layered or two-storey [sic] phenomenon" in which a victim is ". . . confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own."[9] In "The Mission of Jane," the ironic victimization of Lethbury, the character conveying point of view, is easier to recognize than that of Waythorn

in the second story. But even at this early point in her career, Wharton attempts to project an audience whose sense of irony is indeed pitched in exactly the same key as her own, an audience sensitive to the stories' multiple levels and concealed significance.

"The Mission of Jane"[10] parodies the contemporary folk notion that a child may give life to a dead marriage. The Lethburys' adopted daughter Jane does eventually accomplish her mission, but only ironically--by drawing her parents together in self-defense against her. The story spans the years between Mrs. Lethbury's uncharacteristically steadfast insistence that she and her husband adopt the baby girl she hopes will fill the empty space between them to Jane's marriage and their successful deliverance from their daughter's smug and didactic domestic tyranny. It is not their developing love of Jane that creates a bond between them but their mutual discomfort as Jane grows into a perfectly good, perfectly unpleasant young woman who shows every sign of staying with them forever. When miraculously, Jane is married and gone, husband and wife understand each other at last:

> He went up to her, and an answering impulse made her lay a hand on his arm. He held it there a moment.
>
> "Let us go off and have a jolly little dinner at a restaurant," he proposed.
>
> There had been a time when such a suggestion would have surprised her to the verge of disapproval; but now she agreed to it at once.
>
> "Oh, that would be nice," she murmured with a great sigh of relief and assuagement (p. 68).

Mrs. Lethbury, foolish and simple, is certainly a target of Wharton's irony. But Mr. Lethbury, from whose perspective we see most often, is also a target, a major one, who exactly fulfills the condition of being "confidently unaware of there being a . . . point of view that invalidates his own." At the story's opening, he views his wife with tolerant contempt: "Her body had been privileged to outstrip her mind, and the two, as it seemed to Lethbury, were destined to travel together through an eternity of girlishness" (p. 37). When she marshals the courage to announce her desire that they adopt a child, he is only bemused: "If there had been the least hint of hallucination in her transparent gaze--but no: it was as clear, as shallow, as easily fathomable as when he had first suffered the sharp surprise of striking bottom in it" (p. 41).

Lethbury is an early version of what will become a very familiar Wharton hero: the man who overestimates his own resources while underestimating his mate's because she does not live up to his expectations. Wharton illuminates early the reality of Mrs. Lethbury's limitations, but that ironic beam is not directly solely at the wife. Lethbury's cynicism and smug superiority stand in the way of even a superficial understanding of his wife's feelings. When she confesses her disappointment at not having children, he is surprised and put off: "It seemed curious now that he had never thought of her taking it in that way, had never surmised

any hidden depths beneath her outspread obviousness" (pp. 41-42). His response is condescension, but her self-evaluation is infinitely truer and more honest and poignant as she excuses him for never caring to know: ". . . A man has so many occupations; and women who are clever--or very handsome--I suppose that's an occupation too. Sometimes I've felt that when dinner was ordered I had nothing to do till next day" (p. 42). The irony in this exchange is clearly directed not chiefly at her for being satisfied with so little, because self-awareness is a penance of its own, but at him for being unaware, for being supercilious and totally blind to her unhappiness.

The story is finally about how he comes to value his wife, as she does him, in a new light. Later, he will falteringly and not very willingly recognize that he has underestimated her (and it will be she who brings about not only their liberation, but their liberation with honor). But the process is neither sudden nor simple. "It occurred to him that he had not given her enough things to laugh about lately," he perceives guiltily. But in the next instant he is backsliding toward his habitual condescension: "But then she needed such very elementary things: she was as difficult to amuse as a savage. He concluded that he was not sufficiently simple" (p. 43). His conclusion is fatuous, unconsciously ironic, and intended to comment upon him. Wharton pokes fun at the situation in which both are involved and

for which both are in some way responsible, but he is the one whose blindness, whose innocence in Muecke's delineation, evokes her surest and subtlest irony.

In Part II, Lethbury--who, after all, is no villain--is becoming aware, but he cannot, at this point, bring himself to value his wife fully or even fairly. His self-centeredness rests on his pride in the ". . . somewhat rarefied atmosphere of his perceptions" (p. 45). In this, too, he is like other Wharton heroes--Selden in The House of Mirth for one--who use what they believe to be the superior life of the mind possible to them as men to define the barriers (and implied limitations) of relationships with women. Lethbury's security lies in an inner refuge, ". . . a world of fine shadings and the nicest proportions, where impulse seldom set a blundering foot, and the feast of reason was undisturbed by an intemperate flow of soul. To such a banquet his wife naturally remained uninvited" (p. 46). Reason without impulse, without soul: this is the inner world Lethbury cultivates and from which his wife is barred.

The image of refuge is a crucial theme throughout Wharton's work; it is employed ironically to stand for the terrible loneliness of the human spirit and to suggest, not safety and shelter, but alienation and confinement. It is an interior preserve, fortified by barricades which keep

out intruders but also isolate the personality within, as in Lethbury's case. He, so pompous and secure in his own inner self, has condescendingly perceived that his wife has an inner self as well, and his description suggests simultaneously that condescension and his dawning perception of his wife as a real person:

> Formerly she had been to him a mere bundle of negations, a labyrinth of dead walls and bolted doors. There was nothing behind the walls, and the doors led no whither: he had sounded and listened often enough to be sure of that. Now he felt like a traveller who, exploring some ancient ruin, comes on an inner cell, intact amid the general dilapidation, and painted with images which reveal the forgotten uses of the building (p. 46).

He has sounded the outer walls, perhaps, but never really tried to penetrate to the inner cell where his wife really dwells. The ruin and waste he senses are in some way a result of his prideful satisfaction in keeping her outside his own interior life, and his egotism has been in large part responsible for their estrangement.

But Wharton has already shown us that Mrs. Lethbury is painfully aware of her own separation. Elsewhere, Wharton seems to suggest that this lonely condition may be a fact intrinsic to womanhood. In an early story called "The Fulness of Life," an apparently reliable character observes:

> I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall,

> through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.[11]

As we shall see, variations of this image of confinement and isolation appear recurringly in novel after novel, creating conflicts within Wharton's characters which, in turn, engender multiple ironies of situation and theme.

Despite Mrs. Lethbury's hopes, Jane's adoption fails to complete the newly established connection between husband and wife. Mrs. Lethbury does not bloom and become beloved in her husband's only partially opened eyes. She changes, but only, he observes dryly, ". . . like a dried sponge put in water: she expanded but she did not change her shape" (p. 50). His foremost reaction is alarm as ". . . in a monstrous fusion of identity, she became herself, himself, and Jane" (p. 51). Mrs. Lethbury does, in an ironic and not very healthful way, overcome her loneliness, but only by submerging her own identity in an effort to realize the ideal of "family" the adoption of child was supposed to bring about.

But Lethbury's initial alarm is nothing compared to that inspired by Jane's growing up into the kind of girl who longs for nothing more than a lifetime to mold her parents' characters more suitably to her own taste, and their real

unification comes when Jane providentially snags a suitor, and they at last have an opportunity to get her off their hands. Suddenly, mutual understanding, intuitive and profound, comes to them as they struggle to bring about the marriage which is so crucially in their common interest.

Wharton reserves the heroic role not for Lethbury but for his wife, who finds the courage to warn the prospective bridegroom even though that might mean having Jane on their hands again. Afterwards, Lethbury salutes her: ". . . an answering chord in him thrilled to his wife's heroism" (p. 65). His condescension has given way to admiration and empathy. With Jane married and out of their lives, the Lethburys are left with a new appreciation of one another.

The comic tone and happy ending of "The Mission of Jane," suggesting that communication and common interest can at least to some degree overcome separation, are absent from "The Other Two,"[12] which directly follows in this collection. Wharton's ironic method, however, is consistent: Waythorn, the character conveying the narrative's point of view, is an important target of Wharton's irony, a fact which must not be lost on the reader if the story is to be coherently perceived.

Critical interpretation of this story has frequently failed to recognize the consistency of Wharton's method, seeing instead the irony directed squarely and exclusively

at Alice Waythorn, whose three marriages, this reading suggests, show her to be vulgar, callous, identity-less and self-serving--in Waythorn's ultimate judgment, "as easy as an old shoe" (p. 98).

Blake Nevius, for example, discusses the story as a study of manners and sees Waythorn correctly interpreting the circumstances which lead to an awakening that estranges him from his wife:

> . . . The revelation . . . taken together with the known fact of Alice Waythorn's callous treatment of her first two husbands, indicates not only the temporal progress she has made but the boundless extent of her ambitions, and in the concluding episode of the story it helps to explain the vulgar ease with which she accommodates herself to the normally embarrassing situation of having to play hostess simultaneously to her present husband and her two ex-husbands.[13]

The victim of Wharton's irony in Nevius' view is exclusively Mrs. Waythorn.

Both R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggest that the story's theme concerns identity, but only Wolff questions even to a small degree Waythorn's ultimate judgment of his wife's character. Lewis asserts, on the other hand, that:

> The story's climax is the belated discovery by Waythorn, his wife's third husband, that the woman he had thought so unique was (the figure is precise if disconcerting) like "a shoe that too many feet had worn . . . Alice Haskett--Alice Varick--Alice Waythorn--she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a

> little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown gods abide."[14]

Wolff notes Waythorn's initial pleasure in his wife's pliancy and comments on the significance of point of view: "So long as we are allowed the luxury of the masculine point of view . . . we can permit ourselves to rest in relative comfort with the notion of the amiable Mrs. Waythorn as a unique perversion of the human condition."[15] But Wolff decides finally that the fault lies in Alice Waythorn, an ". . . unwilling or unwitting victim[s] of some general social injunction concerning the behavior of women,"[16] a woman who has sacrificed her sense of self entirely to the goal of pleasing others.

These readings draw a very different conclusion about the story's meaning than that which results if Wharton is given credit for an ironic method consistently applied. "It is clear that the same thing never happens to any two people, and that each witness of a given incident will report it differently," Wharton observed in The Writing of Fiction.[17] It is a statement she will repeat and expand, and it asserts her own cognizance of the crucial function of point of view and its ironic potential. She is also attentive to the necessity of keeping the author's omniscience out of the reader's view. Verisimilitude, she believes, exists in proportion to the writer's ability to avoid ". . . drawing back to scrutinize his characters from the outside as the

avowed Showman holding his puppets' strings."[18] Her fiction, then, almost always demonstrating her unwillingness to intrude in her own voice and fundamentally mindful of the power of perspective to give shape and substance, obliges the reader to excavate, to perceive beneath the line. As Wayne Booth points out, "All authors invite us to construct some sort of picture of their view . . . but ironic authors obviously offer that invitation more aggressively, and we must answer it more actively. . . ."[19] The story's double layers and its concealed meaning are situated differently when the "element of innocence" is more accurately identified.

Waythorn, newly married to the former Alice Varick, provides the story's principal testimony. The narrative begins on the first night of the couple's return from a wedding trip cut short by the illness of Mrs. Waythorn's daughter from a previous marraige. At this point, Waythorn has found in his wife and his marriage everything he could have hoped for:

> He was not so old to be sure--his glass gave him little more than the five-and-thirty years to which his wife confessed--but he had fancied himself already in the temperate zone; yet here he was listening for her step with a tender sense of all it symbolized, with some old trail of verse about the garlanded nuptial doorposts floating through his enjoyment of the pleasant room and the good dinner just beyond it (p. 71).

These first impressions are significant for a number of reasons. Waythorn has been a bachelor and has married

only as he approaches middle age, when he believes himself already in the "temperate zone," a term which appears elsewhere in Wharton and almost always signifies a life defined by the absence of the stronger emotions--convention-bound, conservative, to some degree repressed. Further, he is unfamiliar with the realities of marriage and, in fact, has a somewhat romanticized conception of it.

At any rate, he is so far well pleased with his wife, despite his knowledge that she has been married twice before. It was, after all, her excellence as a mother that was, in Waythorn's eyes, her "decisive charm" (p. 72). In her cheerful steadiness he sees a happy contrast to his own personality: "Her composure was restful to him; it acted as ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities" (p. 72). At this stage, in fact, he recognizes without qualification his wife's particular virtues: "His own life had been a gray one, from temperament rather than circumstance, and he had been drawn to her by the unperturbed gaiety which kept her fresh and elastic at an age when most women's activities are growing either slack or febrile" (p. 72).

From this point, the plot traces the process by which Waythorn comes to despise these exact qualities of stability and elasticity. Though, as in "The Mission of Jane," the wife does not entirely escape Wharton's ironic aim, the story ultimately concerns not the vulgar ambition of a climbing woman, but the lost contentment of a man who allows

his own pride and insecurity to poison his perspective.

Waythorn, after all, knows his wife's past and has supposedly discounted the innuendo that has inevitably attached itself to a divorced woman. The circumstances surrounding the divorces are extenuating, the first the result of a juvenile attachment, the second obtained on grounds of the husband's adultery. Waythorn ". . . had an amused confidence in his wife's ability to justify herself. . . . He had the sense of having found refuge in a richer, warmer nature than his own. . . (p. 74).

But circumstance and business make inevitable the Waythorns' frequent contact with both former husbands, and Waythorn's confidence quickly begins to erode. The significant point is that, though Alice Varick makes some mistakes, she does not change in her affectionate regard for her husband and her steadfast desire to please him. After, for example, Waythorn returns home following a day in which two chance encounters with Varick, the second husband, have brought out his initial insidious misgivings, he is immediately reassured by his wife's serenity: "It struck him with a curious pang that she was very happy in being with him, so happy that she found a childish pleasure in rehearsing the trivial incidents of her day" (p. 82). Recognizable here is the condescending complacence we have seen in the earlier story; we should also keep in mind that this passage is, after all, written by a woman. "She looked singularly soft

and girlish in her rosy-pale dress," he thinks, "against the dark leather of one of his bachelor armchairs. A day earlier the contrast would have charmed him" (p. 82). The tone of these reflections is ironic because they subtly but unmistakably illuminate Waythorn's shallow and assailable smugness.

As the evening progresses, he fluctuates erratically between the self-satisfaction of possessorship and doubt. Though Alice's perfect "elasticity" and adaptability will later be seen by her husband as indictments of her character, in this scene she makes a humiliating mistake as she absent-mindedly offers her new husband coffee as her former husband liked it. It is a ghastly error but not a particularly sinister one, and her response seems sincerely remorseful: "Their eyes met, and she blushed a sudden agonized red" (p. 83).

As Waythorn's business contacts with Varick and the first husband's visits to his daughter continue, Waythorn's impressions of his wife come increasingly to depend on his reactions to her former husbands. Subtly, Wharton illuminates Alice's predicament: she is inescapably diminished in her husband's eyes not because of what she herself is or does, but because of her husband's suppositions about her past relations with Varick and Haskett. For example, Haskett's "made-up tie attached with elastic" condemns him, so far as Waythorn is concerned, as being less than a gentleman, and this perception immediately reflects upon Alice: "Waythorn

was exasperated by his own paltriness, but the fact of the tie expanded, forced itself on him, became as it were the key to Alice's past" (p. 90). And the fact that she herself shows no mark of the commonness Waythorn despises in Haskett is equally damning: "If she had denied being married to Haskett she could hardly have stood more convicted of duplicity than in this obliteration of the self which had been his [Haskett's] wife" (p. 91). And she is triply condemned by Waythorn's inability to cast Haskett as a villain: if he wasn't, Waythorn's logic is that she must have been. The sensitive reader, however, viewing from a more objective perspective, finds Waythorn's estimation of his wife's character unreasonable and unjust since it seems based more on his insecurities than her actual misconduct.

More damning still is Waythorn's belated discovery that Alice has lied about seeing Haskett on his first visit to their daughter. The lie comes about only after Waythorn expresses his disapproval--after the fact--of their meeting. Waythorn never doubts his wife's fidelity, or even really her honesty; he blames her for her failure to "divine" his intangible and unspoken objection: "He was sure she would not have seen Haskett that first day if she had divined that Waythorn would object, and the fact that she did not divine it was almost as disagreeable to the latter as the discovery that she had lied to him" (p. 93).

Waythorn thinks of himself as an idealist, but this kind of idealism is a distortion that convicts his wife on even less than circumstantial evidence. Like Browning's Duke, Waythorn chooses never to stoop and never confronts his wife with a single instance of behavior or attitude that evokes in him feelings that amount to outright disgust. The very qualities which were the basis of his initial attraction have become the foundation of an even stronger revulsion. One must look below the surface to the irony Wharton applies to Waythorn's complaint that, "He could have forgiven her for blunders, for excesses; for resisting Haskett, for yielding to Varick; for anything but her acquiescence and her tact" (p. 99).

The story's climax comes when, by awkward chance, all four find themselves taking tea together in the Waythorn library. The situation is uncomfortable, perhaps even ludicrous, and Alice Waythorn's position is probably least comfortable of all:

> She stood drawing off her gloves, propitiatory and graceful, diffusing about her a sense of ease and familiarity in which the situation lost its grotesqueness. "But before talking business," she added brightly, "I'm sure everyone wants a cup of tea."
>
> She dropped into her low chair by the tea table, and the two visitors, as if drawn by her smile, advanced to receive the cups she held out.
>
> She glanced about for Waythorn, and he took the third cup with a laugh (p. 105).

One cannot imagine, with what one knows of the story to this point, that Wharton means Waythorn's laugh to be mirthful. The ending is, in fact, an indication not of his resignation to the realities of his situation, but of his sardonic and bitter misery in it. Alice Waythorn's "ease and familiarity" may be to some degree culpable; like Mrs. Lethbury, she does not entirely escape Wharton's ironic attention. But Waythorn's original condescension, his judgment of her, and his revulsion against the very qualities he initially prized are unjust and destructive. In the context of the story, she hasn't changed; Waythorn's feelings have. His unstable personality and his natural inclination to remain in the temperate zone collide with the tangible evidence of his wife's marital history and warp his perspective unhealthily. The alienation which results is not because his wife is as easy as an old shoe, but because he perceives her to be so. Consequently, the story's theme is more complex, more psychologically penetrating, than it is if the reader misplaces or overlooks the irony.

Once again, Wharton shows characters radically separated, alienated, and ultimately alone. At the story's beginning, Waythorn and Alice had apparently overcome the obstacles that separated them as individuals and had come together in a genuinely happy marriage. But the happiness of their union is temporary, undermined by Waythorn's altered vision of his wife's circumstances and personality which, ironically, had

made the marriage successful in the first place. His laughter at the story's end is not what it appears, actually signifying disenchantment rather than satisfaction. And if the story is to be fully coherent, the reader must understand that Waythorn's unobjective view is not completely reliable. Lack of objectivity and self-centeredness are often present in Wharton's protagonists and are indicators of her ironic treatment of them.

The risk taken by writers who choose irony as their principal mode of expression is that they will be misunderstood by readers who either don't recognize the irony when it is present or who do recognize it when it is not. The realm of irony is shifting ground where one must be cautious about taking anything for granted. Wayne Booth's best advice is that ". . . other things being equal, one should always accept the reading that contributes most to the quality of the work."[20]

"The Mission of Jane" and "The Other Two" are constructed upon ironies of characterization, image, and situation which Wharton consistently employed with increasing sophistication. Consequently, irony becomes a crucial element in the reliable interpretation of her fiction. Though her ironic method becomes more demanding as it becomes more sophisticated, the reader who can fulfill Wharton's demands is rewarded by access to the reading that contributes most to the quality of the work and comes closest to Booth's admonition. A

detailed delineation of how Wharton's method and combinations of ironic devices illuminate in her best fiction a coherence of purpose and theme is the subject of the remainder of this study.

NOTES

[1] Wayne C. Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 41.

[2] D. C. Muecke, The Compass of Irony (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1969), p. 235.

[3] Ibid., p. 233.

[4] This observation is noted in Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction, in Ong's Interfaces of the Word, and in Walker Gibson's Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy.

[5] Ong, p. 60.

[6] Booth, p. 176.

[7] Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 104.

[8] Ibid., p. 40.

[9] Muecke, pp. 19-20.

[10] The Descent of Man and Other Stories, pp. 37-68. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[11] Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton, Vol. I, R. W. B. Lewis (New York: Scribner's, 1968), pp. 12-20.

[12] The Descent of Man and Other Stories, pp. 71-105. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[13] Nevius, pp. 71-72.

[14] Lewis, p. 134.

[15] Wolff, p. 109.

[16] Ibid.

[17] The Writing of Fiction, p. 45.

[18] Ibid., p. 89.

[19] Booth, p. 41.

[20] Ibid., p. 184.

CHAPTER III

Lionel Trilling has suggested that, in the broadest sense, manners is the field of all fiction. "The novel is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul."[1] In Trilling's sense, manners means behavior, but it also means much more: "What I understand by manners is the culture's hum and buzz of implication. . . . It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions."[2] His comments, though they lie in a different context of thought than those of Ong and Barthes, seem to share their critical concern by acknowledgment of the alienation which is perhaps inherent in the nature of fiction, whose "field of research," like irony itself, involves multiple levels of meaning in which surface behavior--the hum and buzz of implication--indicates a deeper complex of motives. The artist's purpose is to render truly these deeper motivations, and for Wharton the half-uttered, unuttered, and unutterable are precisely the concern of fiction and a unifying preoccupation in all her work. As we have seen, she employs an ironic technique to shape in her

audience a fine sensitivity to implication and nuance. Irony is intended to overcome the barriers between writer and reader, to open a channel of communication so that she can "send" and her audience can "receive" what she believes are truths about alienation, separation, and isolation as human concerns.

From 1899, the year in which Scribner's brought out her first collection of short stories, to 1905, Wharton published a book a year. Two of these were collections of short stories, one was an uncharacteristic historical novel,[3] two were middle-length novellas, and the last was The House of Mirth, perhaps Wharton's masterwork and one of the finest character studies in American fiction. Wharton's developing techniques and distinctive themes are evident in all these works; we have seen examples in two short stories from one of these early collections. But particularly in The Touchstone (1900), in Sanctuary (1903), and most markedly in The House of Mirth (1905), it is possible to note the early unbroken threads of ironic technique and thematic unity with which Wharton attempts to weave internal coherence and a vision of life that extends beyond individual books and binds them into a body of work.

The two novellas reflect both the early falterings and the promising potential of Wharton's literary gifts. They are "problem" stories wherein plot ultimately dominates character. They have other weaknesses as well: the frequent

appearance of melodramatic elements such as stock characters and uplifting endings and the author's reliance on an epigrammatic style that emphasizes wit rather than the more subtle aspects of her ironic sensibility.

These early efforts at a longer form also show developing craftsmanship. Wharton is increasingly in control of her material, able to draw on sophisticated ironies of point of view, situation, and image and employ them in the service of thematic unity and aesthetic effect. They also indicate her discernment of subliminal motivations and her apprehension of the complex loneliness of the human spirit which, complicated by the pull of sexuality and the failure of love, has become for modern literature a theme so hauntingly pervasive that it seems almost a natural law. The Touchstone and Sanctuary are, in a sense, rehearsals for the first novel in which Wharton would achieve the "natural magic" she sought--the inevitability of phrase and, ultimately, of effect, that is apparent in The House of Mirth.

The Touchstone is about the consequences resulting from the troubled conscience of a man who sells the love letters of a famous woman novelist in order to finance his marriage to someone else. One of the novella's ironies is that its most intriguing character, the writer Margaret Aubyn, is, in fact, dead when the story begins. But the key to the technique of the novel is Wharton's clear and simple application of the device already illustrated in the preceding

chapter: the ironic illumination of the protagonist.

That Wharton intends her audience to perceive a shading of difference between Glennard's view of himself and its view is indicated early and consistently. Glennard is one of the first of those Wharton heroes whose upper-middle-class professional status means that, though the future may be promising, the present is naggingly impecunious. The reader first sees him in his club, musing discontentedly about the financial obstacles that prevent his marriage and generally constrict his lifestyle. In a passage describing an apparently inconsequential incident, Wharton establishes in two ways the ironic context of her protagonist's portrayal:

> Through the open door he saw young Hollingsworth rise with a yawn from the ineffectual solace of a brandy-and-soda and transport his purposeless person to the window. Glennard measured his course with a contemptuous eye. It was so like Hollingsworth to get up and look out the window just as it was growing too dark to see anything! There was a man rich enough to do what he pleased--had he been capable of being pleased--yet barred from all conceivable achievement by his own impervious dulness; while, a few feet off, Glennard, who wanted only enough to keep a decent coat on his back and a roof over the head of the woman he loved--Glennard, who had sweated, toiled, denied himself for the scant measure of opportunity that his zeal would have converted into a kingdom--sat wretchedly calculating that, even when he had resigned from the club, and knocked off his cigars, and given up his Sundays out of town, he would still be no nearer to attainment.[4]

The astute reader may perceive that Glennard seems no more "purposeful" than Hollingsworth, and that Glennard's contempt is, more accurately, envy of the other's prosperity.

Glennard's present unhappiness is caused by his frustration at not being able to have what he wants, but his notion of sacrifice--resigning from the club, giving up cigars and Sundays out of town--is actually superficial and trivial, suggesting a sense of values that reflects these qualities in his character and signaling to Wharton's audience her ironic intent.

This passage also employs a simple example of a pattern of ironic imagery which recurs often in Wharton's fiction and which, in this instance, is a subtle foreshadowing of later plot development and another element of the irony Wharton applies to her protagonist. Moira Maynard has pointed out Wharton's use of light/dark imagery to suggest different stages of moral blindness and comprehension in, among other works, Sanctuary and The Reef.[5] Examples of this pattern actually occur everywhere in Wharton's work, reinforcing her idea that imperfect understanding, as well as imperfect communication, is one of the forms of alienation. When Glennard inwardly ridicules Hollingsworth for looking out the window "just as it was growing too dark to see anything," the observation seems acerbic but generally unimportant. His petty complaint against Hollingsworth, however, actually applies more significantly to himself. It is really Glennard who is in the dark, who had been in the dark throughout the period that he was loved by the now-famous writer Margaret

Aubyn, and who, when it is too late, will come to appreciate at last the value of her emotional legacy. Only when the impenetrable darkness of death has put her irrevocably beyond his reach does he realize her importance to him. His reaction--belated and self-justifying tenderness for her memory--has the effect of distorting his perspective even further by turning him against his wife. The passage describing Glennard's jibes at Hollingsworth then is an illustration of Wharton's conscious selection of image and detail to support the coherence of form and substance.

Wharton's ironic treatment of the protagonist is further evidenced early in the novella by Glennard's recollections of his relationship with Margaret Aubyn. Wharton intends her readers to see that he had encouraged, been gratified by, and been totally unresponsive to her attachment:

> To have been loved by the most brilliant woman of her day, and to have been incapable of loving her, seemed to him, in looking back, derisive evidence of his limitations; and his remorseful tenderness for her memory was complicated with a sense of irritation against her for having given him once for all the measure of his emotional capacity. It was not often, however, that he thus probed the past. The public, in taking possession of Mrs. Aubyn, had eased his shoulders of their burden" (p. 5).

Glennard is not a totally insensitive character, for a genuinely insensitive personality would never even entertain such thoughts about himself. But he is self-interested and self-indulgent, and these weaknesses bring about the "problem"

of the plot. In order to attain the financial security which will make possible his marriage to Alexa Trent, Glennard sells Aubyn's love letters for posthumous publication.

Is Glennard morally culpable for selling the letters of a woman who was a public figure and is, after all, dead? The answer depends crucially on Wharton's ironic treatment of Glennard. He is culpable because his motives were always self-serving as, on some level, he has known them to be. He victimized his famous friend in life by profiting emotionally from her unhappy love for him; to publish the letters so he can marry someone else compounds that victimization and, ironically, so deepens his debt to Aubyn that she at last assumes a mastery over him in death that she never had in life.

The structure of the novella employs a technique that simultaneously allows Wharton to telescope time and simplify plot. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which shows Glennard finding a way to quiet his conscience and rationalize the selling of the letters. But between the moment he actually decides and the next scene, there is a lapse of more than a year: Glennard and Alexa are now married, have a baby, and are living blissfully in the country off the fruits of his secret ignominy. The letters have just been published. One is reminded of the structure of an Italian sonnet, where the problem is posed in a first part and then developed and resolved in a second. This method

of skipping large complications of plot is often used by Wharton and is sometimes a canny device which directs her readers' attention and avoids unnecessary elements of plotting. Occasionally, however, dramatic force and continuity are jeopardized, especially when the break in time is too broad. This happens, I believe, in Sanctuary. In paring off the plot's excess fat, Wharton risks throwing away part of its meat. The elapsed time and the plot developments which occur off stage, as it were, in The Touchstone do not detract from the novella's dramatic effect; they do, however, indicate that Wharton conceives the story in fairly narrow dimensions.

The story's weaknesses, finally, result from its concessions to melodrama. Glennard and Alexa have the two-dimensional characterizations of melodrama; she, particularly, never approaches flesh and blood. His conventionality is mitigated by the irony applied to his character. His guilt drives him into a tardy and foolish adoration of the dead woman while he preserves his self-esteem by learning to despise his wife: "It was surprising how his cheapening of his wife put him at ease with himself" (p. 114), Wharton writes. His flaws make him human.

The ending, which substitutes simplistic rationalization for resolution, is also melodramatic and falls far short of verisimilitude. "Don't they say," Alexa asks her remorseful husband, "that the early Christians, instead of

pulling down the heathen temples--the temples of the unclean gods--purified them by turning them to their own uses? I've always thought one might do that with one's actions--the actions one loathes but can't undo. One can make, I mean, a wrong the door to other wrongs or an impassable wall against them. . ." (p. 154). This rationalization--that wrong can be justified if it helps one to avoid future errors--will be tested and at least conditionally rejected in Sanctuary, but here it stands unquestioned as the story's resolution: "What did I ever give her?" Glennard asks at the conclusion. "The happiness of giving" (p. 155), Alexa replies. There is nothing in the scene to suggest that Wharton means Alexa's response to be ironic. The happy ending jars because its interpretation of experience, particularly the internal experience of the novella itself, seems inauthentic.

Yet even in this very early novella, there are anticipatory flashes of insight and articulateness which indicate Wharton's developing powers. Her epigrammatic prose demonstrates genuine wit even though it calls attention to her "showmanship" and qualifies as "excessive verbal irony" in Blake Nevius' judgment.[6] Even so, her style shows that she is both smart and funny, two not-so-negligible qualities in either life or literature. Wharton philosophizes about Margaret Aubyn's failure to win Glennard's love by writing, "Genius is of small use to a woman who doesn't know how to do her hair" (p. 19). And about Glennard's discomfiture as

he tries to extricate himself, she comments wryly, "But in the dissolution of sentimental partnerships it is seldom that both associates are able to withdraw their funds at the same time" (p. 21).

Wharton is also more frequently able to multiply levels of meaning and unify matter and form by the selection of patterns of imagery charged with thematic significance. One such pattern is the crucial metaphor of the locked room, the inner cell, symbolizing essential separation, alienation, and isolation. In The Touchstone, Glennard at first imperfectly perceives his fiance's "otherness" as romantic promise, a challenge to be overcome by his love: "Reserve, in some natures, implies merely the locking of empty rooms or the dissimulation of awkward encumbrances; but Miss Trent's reticence was to Glennard like the closed door to the sanctuary, and his certainty of divining the hidden treasure made him content to remain outside in the happy expectancy of the neophyte" (p. 29). But Glennard will discover that his anticipation as a suitor will not be completely fulfilled as a husband. The image of the interior refuge almost always indicates unbridgeable distances, failed or imperfect communion. The disguised language Wharton uses here--the locked rooms, the closed door, the sanctuary with its hidden treasure to which Glennard hopes to gain entry after his marriage--has a sexual as well as psychological relevance indicating an additional source of alienation and separation.

The thematic importance of this image to Wharton's fiction cannot be overstated. Its presence is not only a cohesive bond within her work but also connects it to a literary tradition extending back toward nineteenth-century romanticism and its solipsistic individualism and forward to existentialism and contemporary fiction of alienation. It is like a basic element, a first cause, at the bottom of the varied equations of her books, and in The Touchstone it is confirmed by oblique dramatic irony of situation as well as image.

Aubyn's one-sided love has failed to touch Glennard, but later, married to Alexa, united with the woman he loves and who loves him, Glennard experiences the ironic paradox which complicates Wharton's equation. Love has powers to bind one soul to another, but the bond is difficult, imperfect, and potentially disillusioning. This idea is given concrete representation by the scene in which Glennard sits alone in a room with the door closed while his wife sits outside reading the letters. As he feels simultaneously her nearness and her separateness, Wharton writes that,

> The sensation was part of the general strangeness that made him feel like a man waking from a long sleep to find himself in an unknown country among people of alien tongue. We live in our own souls as in an unmapped region, a few acres of which we have cleared for our habitation; while of the nature of those nearest us we know but the boundaries that march with ours (p. 82).

The passage reiterates the idea that not even the footsteps of the lover penetrate to the innermost cell or far beyond the boundaries of the uncharted country where the soul resides alone. In her autobiography, looking back as an old woman at her earliest memories, Wharton noted that, "There was in me a secret retreat where I wished no one to intrude."[7] Paradoxically, that profound isolation is both horrifying and perversely attractive.

The importance of this idea to American literature, and Wharton's early attention to it, substantiates the fact that her work is far more than a minor literary offshoot of American fiction's mainstream. Thirty years later, for example, it will appear in similar language in Carson McCullers' novella The Ballad of the Sad Cafe.

Even in this early, flawed work, Edith Wharton gives evidence of a sensibility that is modern, prescient rather than outmoded, personal and individual in its concerns rather than social and communal. In his celebrated article "Our Cousin Mr. Poe," Allen Tate has pointed out the close relationship of Poe's consciousness to ours despite the century separating his experience from our own. Similarly, though she has long been relegated to the position by most critics, aspects of even her earliest work hint that Edith Wharton is more to us than a maiden aunt on the fringes of our literary relations.

Sanctuary shares many of the weaknesses of The Touchstone,

including, as Blake Nevius notes, a "wholesale deference to the popular tone of magazine fiction,"[8] whose clearest indication is an unconvincing and appallingly sentimental ending. R. W. B. Lewis complains that the story breaks in two--that each part deals with a separate and distinct moral dilemma, the first faced by Kate Orme as a young girl and the second by her son thirty years later.[9] There is a break, though not, as Lewis believes, because the story concerns distinct moral dilemmas. It occurs because of the telescoping device discussed earlier. The jump in time is large, and the novella is just too short to support it. Readers barely have time to know Kate Orme as a young girl thrust into a crisis that destroys her romantic illusions before they must adjust to her as a matron thirty years older.

But crucially, Kate Orme is, in both parts, at the center of the story and of Wharton's attention, and the coherence of the novella hinges upon that fact. For Sanctuary is a testing of the rationalization which supplies the resolution of The Touchstone, and the "problem" of its first part and the irony to which both it and Kate's character are subjected make that clear.

That rationalization is essentially a cliche--"that good may come." If we remember Alexa's religious analogy of the temple of the unclean gods "purified" and put to the service of right, we see that she was precisely, in fact, describing a sanctuary, a place of impassable walls, a haven

where wrong may be transformed into a barrier against further wrong. That tenuous idea was the foundation of The Touchstone's happy ending, but in this novella, it is even less credible.

Kate Orme immediately spurns it when her fiance, Denis Peyton, offers it as a means of expiation. His perjury has resulted in his fraudulent inheritance of his brother's wealth and the suicide of the real beneficiary, his brother's legal wife, who has drowned herself and her child. At first, Kate is appalled and insistent that public confession is the only possible expiation.

> "It's impossible to make you understand. I did wrong--I did horribly wrong--but that is not the way to repair it."
> "What is, then?"
> He paused, a little askance at the question. "To do better--to do my best," he said, with a sudden flourish of firmness. "To take warning by this dreadful--"
> "Oh, be silent," she cried out, and hid her face.[10]

But by the end of Part I, because of social pressure applied by Denis' mother and her father and because of her own weakness, she has fashioned an equivocation, an altered version of the same rationalization, that will make confession unnecessary. Instead, she will bring good out of evil by marrying Denis in spite of everything and saving the child they will someday have--by becoming a sanctuary wherein the father's weakness will be transformed into strength for the son.

> She had begun to perceive that the fair surface of life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage. Every respectable household had its special arrangements for the private disposal of family scandals; it was only among the reckless and improvident that such hygienic precautions were neglected. Who was to pass judgment on such a system? . . . In her own room that night, she passed through that travail of the soul of which the deeper life is born. Her first sense was of great moral loneliness--an isolation more complete, more impenetrable, than that in which the discovery of Denis's act had plunged her (pp. 61-62).

Wharton is describing Kate's initiation, but hers is a passage from innocence to a despairing vision of moral isolation. Despair, however, may be transformed by the delusive enticements of complacent martyrdom, where no one has to know anything. Wharton's use of inflated language as Kate convinces herself of the necessity of silence is a sure indication of her ironic intent:

> Love itself, once throned aloft on an altar of dreams, how it stole to her now, storm-beaten and scarred, pleading for the shelter of her breast! Love, indeed, not in the old sense in which she had conceived it, but a graver, austerer presence--the charity of the mystic three(p. 63).

Like Nick Carraway, Kate has longed for the world to be at moral attention, and when she perceives it is not, she is even more disillusioned than he. And so she adjusts, by denying her vision and compromising her scruples, and the consequences for her son and also for herself--for Wharton's real attention remains on Kate--will later provide the material of Part II.

Sanctuary is connected not only thematically, but also by its ironic imagery to Wharton's earlier novella. We have already noted Kate's despairing realization of impenetrable moral isolation. The story also extends the metaphor of love as an alien country, which Kate perceives even before Denis' confession.

> She found herself in a new country, wherein he who had led her there was least able to be her guide. There were moments when she felt that the first stranger in the street could have interpreted her happiness for her more easily than Denis. Then, as her eye adapted itself, as the lines flowed into each other, opening deep vistas upon new horizons, she began to enter into possession of her kingdom, to entertain the actual sense of its belonging to her (pp. 4-5).

The last part of this passage is overtly ironic since the sense of belonging is to be immediately blasted. Wharton, writing that Kate cannot imagine sharing her deepest moods with anyone (p. 6), makes her the embodiment of her own discernment of separation and paradox.

Further, beginning with Kate's knowledge of the deaths of the mother and child, the kingdom she is really about to possess is that of nightmare. She sees that her innocence has made her

> . . . like some young captive brought up in a windowless palace whose painted walls she takes for the actual world. Now the palace had been shaken to its base, and through a cleft in the walls, she looked out upon life. For the first moment all was indistinguishable blackness; then she began to detect

> vague shapes and confused gestures in the depths. There were people below there, men like Denis, girls like herself--for under the unlikeness she felt a strange affinity--all struggling in that awful coil of moral darkness, with agonized hands reaching up for rescue . . . Kate's visualizing habit gave a hateful precision and persistency to the image she had evoked--she could not rid herself of the vision of anguished shapes striving together in the darkness (pp. 22-24).

Kate's awakening to moral darkness is also a perception of sexuality and death. Her visualization is subterranean and nightmarish, but she identifies with those anguished shapes "striving" together, since she and Denis are potential sexual partners.

Once she does know of Denis' part in the tragedy, she spends a sleepless night--that "dreadful bridal of their souls" (p. 42)--and by morning has literally killed the love she had earlier felt for him. By the end of the first part of the novella, she has sublimated normal sexuality to self-sacrifice and maternal love. The language describing this is once again sexually suggestive: "Something had cleft the surface of self, and there welled up the mysterious primal influences, the sacrificial instinct of her sex, a passion of spiritual motherhood . . . She never knew, then or after, how she reached this mystic climax of effacement. . ." (pp. 66-67). The overtly sexual imagery Wharton uses to convey this sublimation is an indication that Kate's compromise of conscience is unhealthy, since it involves a confusion of sexual and maternal love, and that Wharton intends her

equivocation to be viewed with some irony.

The first part of the novella closes with a sustained and psychologically authentic pattern of imagery that draws relationships between isolation, love, sexuality, and death in a way that supports an ironic consideration of the story's theme. Part II at first seems to indicate Wharton's intention to ultimately undercut the validity of the sanctuary idea by continued irony, for until her son faces a genuine moral test, Kate herself appears to have been corrupted by her equivocation.

This corruption is manifested in the degree and form of her love for her son. She is idolatrous. She becomes as insensitive to any but his interests as ever Mrs. Peyton, Denis' mother, could have been. When, for example, she suspects her son's friend and competitor, Darrow, is the more gifted of the two, her jealousy overcomes every generous feeling. Only with the shock of Darrow's unexpected death and her intuition that her son might be tempted to take advantage of Darrow's architectural designs does she admit to herself that her love has grown into an "extended egotism" (p. 109) instead of the sanctuary she had intended so long before.

Every element of the story except its ending suggests that Kate's ethical compromise has failed to mitigate the original wrong. But the story's conclusion is Wharton's compromise: rationalization becomes truth--Kate's love alone

redeems her son, and, rather disturbingly, the reader's last view of them is mother and son in each other's arms.

That Wharton may have regretted the novella's conclusion is indicated by the presence of a similar story with a very different resolution in the collection published a year later. The plot of "Quicksand" parallels that of Sanctuary, except that a mother's ethical equivocation not only has no power to preserve her son's integrity but is seen as a part of the moral permissiveness that undermines it. As in the novella, the story's title supplies a metaphor for the consequences of ethical compromise, but "quicksand" seems a more realistic figure than the improbable image of sanctuary substantiated by the ending of the novella.

Despite their weaknesses, The Touchstone and Sanctuary give evidence of Wharton's developing literary skills: her ability to create dramatic, rather than chiefly expository, narrative scenes; to devise and sustain complex patterns of imagery that merge with and support theme and idea; to communicate through her characters the ". . . half-conscious states of mind, obscure associations of thought and gelatinous fluctuations of mood"[11] she would later admire in Proust's fiction. In The House of Mirth, all these skills come together to create a nearly perfect cohesion of tone, theme, and effect. Its gifted commingling of elements of romanticism, realism, and naturalism lifts it, like all really good novels, beyond any categorical interpretation. Lily Bart

is one of the most acutely drawn heroines in American fiction, and the novel is a crucial contribution to literature by women about women.

The House of Mirth is also one of the most under-valued novels in American fiction. The reason is that the conventional interpretation has focused with myopic intensity on its social commentary, seeing minimally or not at all its personal and human dimensions. Most of the critical attention paid to the novel presents a curious case of not being able to see the trees for the forest, for to be studied exclusively in the light of the comment it makes upon society is a limitation few novels can overcome.

Of course, social context is important in The House of Mirth. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, Wharton unleashed the full fury of her satirical voice on ". . . all those vanities of a society whose moral failures are captured in its devastating impact upon the lives of such women as Lily Bart."[12] But above all, from first to last, Wharton's subject is not the group but the individual, not society but Lily Bart and the human truth she makes accessible. Blake Nevius, for example, ignores this distinction, and the novel's real effectiveness, by accepting the conventional view of the triviality of the story's milieu and dismissing the tragic potential of ". . . a human nature subject to no stresses that money could not alleviate, and therefore incapable of expressing itself with the greatest intensity."[13] He sees the novel as

essentially a naturalistic outcry against materialism and the exploitation of human and natural resources and categorizes it with "countless other novels"[14]--most of them not very distinguished--that explore this theme.

The destructiveness of materialism is, of course, one of the novel's themes. Lily Bart is not, however, finally destroyed merely by stresses money could alleviate, but by the internalized conflict between the real and the ideal, between fate and freedom, and by the confusion they engender in her about how to live. The House of Mirth can more generously be connected with a tradition broader than the naturalistic exploration of materialism. The Scarlet Letter concerns that confusion, and so do The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises. "Perhaps as you went along you did learn something," Jake Barnes ponders. "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it."[15] The antecedent for that ambiguous "it" is no more for Jake simply the broken society he has drifted away from than it is the amoral society that casts Lily out.

The House of Mirth is one of those distinctly American novels that concerns in its individual ramifications first the compromised promise of life in the New World. "The most damaging flaw in the conventional interpretation is that it fails almost completely to comprehend the language of the book," Roy R. Male writes about The Scarlet Letter.[16] He might as well be speaking of The House of Mirth, for it is

in the language of the book that one must look for its truest dimensions.

As always with Wharton, that language is fundamentally ironic, and, also as always, a good beginning point for analysis is to see how irony is applied to point of view. In The House of Mirth, point of view is divided chiefly between Laurence Selden and Lily Bart, and, as we have seen her do before, Wharton establishes a measure of ironic distance between the characters' perspectives and the reader's.

The story begins from Selden's narrative vantage, and this choice serves a dual purpose. First, it provides the reader with expository information about Lily Bart given by a discriminating perspective--all too discriminating, as it turns out. We learn from Selden's chance meeting with Lily that she is twenty-nine, that her beauty has not been dimmed by eleven years of an exhausting social whirl, and that she is a woman for whom Selden feels both fascination and marginal contempt. "He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not probable that the material was fine, but that the circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?"[17] With almost throw-away casualness, this image captures the crux of Lily's conflict in her own eyes and in Selden's. Does the glaze cover

vulgar clay or fine? Is there a flaw in the material itself, or in the use to which it has been put?

Also, Selden's analogy indicates something about his own character, which is the other advantage of beginning from his perspective. He is intensely analytical, fastidious, demanding, and, ultimately, condescending. He represents a type of man Wharton's biographies indicate she knew well, and the condescension in his estimate of Lily and the "herd" of her sex is an early indication of the ambivalence Wharton means her readers to feel about him.

The novel's opening, centering as it does on an apparently inconsequential meeting between Lily and Selden, does much more than supply exposition and indicate ironic tone. First, even before the shift of point of view in the second chapter, it puts the focus of the novel squarely on Lily, subtly delineates the grounds of her attraction to Selden and his to her, and also suggests the novel's dramatic conflict. This meeting, and in fact each of their meetings, signifies a digression out of time for Lily--an imprudent but somehow vital turning of her spirit from necessity toward freedom. And yet the issue is more complicated than that simple dichotomy suggests. For the image of Selden, and all it represents, that Lily admires, comes to love, and measures herself by is actually dangerous to her since it rests on a physical and intellectual independence in direct opposition

to her necessities of expediency and equivocation.

Actually, Selden and Lily are much alike. Both are immersed in but in some ways alienated from their amoral social environment. Both are separated from it by calibrations of consciousness and conscience that their wealthy acquaintances don't possess. The difference between Lily and Selden is largely a matter of gender. His independence and security are effortless and acceptable because he is a man. Though he is a basically decent man, the position of moral superiority he assumes in his relations with Lily is not altogether justifiable. His disgust with her when he mistakenly assumes she is the mistress of a married man in their circle is hypocritical in light of his own earlier and rather notorious affair with Mrs. Dorset. "What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (p. 7), Lily complains wryly in a line more meaningful than she, but not Wharton, knows.

Above all, the novel's opening illustrates the best and worst in Lily's character. She is vain, audacious, acute, inconsistent, capable of great honesty and equally great insincerity. In fact, Wharton subjects her to such mocking irony that she is sometimes difficult to like. Comparing herself to her friend, plain, penniless, philanthropic Gerty Farish, Lily is arrogantly blithe: "But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy" (p. 7). In Lily's cosmology, happiness depends upon wealth; wealth for a woman requires an expedient marriage; and though

she chafes against the abridgement of freedom that expediency demands, she believes she has no option except marrying for money. Even in the opening scene, her attraction to Selden initiates a gradual elevating of her consciousness that makes that option less and less tolerable without offering any clear alternative.

But Lily is not completely the pawn of some inexorable naturalistic fate, and though naturalism is an important part of the book's imagery and plot structure, the novel cannot finally be dismissed as exclusively naturalistic. Fate seems to close in on Lily; circumstance is always tripping her up; she comes to see herself as helplessly doomed. Even so, she transcends deterministic characterization, and in doing so, carries the novel with her to broader universality.

This happens because Wharton does not conceive experience in solely naturalistic terms, either as an individual or an artist. Her autobiography gives eloquent testimony to the influence of the Romantic poets on her adolescent development and also records a profound and undiminishing response to nature in language that sounds like Emerson.[18] She consistently infuses into her work strong elements of romanticism--among them, an irrepressible fascination with beauty, a sensual response to nature, the occasional introduction of the exotic and mystical, and an admiration for individuality and persevering free will. The first and last of these show up in The House of Mirth. Though Wharton does not idealize

Lily, she makes her beauty not a cynically manipulated tool as she will Undine Spragg's, but a talisman of Lily's deeper human potential, and invests her with a perverse and imperfectly realized belief in the ideal in a reality predicated on pragmatism and self-interest.

In the realm of human conduct, self-interest and natural impulse are often at odds, and a further evidence of the presence within the novel of a subtle blending of romanticism and determinism is the conflict between nature and artifice suggested in Wharton's selection of image. "Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (p. 15), Lily fumes, having been caught in the impulsive act of visiting Selden's flat by not one but two people who are potential enemies. But within moments, she has successfully stifled her natural impulses and is stalking, with as much artifice as she can muster, wealthy Percy Gryce, whose inherited fortune has been made on a patented device that excludes fresh air from hotels. The atmosphere Lily moves in is also airless, a vacuum where freedom and natural impulse are suffocated by cynicism and calculation, as stifling to Lily's better self as ever Esther Greenwood's bell jar will be to hers fifty years later. Lily perceives that she is caught in the "great gilt cage" Selden can somehow escape at will: "How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily as she heard its door clang shut on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood

always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom" (pp. 54-55).

In the brilliant scene where Lily puts aside her pursuit of Percy Gryce to step out of time once again with Selden, Wharton clearly merges and unifies the book's contending naturalistic and romantic imagery. The setting is romantic--not ornamental, stuffy Bellomont, but "a zone of lingering summer" (p. 63) beyond it where natural beauty partially dispels the constraints between them. "Lily had no real intimacy with nature," Wharton writes, indicating the distance between her heroine and herself, whose own intimacy with nature was so intense, "but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background for her own sensations" (pp. 63-64).

But in this liberating, romantically suggestive landscape, Lily becomes a symbol of the conflicting impulses at the novel's heart: "There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually, the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them; the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger and the free spirit quivered for flight" (p. 64). The imagery has shifted and been transformed--the caged bird is now poised to fly. In contemporary literature

of the oppressed, particularly black literature and women's literature, flight is an archetypal metaphor for physical or emotional liberation.[19] Wharton's use of it in her early work and elsewhere in exactly such a context is another evidence of the acuteness of her artistic intuition.

In fact, this whole scene exhibits densely-woven patterns of meaningful imagery. The metaphor of flight lifts Lily above the flirtatiously superficial beginning of her encounter with Selden into a discussion of a subject from which the novel never really digresses:

> "My idea of success," he said, "is personal freedom."
> "Freedom? Freedom from worries?"
> "From everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit--that's what I call success."
> She leaned forward with a responsive flush. "I know--I know--it's strange; but that's just what I've been feeling today" (p. 68).

The "republic of the spirit" first suggests the realm of the ideal, a country, as Selden describes it later, where one must find one's way alone and where he obviously sees himself as having citizenship while Lily is merely an immigrant seeking naturalization. The figure also subliminally recalls Wharton's earlier geographical image of the inner cell and the alien country of love--all three images of separation and isolation which undercut the possibility of oneness and communion. Selden does not perceive that his republic is much more accessible to him as a man than to

Lily. He chides that she cannot be allowed to enter at all if she continues her pursuit of wealth, and here Wharton picks up again the images of artificiality and airlessness employed earlier. When Lily argues that the rich should be eligible to belong to the republic because money frees them from the distraction of thinking about it, Selden replies, "You might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breathe. That is true enough in a sense, but your lungs are thinking about air if you are not. And so it is with your rich people: they may not be thinking of money, but they're breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp!" (p. 69).

The ironies implicit in this scene are complex and numerous and pertain to dramatic situation as well as imagery. For example, Lily's attraction to Selden here again rests on what she perceives as his superiority to the corrupting influences of their common environment. Selden here and always has the power to inspire in Lily the desire to be her best self. Yet, since from the first he judges her as well as others from the vantage point of this superiority, this "light irony" and fastidiousness that she prizes, these very qualities will alienate them until it is too late for him to save her. For, at the bottom of his character, there is a moral reticence, an inadequate capacity for belief, that

aligns him with other Wharton characters whom she indicts for living in a temperate zone of repressed feeling. He is, for example, intrigued by Lily's beauty and unsuspected depth, but he is also simply vain enough to trivialize her effect on him as merely ". . . stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments" (p. 69), and in Book II, he is pleased to regard himself as a spectator taking an objective interest in life (pp. 183-184). His complacence and condescension are poised against a genuine decency of character, but these qualities are familiar signals to Wharton's audience that they should perceive him with some ambivalence.

A further irony is that, despite the obstacles between Selden and Lily, the most serious of which are the imperfections of their own natures, they almost break through to a saving understanding of each other. But it is the habit of irony itself--the habit of artifice in word and deed--that finally makes Selden hedge and Lily withdraw. The deliberately cynical tone they put on and off so easily as a defense creates a willful ambiguity of intention that obscures real feelings so that even they seem at times uncertain of the significance of what passes between them. Irony as a medium of communication is a protection against vulnerability, but it finally erodes their unsteady empathy and jeopardizes the fragile communion that has precariously sprung up. Lily's untried wings will not sustain her indefinitely: "She leaned on him for a moment as if with a drop of tired wings; he felt

as though her heart were beating rather with the stress of a long flight than the thrill of new distances" (p. 73). The moment is actually broken by a symbol significant to the romantic sensibility: the intrusive hum of an automobile--a machine in the garden--which starts time once again by reminding Lily of her obligations to Bellomont and the "real" world.

The novel's structure has been correctly described as a downward spiral charting Lily's descent from one link in the social chain of being to the next until at last she has no place in the chain at all. Another way to understand the novel's structure is to note a pattern of contrasting and catalyzing scenes wherein, however determinedly Lily seems to be immersing herself in the ethically murky discriminations of the tribe, she eventually perceives herself, or is perceived by someone else, in stark relief against that inferior background and each time is propelled gradually outward by that exposed distinction. All of her encounters with Selden are such catalysts, even though he cannot sustain his impression or act on it himself. We have seen two of these already. A third example is the scene in which Lily takes part in the tableaux, and Selden is moved by her beauty to a new affirmation of feeling for her: "In the long moment before the curtain fell, he had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held

out suppliant hands to him from the world in which she and he had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again" (p. 135). But circumstance, which except for placing Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden into her hands, seems stacked against either Lily's osmosis into the group or her independence from it, intervenes; events occur which allow Selden to assume that Lily is Gus Trenor's mistress, and the hope he is prepared to hold out to her is withdrawn.

Other characters also reinforce the distinction in Lily that impels her outward. Simon Rosedale, Jewish, newly rich, and ruthlessly hungry for social legitimacy in an anti-Semitic society, admires her for her superiority to an environment in which he also is, for different reasons, an outsider. In the ironic context of the story, he becomes in a way a faithful friend to Lily and when, by the end of the novel, she overcomes the largely unjustified revulsion he inspires in her by learning to value his compassion while still recognizing his self-interest, it is a sign of her awakening consciousness and the widening separation between her and the Trenors, Dorsets, and Brys.

The relationship between Lily and Gerty Farish further confirms Lily's potential fineness of spirit, which idealistic Gerty intuits and encourages. It also supplies evidence that freedom comes at the price of the constricted, as Lily would

say, "dingy" life that Gerty lives. Gerty Farish's presence in the novel may be ultimately of minor importance since, as has been noted, her essential function is to be a foil for her vivid friend. But Gerty and Lily's relationship deserves additional attention because it is a rare phenomenon in American fiction--a serious portrayal of authentic female friendship.

In one brilliant scene, Wharton shifts the point of view away from the major characters to invest Gerty with a realness that has been to this point reserved for Lily. In this scene, Wharton shatters Lily's condescending assumption that Gerty's goodness is a matter of necessity rather than choice, a manifestation of a plain face and a dull imagination.

For Gerty has hoped for happiness too, in the form of her secret love for Selden. But that hope is blasted when she realizes that it is Lily he loves, and Gerty is left in a reality as lonely and comfortless as any Lily will face. Wharton employs once again the image of flight and failure: "It was at this point, perhaps, that a joy just trying its wings in Gerty's heart dropped to earth and lay still" (p. 156). Alone on her bed in the dark, she is appalled by the hatred she feels for Lily. "It closed with her in the darkness like some formless evil to be blindly grappled with" (p. 162). Later, in the same evening, Gerty is called upon to surrender even her grief and bitterness to her friend's

need for solace. The night Lily spends at Gerty's flat is rare in literature--two women, one plain, one beautiful, one aware, one ignorant, of the other's pain. "Oh, Gerty," Lily cries without knowing how wrong she is, "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--" (p. 164). The two girls end by sleeping side by side in Gerty's narrow bed as Gerty holds Lily's hand and pillows her head upon her arm as a mother might comfort a child. It is a moment of fleeting refuge for two very different but lonely women. The scene foreshadows Lily's last sleep in which she hallucinates that she cradles her own child in her arms. Wharton's interest cannot light for long on the Gerty Farishes of the world, but her empathy can see them clearly and compassionately. There are few such portrayals in the whole of American literature; several are in Wharton's fiction.

The climax of the novel follows an acceleration of Lily's movement downward and outward. The movement downward--from the Dorsets to the Brys to Norman Hatch to the milliner's workroom--is of primary significance to the novel's social comment. The movement outward, however, is even more meaningful because of its connection to the killing human loneliness which gives the novel its profoundest vision. It is not finally her abhorrence of destitution that makes Lily seek oblivion in the sleeping draught that kills her (in

that case her situation would be only pathetic), but her vision of separation and isolation, "the clutch of solitude at the heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless currents of the years" (p. 319).

Two scenes which are often perceived as melodramatic lapses--Lily's failure in the workroom and her encounter with Nettie Struther--actually reflect Wharton's daring means of reinforcing this vision. If Lily is an outsider in the social class from which she has been cast out, her hopeless ineptitude and simple "strangeness" make her irredeemably alien in the workroom. The women are not unkind, but ". . . the consciousness of her different point of view merely kept them at a little distance from her, as though she were a foreigner with whom it was an effort to talk" (p. 286). The diction suggests again the metaphor of the alien country where words fail to mean and communication is never accomplished. It is by now a familiar image associated with isolation and separation, and it comes to dominate the ending of The House of Mirth.

We have seen already the failed communication between Lily and Selden. A further example which explicitly hinges on the failure of the word occurs after Lily is publicly insulted and then deserted by Bertha Dorset. Selden offers help, but the opportunity to save Lily passes, Wharton writes, "before he could find the fitting word" (p. 219). Again,

when he rebukes her for her association with Norma Hatch, he has the sense that she can't hear what he is saying (p. 281).

In their final encounter, when Lily is almost desperate enough to use Bertha's letters against her, Selden and Lily have one last chance to break through to one another. Lily's perversity and pride have always before made her responsible for at least her share of the obstacles that separate her from Selden. But Lily can no longer afford those emotional luxuries. "In her strange state of extra-lucidity, which gave her the sense of already being at the heart of the situation, it seemed incredible that anyone should think it necessary to linger in the conventional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (p. 306). But in Selden ". . . the determining impulse was still lacking." For Lily, ". . . the sense of loneliness returned with redoubled force as she saw herself forever shut out from Selden's inmost self; . . . the secret hope she had carried with her suddenly revealed itself in its death-pang" (p. 307). What has died is the hope for communion with the human being she feels closest to. What returns is her sense of inevitable loss and separation. She burns the letters without his knowing in his own grate and leaves as ". . . he was still groping for the word to break the spell" (p. 310).

The encounter with Nettie Struther which follows, then, though it does flirt with melodrama, has two legitimate functions, both of which are chiefly ironic. First, Nettie's

situation is paralleled with Lily's, but her isolation has been broken by the human connections of a husband who "knew about her" but loved her anyway, and the birth of a child. The contrast emphasizes Selden's failure. Moreoever, the meeting gives Lily a temporary sense of human fellowship which only makes more excruciating the reality of loss and solitude she confronts later in her room.

All three of these final scenes, however, are most coherent in a context other than social satire. In that lonely rented room which recalls Wharton's analogy of the innermost chamber where woman's nature sits alone, waiting for a footstep that never comes, Lily reaches an epiphany that has nothing to do with materialism or social class.

> It was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of a deeper impoverishment, of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance. . . . All the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance; her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther's kitchen. . . . It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail, audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on a cliff--a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss (pp. 319-320).

Lily's insight reveals horrifying loneliness unmitigable by beauty, youth, or money. She is absolutely alone; for her there is no continuity. As she slips into death, her last fantasies are of human connections--to Selden, to a

child she will never have.

The ambiguity with which Wharton treats Lily's motives deserves attention. As we have seen earlier in the example of Irving Howe, critics have often regretted in Wharton a despondency and darkness of vision that, they apparently believe, is artistically limiting. Gary Lindberg, to cite another example, finds "the quality of human resistance"[20] missing in Wharton's characters and sees that as a weakness. Considered as a whole, however, Wharton's work simply explores the options available to her characters once they have perceived their own isolation. Lily seeks release by taking the drug that kills her, but whether that release is deliberately intended to be the permanent one of death is handled ambiguously within the text. Lily is not, as she is often considered, a weak character buffeted by exterior forces until she chooses a pathetic death. And neither is her death, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff says, Wharton's ". . . judgment upon the elements of femininity that Lily embodies: [that] they are not viable, not worth preserving."[21] Lily is a heroine, not an anti-heroine like Undine Spragg. She is flawed, but she has changed, grown, become capable of love and deep feeling. She can see what life might be and struggles for it; but she is also tormentedly conscious of the contrary--despair, loss, and profound isolation.

The denouement of the novel is coherent because of its total irony. Selden comes too late to ask Lily to marry

him, and even at the last, as he searches for a suicide note but finds the check to Trenor which frees her from indebtedness, he doubts her motives. She is dead, unalterably lost to him, but momentarily he is incapable once again of the measure of belief that would overcome separation. Wharton allows him finally the cold comfort of comprehension by way of hindsight: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees, and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (p. 329). The deliberate ambiguity of this conclusion is a mark of the maturation of Wharton's technique since the pat endings of the earlier novellas. Her audience is amply rewarded for assuming the demanding role she requires of them.

The House of Mirth ultimately transcends its reputation as naturalistic commentary on a destructive and amoral society. A later novel, The Custom of the Country, comes much closer to matching that description. But the concerns of The House of Mirth are broader, more profound. The characterization of Lily Bart and the novel's language and imagery show a complex commingling of elements of both naturalism and romanticism. Lily's death is less a direct consequence of her passage downward than of her passage out, and the novel's vision--and Wharton's--is the modern one, the tragic one, of "the clutch of solitude at the heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless currents of the years."

NOTES

[1] "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," p. 212.

[2] Ibid., p. 206.

[3] The Valley of Decision (New York: Scribner's, 1902), was set in eighteenth-century Italy and concerns the political and social upheavals of that time and place. Wharton never attempted a purely historical novel again.

[4] The Touchstone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900; reprint ed., Grosse Pointe, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1968), p. 3. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[5] Nevius, p. 132.

[6] Moira Maynard, "The Medusa's Face: A Study of Character and Behavior in the Fiction of Edith Wharton," Diss. New York Univ. 1971, p. 49.

[7] A Backward Glance, p. 70.

[8] Nevius, p. 25.

[9] Lewis, p. 123.

[10] Sanctuary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 38. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[11] The Writing of Fiction, p. 155.

[12] Wolff, p. 110.

[13] Nevius, p. 55.

[14] Ibid., p. 56.

[15] Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 148.

[16] Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1957), p. 93.

[17] The House of Mirth (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 5. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[18] In A Backward Glance, Wharton writes of the significance of a childhood birthday gift of a volume of Keats and

Shelley: "Thus the gates of the realms of gold swung wide, and from that day to this I don't believe I was ever again in my inmost self wholely lonely or unhappy" (p. 71). About her earliest awareness of the intensity of her response to nature, she wrote,

> . . . my secret sensitiveness to the landscape--something in me quite uncommunicable to others, that was tremblingly and inarticulately awake to every detail of wind-warped fern and wide-eyed briar rose, yet more profoundly alive to a unifying magic beneath the diversities of the visible scene--a power with which I was in deep and solitary communion whenever I was alone with nature. It was the same tremor that had stirred me in the spring woods of Mamaroneck, when I heard the whisper of the arbutus and the starry choir of the dogwood; and it has never been still (p. 54).

[19] Erica Jong's novel Fear of Flying is an illustration of this point as it appears in women's literature. It also occurs frequently in black literature. One recent example is Tony Morrison's Song of Solomon.

[20] Lindberg, p. 173.

[21] Wolff, p. 136.

CHAPTER IV

Ethan Frome (1911) and Summer (1917), though they were published several years apart, are companion pieces--related visions of the lives of middle-class, emotionally-constricted characters outside the aristocratic culture of Wharton's own experience. The novellas are set in the agrarian New England environment Wharton had come to know during ten years of residence in Massachusetts, and their detailed portrayal of the harshness of that rural landscape and their sympathy for those who live in it do much to disprove the claim by some critics that Wharton is limited to her own narrow social milieu and that her portraits of any experience but that of her own class are abstract and insensitive.[1] Ethan Frome is one of the two or three of Wharton's books which retain a fairly large audience; Summer, which deserves a popular readership as much, is generally ignored and unfamiliar to modern readers. The novellas are linked not only by theme, characterization, and setting, but by devices of ironic technique Wharton consistently employs, particularly by the juxtaposition of elements of romance and determinism for ironic effect.

Thematically, they both demonstrate the powerful destructive potential of alienation, but they are not proof of the "limitations of heart"[2] of a writer who, unable to transcend despair herself, could not allow her characters to do so--another rationale for Wharton's de-valuation by some critics. Again, we may be grateful to R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff for providing biographical information which dispels the misapprehension that Wharton's life, and consequently her work, were constricted by repression and inexperience, and that these represent deficiencies that distort and narrow her personal perspective and, eventually, her achievement as a writer.[3]

Loneliness and isolation cause suffering in both Ethan Frome and Summer, but their different conclusions indicate that Wharton's exploration of alienation was exactly that--an exploration, not a presupposed conclusion. The novellas' two protagonists have in common not only middle-class identity but uniquely acute sensibilities that exacerbate their discontent in their particular environments, separate them from conventional, unsatisfying relationships, and impel them toward an attempt at integration through illicit love. Like Lily Bart, they are essentially hypersensitive outsiders contending with conventions that bewilder and thwart their sense of themselves, and this gives the novellas some relevance as social commentary. But as in The House of Mirth, these stories are most coherent as

interpretations of individual experience, offering radically different interpretations of that experience. Both books confront an alienation so profound that it is killing to the human spirit, but their resolutions--the ultimate fates of Ethan Frome and Charity Royall--indicate just how discerningly complex was Wharton's comprehension of the half-uttered, unuttered, or unutterable.

Ethan Frome was conceived by Wharton as tragedy. It concerns a protagonist who, perceiving a chance represented by his love for his wife's young cousin to break free from the numbing isolation that is choking out his life, ironically brings upon himself and his lover an annihilation that makes death look like solace. Much has been said about the artistic "rightness" of the novella's structure,[4] which depends upon a frame and an outsider-narrator, a device Wharton borrows from Browning, to overcome, for one thing, the problem of the inarticulateness of the major characters who would be psychologically incapable of telling their own stories. Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence is also strikingly evident in a number of ways: the names of the characters, Ethan and Zenobia, seem to be direct borrowings;[5] and the image of the threshold, so important in, for example, The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, and "Young Goodman Brown," is repeated both in Ethan Frome and Summer for the identical purpose of presenting a concrete emblem of

separation and the characters' often thwarted attempts to "cross over" it.

But the most significant link between Ethan Frome and Hawthorne is that the frame and the rare use by Wharton of a first-person narrator allow the tale to be, as that narrator almost off-handedly states, a vision of Frome's story rather than an absolutely realistic account of what took place. As Hawthorne does, Wharton is then able to combine within the story elements of both fact and fancy, romance and realism--a combination which, after all, is the distinction Hawthorne points out between the romance and the novel. In his work, fancy often has the edge; in Wharton's, fact usually does. But the combining, both writers seem to agree, captures a more complex truth than either one alone. In Ethan Frome, these devices of frame and perspective simplify Wharton's difficulties in presenting the narrative and, more importantly, they inevitably permit juxtapositions of elements of romance, realism, and naturalism which enhance the story's irony, indicate the direction of its targets, and underpin its theme.

Despite the simplicity of the novella's form and language and its unswerving focus on the internal and external constrictions of the characters' lives which is crucial to Wharton's theme, Ethan Frome has been the subject of widely diverging analysis and assessment. Often, this analysis has seen the narrator, rather than Ethan Frome, as the story's true center. However, like his near-relation in Wuthering

Heights, the narrator is essentially present to provide an eye to observe the events of the plot, a mind to give them coherence as his "vision," and a voice to articulate them for the reader's ear. He is important to the degree that, from the first, he guides our attention to what is significant about place and personality. Of the crucial setting, he observes:

> During the early part of my stay, I had been struck by the contrast between the vitality of the climate and the deadness of the community. Day by day, after the December snows were over a blazing blue sky poured down torrents of light and air on the white landscape, which gave them back in an intense glitter. One would have supposed that such an atmosphere must quicken the emotions as well as the blood; but it seemed to produce no change except that of retarding still more the sluggish pulse of Starkfield.[6]

And upon his first view of Ethan Frome, he marks both his distinction and his ruin:

> Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man. It was not so much his great height that marked him, for the "natives" were easily singled out by their lank longitude from the stockier foreign breed: it was the careless powerful look he had in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain. There was something so bleak and unapproachable in his face, and he was so stiffened and grizzled that I took him for an old man and was surprised to learn that he was not more than fifty-two (p. 3).

But he remains observer rather than participant, and from the first sentence to the last, Wharton's concern is clearly with Ethan's story.

The novella's pessimism has been the most frequent reason for unappreciative readings. Lionel Trilling, for example, in perhaps the most uncompromising denunciation, rejects the story because it "presents no moral issue" and is merely a tableau of gratuitous suffering. He objects to what he apparently considers the amorality of the narrative, whose only point he finds to be ". . . that moral inertia constitutes a large part of the moral life of humanity."[7] It is a dubious charge which is perhaps more relevant to a thesis Trilling has in mind than to Wharton's lack of one.

Like many of Wharton's stories, Ethan Frome is a dark rendering of the American dream gone awry, revolving about characters who are wretchedly locked into their new world rather than liberated by it. They have, to put it simply, spent too many hard, impoverished winters in Starkfield, Massachusetts, which could as easily be Winesburg, Ohio, a generation later. In fact, as the narrator perceives and reveals them, the citizens of Starkfield are no less grotesques as Anderson defines the term than his own starved and alienated characters.[8] Wharton's fiction returns habitually to portraits of American life at both ends of the social scale which show the distance between the promise and the actuality of that dream. Initially, the frame of Ethan Frome presents an environment grimly bound by harsh climate and harsher poverty; in the flashback of the narrator's vision, Ethan has already, in the prime of his young manhood,

surrendered his ambitious dreams of upward mobility--of becoming an engineer--been miserably married to a homely and complaining wife, and has almost become as unreachable and uncommunicative as his Frome relations in the nearby family cemetery.

The narrator begins his vision of Ethan's story on a deep winter night when the very atmosphere is a metaphor for the vacuum of isolation which is Ethan's life. "It's like being in an exhausted receiver" (p. 14), Ethan thinks, employing an image of suffocation and airlessness that is a significant echo of the imagery of airlessness Wharton has used in The House of Mirth. But Ethan on this night has a stimulus to coax breath and warmth back into his life: he is already on the threshold of involvement with the hired girl, his wife's cousin Mattie Silver.

Ethan is essentially a sympathetic character. The language of the narrator's description of him is one indication of this. Another is that, among other expository details provided for the reader within the narrator's vision, Ethan is shown to possess the heightened sensitivity that is almost always a sign of Wharton's personal empathy and positive portrayal. Though his parents' deaths and his subsequent marriage have put an end to his education, his studies, we are told, had ". . . made him aware of the huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things" (p. 15). And a sign of approval we have seen before is Ethan's romantic

appreciation of nature: "He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. His unfinished studies had given form to this sensibility and even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion" (p. 17). One of the novella's most insistent ironies, in fact, is that in the midst of images of entrapment that signal the story's unmistakable naturalism, Ethan's romantic sensitivity and his belief that Mattie shares it impel him first toward communion and love, but eventually spring the terrible trap of the book's climax.

But though Wharton guides her audience toward sympathetic identification with Ethan, the practiced Wharton reader, the one upon whom nothing is lost, will also recognize that he is a target of irony resulting from the mingled elements of romanticism and naturalism in his portrayal. He is certainly not entirely the helpless victim of a grimly determined environment; he is himself, in fact, about to victimize Mattie Silver, and he must also share responsibility for his failed marriage to Zeena. Like Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, as Wharton must have consciously intended, Ethan Frome is flawed by a kind of self-absorption which weakens his judgment and ultimately ruins him.

His attraction to Mattie, for example, like Lawyer Royall's to Charity in Summer, is natural and human, for she is a bright bit of light and life in an otherwise drab world.

But Ethan's involvement with her, unlike Royall's with Charity, is basically self-indulgent and ego-centered. He is, after all, a married man so hopelessly mired in his domestic responsibilities that he can offer her nothing. A more selfless, nobly-motivated love would at least recognize the reality and hesitate to involve her. But when he sees on the night that he goes to bring her home from the dance that she is being courted by the most eligible bachelor in Starkfield, his jealousy flares out at both of them and impels him to his first fairly overt advance. Wharton's subtly ironic recording of his thoughts at this point suggests that his interest in Mattie arises to some degree out of his own vanity: "The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her. She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will" (p. 17).

In the insistently naturalistic setting of the novel, their attraction is based on primitive but unmistakable mutual romantic sensitivity, a response Wharton values but refuses to idealize:

> And there were other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy: the cold red sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on the sunlit snow. When she said to him once: "It looks just as if it was painted!" it seemed to

> Ethan that the art of definition could go no farther, and that words had at last been found to utter his secret soul. . . (p. 18).

The simple-mindedness of Mattie's comment and Ethan's response is another indication of Wharton's ironic tone and clues the reader to the presence of meaning beneath the surface of the prose. For as Wharton has suggested before, love itself may be a trap, an illusory alternative to the lonely, confined life which seems the rule in Starkfield. That there is a destructive element in Ethan's feelings for Mattie is further demonstrated ironically by the culmination of their first "love scene" in the Frome grave yard, a place of ultimate isolation and lifelessness. Standing among the headstones with Mattie, Ethan thinks:

> For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. 'We never got away--how should you?' seemed to be written on every headstone. . . . But now all desire for change had vanished, and the sight of the little enclosure gave him a warm sense of continuity and stability.
> 'I guess we'll never let you go, Matt,' he whispered, as though even the dead, lovers once, must conspire with him to keep her (p. 26).

The thematic centrality of isolation, entrapment, and failed communication recurs in Ethan's relationship with Zeena, which also, and even more subtly, shows Ethan as a target of irony. Zeena is such a hypochondriacal shrew that at first she seems to be the novella's genuine villainess. But though she is mean-spirited and whining, for the perceptive

reader the unpleasantness of her personality is mitigated to a degree by Ethan's culpability. We learn, for example, that since Mattie's coming Ethan shaves every day and even tries to lighten her load by doing some of her work--and that his wife has noticed: ". . . and Zeena, one day, had surprised him at the churn and had turned away silently, with one of her queer looks" (p. 19). Her first, not unreasonable, response is to encourage Denis's courtship of Mattie in order to bring about the girl's departure. But when she tries to talk to Ethan about this--to warn him indirectly by showing him that she knows--he cuts her off as he does habitually, refusing to acknowledge even that there is a problem.

The whole history of their betrothal, in fact, prefigures the motivations that push Ethan toward Mattie. After his father's death, Ethan had been alone on the farm with his mother, a woman who has been so overcome by isolation that she has lost the will to break it even with speech:

> Sometimes, in the long winter evenings, when in desperation her son asked her why she didn't 'say something,' she would lift a finger and answer: 'Because I'm listening,' and on stormy nights, when the loud wind was about the house, she would complain, if he spoke to her: 'They're talking so out there that I can't hear you' (p. 34).

When Zeena comes to nurse her, Zeena's "volubility" is music to Ethan, and after his mother's death, he marries without really knowing his bride, not out of love but out of fear

of the solitude her leaving would restore. It is not a compatible match, and Ethan comes quickly to regret his precipitousness. But Wharton implies that Zeena is also a victim of their incompatibility: "Then she too fell silent. Perhaps it was the inevitable effect of life on the farm, or perhaps, as she sometimes said, it was because Ethan 'never listened'" (p. 36). Zeena is a powerfully unattractive woman, plain-faced, flat-chested, sleeping at night with her teeth in a jar by the bed. But she is married, after all, to a man who fantasizes about her death (he wishes, at one point, that she might be killed by burglars), and she is beleaguered in her own home by his infatuation with a prettier, younger relative. She too is locked into an existence of alienation and silence, and with the extenuating circumstances that soften her sinister edges, Wharton simultaneously emphasizes the story's theme and avoids the single-dimensioned oversimplification of melodramatic characterization.

The theme of alienation, then, is underscored throughout the novella--most apparently by its naturalistic setting and more subtly by the irony of its imagery and characterizations. This irony consistently arises from juxtaposed suggestions of entrapment and death on the one hand and romantic sensibility and individual striving toward liberation on the other. Nowhere is this juxtaposition more clearly worked out than in Ethan's own character. As we have seen,

too many winters in Starkfield have cultivated in Ethan a tendency toward silence and withdrawal that is at war with his latent sensitivity and his desire to break free. But these conflicting elements in Ethan are imbalanced. His "sensibility" is undeveloped; the clouds that obscure the meaning of things never clear enough to make meaning plain. The grip of isolation, on the other hand, is strong, involving an inward-turning that results in the self-absorption and egocenteredness which end in confusion, paralysis of will, and eventual failure. His feelings for Mattie, for example, and his growing willingness to act on them are an indication of the ascendancy of his desire to break free. But his self-absorption makes him oblivious of the consequences to Mattie, Zeena, and himself. He never sees past the idealized fantasy of their relationship and is unable to act on or even to think forcefully about its potential for catastrophe.

The novella's imagery reinforces precisely this imbalance. We have seen one example already in Ethan's declaration in the cemetery where he does not, but the reader does, recognize the explicit irony in the situation and in his foreshadowing and almost sinister pledge that he will never let Mattie go. Later, on his way to the single evening of complete happiness with Mattie he will ever know, Ethan passes the cemetery again and notes, without really a glimmer about its significance, the headstone of a kinsman, another Ethan Frome wedded to Endurance, his wife of fifty years. Again,

there is a terrible foreshadowing irony in Wharton's insistent juxtaposition of these images of death as a preface for the love scene which immediately follows. Further irony may be noted in Wharton's use of parallels--for example, an earlier scene when Ethan crosses his threshold to a cheerless greeting by Zeena with this one when, with Zeena out of town, Ethan's door opens on Mattie, waiting for him with a crimson ribbon in her hair.

This scene, in which Mattie and Ethan fantasize their idealized marital bliss while Zeena is away overnight surreptitiously making arrangements for Mattie's departure, clearly shows that, at least for Ethan, the wellbeing of companionship and communication, rather than any potential sexual connection, is the basis of their relationship:

> All constraint had vanished between the two, and they began to talk easily and simply. They spoke of everyday things, of the prospect of snow, of the next church sociable, of the loves and quarrels of Starkfield. The commonplace nature of what they said produced in Ethan an illusion of long-established intimacy which no outburst of emotion could have given, and he set his imagination adrift on the fiction that they had always spent their evenings thus and would always go on doing so. . . (pp. 44-45).

Though Ethan is brought back to the hopeless present when Zeena's cat sets her chair rocking, and though he recognizes that this will probably be their only evening together, there is no sexual consummation between Ethan and Mattie. Like many of us, Ethan is unprepared to translate his idealized

dreams into reality, even when the alternative is the loss of the dreams entirely.

For when Zeena returns, she has already arranged for Mattie to be sent away and replaced by another hired girl. Circumstance closes in on Ethan and Mattie, partly because he is a decent man incapable of the ruthlessness that would set them both free. He is trapped between his vision of how life might be and his inability to translate it into substance: "With the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him as it was" (p. 70).

The ultimate irony is that nothing could be worse than what does happen. If Ethan's discontent with his life and his own contending nature had never been stimulated by the presence of Mattie Silver, if he had stifled his attraction and let Denis Eady's courtship take its course, even if Mattie had been forced out jobless and alone, one can't imagine that any resulting catastrophe could have turned out so appallingly.

Again and finally, Wharton's ironic method is to juxtapose romance and naturalism, to allow Ethan and Mattie to perceive their situation in the emotion-charged context of conventional romance, and then to let their feelings carry them to disaster. As Ethan drives Mattie to the train, they stop off at Shadow Pond, a "shy secret spot" of romance and

and reminiscence that distorts the face of necessity and reminds them of the precise nature of their mutual happiness and their mutual loss: ". . . all their intercourse had been made up of just such inarticulate flashes, when they seemed to come suddenly upon happiness as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods. . . " (pp. 75-76).

Carried away by emotion, they move almost incidentally toward the attempted double suicide that cripples him and leaves her a helpless paralytic. The imagery that describes this movement relies once more upon ironic juxtaposition of disparate elements:

> Once he found her mouth again, and they seemed to be by the pond together in the burning August sun. But his cheek touched hers, and it was cold and full of weeping and he saw the road to the Flats under the night and heard the whistle of the train up the line.
>
> The spruces swathed them in blackness and silence. They might have been in their coffins underground (p. 82).

More actively than Lily Bart, they opt for oblivion, but fate is not so kind. The final effect of the frame is the terrible view it gives us of Mattie Silver, misshapen and whiningly querulous after twenty years of paralysis, suffering, and solitude closed up in the Frome house with Ethan and Zeena. In a terrible way, Ethan and Mattie get their wish: he will never let her go and she will never have to leave him.

With the judgment of the townswoman Mrs. Hale which concludes the narrative, Wharton returns the focus of the

tragedy to Ethan: ". . . and I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived: and the way they are now, I don't see's there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues" (p. 88). This is perhaps the most pessimistic expression in all of Wharton's work. Her characters seek continuity and communion--a basic quest of American literature--in an environment where alienation is a part of the state of nature. But more horrifying still is the truth that some manifestations of continuity and communion are worse than death and dissolution. This profoundly pessimistic idea is one facet of the shifting prism Mrs. Wharton holds up to the light of experience, but hers is not the simple and excluding perspective of pessimistic determinism.

Few characters in American fiction seem doomed more absolutely than Ethan Frome, but it is an error to suppose that his annihilation is merely the working out of the customary fate of the protagonist of naturalistic fiction. Frome simply does not learn enough from his feelings and experiences, is too yielding to an illusion of happiness that is destructively different from real possibilities. Ethan Frome's miserable fate is, at least to a significant degree, attributable to his own weaknesses of judgment and will.

In Charity Royall, the heroine of Summer, Wharton creates that rare creature--a female protagonist of an

initiation story who is a pure survivor. Summer (1917), the book Wharton called sardonically "hot Ethan," has all the elements of classic initiation--an emotionally undeveloped but sensually conscious young protagonist who experiences a transforming sexual awakening, the clash of idealized passion and romance with the pragmatic necessities of reality, the ambivalent maturation that is a movement from innocence to experience. But Summer transcends the conventional working out of this archetypal formula because of Wharton's bold characterization of the heroine, the frank portrayal of female sensuality before many were ready even to recognize its existence, and because of certain daring implications within the story's plot, patterns of imagery, and resolution.

Charity shares with Lily Bart a sense of herself as outsider and with Ethan Frome a regretful awareness of the constricting smallness of her environment and a hunger for a larger, more meaningful world. When all their frustrations and discontents are condensed, reduced to their common denominator, what all three of these characters desire is coherence, continuity, a cessation of their bewildered struggling with their "aloneness," the peace which comes, they believe, with the calming solace of human love or, at the other extreme as we have seen, with oblivion. Charity is, in a sense, an amalgam of these characters--in almost any Wharton protagonist there are always echoes of others--but there is more in Charity of their strengths than of their

weaknesses. In the course of the novella, Charity Royall must grow into her name, must learn compassion and generosity of character to humanize the native shrewdness and self-reliance she possesses as part of her mysterious birthright from the Mountain. Ultimately, she must transform her expectations and marshal her strengths on the side of life, rather than death, which Lily and Ethan fail to do.

The novella begins with the significant image, already noted, of the threshold: "A girl came out of Lawyer Royall's house, at the end of one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep."[9] It is a traditional, perfectly appropriate image suggesting initiation to come, as Hawthorne knew when he used it to begin one of his tales of initiation, "Young Goodman Brown." Wharton actually provides her readers with quite a lot without seeming to do so in this opening scene. As winter was a crucial governing symbol for Ethan Frome, fusing setting, characterization, plot, and theme, so Wharton introduces summer as a symbol with an almost identical function here, except that it is perhaps even more important since it, not the heroine herself, provides the story's title. In Ethan Frome, Ethan's and Mattie's recollections of summer were a kind of coded acknowledgment of their stirring passion. Summer is much more explicitly in this story both a catalyst for and an emblem of Charity's awakening sexuality. She is, in a sense, like some young female animal quite naturally coming into season, and Wharton

presents the mysterious stranger, the young man who, essentially because he is a stranger, has the power to arouse and focus Charity's so far half-dormant, half-repressed sexual identity.

The other crucial bit of detail in the novella's superficially simple opening suggests the alienation Charity begins with. Upon her first view of Lucius Harney, handsome and laughing and foreign to North Dormer, Charity's reaction is not the normal admiration or flirtatious anticipation of an adolescent girl; her first reaction is fear: "Her heart contracted a little, and the shrinking that sometimes came over her when she saw people with holiday faces made her draw back into the house and pretend to look for the key she knew she had already put into her pocket" (p. 4). Her sense of separation is almost instinctive. Though she had been taken off the darkly mysterious and symbolic Mountain as a baby and adopted into the "civilized" atmosphere of Lawyer Royall's home and North Dormer's small town society, Charity remains in almost every way an alien. She is like a wildflower transplanted into a country garden: she may flourish there, but she will never be domesticated. Lily Bart was blasted by the insight that reveals her separation and aloneness; all Charity's young life has been informed by it. "How I hate everything!" (p. 4) are the first words we hear her speak.

The reader comes to know that part of Charity's bitter-

ness is the result of her relationship with her guardian, himself a man embittered, like Ethan Frome, by failed ambitions, wasted potential, and the shame of one terrible moral error when, in the course of a drunken night following his wife's death, he presents himself at the threshold of Charity's bedroom. His sexual advance barely deserves the name: he is not really threatening; he acts out of loneliness and what turns out to be genuine love; and Charity is not even really frightened. But she is revolted, disgusted--too young and uncharitable to be anything else. She is also incapable of either forgiving him or allowing him to forgive himself. His lapse gives her a moral edge which translates into her sovereignty in the house and creates an unbridgeable chasm between them. In fact, Charity is secure enough to use the episode, at least unconsciously, to her advantage, insisting on a hired woman as a reminder of his ignominy and making him use his influence to get her a position as local librarian so she can save money enough to leave Royall, North Dormer, and all it represents.

Blake Nevius has suggested, in what seems a generalization based on a false assumption dispelled in chapter one, that: "More clearly than in Ethan Frome, Mrs. Wharton is repelled by her material--perhaps as only a lady and a summer visitor to the Berkshires could be. . . . As before, the distance from Paris to Lennox lends no enchantment to the scene, and this time there is no encouragement for the

author to identify herself with her central character."[10] Yet he quotes and seems to accept without contradiction Wharton's own assertion that she did not ". . . remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene, or the people creating it."[11]

And it is simply inaccurate to say that Wharton does not identify with her protagonist. Her portrayal of Charity Royall is emphatically sympathetic. One indication of this, besides the evidence presented by the way Wharton works out Charity's fate in the narrative as a whole, is that she gives Charity a sensitivity and responsiveness to nature which, as we have already seen, almost always indicates her own identification with the character. In an early scene, for example, Charity, unable to stand the stifling atmosphere of the library, runs off to a knoll open to wind and sun:

> She was blind and insensitive to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of her blood responded. She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair and through her cotton blouse, and the creak of the larches as they swayed to it.
>
> She often climbed up the hill and lay there alone for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and rubbing her cheeks in the grass. Generally at such times she did not think of anything, but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being (pp. 13-14).

The language here, almost erotic in its explicit description of her physical pleasure, suggests a strikingly romantic side of Charity's nature, one with which, as we have seen,

Wharton strongly identified--one, in fact, she shared.

But Charity does not entirely escape the irony Wharton habitually applies to her major characters, and her utter incompetence, ignorance, and apathy in her job as librarian are signs of this ironic treatment. Charity may have wise blood, but she is altogether incapable of understanding, responding to, or taking advantage of the world of wider culture open to a Lucius Harney, for example. The books she is supposed to care for she sees as undermining adversaries capable of making a fool of her; they might as well be written in a foreign language. For her, literature and art in no way break down the isolation that limits her world. Books will never give Charity as they did Wharton, the sense that she "will never really be alone again."[12] Charity, at least as she is when the novella opens, is intellectually inanimate, and that is a limitation Wharton and her audience are aware of, though Charity is not.

In her youthful perversity and bravado, Charity has defensively exaggerated her separation from everyone around her because it affords her a kind of superiority. This has kept her aloof from local courtships, and one of her strongest bonds to Harney is his admiration for her "difference," just as he implies that he admires the Mountain people because they "don't give a damn for anybody" (p. 47). Charity does not understand that this is merely a superficial, short-sighted judgment. (His actual physical short-sightedness

is, in fact, a metaphor for a deeper impairment of vision.) Ironically, the very difference of their backgrounds and personalities will make impossible any permanent bond between them. He too is audaciously young and impetuous; his enthusiasm for the carelessness represented by the Mountain, on one level a symbol of the primitive and unbridled in the human personality, is not reliable as an indication of his long-range values.

But ". . . there had never been such a June in Eagle County" (p. 38), Wharton writes, and Charity and Harney are inevitably drawn together. The sexual charge building between them and its emotional ramifications are established by dramatic irony and ironic imagery. A crucial scene in which Charity watches Harney from outside his bedroom window, for example, appears at first to be intended as a build up for the expected conventional seduction.

> One motion of her hand, one tap on the pane, and she could picture the sudden change in his face. In every pulse of her rigid body, she was aware of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her; but something kept her from moving. It was not the fear of any sanction, human or heavenly; she had never in her life been afraid. It was simply that she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in (p. 77).

Charity refrains from that tap on the pane that would bring her at least a form of the human connection she seeks because her contact with Harney--her developing love for him and his sympathy for her--has already awakened in her a "wondering pride," a "startled softness" (p. 77).

Wharton is already charting the direction of the story's departure from the conventional cautionary tale of seduction. The traditional, simplistic formula usually equates female initiation with a fall from innocence involving either lasciviousness or helpless ignorance, a fall which suggests the Scylla and Charybdis of female sexuality--the old belief that a girl must be either a lady or a whore. Charity is indeed moving closer and closer to consummation of her sexual attraction to Harney, but she is impelled by forces more psychologically complex, and more accurately portrayed by Wharton, than those traditionally ascribed in literature to young women in her circumstance.

The largely overlooked idea Wharton delineates insistently in Summer is the creative potential of sexual love, an idea which was to become an important theme in later writing women. It is central to Carson McCullers' Ballad of the Sad Cafe, for example, in which both Miss Amelia and the whole town draw life and creative energy from her crazy, hopeless love.[13]

In Summer, Charity's awakening sexuality is not automatically or entirely a portent or cause of doom; it is instead enlightening, expanding, and it engenders the first unreliable but recognizable stirrings of the virtue she was named for but has, to this point, ironically lacked. Directly after her night of charged emotion and insight outside Harney's window, for example, Charity is able to acknowledge

for the first time the depth and genuineness of Mr. Royall's feelings as he tries to warn her about her deepening involvement:

> And suddenly, she understood that, until then, she had never really noticed him or thought about him. Except on the occasion of his one offense he had been to her merely the person who is always there, the unquestioned central fact of life, as inevitable but as uninteresting as North Dormer itself, or any of the conditions fate had laid on her. . . . But now she began to wonder what he was really like (pp. 80-81).

It is, of course, the wrong time for him to approach her, to "finger her dreams" or intervene in her life before summer has even fully come on. But the exchange between them at this point in the novella, when Royall declares his own love once again and then, when he is spurned, offers to give her Harney if she wants him, shows that Wharton does not mean Royall to be either contemptible or foolish, and that Charity is capable, even at the height of her own anger and bitterness, of insight and honest comprehension: "They stood and looked at each other for a long moment, eye to eye, with the terrible equality of courage that sometimes made her feel as if she had his blood in her veins" (p. 86).

Wharton's dynamic characterizations often depend on patterns of passage, as we have seen in the example of Lily Bart, whose "passage" from one set of values to another precipitates another kind of passage out of society and, eventually, out of life. Charity's initiation is based also

on similar patterns of passage, though their consequences for her are ultimately different. One gigantic irony in Wharton is that expanded experience and painfully developed insight into one's own nature and one's connection or lack of connection to others bring penalties rather than rewards. In Summer, the irony and paradox of this idea are carried out in the story's imagery and dramatic structure.

Even in what appears to be a fairly insignificant detail--in, for example, the symbolism of Charity's new white straw hat with the cherry-colored lining, or on the occasion when she admires her image in a looking glass propped against Royall's black leather Bible--Wharton suggests the paradoxical tension between innocence and desire, between natural adolescent vanity and the conventional morality which seeks to repress it. And the stifling heat of the Fourth of July celebration at Nettleton and the display of fireworks which transports Charity are tangible manifestations of the building sexual heat and light which are initially ignited on this occasion: "With sudden vehemence, he wound his arms about her, holding her head against his breast while she gave him back his kisses. An unknown Harney had revealed himself, a Harney who dominated her and yet over whom she felt herself possessed of a new mysterious power" (p. 109). Wharton here expresses the most fundamental sexual paradox--the simultaneous mystery of surrender and conquest. Dramatic irony occurs in Charity and Harney's almost immediate confrontation

with Royall who, drunk and jealous, publicly accuses Charity of being a whore despite both the injustice of the charge and the fact that he himself is with Julia Hawes, who is precisely what he accuses Charity of being. These closely juxtaposed scenes are thematically related by their insistent sexuality and suggest the irrestible pull of passion and also its darker side, which becomes mere appetite when it is separated, as it is in the pairing of Royall and Julia Hawes, from the context of love.

From this point on, the novella's ironies become increasingly symbolic and psychologically complex because it is through them that Wharton's equally complex notions of the consequences of sexuality and the difficult tension between sex and love are to be conveyed to the reader. Sex is never a simple matter in Wharton, though that fact has not always been credited by critics. In this story, it is not merely destructive; it is redeeming as well, and creative and enlarging--a manifestation of love which is also unstable, volatile, and dangerous.

In a sequence of scenes that culminate in Charity's sexual "fall," dramatic irony and recurring ironic imagery delineate these complexities. Charity, running away from the sexual implications of all that has taken place, sets out for the Mountain, which is both literal place and a symbol of exactly those primitive and sensual emotions she is fleeing. On the way, she passes a gospel tent and is exhorted

to lay her guilt before God. But religion is one of those things generally left out in Wharton's fiction, and Charity's only regret is that she has nothing to feel guilty about. Like Hester Prynne, Charity is headed away from civilization --an outsider propelling herself further out, on her way to the forest and beyond that to the Mountain, the frontier where civilization ceases. Her flight is interrupted, but in an ironic sense advanced, by Harney, who has followed her.

Later, in an abandoned house "as dry and pure as the interior of a long empty shell" (p. 122), half-way between town and forest and significantly in an apple orchard, Charity loses her innocence. But even this important scene is ironically motivated when Charity tells Harney about Royall's sexual advance to explain why she has run away and won't go back. The irony here is that not only is this a half-truth, since we know that Charity may have been repelled by Royall but is not afraid of him, but that Harney is inflamed by her story from protectiveness to passion and in fact commits the act which he has villified Royall for even imagining: "'The damned hound! The villainous low hound'." His wrath blazed up, crimsoning him to the temples. 'I never dreamed --good God, it is too vile,' he broke off as if his thoughts recoiled from the discovery" (p. 123). But two paragraphs later, ". . . He came close and caught her to him as if he were snatching her from some imminent peril: his impetuous eyes were in hers, and she could feel the hard beat of his

heart as he held her against it. 'Kiss me again--like last night,' he said, pushing her hair back as if to draw her whole face into his kiss--" (p. 124). Charity's sexual initiation, despite her earlier resolutions that it should not happen so, has occurred because of a certain amount of self-deception on both sides.

Of course, Charity does return to North Dormer and the red house of Lawyer Royall because Harney wishes it and because it is the only way they can extend their involvement. Charity is, for this time, completely caught up in her love for Harney: "All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will. It was not that she felt in him any ascendancy of character--there were moments when she already knew she was the stronger--but that all the rest of life had become a mere cloudy rim about the central glory of their passion" (p. 129). The reader can clearly anticipate, and is meant to, the danger inherent in the depth of Charity's commitment, but there are constructive effects as well. Charity has for the first time in her life a sense of security, connection, belonging, and more, of life:

> The only reality was the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils. She had lived all her life among people whose sensibilities seemed to have withered from lack of use. . . . She had always thought of love as something confused and furtive and he made it as bright and open as the summer air (p. 132).

For Charity, and for Harney too, this is the time of high summer, of symbolic heat, blooming, lush growth, bright, cloudless days and crystal nights presided over by the white star that is the emblem of the pure aspiration of Charity's love. There is irony in the deliberately romantic connotations of this imagery, however, and the reader is made to feel the impermanence of the season and the approach of disaster by a series of foreshadowings. The most striking of these is a scene in which Charity returns from an assignation with Harney at the little house in the orchard to discover laid out on her bed the dress Ally Hawes, Julia's sister, has been sewing for her to wear in the approaching Old Home Week festivities. The dress is China silk, "virgin" white, and there are a veil and white satin shoes--discards of Annabel Balch, the upper class city girl to whom Harney is already secretly engaged. The dress is a well-chosen symbol of loss--lost innocence and much more--for Charity will, of course, never marry Lucius Harney. Harney is, finally, a Wharton male in the mold of Lawrence Selden--though he does not intend to harm Charity, he has not the strength of character to avoid it.

Royall is the male character who really captures Wharton's attention--flawed, embittered, but still a man worthy of respect, a character cast larger and deeper than any in the novella except Charity herself. The reader is meant to see these qualities clearly--even as Charity

grudgingly begins to acknowledge them--in the scene where Royall makes a speech during Old Home Week. In this speech, he affirms, without sentimentality or excess, the value of place and roots, even a narrow place like North Dormer, and rejects the bitter resentments of failed ambition. To this point, Royall's resemblance to Ethan Frome has been marked and unavoidable, but here Wharton breaks from the hopelessness, constriction, and entrapment that defines Frome in his environment to create in Royall a character stronger, more resourceful, and ultimately more honest and durable in a similar environment. If Ethan Frome is a story about victimization, Summer concerns survival and is evidence of Wharton's openness to experience and her willingness to acknowledge its multiplicity.

Another function of this crucial scene describing North Dormer's mid-summer holiday is to undermine Charity's mistaken sense of security in her relationship with Harney. Once she has seen him with Anabel Balch, that sense of belonging and continuity--"lastingness"--is forever blasted even though their affair continues. The sexual connection, based as it is on blind love on her side and well meaning but limited physical attraction on his, cannot secure the coherence Charity needs in her life. By the time Royall confronts them in their orchard house and forces Harney into an insincere promise of marriage, that fact is inescapable, and sex has ironically become a maelstrom reminding the

reader of an image Wharton employed in Sanctuary: "She clung to him desperately, and as he drew her to his knees on the couch she felt as if they were being sucked down together into some bottomless abyss" (p. 156).

Harney's leaving for New York to "settle things," and Charity's learning for certain that what he has to settle is his engagement to Anabel Balch marks the beginning of summer's end. Charity's instinctive comprehension of the gulf between them moves her to set her lover free if he wishes to be free, and it is only after she has posted a letter telling him so that she discovers she is pregnant, a fact she confirms by visiting an abortionist and apparent procurer in Nettleton who takes as payment the blue brooch Harney had given her earlier. But Charity is only there for confirmation, not for an abortion. Wharton insists on the ironic duality she has worked out throughout the narrative; Charity's pregnancy carries her further into the abyss of separation and ostracism, but it is also creative and paradoxically connecting: "She would never again know what it was to feel herself alone" (p. 168). For Charity and, it seems in Wharton's view as well, this is no small compensation. Charity's illegitimate child, like Hester Prynne's Pearl, is simultaneously her bond with humanity and the seal of her separation: "In the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure. . ." (p. 174). Once again, she thrusts herself outward, toward the Mountain, a

place where there is no established order.

The scene that follows is perhaps the most extraordinary in all of Wharton's work, and its vividness is a clear denial of the charge that Wharton did not genuinely possess her material. On the Mountain, Charity and the minister who has intercepted her on the way find her mother dead from the debaucheries of a lifetime. The description of the dead woman, her sordid surroundings and degenerate companions is carefully and realistically detailed. The depravity of the Mountain is stark, concrete, and literal, especially in the incongruity of its contrast with the spirituality of the minister's funeral sermon. But it is also, as it has been throughout the narrative, a symbol not of freedom from established order but of licence, incoherence, and chaos, reflecting the most primitive and pathological elements of societal and individual personality. Wharton had a fine mistrust of the current burgeoning literary fascination with psychoanalytic theory; in A Backward Glance, she derided ". . . creative art abandoned to pathology."[14] But that does not mean that she was unaware of or insensitive to the deepest, unilluminated levels of personality, the "unutterable" recesses of motivation. In an ironic reversal, the Mountain represents these pathological impulses rather than those arising out of natural expression, which as we have seen in the book's romantic imagery, Wharton celebrates as nourishing and healthy. Charity must confront and reject

this hellish, dehumanizing vacuum of incoherence and anarchy before either her "personal adventure" or her personality has any chance to emerge whole and sound. After a life time of living in its shadow, Charity comes to know at last that ". . . Anything, anything was better than to add another life to the nest of misery on the Mountain. . ." (p. 194).

The novella's conclusion moves toward what appears to be but really is not a conventional treatment of Charity's initiation experience in terms of compromise and disillusion. Royall appears once again to offer her the solution of marriage. It is a generous act, conceived in full knowledge of her condition and out of genuine love, and Charity--who has always been strong, brave, and independent--is at last a woman who lives up to her name. There is a rare sweetness in Wharton's careful recording of Charity's almost will-less acceptance, their journey to Nettleton where they are immediately married, his gentle forbearance of conjugal privilege on their wedding night, his pride in and affection for her, and, above all, Charity's deepening appreciation of his goodness. Her acceptance of his love is equally a receiving of charity, in the sense of that word that means compassion, and an extending of it. Summer is over, but autumn has its own beauties, and it is, after all, not as if summer had never been. In the novella's final instance of dramatic irony, Charity buys back the blue brooch with the money Royall has given her for a trousseau to save for her child.

Her act is not a betrayal of her husband but an affirmation of the validity of her own feelings.

Summer is also an affirmation of endurance, courage, and abiding love. It is an interpretation of experience related to Wharton's other works by the sense of alienation which is a donnee, by the struggle for illumination and insight, and by the pursuit of communion and coherence in a world where these are rare commodities. Its irony is a significant component of its originality, helping to deflect it from the conventional formula of initiation and creating additional connections to Ethan Frome. Irony is certainly a major strength and a key to meaning in both these stories --the most dependable bridge of communication and continuity between Wharton and her audience.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Blake Nevius, pp. 54-55, and Alfred Kazin's chapter on "Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser" in On Native Ground.

[2] Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," in Great Moral Dilemmas, ed. Robert MacIvar (New York: Harper and Bros., 1956), p. 38. See also E. K. Brown, "Edith Wharton," from Etude Anglaises, 1938.

[3] "I have drunk of the wine of life at last," Wharton writes in the midst of her affair with Morton Fullerton in the spring of 1908. "I have known the best thing worth knowing, I have been warmed through and through never to grow quite cold again till the end. . ." (p. 26 in The Love Diary, quoted in Wolff, p. 150). Another entry further articulates Wharton's awareness of the power of communion to overcome separation: "I knew then, dearest dear, all that I had never known before--the interfusion of spirit and sense, the double nearness, the mingled communion of touch and thought. . . . One such hour to irradiate a whole life."

[4] Wharton herself felt satisfaction with that structure: ". . . though I am far from thinking Ethan Frome my best novel, and am bored and even exasperated when I am told that it is, I am still sure that its structure is not its weak point" (p. 209, A Backward Glance).

[5] See Wolff's discussion of Ethan Frome, pp. 163-184.

[6] Ethan Frome, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), p. 5. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[7] Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," p. 43.

[8] Winesburg, Ohio (1919; rpt. New York: Random House, 1947), pp. 1-5.

[9] Summer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), p. 3. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[10] Nevius, p. 170.

[11] Ibid., p. 168.

[12] See note 19, Chapter Three.

[13] This theme is central to both The Ballad of the

Sad Cafe and The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. McCullers insists on the utterly mysterious nature of sexual love and its simultaneous potential for creation and destruction.

[14] A Backward Glance, p. 127.

CHAPTER V

The second decade of the twentieth century was the most productive of Edith Wharton's career. In those ten years, she published five good books--the novellas discussed in the preceding chapter and three longer fictions, The Reef (1912), The Custom of the Country (1913), and The Age of Innocence (1920), in which she returned to the scrutiny of her upper-class milieu. All five works of this prolific period concern what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls the ". . . immensely convoluted,many-sided problem of sexuality."[1] More particularly, they explore, as we have seen already in Ethan Frome and Summer, the relation of sexuality and romantic love to Wharton's prevailing sense of inevitable alienation as a factor of human identity--Lily Bart's vision of people as atoms whirling away from each other, of "the clutch of solitude at the human heart." They also share ironic technique, always in Wharton a basic element of invention. Although the effects of her technique are strikingly and deliberately varied, each book's coherence depends as usual upon irony accurately "sent" through the transceiver of writer/reader.

Each of these five narratives is in some way an experiment, the writer's effort to extend her imaginative energies and technical inventiveness. In the Massachusetts novellas for example, Wharton examines the potential of sex and love to relieve the chronic alienation of the inarticulate, stunted lives of her literally provincial, middle-class protagonists. So far as ironic technique is concerned, the illusion of the narrator's "vision" gives Ethan Frome's story many of the qualities of a dramatic monologue, opening up the story's ironic possibilities and imparting to it tragic realism rather than the melodramatic bathos of the conventional tale of star-crossed lovers. In Summer, irony invests Wharton's consideration of female sexuality and initiation with originality and ultimately positive insight.

The Reef, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence also experiment with irony as a medium of exchange between author and audience, extending Wharton's ironic strategy and placing upon her readers even greater demands of sensitivity and responsiveness to ambivalence. The Reef, which has been called the most Jamesian and most perplexing of Wharton's novels,[2] is, in a way, Wharton's most audacious experiment. Beneath its deceptively traditional surface, it is a static, loosely-structured, resolution-less narrative risking a combination of stable and unstable ironies to a degree Wharton had not attempted previously. The Custom of The Country replaces Wharton's characteristic ironic subtlety

with broad satire, perhaps conceived by the author as a more suitable vehicle for the novel's unmitigated anti-heroine. The Age of Innocence is in a way the culmination of all these experiments--a personal and social record of the entangled power and limits of love--and the second nearly perfect evocation of natural magic in Wharton's career.

As one surveys Wharton's fiction as a body of work, it becomes clear that, though certain motifs and techniques are consistently employed for coherence and unity, as an "inventor," Wharton was not committed to any single, excluding vision or to the dogged repetition of form. The reader cannot, for example, anticipate the ending of one novel by referring to the resolutions of others. Conflict generally arises from her characters' consciousness of alienation and the bone-deep discontent it engenders. In these books, Wharton narrows the scope of this conflict to the close examination of whether romantic love and its sexual corollary can overcome the sense of separateness and isolation and bridge the distance between self and "other." The accurate reading of character, then, becomes especially crucial in these novels since romantic love and sex are such complex motivators of behavior.

The Reef is elusive and only partially successful because the characters' motives, and Wharton's, seem obscure and ambivalent. The novel's uncertainties arise in large part out of its narrative vantage, but they are also

deliberately constructed to achieve certain ambitious effects.

The plot concerns the romantic entanglements of the three major characters, Anna Leath, George Darrow, and Sophy Viner. Only Anna and George convey point of view; this has led many critics to wrongly assume that Sophy's role in the novel is less important than the others, or--an even greater error--that she is an unsympathetic character. This confusion about Sophy is largely responsible for amazingly different and contradictory interpretations of the novel's intentions and effectiveness. Blake Nevius, for example, writing without benefit of revisionist concessions granting Mrs. Wharton a degree at least of broad mindedness, notes that no satisfactory interpretation of the novel is possible because, as he believes, Sophy Viner is finally a victim of Wharton's failure of sympathy for anyone outside her own class.[3] In his view, the moral perspective of the novel and its ultimate coherence are suspect, since he reads the novel's ending, in which Sophy returns to the service of the unsavory Mrs. Murrett, as the proof of Wharton's antipathy and consequently of her "depressingly narrow sense of human values."[4] Wharton's sympathetic portrayals of Charity Royall and Ethan Frome, as we have already seen, are not the only characterizations that seem to contradict this judgment; its basic error is a misreading of the meaning of the novel's conclusion which results in a failure to recognize Wharton's consistent irony. Further, that Sophy is not given narrative vantage and allowed to

present her own case does not necessarily indicate the author's lack of sympathy, as Caddie Compson's striking example demonstrates. Sophy Viner is neither a minor character nor the villainess of the piece, as the consistent identification of the novel's ironic purpose will indicate.

The extremely complex and even nebulous irony of The Reef makes Wayne Booth's advice that ". . . other things being equal, one should always accept the reading that contributes most to the work . . ."[5] especially valuable as a beginning point. Unfortunately, questions about point of view have deflected attention from the more important concerns of ironic direction and degree. Even if the problem of Sophy Viner is deferred, the novel's ambiguity offers critics another temptation--to view Anna and/or Darrow, for various reasons and in different ways, as autogiographical reflections of Wharton herself.[6]

Wharton does include in this book some intriguing allusions to her personal life, and much has been made of these. The hotel in which Darrow and Sophy have an affair, for example, is the Terminus, the name of the hotel in which Wharton and Morton Fullerton met for the same purpose. But the meaning of such private references must, except for unverifiable speculation, remain private. The danger of assuming that Anna or Darrow or both represent some coded manifestation of Wharton's own psyche is that, taken too seriously, such

an assumption may downplay the author's ironic distance from these characters and potentially misplace the meaning of the novel's irony entirely. Coherence results more dependably from analysis of the devices of Mrs. Wharton's ironic technique, consistently present as always, and equally consistently employed in the exploration of the unending necessity and longing for human connection--and in this novel particularly, the punishing psychological ordeal involved in even undertaking the pursuit of such connections.

The novel's controlling metaphor literally suggests barriers and separation: despite the genuineness of the characters' loves for one another, despite their consciously expressed need for love and human connections somehow deeper and more nourishing than those they have already experienced, they are wrecked on a reef of circumstance, woefully unfortunate coincidence, and most insurmountably, their own self-lacerating bondage to narrow convention and a paralyzing inability to claim happiness by asserting their best selves. Fifty years earlier, Matthew Arnold had employed a similar figure and theme in his short poem, "To Marguerite," in which he describes human beings as islands isolated in and surrounded by the "sea of life."[7] Though Wharton makes no direct reference to the poem as a source, The Reef is most clearly understood as an extension of that image and idea. More specifically, the reef within the novel is associated with sexuality--the

awesomely mysterious impulse which binds and connects but may unpredictably and ironically sever and separate.

Although the presence of sexuality in Wharton's fiction has often been overlooked, there is a surprisingly insistent sexual undercurrent in much of her work. She tries to capture the complex workings of sexuality in their somehow subterranean relation to manners--behavior and the consequences of behavior. This ambitious aim accounts for The Reef's deliberate ambivalence of character motive, tone, conclusion and, above all, the elusiveness of its irony.

The novel's crucial opening episode describes the incidental meeting of George Darrow and Sophy Viner in a train station and their subsequent journey together to Paris where propinquity and circumstance result in a brief sexual episode which eventually has disastrous consequences. Ironies of situation are obvious and multiple. In an immediate sense, the cause of Darrow's initial interest in Sophy, an interest which turns swiftly into pursuit, is that Anna Leath, whom he hopes to make his fiance, has just sent him a wire postponing his visit, and Sophy is merely balm for his wounded ego. We learn later that Darrow's pique and the indiscretion which is its result are unjustified; Anna's change of plans is in no way a rejection of Darrow. In fact, her reason--that she must suddenly find a governess for her daughter--is itself ironic, since Sophy will eventually be that governess. A further irony is that Sophy's friendship with Darrow, which seems to her a

wonderful turning of her pitiful fortunes, is actually the closing of the trap that will determine her unhappy future.

The novel's opening book not only establishes the dramatic ironies which account for the movement and the direction of plot, it also indicates the direction of the irony Wharton applies to characterization. Superficially, the meeting in the train station recalls the opening of The House of Mirth; there is, moreover, a deliberate and telling resemblance between Darrow and Selden and, most significantly, between Sophy and Lily. Though Sophy begins on a lower rung of the social ladder, she is actually in much the same position as Lily--a kind of paid retainer/companion dependent on the dubious largesse of rich, vulgar women like Mrs. Murrett. In Lily's story, we saw at least one instance of Mrs. Wharton's compassion for the desperate precariousness of those in such a position, and though Lily was allowed to make her own case and Sophy is not, Wharton portrays Sophy with consistent sympathy from first to last. She is almost humorously unpolished, though she sometimes adopts a transparently defensive pose of worldiness. She is fresh and open and has the romantic capacity for profound feeling which, as we have seen again and again, is almost always an emblem of Wharton's at least partial empathy. When, for example, Darrow takes her to see Greek tragedy at the Theatre Francais, he is fascinated by the depth of her reaction, and his analysis tells the seasoned reader much about them both and, in particular,

reveals Sophy a sympathetic character:

> . . . she felt what would probably have been unperceived by many a young lady who had taken a first in classics: the ineluctable fatality of the tale, the dread sway in it of the same mysterious "luck" which pulled the threads of her own small destiny. It was not literature to her, it was fact: as actual, as near by, as what was happening to her at the moment and what the next hour held in store. Seen in this light, the play regained for Darrow its supreme and poignant reality. He pierced to the heart of its significance through all the artificial accretions with which his theories of art and the conventions of the stage had clothed it, and saw it as he had never seen it: as life.[8]

Sophy not only intuitively <u>feels</u> the symbiosis of life and and art; she helps Darrow to renew his own comprehension of that connection--and in doing so she is clearly a character with whom the audience is intended to identify.

Even Darrow's estimate of Sophy, though he sometimes projects upon her his own cynicism, is finally not cynical. Much more unhesitatingly than Selden responds to the fineness in Lily, Darrow is always able to recognize that it is Sophy's loveliness, the unhappiness of her pinched little life, and her trustfulness rather than her ambition that make her vulnerable. Though she succumbs to the tempting interlude of kindness and romance that Darrow offers her in Paris, the language of the novel never suggests that she is a seductress. Instead, she is shown to be earnest, inexperienced, and basically innocent:

> Her questions testified to a wholesome and comprehensive human curiosity, and her comments showed,

> like her face and her whole attitude, an odd mingling of precocious wisdom and disarming ignorance. When she talked to him about "life"--the word was often on her lips--she seemed to him like a child playing with a tiger's cub; and he said to himself that some day the child would grow up--and so would the tiger (p. 60).

Darrow, on the other hand, becomes a seducer through a series of maneuvers to keep Sophy with him in Paris. Unlike her, he is experienced enough to consider the consequences of an amatory dalliance. But he is petulant about and embittered by the significance he attaches to Anna's failure to explain or communicate further, and he is genuinely charmed by Sophy's freshness and her awe-struck admiration for the wonders of Paris which have become mundane to him. As we have come to expect, there is a discernible difference between Darrow's view of the way things are and the reader's, resulting primarily from his failure to perceive his own vanity and self-interestedness.

Even so, Darrow is not presented as a simple villain. He is sensitive, intelligent, analytical. Though he rationalizes that he only intends to give Sophy a "child's holiday," he knows, on some level at least, what will happen if he convinces her to accept such a holiday, to stay on with him. "Is it really going to happen to me?" she asks, referring to the carefree time he promises. "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" (pp. 71-72).

Ten days later, Darrow is feeling only revulsion and recrimination. The "transient intimacy" of his affair with Sophy, symbolized by the very rooms in which they stay and, with special irony, by the communicating door between those rooms, repels him utterly. The imagery of the final scene of Book I suggests the confinement he comes to feel in his physical closeness to Sophy. Since Darrow still has the narrative vantage, the reader does not yet know what Sophy feels about Darrow, but on his side, intimacy has ended his attraction rather than increased it. Sex between these two attractive, attracted people is an end rather than a beginning.

Though we might speculate about why this should be so, the answer is not obvious. The text denies that Darrow is simply a sexual predator interested only in the conquest or that he rejects Sophy because he is anxious to take up his pursuit of Anna. He has never had such an affair before, and, when, still involved with Sophy, he at least receives a letter from Anna, he is so immersed in feelings of revulsion and guilt that he burns it unread, passing up his opportunity to reestablish their relationship. Wharton's refusal to provide an easy explanation or, in fact, <u>any</u> real explanation, is a way of focusing on the enigmatic nature of the sexual connection itself.

In Book II, point of view is abruptly shifted to Anna Leath, whose ambiguous, contradictory characterization poses

the most complicated problem of the novel. Wharton invests her with a history and sensibility which suggests both her emotional potential and limitations:

> In the well-regulated, well-fed Summers world the unusual was regarded as either immoral or ill-bred, and people with emotions were not visited. Sometimes, with a sense of groping in a topsy-turvy universe, Anna had wondered why everybody about her seemed to ignore all the passions and sensations which formed the stuff of great poetry and memorable action. . . .
>
> Little by little the conditions conquered her, and she learned to regard the substance of life as a mere canvas for the embroideries of poet and painter, and its little swept and fenced and tended surface as its actual substance (p. 85).

Anna's childhood background and the conclusions she draws from it seem extraordinarily similar to the circumstances of Wharton's own background described in A Backward Glance. Yet a close reading of this passage reveals that the distance between Wharton and Anna may be greater than that between Wharton and Sophy, for Anna had allowed herself to be reconciled to the separation of art and life. Conquered by conditions in which "the stuff of great poetry and memorable action" have no relation to real life and exist only in imaginative visions, Anna is less vulnerable than Sophy but also less courageous. Wharton invests Anna with her own experience not because Anna is a representation of herself but because she knows that the emotionally-repressed environment of her own growing up is itself representative of the stunted emotional development of whole generations of

carefully brought up young people, particularly women, so isolated from certain kinds of experience that they may spend their lives evading experience or be wrecked by their inability to cope when they do confront it. Anna's coherence as a character and her function in the structure of the novel depend upon the reader's recognition of these circumstances of her life and personality and Wharton's ironic use of them.

When Book II opens, with, significantly, a variation of the threshold imagery Wharton has employed before with ironic effect, Anna is about to embrace genuine emotional experience, in the form of her romantic attachment to Darrow, for the first time in her life. Still young, widowed, endowed with wealth, status, beauty, children, she would seem to possess every requirement of happiness. But these things are not enough; she is suddenly and transcendantly happy only because of the emotions aroused by Darrow's expected arrival: "In every nerve and vein she was conscious of that equipoise of bliss which the fearful human heart scarce dares acknowledge. She was not used to strong or full emotions; but she had always known that she would not be afraid of them. She was not afraid now; but she felt a deep inward stillness" (p. 83).

But Anna's happiness has not been tested, and despite her brave assertion, she is naive in her failure to recognize that strong emotion does not always exist solely in the happy and positive context of romantic commitment. By allowing Anna

to recall her emotional history in memories of a youthful romantic encounter with Darrow years earlier and her marriage to Fraser Leath, Wharton throws a subtly ironic light upon Anna's belief that she is unafraid of emotional risk. The perceptive reader sees that as a result of cultural conditioning and perhaps because of a natural reticence, Anna has avoided full emotional experience all her life.

When she had been courted by Darrow as a girl, for example, the natural passion she had felt in him then and sensed in the responses of other young women was to her simply confusing and alienating. Watching Darrow with another girl, Anna is bewildered: "All night she lay awake and wondered: 'What was she saying to him? How shall I learn to say such things?' and she decided that her heart would tell her--that the next time they were alone together the irresistible word would spring to her lips" (pp. 88-89). But that word eludes her, and when they speak of the other girl and Anna sees again in his eyes the sexual spark that girl had kindled, "She felt as if he were leagues and leagues away from her . . . and she was conscious of sitting rigidly, with high head and straight lips, while the irresistible word fled with a last wing-beat into the golden mist of her illusions" (p. 89).

The language of this passage recalls the identical ironic imagery of The House of Mirth in which Lily and Selden strove for that irresistible word that would banish

the misunderstanding which separated them. In The Reef, however, Wharton specifically connects the failed communication of Anna's real feelings with sexual repression to indicate the isolation and separation which inevitably result. Later, Anna's marriage to Fraser Leath also fails to bring about that liberating word. Anna is monstrously lonely in her marriage; to describe that loneliness, Wharton employs again the image of the soul shut away, confined, waiting for visitors who never come (pp. 97-98).

But now, having rediscovered Darrow off-stage as it were, Anna is ready to invite both emotion and experience. She feels is if she is "skimming miraculously over bright waves" (p. 99). Ahead, however, lies the reef of Darrow's affair with Sophy who, we learn in the course of the plot's slow unraveling, is coincidentally now the governess of Anna's daughter and the prospective fiance of her stepson Owen.

The coincidental machinery that makes the plot move and the purely strategic and seemingly endless maneuvers to get everything out in the open contribute to the reader's sense of distracting intricacy--a serious weakness that Wharton can't seem to find a way to avoid in this novel. Furthermore, too many elliptical conversations about what people know or don't know or mean or don't mean sometimes almost stop the progress of the narrative. These are distractions from the important nuances of Anna and Darrow's

romance and Sophy's involvement in it.

As the novel progresses, the direction and degree of Wharton's irony are more difficult to identify, but Darrow remains an ironic target. There is no doubt that he loves and wants Anna, but his affection, like that of most of Wharton's males, involves a certain amount of self-interest:

> He summed it up vaguely by saying to himself that to be loved by a woman like that made 'all the difference'. . . . He was a little tired of experimenting on life; he wanted to 'take a line,' to follow things up, to centralize and concentrate, and produce results. Two or three more years of diplomacy--with her beside him!--and then their real life would begin: study, travel, and book-making for him, and for her--well, the joy, at any rate, of getting out of an atmosphere of bric-a-brac and card-leaving into the open air of competing activities (pp. 127-28).

He sees Anna as part of a means to the end of a pleasant future, while failing utterly to conceive of what that future might actually be like for her. He appreciates her as the kind of woman one would like to "possess," to be seen with in public, even as the best thing that has happened to him. But another significant point of this passage is that the occupations of the future he imagines for himself he could as easily pursue alone. Beneath the surface, his imaginings about "centralizing," "concentrating," and "producing results," actually express his need for communion, continuity, for focus and meaning his solitary life lacks.

The irony aimed at Anna is more ambiguous, particularly

confused, and because Sophy begins to emerge more clearly in contrast. Anna's emotional awakening almost inevitably engages sympathy and approval--there seems to be real courage in her determined confrontation of the deeper emotional demands of her relationship with Darrow. Their romance seems to invest her with an honesty and insight that create mutual understanding and appreciation between them and promises to banish the loneliness of both. "It was as if, after a swim through bright opposing waves, with a dazzle of sun in their eye, they had gained an inlet in the shades of a cliff, where they could float on the still surface and gaze far down into the depths" (p. 130). But this is before Anna learns of the reef of Darrow's "indiscretion."

On the basis of the evidence of the text, even when her engagement to Owen is considered, Sophy is not intended by the author to be seen as an adventuress, as a "spoiler" of dubious morality. Neither her own words and actions nor the other characters' estimates of her bear that out. Sophy is, in fact, the real victim of the novel, victimized by the double standard that finds her irredeemably culpable for what convention considers a grave transgression and by her own true-heartedness which makes her doubly vulnerable. The interlude in Paris was no casual emotional adventure to her. Worse for her, she still loves Darrow, a circumstance he will use to get her to break her engagement to Owen and withdraw from the scene, consequently extricating him from a

situation that can destroy his and Anna's future together:

> "You'll be wretched if you marry a man you're not in love with."
>
> He knew the risk of misapprehension that he ran, but he estimated his chance of success as precisely in proportion to this peril. If certain signs meant what he thought they did, he might yet--at what cost he would not stop to think--make his past pay for his future (p. 206).

Darrow may be willing to manipulate the feelings of others for his own advantage, but Sophy never is.

In the course of the novel, Wharton increasingly allows Sophy's genuine gallantry and depth of feeling to illuminate the artificiality and self-interest of the others. Darrow's calculation is correct, and he is able to manipulate her because of her regard for him. But withholding Sophy's actual declaration of her feelings about her affair with Darrow until that information becomes crucial later emphasizes the ironic impact of her feelings when she does express them. To some degree, as the novel progresses and Wharton provides the pieces to the puzzle of Sophy's character and her place in the novel, readers are required to reassess their interpretations, just as Darrow and Anna must, and to question the accuracy of their own sympathies. For example, Sophy, who appears to be, as Darrow condescendingly thinks of her, ". . . one of the elemental creatures whose emotion is all in their pulses and who become expressive . . . when they try to turn sensation into speech" (p. 265), seems to have

understood much more profoundly and realistically than he what went on between them:

> "I wonder what your feeling for me was? It seems queer that I've never really known--I suppose we don't know much about that kind of feeling. Is it like taking a drink when you are thirsty? . . . I used to feel all of me was in the palm of your hand. . . . Don't for a minute think I'm sorry! It was worth every penny it cost. My mistake was in being ashamed, just at first, of its having cost such a lot. . . . I tried to take your attitude about it, to 'play the game' and convince myself that I hadn't risked any more on it than you. Then, when I met you again, I suddenly saw that I had risked more, but that I'd won more too--such worlds!" (pp. 262-263).

The brave honesty of this speech is heroic, especially in its contemporary setting. It diminishes Darrow for his manipulation of Sophy's feelings and destroys in both him and the reader any lingering condescension or contempt they might feel about her.

Once the truth is in the open and Sophy breaks her engagement, the action finally rests on Anna's reaction to the truth. She had longed for the strong emotions of "real" life; ironically, she gets them and is pitifully unprepared, especially when her ineffectual struggles and rationalizations are contrasted with Sophy's uncompromising honesty. Anna finds that the fastidious emotional reticence of a lifetime's careful cultivation is suddenly at war with desire: "So, in herself, she discerned for the first time instincts and desires which, mute and unmarked, had gone to and fro

in the dim passages of her mind, and now hailed each other with a cry of sympathy" (pp. 316-317). The text indicates that, simply put, Anna wants Darrow and envies Sophy for precisely the experience which condemns her. More destructively, she can neither forgive Darrow nor give him up.

The novel's most emphatic irony occurs when, rationalizing that one time before they part she wants to be to him what Sophy had been, Anna at last allows him to make love to her. Does this consummation finally resolve her doubts, give her the courage to accept both what life offers and what it withholds? Not at all. Instead, it exacerbates her uncertainties, as, after still another round of recriminations and goodbyes, Anna concludes the next to last chapter triumphantly:

> "Why he's mine--he's mine! He's no one else's!" His face was turned to her and the look in his eyes swept away all her terrors. She no longer understood what had prompted her senseless outcry; and the mortal sweetness of loving him became again the one real fact in the world (p. 360).

The first sentence of the final chapter reads: "Anna, the next day, woke to a humiliated memory of the previous evening" (p. 360).

Wharton's hard truth is that there is no resolution of the doubts and distances separating her characters. When Anna seeks out Sophy in a kind of last desperate attempt at clarity and peace of mind, qualities she cannot find in

herself, she discovers that Sophy has gone to India with the notorious Mrs. Murrett. The implication is that fidelity to her own feelings has cost Sophy everything, the future most of all. For Anna, who doesn't know where fidelity lies, the future doesn't seem much more certain. The novel breaks off abruptly without any attempt at a conventional ending, reinforcing the narrative's thematic ambivalence.

These characters, and particularly the two women who represent the book's true center, are like Arnold's lonely islands, isolated by social, psychological, and emotional barriers they cannot overcome. The novel's imagery, which is almost entirely associated with confinement and separation, and its point of view and characterization are parts of an ironic method used to support the idea that, because individually and culturally we comprehend romantic love and sexuality so imperfectly, these forces which might be bonds of security and stability may provoke rather than diminish our separation from one another, whether we embrace "strong emotion" as Sophy does or mistrust it as Anna does.

In The Custom of the Country, begun several years before The Reef but published a year later, Wharton invents a character whose capacity for emotions of any kind is limited solely to those that concern herself. Undine Spragg lacks all human feeling including romantic love and love of parents and child, except to the degree that it may be transformed into self-adulation. Though she is constantly surrounded

by others, Undine is, in fact, the ultimate isolate.

The novel is considered one of Wharton's best by most critics; it is certainly a tour de force in which, for once, Wharton does not seem to mind being recognized as the Showman pulling the strings.[9] Irony is showier in this book, and though it depends upon the familiar technical elements we have consistently traced, they are for this occasion altered to suit the demands of satire. Elements of romanticism, for example, which are almost always present to some degree in Wharton's fiction, are absent here, replaced by an uncompromising naturalistic focus on Undine's insatiable appetite for "something better still beyond,"[10] an appetite inexorably devouring those who can put that something better within her reach. Even Undine's beauty is not the romantic talisman of exquisite sensibility and fine substance that Lily Bart's is. It is instead the bait with which she sets her snares and her personal proof of her own superiority and the "worthiness" that justifies her ambition.

One important pattern of ironic imagery is Wharton's identification of Undine and the self-aggrandizing materialism she represents as perversions of the pioneer spirit turning back eastward to subjugate the frontiers of old money and elitist culture represented by "aboriginal" New York gentility. But the significance of such patterns is dwarfed by the metaphor of Undine herself and her devastating upward mobility. The novel's strength, R. W. B. Lewis writes, is that it

> . . . derives from Edith Wharton's imaginative understanding of what was happening, historically, to the American and French aristocracies in the first decade of the 20th century. Both were giving way before the two major forces of the historic moment--sexual power and financial aggressiveness. Those forces combine, in the second marriage between Undine and Elmer Moffatt (now a billionaire) to form a huge metaphor of the enthralling and terrible ongoing process of the age.[11]

Gary Lindberg notes that Undine is "caught between being an individual character, open to moral evaluation, and being the embodiment of a social phenomenon demanding analysis more than personal judgment."[12] Undine is process and phenomenon as much as she is person and, as Wharton is fully aware, she engages the reader differently than a more conventionally human protagonist would.

This accounts in part for the sharper irony and much increased cynicism of The Custom of The Country. For example, Wharton makes it impossible for the reader to identify with the protagonist, since Undine is actually an anti-heroine without conscience or any other means of objective self-evaluation, and therefore totally a victim of Wharton's irony. Consequently, there is a strikingly widened distance between the way she views herself and the way she is viewed by the reader, a distance expanded even more by occasions when the author herself seems to intervene in her own voice to define unmistakably for her audience Undine's flaws of heart and mind: "Undine was fiercely independent yet passionately imitative.

She wanted to surprise everyone by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses" (p. 19). These humorously cynical observations are interjections winkingly passed between writer and audience to confirm the ironic perspective from which Undine is to be viewed and, since Undine's values are utterly unreliable, to establish a system of values and suggest a recognizable ethical center. The irony of this novel, so much more pronounced than that of The Reef, is also less ambivalent.

The extreme broadness of Wharton's satirical strokes is another sign of the novel's cynicism. For example, Undine's friends have names like Indiana Frusk, and her home town is Apex, Kansas.[13] There is a certain stylization in some of the novel's details of background and action that helps to set the dark comic tone that underlies the author's treatment of Undine herself. Because Undine is so unsympathetic, Wharton's problem, as Lindberg suggests, is to find a way to guide the reader toward analysis rather than judgment. He believes that Wharton's harshness frees one to look at Undine "without the distorting medium of hatred";[14] more accurately perhaps the reader is freed by Wharton's humor. Stylized satirical details like place names and Undine's outrageously ignorant small talk may hold in abeyance the reader's loathing of Undine and also increase his antipathy when the very

realistically portrayed consequences of Undine's destructiveness began to add up later on.

The most obvious victim of her destructiveness, Ralph Marvell, who also conveys point of view, appears to be a sympathetic figure. But the astute reader discovers that he too is portrayed with subtle irony which, while granting his fundamental goodness, also illuminates irretrievable weakness. He is a bird to Undine's cobra, hypnotized by her beauty, fatally attracted by the vision of himself as her protector and mentor. Like Selden and Ethan, and, it would seem in Wharton's view, like all those who perceive themselves as made of finer stuff than their fellows, Marvell's affection is stimulated by his own self-image. He fantasizes about Undine, just as Selden fantasized about Lily and with the same ironic effect, as ". . . 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" (p. 84). Unlike Selden, who might have saved Lily if he had acted on his vision, Marvell does act, and the consequences are disastrous.

But Marvell is inescapably an ineffectual visionary in matters both practical and philosophical. He naively and irresponsibly expects to support his new wife on the allowance her father provides. His professional abilities and his

artistic aspirations are held up to ridicule even by the grandfather who loves him. And his much vaunted sensitivity and intelligence are called into question by his total misreading of his wife's personality. It is he who conceives of the analogy of the old gentility as aborigines "doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race" (p. 74), but ironically he doesn't understand that he is one of the doomed natives, congenitally unprepared to deal with the amoral ruthlessness of the invaders. Even when he belatedly comes to see Undine as she is, he is unable to protect himself from her or from Elmer Moffatt, who is the male version of Undine. Marvell's suicide is the waste of a decent man, a genuinely tragic example of the cost of ruthless ambition, but even that is treated with a cynical edge when one considers that his meaningless death shows him to be at least partially a pathetic victim of his own weakness.

As Lewis noted, The Custom of the Country is clearly a social commentary on the process of combining sexual and material appetites. Its satirical pointedness, its metaphorical heroine, and even its title suggest as much. It is perhaps the most socially focused and least personal of all Wharton's fictions. On an elemental level, however, its subject is still the familiar one which seems to be always p_esent in some variation. Alienation as a basic motivation of the major action of the novel may be seen in a number of circumstances.

It shows up, for example, in Ralph Marvell's imaginings of the familiar image of the cave--the idealized secret refuge of his inner life which sets him apart and which he jealously guards from violation but also paradoxically yearns to share:

> And so with his inner world. Though so coloured by outer impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. One day, of course, someone would discover it and reign there with him--no, reign over it with him (p. 76).

As we have seen elsewhere in Wharton, in some instances this image is an expression of profound psychological loneliness. It may also represent--as it did for the husband in "The Mission of Jane" and in Selden's excluding "republic of the spirit"--a degree of complacent self-satisfaction. Marvell's sheltered inner world contributes to his destruction by protecting him too well from experience in the real world that might have given him a clearer vision of Undine and by actually becoming a part of his delusion about their life together.

His marriage is a long process of disillusionment in which his idealized vision is slowly dismantled: ". . . though the currents of communication between himself and Undine were neither deep nor numerous, each fresh rush of feeling seemed strong enough to clear a way to her heart" (p. 151). There is, of course, no chance of drawing near to Undine through physical intimacy since to her, "remote and Ariel-like," sex is only significant as a medium of exchange, like money, to

get her what she wants. When he crosses her will, he sees that she grows as inaccessible as an enemy. Not even the child they have can create the communion of shared experience since Undine is absolutely incapable of maternal feeling. Finally, even the "unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch" dies, and he comes to know her as ". . . something immeasurably alien and far off" (p. 221).

Undine herself is, of course, the novel's ultimate manifestation of alienation and its ruinous consequences. Her absolute egoism, coupled with an equally absolute deficiency of conscience, separates her entirely from any sense of belonging to her kind. She is never at home or at rest anywhere. All her past, she remembers bitterly early in the book, was like a long struggle for something she could not have (p. 52). She feels kinship with no one; though her life is a constant yearning to belong to one "set" or another, her memberships are transitory and superficial. Because, as Marvell had come to understand, "she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (p. 224), her feelings are on so shallow and primitive a plane that she is not even conscious of the need, as other Wharton protagonists are, to touch, connect, somehow abridge their loneliness.

Further, she is incapable of moral development because she lives in the vacuum of her own self-interest. Marvell's suicide, for example, makes hardly a ripple on the surface of her life and, as usual, is comprehensible to Undine only in

its relation to herself. The most contrition she can muster is ". . . to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it" (p. 487). When at last she notices that in the aristocratic society of her French husband she seems to be deficient in some way--that her triumphant entrances have no sequel, as Wharton puts it--she only concludes that she is growing dowdy and cannot comprehend an acquaintance's remark that, though she is as handsome as ever, ". . . people here don't go on looking at each other forever as they do in London" (p. 542).

In The House of Mirth, Lily's progress downward can be described in terms of passage. Undine's social progress, her passage, is cyclical rather than linear, and that makes possible the novel's greatest irony which illustrates the absoluteness of Undine's psychological and emotional isolation.

Before the book ends, Undine appears to come full circle in her emotional adventures. The secret that helped to push Ralph Marvell over the edge is that Undine had been briefly married in Apex to Elmer Moffatt, an unscrupulous sharper so gifted that he reappears at the end of the novel a billionaire. Wharton indicates that Undine's attraction to Moffatt is somehow different--stronger, more elemental, as if at least once in her life she had unconsciously recognized and responded to another nature, a kindred spirit. When he reappears in her life after a series of periodic

encounters, her declaration of love (which she makes unhesitatingly despite the fact that she is married to de Chelles) seems motivated by real feeling for once: "For the moment all thought of self-interest was in abeyance, and she felt again, as she had felt that day, the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his" (p. 568).

As unpleasant a pair as these two are, Wharton's point seems to be that Undine is at least capable of genuine human response, and the text further suggests that a part of that response is sexual. There seems even to be a kind of ironic justice in the fact that she ends with Moffatt, especially since if she had just stuck with him she would have reached the same point with far less damage to those around her. The novel's last chapter provides further evidence of that damage by focusing on the most helpless of Undine's victims, her son Paul--a lonely, bewildered nine-year-old whose mother has not only deprived him of affection, kindness, or continuity, she has separated him from all those who might have provided them. "If we two chaps stick together it won't be so bad--we can keep each other warm, don't you see?" Moffatt tells the boy kindly, knowing first hand Undine's capacity for neglect (p. 589).

For the novel's final ironic turning is the undercutting of what seemed Undine's authentic emotional link to Moffatt: "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" (p. 591). Undine finally is consistent in the prodigious egoism that seals her off in her own selfishness. In her world, words function only to make one's wishes known, sex is money, and love does not exist. She is alienated from even the concept of soul. Despite the fact that more than any other Wharton character she is the representation of an idea rather than a three-dimensional personality, she is a model for what becomes in American literature a familiar feminine type of which Daisy Buchanan is another example, and the novel itself is an extreme but coherent extension of Wharton's customary techniques and concerns.

Wharton's prolific decade ended with the publication of The Age of Innocence in 1920. A year later, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The abiding critical appreciation of this book may be summed up by Blake Nevius' evaluation: "It is a triumph of style, of the perfect adaptation of means to a conception fully grasped at the outset. It would be difficult to say that she faltered or overreached at any point."[15]

Though there are differences of interpretation, particularly about the meaning of the conclusion, many analysts see in this novel Wharton's most pointed protest against the artificially cultivated innocence and repressive narrowness of the aristocratic New York of her childhood. The book

certainly concerns these things. But just as surely as The House of Mirth transcends categorization as merely social commentary, this novel's emotional timbre creates levels of psychological meaning which engage the reader more closely than the narrow scope of social commentary usually has the power to do.

How is this accomplished? For one thing, The Age of Innocence is a love story, perhaps one of the most moving and least appreciated of the twentieth century. Further, in Newland Archer Wharton creates an extremely sympathetic protagonist, certainly the best male character in her fiction. Like all Wharton protagonists, of course, Archer is to some degree a target of irony, but that irony seems finally milder and less indicting than that turned on Ralph Marvell and Laurence Selden, characters whom he superficially resembles in terms of class and situation. Archer is, particularly at first, priggish, narrowly conventional, sometimes even pompous in his complacent allegiance to the mentality of the herd. But Wharton also writes straightforwardly and disarmingly early in the novel that "There was nothing mean or ungenerous in the young man's heart,"[16] and that judgment is borne out by the rest of the narrative.

He begins with a nature less reticent than Selden's, less idealistic and ineffectual than Marvell's, and potentially capable of discernment and intense emotion. The combination of Archer's attractiveness as a protagonist and

the novel's single narrative vantage increases the reader's identification with and sympathy for him. Moreover, there are no authentic villains in this story, and this too--Wharton's balancing of the "unknown quantity" of character with a dramatic situation whose complex ethical nature is more difficult to judge than it appears superficially--deepens and complicates the reader's response.

Wharton's audience must recognize an additional dimension of irony established by Archer's secure position within his social group. Many of Wharton's characters, as we have seen, are "outsiders" seeking connection and continuity, often through the redeeming power of love, to assuage their lonely sense of incompleteness. But Archer is in every way an insider--a character in the highest rank of an extremely tight-knit society--and the major irony of The Age of Innocence is that this above all prevents him, ambiguously but effectually, from attaining what he thinks of by the end of the novel as "the flower of life" (p. 275).

In a sense, though Archer is already a young man when the story begins, the novel employs many of the conventions of an initiation story, although, as in Summer, those conventions are altered by Wharton's ironic sensibility. In the course of the novel, Archer moves from unquestioning acceptance of "society" and his place in it to doubt, criticism, and active struggle for Ellen, the woman who has stirred him awake by the example of her own honesty and independence of mind.

The motif of initiation is reinforced by certain details of plot that point up the basic immaturity of the aimless New York upper class. The enforced ignorance of the females of that society, for example, keeps them artificially innocent and childlike much beyond the time they should naturally assume the attributes of womanhood. May, with her "boyish" athleticism and unclouded innocence, seems an adolescent at twenty-one and remains so all through her maturing years while her family conspires to protect her, as they would a child, from the more unpleasant faces of reality. This leisured class actually has no work, and their play particularly suggests their arrested development. The theatre, for example, is not a cultural experience for these people but a game of dress-up and musical chairs. When Archer spends a weekend in the country in pursuit of Ellen, the men's evening entertainment sounds like over-night cub scout camp: ". . . about midnight he assisted in putting a goldfish in one guest's bed, dressed up a burglar in the bathroom of a nervous aunt, and saw in the small hours by joining in a pillow fight that ranged from the nurseries to the basement" (p. 106).

In A Backward Glance, Mrs. Wharton lamented America's waste of its leisure class, and in this novel she gives dramatic delineation to the precise nature of that waste. For the leisure class of Wharton's childhood, the age of innocence is extended so persistently that their immaturity diminishes

their capacity to function in the "real" world which works by rules generally more complicated than their own. Archer's increasingly felt need to separate himself from this environment represents a variation of the natural instinct to think for himself, to determine his future--in effect, to grow up.

The catalyst for Archer's first questionings is the appearance of Ellen Olenska, a former member of the tribe who has returned from Europe so wounded by her experiences there that all she believes she wants is the security and benevolent protection of a formal social order. But Ellen's instinctive unconventionality and independence spark in Archer's imagination his own latent individualism. Even before he is conscious of his attraction to Ellen, Archer has doubts about the enforced innocence and the double standard that keep girls like May from the freedom he enjoys as a man. Already, from his new vantage point as May's fiance, he senses the impediments these restrictions impose upon honest communication and genuine understanding. Though at this point he and May seem to understand each other well despite the obstacles of convention and decorum, when he looks at May's photograph, ". . . that terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything, looked back at him like a stranger through May Welland's familiar features" (p. 37).

Wharton insists again and again that despite its

superficial cohesiveness, the society she describes effectively stifles with its suberfuges and restrictive conventions any meaningful individual communication. Even the intimacy of marriage may engender only limited communion because, since the conception of sexuality of these men and women may be either repressed or hypocritical, it effectively consigns both genders to different worlds.[17]

Other possible means of communication also disguise meaning rather than clarify it, as the novel's most persistent pattern of imagery demonstrates: "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world," Archer thinks, "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs. . ." (p. 39). Language in this society is a code which takes the place of straightforward meaning and may be manipulated to evade confrontation. When, for example, Archer tries to deny his growing attachment to Ellen by urging May to elope with him, an act which May considers socially unacceptable, she retreats behind the pronouncement that an elopement would be vulgar, knowing that the word alone is enough to extinguish further discussion. Wharton even provides translations to illustrate the complex lengths to which such camouflaging of meaning may be taken. At one point, Archer proposes a fictitious business trip to Washington as an excuse to talk to Ellen. May's only response, though she knows why he is going, is to urge him to see Ellen:

> It was the only word that passed between them on the subject, but in the code in which they had both been trained it meant:
>
> "Of course you understand that I know all that people have been saying about Ellen, and heartily sympathize with my family in their effort to get her to return to her husband. I also know that, for some reason you have chosen not to tell me, you have advised her against this course, which all the older men of the family, as well as our grandmother, agree in approving; and that it is owing to your encouragement that Ellen defies us all. . . . Hints have indeed not been wanting; but since you appear unwilling to take them from others, I offer you this one myself, in the only form in which well-bred people of our kind can communicate unpleasant things to each other: by letting you understand that I know you mean to see Ellen when you are in Washington, and are perhaps going there expressly for that purpose; and that since you are sure to see her, I wish you to do so with my full and explicit approval--and to take the opportunity of letting her know what the course of conduct you have encouraged her in is likely to lead to (pp. 212-213).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out that there <u>is</u> understanding, at any rate, beneath the surface of the code: "It is true . . . that old New Yorkers don't like to talk about 'unpleasant' things. But what a wealth of shared knowledge their reticences permit!"[18] Perhaps so, but surely such reticence may be manipulative at its best and, at its worst, so abused and distorting that it thwarts communication rather than augmenting it.

The environment depicted in the novel stifles freedom of action as well as expression by enforcing a complex set of rules of conduct intended to insure conformity at every point. Ironically, Ellen, who wants so badly to belong, who

has learned so harshly that separation is the price one pays for being different, at first supports the idea that, as Yvor Winters says, ". . . a formal social order, with all its restrictions, seems to provide a more satisfactory way of life than freedom in isolation."[19] But she is too much her own person, as an "alien" too used to freedom, to give it up for long. "The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend" (p. 65), she cries out to Archer after a pitiably brief time back in the constricting atmosphere of the tribe. Archer increasingly frets against the boundaries of convention that enmesh him more and more tightly once he is married to May. All his aspirations eventually come to focus on his love for Ellen. However, like Ethan Frome, Archer is unalterably <u>not</u> free to pursue the authentic love of his life. And like Ethan, his constraints drive him to such desperation that he even fantasizes about May's death (p. 235).

Wharton employs a significant ironic contrast in her association of May with images of both life and death. She is several times identified as a young Diana, and is thus associated with life force. But Wharton also chooses images which associate both May and the society she champions with death. In one passage, Archer's thoughts link her to generations of her female forebears who had ". . . descended bandaged [sexually blind] to the family vault" (p. 68). On another occasion, Archer reflects that "the blood that ran

so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element" (p. 151). He comes to view his marriage to May as deadening because it is the primary bond that ties him to a pretend-life which substitutes role-playing for experience. An example of this and the failed communication between them is reflected in the double entendre of the following passage:

> "Newland! Do shut the window. You'll catch your death!"
> ". . . But I've caught it already. I am dead--I've been dead for months and months. . . . I shall never be able to open a window without worrying you," he rejoined. . . .
> For a moment she was silent; then she said very low, her head bowed over her work: "I shall never worry if you're happy."
> "Ah, my dear; and I shall never be happy unless I can open the window!"
> "In this weather?" she remonstrated, and with a sigh he buried his head in his book (p. 235).

This ironic contrast of life/death imagery is extended even further by the fact that it is May's premature disclosure to Ellen that she is pregnant, and then its actually being true, that binds Newland irrevocably to her.

The tension between the characterizations of Ellen and May, however, and the choices they represent for Archer, are more ambiguous than they at first appear, and that ambiguity arises directly from Wharton's deliberate irony. May, after all, is not a Zeena Frome. She is a loving, faithful wife acting in the interest of her marriage and even in her husband's interest as she perceives it. Ellen's and Archer's love, on

the other hand, is not simply illicit passion. It is shown to transcend physical desire and seems to promise genuine communion and oneness that would make them better off together than they are apart. His love for Ellen seems to Archer to be "closer than his bones" (p. 194). She invests his life with greater potential than merely the filling of time with amusements. Simply put, she gives his life meaning and dimension it doesn't have without her, an idea Wharton reinforces by a direct allusion to The Beast in the Jungle. On an occasion when Archer makes complicated arrangements to see Ellen but fails to find her, "His whole future seemed suddenly to be unrolled before him; and passing down its endless emptiness he saw the dwindling figure of a man to whom nothing was ever to happen" (p. 181). In James' parable, such a fate becomes tragic reality to a character whose name Archer's echoes, and the threat seems equally real in Archer's purposeless, artificial environment.

As the careful reader should note, however, this vision arises in ironically trivial circumstances that tend to undercut its seriousness. Archer has entertained similar fears about missing out on "real" experience in a number of other passages, but he has so little experience that he seems to have no concrete notion of what he means by it. When Ellen presses him to admit that there is no solution that can give them a life together, his response seems naive:

> "Ah, I'm beyond that."
> "No, you're not! You've never been beyond. And I have," she said in a strange voice, "and I know what it looks like there" (p. 231).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests that Archer ". . .drastically simplifies his notions of Ellen . . . so that he need not deal with the complexities of her complete person."[20] The differences in their personalities and backgrounds are certainly marked, though Ellen, at least, never loses sight of them, and Archer doesn't pretend to understand completely the mysteriousness of his attachment to her. In fact, Archer is guilty of simplifying his notions of both Ellen and May, and it is here that the practiced reader finds Archer most clearly vulnerable as a target of irony.

The way of life he resists--the narrowness and superficialities and pretenses--needs to be resisted, but Wharton avoids idealizing his resistance by showing that his judgment is not always reliable. Two pages before May tells him about her conversation with Ellen that resulted in Ellen's decision to return to Europe, Archer observes his wife in terms that reflect upon him unmistakable irony: "As she sat thus, the lamplight full on her clear brow, he said to himself with a secret dismay that he would always know the thoughts behind it, that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected word, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion" (p. 234). He is to be proved wrong

twice--at once when she acts to separate him from Ellen, and years later when he discovers that she has understood his sacrifice of Ellen. He misreads the hieroglyphics of his wife's behavior and that of everyone around him. At the moment he has at last overcome the habits of reticence and evasion and is ready to communicate the truth to May, she and the society which is her ally have already thrown up an insurmountable obstacle to insure his fidelity to the tribe.

The ultimate problem of the novel is to determine how the audience is intended to view this sacrifice of the flower of life that is the cost of his and Ellen's mutual renunciation. Is it ignominious surrender, or an heroic triumph over self, as Marilyn Jones Lyde believes,[21] or the author's sentimental endorsement of the tribal code,[22] as Geoffrey Walton says.

Several details of the text seem to indicate that Archer's frustration and bitter loss are intended to be shared by the reader. There is, for example, the symbolic muddying of May's wedding dress/evening gown on the night she tells Archer that Ellen is leaving and after she has lied to accomplish that aim. Her action is, in a sense, a violation of the straightforward code by which she professes to live and to which she holds her husband. Further, at the dinner of farewell which May and all of New York society arrange for Ellen with dispassionate cruelty, Archer realizes

that to all of them, to May as well, he and Madame Olenska are lovers:

> . . . he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin.
>
> It was the old New York way of taking life "without effusion of blood;" the way of people who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than "scenes," except the behavior of those who gave rise to them (p. 266).

The bitter insight of this passage seems too eloquently articulated not to be taken seriously. The code that supposes the worst and, acting on that false supposition, is willing to destroy while retaining the pretense of innocence is surely intended to be perceived as base and mean-spirited.

The novel's concluding chapter takes up twenty-six years later to present the consequences of May's victory. The ambiguity that encourages multiple meaning and interpretation is sustained to the last. Archer's life has turned out to be neither the ideal he pursued nor the vacuum he feared. He has satisfied the expectations of his society by raising a family, involving himself in philanthropies, in general living up to the conventions and even expanding them a little by a brief and fairly minor tenure in politics. "His days were full, and they were filled decently. He

supposed it was all a man ought to ask" (p. 275).

But the tone of the conclusion is elegiac, wistful, and transfused with a note of poignant loss. He accepts finally the idea that there is good in the old ways and good, too, in the new order which does not blink at his son's betrothal to the illegitimate daughter of a scoundrel and which allows his conventional daughter Mary to lead a larger life than her mother had. The details about his son's engagement also have an ironic purpose, for Wharton suggests that in the space of only one generation society has, at least to a degree, lost its power to close rank in the old way, and that makes its former rules seem more arbitrary and, consequently, less defensible. Wharton shows us that though his life has been productive, Archer's resignation to duty has been bought at a price of which he himself is conscious: "The worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently utterly unfitted one for doing anything else" (p. 279). Duty has locked him into the past, and he is nostalgic about the passing away of what he has known.

The extent of his isolation and loneliness and the pain he has felt because of it are expressed when he learns that May had valued, and somehow <u>given</u> value, to his sacrifice of Ellen by telling their son Dallas about it before she died. Retroactively, there is release for Archer in receiving even so tardy a communication of her compassion: "It seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all,

someone had guessed and pitied. . . . And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably" (p. 283).

Perhaps even if Archer and Ellen had come together, they would not have been able to live out successfully Archer's ideal of a world where they could simply be ". . . two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other" (p. 230). Ellen does not seem to believe in such a world, but that she is willing to take the risk is evidenced by her readiness to commit herself to him just before May's intervention. Alienation, separateness, loneliness are never easily overcome in Wharton. To a degree, Archer achieves valuable continuity and belonging in his life with May even as he remains alienated from the better self that seems to flourish with Ellen as a stimulus.

But neither does the novel finally undermine the value of their attachment. At the conclusion, Archer chooses not to see Ellen again because he wishes to preserve the essence of her that has not changed or faded--the realness of his memory of her. His is not a gesture of repudiation but a desire to prevent the loss of what he has preserved. Perhaps Archer and Ellen, as she once said, can keep each other only by remaining apart--then and now when there are no obstacles to separate them. The Age of Innocence is ambiguous because it is built upon a paradox which describes a painful and complex reality.

In varying contexts, The Reef, The Custom of the

Country, and The Age of Innocence extend Wharton's considerations of alienation as a waste of human potential. As Wolff suggests, they share a narrowed focus upon "the convolutions and many-sided problems of sexuality." Irony is, as usual, employed to create unity and coherence within each narrative. It also helps Wharton to make use of ambiguity and divergence to avoid simplistic conclusions about the experience her novels explore.

NOTES

[1] Wolff, p. 219.

[2] See Gary Lindberg, p. 181 and p. 76, Blake Nevius' Edith Wharton, and Richard Lawson's discussion in Edith Wharton (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 55 ff.

[3] See particularly pp. 138-139 of Edith Wharton: "In dealing with characters whose social orbits lie outside of her own, she is able to preserve her detachment only so long as their actions in no way threaten the values, standards, and manners she cherishes. From the moment they present themselves to her imagination in a subversive guise, they can expect no sympathy."

[4] Ibid., p. 140.

[5] Booth, p. 184.

[6] Lewis, for example, writes that ". . . Darrow . . . represents the Edith Wharton of 1912 rather than 1909" (p. 327), and his quick loathing of his involvement with Sophy reflects Wharton's own revulsion with her involvement with Morton Fullerton.

[7] The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Arthur M. Eastman et. al., eds. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970), p. 820.

[8] The Reef (New York: Appleton and Co., 1912), p. 59. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[9] See Chapter Two, pp. 13-14.

[10] The Custom of the Country (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 54. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[11] Lewis, p. 349.

[12] Lindberg, p. 115.

[13] Lewis recounts that when Bernard Berenson objected to the manufactured unlikeliness of such names, Wharton responded with two actual and equally outrageous examples of her acquaintance--Lurline Spreckels and Florida Yurlee.

[14] Lindberg, p. 120.

[15] Nevius, p. 185.

[16] The Age of Innocence (1920; rpt. New York: Random House, 1948), p. 14. All subsequent references are to the same text.

[17] Josephine Jessup discusses this idea from a feminist perspective in The Faith of Our Feminists (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950).

[18] Wolff, p. 322.

[19] Maule's Curse, rpt. in In Defense of Reason (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 309.

[20] Wolff, p. 319.

[21] Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 96.

[22] Walton, p. 137.

CHAPTER VI

Edith Wharton remained prolific after 1920, though few of the novels and novellas[1] published in the last seventeen years of her life attain the dramatic energy, coherent focus, and memorable characterizations of the best of her earlier work. Her last three novels, however--Hudson River Bracketed,[2] The Gods Arrive,[3] and The Buccaneers,[4] which was unfinished at the time of her death in 1937 but published by her executor a year later--are particularly valuable to this study of Wharton's ironic method and its relation to the thematic tension between alienation and integration treated so pervasively throughout her work.

Hudson River Bracketed and its sequel The Gods Arrive, despite some often noted narrative weaknesses,[5] are important within the body of Wharton's fiction because they are kunstlerromanen in which Wharton attains a particularly interesting coupling of form and substance. In these novels, Wharton uses irony in characteristic ways to illuminate the relation of alienated consciousness to the actual process of invention and the special sensibility of the artist. Wharton's ironic method, if its implications are accurately understood,

leads the audience to conclude that separation may be an integral part of the creative process, paradoxically becoming even more of an obstacle to wholeness and integration in the life of the artist than it is in the lives of ordinary men and women.

She developed this subject very broadly, at great length, and with complex ambivalence especially apparent in her treatment of the protagonist. Wharton herself thought these were among the best of her fictions.[6] They are fully coherent, however, only when they are considered together. Then their divergent narrative threads come together in a view of fully realized art and life which resolves, at least in this context, the problematic tension between alienation and integration with which Wharton concerned herself in volume after volume.

The Buccaneers returns to a variation of the narrative of the outsider, but it too, although in a different manner, concerns art--not the creative process itself or the temperament of the artist, but the power of art to counter alienation by inspiring communion and profound affinities among sensitive individuals. The Buccaneers, even unfinished and unrevised, proves that Wharton's talents were not destroyed by age or expatriation. The novel possesses that quality of "inevitable rightness" which Wharton had sought in her work and frequently attained. Moreover, it shows that even at the end of her career, her vision remained ironic rather than becoming tragic and embittered.

The coherence of Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive depends upon two ironic devices familiar throughout Wharton's fiction. Perhaps most crucial to the novels' coherence is the accurate identification of the irony to which she subjects her characters, and particularly the protagonist, Vance Weston. His portrayal is certainly ambivalent, but the degree and exact nature of that ambivalence require the most sensitive reading on the part of Wharton's audience. Weston seems at times, for example, to be the spokesman for Wharton's own most closely-held convictions about "Literature," the title she originally considered for Hudson River Bracketed, as when he rejects the superficial realism popular among his fellow authors:

> Ape these fellows--yes, he knew he could! He'd tried his hand at it, not always quite consciously; but though he was sometimes rather pleased with the result he always ended by feeling that it wasn't his natural way of representing things. These brilliant verbal gymnastics--or the staccato enumeration of a series of physical aspects and sensations--they all left him with the sense of emptiness underneath, just where, in his own vision of the world, the deep forces stirred--and wove men's fate (p. 335).

Thus, it seems that at least on one level Vance Weston is intended to be taken seriously as an artist since Wharton suggests to the reader that he, unlike almost every other literary figure in the novel, is authentically a creator. But one of Wharton's purposes is to explore, rather than to idealize, the creative process and the personality in which

it resides. Weston is, consequently, far from being, as Geoffrey Walton asserts, ". . . presented for our whole-hearted sympathy as having all the freshness and innocent energy of the young pioneer, qualities that he keeps through all difficulties and temptations."[7]

Instead, from the novel's first lines the reader is intended to see that Vance is a target of irony by noting in Wharton's description of him not merely the earnest sensitivity of the young artist but also the callow and presumptuous egotism of an immature boy. Her tone and diction, at least in the reader's introduction to Vance, are comic/ironic:

> By the time he was nineteen, Vance Weston had graduated from the College of Euphoria, Illinois, where his parents then lived, had spent a week in Chicago, invented a new religion, and edited for a few months a college magazine called "Getting There," to which he had contributed several love poems and a series of iconoclastic essays (p. 3).

Wharton here simultaneously establishes and undermines the seriousness of his intellectual and literary ambitions and--even more an evidence of her craftsmanship--in a very few lines places him in the context of his culture, the materialistic, culturally provincial and superficial American Midwest.

Vance, Wharton continues, has been born into a world where ". . . everything had been, or was being, renovated" (p. 3). The destructiveness of a cultural vacuum without the continuity of traditions or the nourishment of a recognizable past and the problem of determining values within

such a vacuum become the major dilemmas of his life and his writing. This complex of ideas constitutes a motif which develops the internal narrative action of this novel and The Gods Arrive, establishes the most direct thematic connection between them, and suggests the other ironic device crucial to the novel's coherence.

That device is the juxtaposition of a familiar element of romantic sensibility against Wharton's otherwise generally realistic perspective. As we have seen before, Wharton's strong personal affinity with nature often shows up as a romantic trait within her characterizations. In such instances, nature can dispel oppression, give solace, arouse feelings that present a character sympathetically and help the reader to identify with him. In this novel, nature is also associated with creativity in ways that are traditionally romantic. Most simply, as one might expect in a Wharton novel, nature may inspire and stimulate creative energies. On a more complicated subliminal level, nature is somehow parallel, akin to the creative process as the artist experiences it. The creative process, in fact, is identical in nature and art--mysterious, continuous, and essentially organic.

The artist's necessary recognition of the organic principle at the heart of the creative process is central to both Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive--the elemental aesthetic verity Wharton presses most urgently. It is what sets Vance Weston apart from the other artistic frauds of

both novels who are motivated mostly by the desire for popular success and have no notion of what they are about as artists. We see this, for example, in one of Weston's exchanges with another novelist:

> "I mean, how does the thing germinate, spread itself above and below the surface? There's something so tree-like, so pre-ordained . . . but I can't make it all out--can you?"
>
> Blemer gave his jovial laugh. "Never tried to," he said, reaching with a plump hairy hand for a passing cocktail (p. 419).

Though Vance's perception of that organic principle is unsteady, when he gives himself over to it, he writes well and truly. When, swayed by the pressure to succeed or influenced by some contemporary trend or other, he ignores it, his writing is bad, a travesty of his gifts. The ridicule of Wharton's thrusts at the art of Weston's fellow writers--habitues of "The Cocoanut Tree," authors of novels with titles like "The Corner Grocery"--indicates how strongly she felt.

As Vance knows it, life is rootless and disjointed, impelled frantically forward by ideals of progress and success always defined in material terms, but, ironically, these ideals are obstacles to genuine "success" in his art or his personal life. In no circumstance, Wharton writes, can Vance as a boy at the novel's beginning ". . . dissociate stability from stagnation" (p. 5), and the result is a kind of anarchy that discounts the past, distorts the present, and creates a general confusion of values. Nature, in the romantic

context Wharton assigns it, is a reproach to chaos and materialism and a model for a saner system of values based on permanence, order, and multiform creativity in general--stability that is not associated with stagnation.

As we might expect, a character's responsiveness to the physical beauty of nature, and, more significantly, to its deeper romantic suggestiveness, may be an indication that he or she is, at least at that point in the narrative, not intended to be perceived ironically. This is particularly true of Vance and also of Halo Spear, the two characters who most clearly possess romantic sensibility and whose finely calibrated personalities are most capable of understanding the conflict between idealistic and material values. When Wharton does portray them ironically, she does so almost always as a consequence of their compromise of ideals and their acquiescence in anti-romantic, materialist values.

From the novel's beginning, Vance shares with many of Wharton's protagonists an intuitive sense of alienation. His adolescent desire to invent a new religion whose only necessity is ". . . just a mystical communion between souls to whom the same revelation had been vouschafed" (p. 8) is evidence of his sense of separation. Even more directly, Wharton writes, using an image which she has employed frequently, "He often felt as if his own soul were a stranger inside of him, a stranger speaking a language he had never learned, or had forgotten" (p. 47).

But Wharton insists that, given the right impetus, this loneliness can be used creatively, as an idea to be transformed into art and thus, ironically, to effect communication which diminishes separation and isolation. The actual transformation of Vance's loneliness into poetry is inspired, significantly, by the trees outside his window after he leaves Euphoria and moves east to live with his cousins on the Hudson. Those trees, larger and more numerous than any he has ever seen in the Midwest, are a symbolic representation of a natural, organic unlocking of imagination and creative energy. Their power to inspire resides not only in their beauty but in their size and number--marks of age and permanence Vance has never encountered in his America. This tightly-connected complex of associations is re-established in an even more explicit symbol: Vance's infatuation with "the Willows," the oldest and loveliest house he has ever seen--a natural repository of tradition (represented by its age and history) and ideas (represented by its library). At the Willows, Vance discovers "Kubla Khan" and poetry as he never knew it existed. There he meets Halo Spear. There, above all, he begins the unsteady process of intellectual, artistic, and personal maturation which holds Wharton's attention for the remainder of both novels.

Wharton recurringly emphasizes an ironic contrast between the creative process as it is understood by New York's commercially-motivated literary milieu and its actual

engendering in an artist of real talent. The contrast is between the artificial and imitative and the natural and organic. Vance Weston's talents fail him utterly, for example, when he denies his natural instincts and tries to force them to conform to the demands of his employer, Lewis Tarrant, or those of a popular audience. But again and again they are restored by contact with the natural world--his first view of the sea at Coney Island, a view of the sun rising over the Hudson, the time he spends at the Willows which, as Halo says,

> . . . symbolized continuity, that great nutritive element of which no one had ever told him, of which neither Art nor Nature had been able to speak to him, since nothing in his training had prepared him for their teaching. Yet, blind puppy, groping embryo that he was, he had plunged instantly into that underlying deep when the Willows had given him a glimpse of it (p. 498).

Another example of this pattern is an ironic reversal of the now-familiar motif of the machine in the garden. Vance, unable to make progress on his city novel "Loot," settles with his ailing wife in a ruined apple orchard, where, "not far off, the outskirts of the metropolis whirled, rattled, and smoked" (p. 510), and finds there the inspiration for the significantly-titled "Magic." Wharton carefully illuminates the creative power of the Garden even when it is surrounded by the environment of the Machine:

> Just outside the cottage window an apple-branch crossed the pane. For a long time Vance had sat there, seeing

> neither it nor anything else, in the kind of bodily and spiritual blindness lately frequent within him; and now suddenly, in the teeming autumn sunlight, there the branch was, the centre of his vision.
>
> It was a warped unsightly branch on a neglected tree; but so charged with life, so glittering with fruit, that it looked like a dead stick set with rubies. . . .
>
> Whatever happened to Vance on the plane of practical living, in the muddled world where bills must be paid, food provided, sick or helpless people looked after, there still came to him the mute swinging wide of the secret doors. He never knew when or how it would happen: it sometimes seemed that he was no more than the latch which an unseen hand raised to throw open the gates of Heaven. . . .
>
> As usual with him now, the sudden seeing of the apple-branch coincided with the intensely detailed inner vision of a new book (pp. 506-507).

The imagery of this passage is charged with romantic significance and calculated ironic effect. The apple orchard, even stunted and threatened by metropolitan encroachment, is for Vance a kind of paradise capable at once of inspiring invention and providing a metaphor for the creative process. Wharton details Vance's response, describing a phenomenon not unlike Keats' negative capability--a "mysterious transfusion of spirit" (p. 515) that merges the artist's identity with the life-element of his creation. Her autobiography and other comments about her own writing suggest that Wharton is actually describing her own creative process.

There are further crucial ironies in the ambiguous mixture of romance and realism throughout the portion of the novel set in the apple-orchard. Despite the fact that Vance Weston is associated with romantic sensibility and apparently

represents Wharton's own aesthetic experience, that ambiguity is most significant in the ironic and realistic elements of his characterization in these episodes.

The single-track absorption which sometimes allows him to dash ". . . straight to the vital matter" where his art is concerned and endows him with the inspired lucidity that puts him in touch with his best creative instincts also has a darker side and makes him, on other terms, a deserving victim of Wharton's irony. A destructive manifestation of his single-mindedness is a towering self-interest which, exacerbated by his youth and inexperience, causes him to commit ruinous errors in his creative and personal life. For example, that lucidity which accounts for his best work is undependable, easily obscured by his ambition, and worst, seems to prevent him from clearly perceiving his personal obligations. Like Undine Spragg, although for reasons less selfish, he is often almost entirely incapable of projecting beyond himself in his relations with others, and this is particularly ironic since Wharton has shown that precisely this quality is his strength as an inventor in a world of his own creation. His vision as an artist is contrasted ironically with his blindness as a man, and this contrast is most concretely represented in his relations with the women in his life.

His disastrous marriage to the beautiful and devoted but totally unsuitable Laura Lou, for example, is the result

of an impulsive attraction which Wharton deliberately likens to his strong responses to natural beauty:

> The sight of her, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, had rapt him away from common values and dimensions into that mystic domain into which he sometimes escaped from the pressure of material things. To that domain Laura Lou at the moment held the key, as hitherto great poetry had held it, the sunrise from Thundertop, his first sight of the sea, his plunge into the past in the library at the Willows, or any of the other imaginative shocks that flung open the gates of wonder (p. 265).

But "at the moment" is a significant qualification of his fascination. Her limitations quickly cool his ardor. He cannot be engaged for long by her simple-minded, dependent beauty even though her love is not diminished by his increasing indifference. Finally, he seems unable to perceive her clearly at all: he does not see that his thoughtlessness jeopardizes her health, that her illness is serious and worsening, that while he is transported into the world of "Magic," she is dying.

The episodes that follow the rejuvenation of Vance's creative vision in the apple-orchard are intended by means of striking dramatic irony to illustrate his myopic insensitivity about everything else. The outer world with its cares and responsibilities does indeed vanish for him when he is immersed in the reality of his own invention. "It was as wonderful and secret as a birth," he thinks. ". . . The word turned his mind to Laura Lou. How queer if she were going

to have a child!" (p. 514). His irritation at this possibility is especially ironic and unattractive since the reader knows what his preoccupation with his writing has caused him to ignore--that Laura Lou is concealing not a pregnancy but the tubercular hemorrhaging she fears would cause them to be separated. Throughout the fairly long period of her decline, he never perceives how ill she is and actually resents the weakness and exhaustion that force him occasionally to interrupt his work to care for her.

Wharton does not suggest that Vance is responsible for Laura Lou's death, though the poverty and deprivations of their married life perhaps hasten it. She also seems to justify Vance's condescension to his young wife--he addresses her as "Child" throughout the book--on the grounds of his much greater intelligence, sensitivity, and independence. But his superiority is subtly undermined as Laura Lou's uncomplaining suffering adds a dimension of gallantry to her character, and his insensitivity makes him in contrast less sympathetic. His obtuseness is not deliberate, but it is a significant flaw in a character whose vocation depends on insight and empathy. Even vulgar Bunty Hayes, who was engaged to Laura Lou when Vance wooed her away, seems capable of a love for her which is more genuine and less self-interested than Vance's. The depth of Hayes' grief casts an ironic light upon Vance's inability to feel her loss:

> . . . since he had honestly tried to give her all that she was capable of receiving from him, how was he to blame if her going had left the live forces in him untouched? It was as if a door had quietly opened and shut in a room in which he was working--and when he looked up from his work he saw no change. Some one had gone out, but the room was not more empty. . . (p. 552).

This passage describes Vance's own thoughts about his reaction to Laura Lou's death; the attentive reader cannot help perceiving that those thoughts are self-absorbed, even callous, though Vance himself is insensitive to his own failure of feeling.

Wharton's intent is not merely to show that Vance's limited capacity to relate to Laura Lou is the natural consequence of their incompatibility, but to demonstrate that the insight which is an element of creative energy does not necessarily illuminate his personal life. Paradoxically, in fact, she seems to imply instead that the artist's satisfaction in and dominance of the world of his own invention may even increase his separation from the reality of flesh-and-blood human beings. The illustration of these ideas is the most important function of the novel's true heroine, Halo Spear, the person most capable of appreciating the artist in Vance and potentially best-suited to become his wife.

At first, it seems that the obstacles that separate Vance and Halo are merely their unhappy marriages to other people. Although Halo's attraction to Vance begins early

in the novel, she makes a marriage of convenience to Lewis Tarrant, the wealthy, dilettante publisher of a literary review. By the time Vance understands that he loves Halo, he is already married to Laura Lou. Halo, like Lucius Harney in Summer, is short-sighted, a metaphorical representation of the tendency to make other kinds of errors of perception. She actually makes two very serious errors of psychological short-sightedness--one when she compromises her independence for the material comforts of a loveless marriage, and another when she believes that what she loves about the artist in Vance Weston is identical in the man he is.

If Hudson River Bracketed were actually a version of the conventional romance of star-crossed lovers, Wharton would not have needed a sequel, and she would certainly have ended the novel differently. Until the novel's conclusion, there is no reason for the reader to doubt the genuineness of Halo's and Vance's attraction to one another. The bond between them seems the more intense because for both it seems to be elementally connected to his work. He articulates this connection directly when he declares:

> "But you're in my books, you're part of them, whether you want to be or not, whether you believe in them or despise them, whether you believe in me or despise me; and you're in me, in my body and my blood, just as you're in my books, and just as fatally. It's done now and you can't get away from me, you can't undo what you've done: you're the thoughts I think, and the visions I see, and the air I breathe, and the food I eat--and everything, everything, in the earth and over it. . ." (p. 437).

Neither is this merely a hyperbolic outburst of passion, for a page later he refines his declaration more thoughtfully: "And it was all as he had said. He and his art and this woman were one, indissolubly one in a passionate mutual understanding. He and she understood each other--didn't she know it?--with their intelligences and their emotions, with their eyes, their hands, their lips" (p. 438).

The conclusion of Hudson River Bracketed, however, which at first seems an abrupt breaking off of the narrative, is actually an ironic dismantling of its character as a conventional love story, a preparation for the narrative development of The Gods Arrive, and a final assertion of the artist's intensified alienation. The last scene takes place only a week after Laura Lou's death and describes an ominous breakdown of the understanding between Halo and Vance. His inability to understand her dismay at his dispassionate announcement of Laura Lou's death seems almost a curious anticipation of Meursault's reactions in The Stranger:

> She was suffering terribly; he saw that she was horrified and did not know how to express her dismay. He supposed that she thought him to blame for not telling her at once--perhaps regarded him as brutal, unfeeling. But he could not imagine why. All that belonged to another place, to another life almost. . . (p. 559).

He has separated himself from his wife's death so completely that, ironically, this creates an emotional chasm between Halo and him as well.

Wharton constructs an ironic reversal in the novel's final scene which hinges upon the reader's tendency to accept Vance's assertions without question since his perspective controls point of view. But sensitivity to the tone and substance of the exchanges between Halo and Vance makes the audience aware of another level of meaning. Under the circumstances, Halo's reaction to the news of Laura Lou's death--shock and guilty remorse--is natural and understandable. It is Vance's failure to empathize with her feelings or even comprehend them which is disturbing. Although she has really done nothing to threaten their "indissoluble" understanding, his disappointed condescension undermines the genuineness of what he himself has described as a mutual integration of identity:

> It was curious; he had to reason with her as if she were a child. It was almost as if he were reasoning with Laura Lou. He felt himself calling upon the same sort of patience--as if he were sitting down on the floor to comfort a child that had hurt itself. . . . And when at last he drew her arm through his and walked beside her in the darkness to the corner where she had left her motor, he wondered if at crucial moments the same veil of unreality would always fall between him and the soul nearest him; if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones (p. 560).

The narrative's development and this final episode in particular suggest a grim answer to Vance's speculation.

The novel's conclusion is extremely significant for a number of reasons. By means of its rejection of a "romantically" satisfying resolution, its ironic tone and substance,

and its explicit articulation of the novel's theme in the final sentence, Wharton re-establishes for her audience Hudson River Bracketed's real focus and unity and creates a bridge between this novel and her only sequel. Marilyn Jones Lyde's summing up of Hudson River Bracketed, which is representative of the general critical reaction to the book, fails to take note of its unity:

> Hudson River Bracketed provides the most obvious example of the diffuseness resulting from Mrs. Wharton's loss of command over her material. The episodes no longer mark a definite progression, and there is a disconcerting lack of unity in Vance Weston's character, due evidently to the effort to incorporate in his personality many of the conflicting social and artistic currents of the time.[8]

But when the novel's irony is accurately understood and analyzed, Wharton's concerns are complex rather than diffuse.

In both Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, Wharton certainly intends, as an explanation and perhaps even a justification of her own technique, to define the process of invention in terms which associate it with the creative principle in nature--mysterious and organic. She further implies that the artist's vision may encourage his existence in a solipsistic world of his own invention which increases his alienation from the world of real people. Ironically, this alienation may eventually jeopardize the soundness of his creative instincts since they must in some way reflect the real world. In Hudson River Bracketed, Vance, as we have

seen, began with a dim consciousness of separation which is later magnified by his vocation as an artist. He finds a measure of connection and continuity in the analogy he senses between the creative impulse in nature and in his own best work and in his relationship with Halo. But he is immature, self-indulgent, confused by shallow ideals of success; involvement with the imaginary beings of his own invention is far simpler and more ego-bolstering than with real ones, even the soul nearest to him.

The Gods Arrive, which traces the parallel disintegrations of Vance's relationship with Halo and his creative energies, extends Wharton's exploration of the consequences of alienation for the artist. Vance Weston is a specific example of a type of Wharton character described by Gary Lindberg: "His fugitive, erratic, and isolated feelings must be made to cohere in actions and words comprehensible to others. . . . His local manners, in the first instance, provide the forms within which this is possible. If, for whatever reason, he is cut off from such forms, he appears inwardly chaotic and outwardly selfish."[9] Vance is literally and figuratively cut off from "local manners" by the Bohemian life style he adopts in Europe where this novel is set. The European environment Wharton found so nourishing to her own identity as an artist is distinctly different from the one she makes depleting to his. Chaos and selfishness are magnified by the drifting aimlessness and license

of the milieu of his European experience.

The novel is constructed upon scenes of dramatic irony that demonstrate the accumulating destructiveness of Vance's unbridled self-indulgence. His response to a Spanish cathedral, for example, whose beauty and age might be expected to stimulate him intellectually and creatively as the Willows did, is first defensive insensitivity and then inarticulate and unproductive rapture that he does not bother to try to share with Halo. The scene becomes an ironic contrast to episodes in the earlier novel in which "place" so effectively arouses his creative energies. It is also evidence of the increasing distance between Vance and Halo, who mistakenly responds to his temperamental self-absorption by completely submerging her identity in his, as if by doing so she might somehow get past that "veil of unreality" she senses between them.

Many scenes reaffirm Wharton's ironic treatment of Vance. "He seemed to himself a totally different being from the young ignoramus who had left New York with Halo Tarrant a year previously" (p. 73), he perceives with satisfaction at the beginning of Book II. He <u>is</u> different, but there is a striking discrepancy between Vance's view of himself and what the sensitive reader perceives as errors of selfishness and vanity that constitute the actual changes in his personality. In fact, both his personal life and his talent are increasingly out of control, and though he sporadically comprehends this, as when he considers marrying Halo as ". . . the only means

man had yet devised for defending himself from his own frivolity" (p. 120), he does not have the will to act upon his insights.

Despite this inability, Wharton's insistence upon the necessity of continuity and integration in both life and art accounts for the novel's narrative unity. That these elements, for example, are devalued by Vance's fellow writers for the sake of popularity disturbs him even though he cannot keep himself from imitating them. He objects to their practice of breaking down, of separating, to their

> . . . miscroscopic analysis of the minute in man, as if the highest imaginative art consisted in decomposing him into his constituent atoms. . . . The new technique might be right, but their application of it substituted pathology for invention. Man was man by virtue of the integration of his atoms, not their dispersal (p. 115).

In this passage and others, Wharton shows that she does not wish to undermine completely the reader's sympathetic identification with Vance or his function as a vehicle for her own literary ideals.[10] But his personal and artistic conflicts must reach some crisis before they can be resolved.

His personal crisis is brought about by his disillusioning affair with Floss Delaney, a greedy, amorally climbing girl from his past, for whose purely sensual attractions he has carelessly deserted Halo. His artistic crisis is reached when he realizes that his novel "Colossus" is a failure, as he comes to think, ". . . a kind of hybrid monster made out of

the crossing of his own imaginings with those imposed on him by the literary fashions and influences of the day" (p. 393).

The manner of his redemption in the book's conclusion is further illustration of Wharton's far-sighted ironic counterpointing of scenes and images in the first novel with others in the sequel to establish unity of theme and technique. As we have seen, Hudson River Bracketed began with Vance's unconsidered speculations about religion as a potential source of coherence and stability. The Gods Arrive concludes with a series of events that in an ironic way confirm and develop those speculations. Vance seems at last impelled toward maturity at the point when he comes closest to being overwhelmed by chaos. In retreat, he discovers by chance in the writings of St. Augustine, whose thought is, after all, an archetypal pattern of separation transformed into integration and union, a parallel to and resolution of his own experience. "And Thou didst beat back my weak sight, dazzling me with Thy splendour," he reads, "and I perceived that I was far from Thee, in the land of unlikeness, and I heard Thy voice crying to me: 'I am the Food of the full-grown. Become a man and thou shalt feed on Me'" (p. 418).

The application Wharton allows her protagonist to make of this counsel depends on a rather facile interchange of the concept of God with experience in general: "I read something up there in the woods," he tells Halo, "about God . . . or

experience . . . it's the same thing . . . being the food of the full-grown. That seemed to explain a lot to me" (p. 439). His interpretation is secular rather than religious, but it recognizes that the "land of unlikeness" is sterile and unhappy; creativity in all its forms is the product of integration. Once he has learned this, his creativity, Wharton seems to suggest, is restored: at the novel's conclusion, he has begun a new book and is reconciled with Halo, who is carrying his child.

Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive fall short of that ideal of inevitable rightness to which Wharton aspired and which she more nearly attained in The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, Summer, The Custom of the Country, and The Age of Innocence. Besides weaknesses of style pointed out by Blake Nevius and others,[11] the novels lack sustained dramatic impact. This is partly because of their length and because Vance Weston is required to convey to the reader his abstract ideas about writing by "telling" rather than "showing." But Wharton has certainly not lost the power to create unity in the development of the narrative, as the ironic connections of plotting, characterization, and theme within and between those novels prove. Their particular relevance to this study is that they indicate that her considerations were evolving beyond describing alienation and dramatizing its destructive potential. She seems in addition to be suggesting that continuity and coherence are not always unrealizable if one

can find the means of attaining them.

The Buccaneers promised to have the strengths of Wharton's best work--perfect command of central theme, stylistic grace, and memorable characterization--and also the shift toward a more positive estimation of the power of human resources. R. W. B. Lewis asserts that The Buccaneers is superior to anything Wharton wrote after 1920 and accounts for it by suggesting that her own perspective had altered: "It is not quite a matter, apparently, of some miraculous recovery of power in the twilight of a long life, though a fresh kind or power can be felt welling up. It is rather, one speculates, that Edith Wharton in her last years moved gradually into a new state of being."[12]

In her last novel, Wharton rejected the tragic vision she had held out in The House of Mirth and Ethan Frome and the ambiguous failures of sympathy to overcome separation in other novels like The Reef and The Age of Innocence. Though she returns to the past for the setting of The Buccaneers, she is not retreating into nostalgia or merely reaffirming old ideas. As Geoffrey Walton writes, ". . . Edith Wharton was in this last work attempting much more than a piece of historical reconstruction. . . . It [the novel] gradually works toward a vision of social reintegration with moral and intellectual concomitants, a concept of balance between ancient order and new, sincere, and unconventional individualism."[13] The novel also suggests a vision of personal

reintegration by showing that one's sense of identity, shattered by mistakes and compromises, may be reclaimed, and that intangibles like love, friendship, gallantry, sacrifice, and the beauty of poetry and painting may create bonds between people that help them to be more to each other than ". . .atoms whirling away . . . in some wild centrifugal dance," as in Lily Bart's image of loneliness and separation.

The Buccaneers is, in a sense, a refracted view of the career of Undine Spragg. It concerns the fortunes of a group of beautiful and lively American girls--invaders from the West who storm first New York and then London society for the sake of plunder: the most prestigious marriages they can manage. But Wharton means her title to have playful and basically approving connotations. Their ambitions and characters have none of the monstrous dimensions of Undine's and, in fact, as the narrative is worked out, reflect a significant measure of innocence. The novel is actually a carefully developed ironic reversal of the situation of The Custom of the Country. These girls--and particularly the youngest and most promising of them, Nan St. George--are more nearly victims than victimizers. They seem brash and formidable in their pursuits of the most eligible bachelors of London society, but they are vulnerably naive about the personal cost of living out the realities of their marriages.

At the novel's beginning, the invaders--Virginia and Annabel St. George, Lizzy and Mabel Elmsworth, and Conchita

Closson, all less ruthless than Undine--actually don't seem to have much hope of realizing their ambitions. One basic irony of Wharton's story is that they are as much victims of the insecurities created by the overwhelming social changes taking place about them as those whose fortresses of old money and social prestige they wish to breach. "Everything was changed since crinolines had gone out and bustles come in" (p. 4)--this simplistic summing up of the problem as it is perceived by Mrs. St. George sets the comic/ironic tone that allows Wharton to mock the frustrations of these newly-rich climbers who are threatened by change even though they depend upon taking advantage of it.

But Wharton intends her audience to like and identify with her buccaneers. She portrays them sympathetically as individuals and also she creates a sense of them as a group with an identity that is somehow the sum of all its parts: Virginia--blondely, placidly exquisite; Lizzy--dark, equally beautiful but more shrewd; Conchita--foreign and audacious; and, most of all, Nan--unformed, unique, and vulnerable. The narrative scenes that give dramatic life to these qualities are proof that Wharton's ability to visualize character has not diminished. The scene in which Conchita teaches Nan how to smoke is one striking example.

On the surface, the encounter between the two girls shows on Nan's part merely the hero worship of a very young girl for a slightly older one, and on Conchita's the kindly

condescension of the object of such admiration. But the scene also establishes for an attentive audience more complicated insights into their characters which will be carried out consistently in their development later on.

Conchita's talk about "love-making" and clandestine romance reveals, on the one hand, a precocious sexual sophistication that is juxtaposed against Nan's innocence and ethical fastidiousness when Wharton shows that she is repelled by Conchita's indiscretions. On the other hand, Conchita's adolescent pride in her ability to blow smoke rings makes her seem both innocent and likable. And the other side of Nan's personality--her natural independence--is suggested by not only her willingness to smoke but her delight in it: "She puffed again and knew she was going to like it. Instantly, her mood passed from timidity to triumph, and she wrinkled her nose critically and threw back her head, as her father did when he was tasting a brand new cigar" (p. 19). In this scene, character is developed beneath the surface meaning of the context by Wharton's technique of a kind of ironic cross-referencing.

Although Annabel St. George is the protagonist of The Buccaneers, Wharton links her inextricably by temperament and fortune to another remarkably attractive character--her governess, Laura Testvalley, the only character able to come and go, in her peculiar fashion, between the customarily separate worlds of old and new money on both sides of the Atlantic.

One of Laura Testvalley's functions is to advance the plot by becoming the means by which her American charges gain entrance to London society. In addition, Laura is herself a symbol of integration, at least in a limited way, and Wharton seems to have intended her to be the agent of Nan's escape at the end of the novel from a constraining lifestyle where she is alienated from any recognizable sense of self. As we shall see, there are ironic dimensions in both these functions.

Wharton's most fortunate inspiration in the invention of Miss Testvalley's character is to make her a descendant of Italian patriots and a cousin of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose richly sensual poetry and painting is, as Wharton says, as close to Laura as her bones. Thus, her independent spirit and passionate nature seem a natural inheritance, and these qualities--independence and passionate feeling, balanced by the acquired appreciation of permanent values--become the elements which make integration possible in contexts both social and personal.

The relationship of Nan and Miss Testvalley has a number of ironic turnings which contribute to the development of Wharton's theme. The rapport between Laura and Nan is immediate and deep; the governess nourishes out of the best in her own nature the best in Nan's. They become more than teacher and pupil, more than friends. Laura comes to think of Nan (the diminutive is dropped as she grows up) as the

daughter she might have had. But by helping the other girls to realize their matrimonial ambitions, Laura inadvertently jeopardizes Nan, younger, more sensitive and inexperienced than they, by allowing her to be swept into a disastrous marriage with the Duke of Tintagel, the best match in England but a man totally incapable of appreciating her individuality and high spirits. Ironically, Laura is indirectly the agent of Nan's undoing just as later, under other ironic circumstances, she will help to save her.

Wharton also employs an ironic contrasting of imagery dealing with place to reflect character and value and to develop and support her theme. One evidence of Annabel's emotional depth is her response to the significance of English place--a response not unlike the nourishing sense of permanence and continuity the Willows inspires in Vance Weston. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes, Annabel resonates to tradition ". . . not because it is a habit or obligation, but because so much that is worthwhile in human experience has been carried from past to present through pious reverences and remembrances."[14] She responds in this way to Honourslove, the ancestral home of Guy Thwarte, with whom she will later fall in love. She calls her response "beyondness"--a feeling of communion and oneness between sympathetic sensibilities which may be aroused by an interrelation of permanence and beauty. Annabel's and Guy's shared reverence for all that Honourslove represents creates a sympathetic link between

them, just as Laura and Guy's father are later brought together for a time by their shared response to the Rossetti painting in the study at Honourslove.

One of the reasons that Annabel marries the Duke of Tintagel is that she hopes to recapture this sense of "beyondness" in her relationship with the owner of the ancient castle thought to have belonged to King Arthur. Unfortunately, her husband neither shares nor understands her feelings:

> Though the walls of Tintagel were relatively new, they were built on ancient foundations, and crowded with treasures of the past; and near by was the mere of Excalibur, and from her windows she could see the dark gray sea, and sometimes, at nightfall, the mysterious barge with black sails putting out from the ruined castle to carry the dead King to Avalon.
>
> Of all this, nothing existed for her husband. He saw the new Tintagel only as a costly folly of his father's, which family pride obliged him to keep with fitting state, in spite of the unfruitful acres that made its maintenance so difficult (pp. 249-250).

And Longlands, the other ancestral seat of the Tintagels, is only a physical monument to their haughtiness and unquestioning enslavement to tradition.

Wharton is not expressing simple social conservatism in her insistence that the present should not repudiate the past, an ongoing phenomenon she perceived in her own country. Her work, as we have seen, is filled with examples of the life-draining destructiveness that is the consequence of blind adherence to tradition for its own sake. But she distinguishes clearly between tradition which is merely

oppressive and the positive values of permanence and stability, as when Annabel perceives that,

> It was not the atmosphere of London but of England which had gradually filled her veins and penetrated to her heart. She thought of the thinness of the mental and moral air in her own home; the noisy quarrels about nothing, the paltry preoccupations, her mother's feverish interest in the fashions and follies of a society which had always ignored her. At least life in England had a background, layers and layers of rich deep background, of history, poetry, old traditional observances, beautiful houses, beautiful landscapes, beautiful ancient buildings, palaces, churches, cathedrals. Would it not be possible, in some mysterious way, to create for one's self a life out of all this richness, a life which would somehow make up for the poverty of one's personal lot (p. 305).

The connection of the past to the present is a manifestation of coherence and continuity which not only enriches life, but is necessary to one's sense of personal identity.

Honourslove, then arouses emotions and represents values that are ironically absent at Longlands. The atmosphere of the former makes the beauty of the past accessible in the present and inspires sympathetic communion and shared sensibility. The other stultifies any but the most superficial human connections and, further, contributes to a general disintegration of Annabel's sense of self.

Wharton has shown Annabel always set apart from others, even her sisters and her friends, by the sensitivity that elicits Laura Testvalley's affection. But isolated at Longlands in an empty marriage, her sense of separation and

loneliness threatens even her personal identity:

> She was now to all appearances, Annabel Tintagel, and had been for over two years but before that she had been Annabel St. George, and the figure of Annabel St. George, her face and voice, her likes and dislikes, her memories and moods, all that made up her tremulous little identity, though still at the new Annabel's side, no longer composed the central Annabel, the being with whom this strange new Annabel of the Coreggio room at Longlands, and the Duchess's private garden, felt herself really one. There were moments when the vain hunt for her real self became so disheartening that she was glad to escape from it into the mechanical duties of her new life. But in the intervals she continued to grope for herself, and to find no one (p. 241).

Like almost every other Wharton protagonist, Annabel comes to a realization of pervasive alienation: ". . . She gradually learned that it was not only one's self that changed. The ceaseless mysterious flow of days wore down and altered the shape of the people nearest one, so that one seemed fated to be always a stranger among strangers" (p. 260). Her perception is particularly ironic since it is directly a consequence of attaining what she and her friends wanted so badly. Annabel sees that disillusionment has changed them all, made those vivid, bold young women of Saratoga "vanish out of recognition" (p. 261), as she fears she has done.

> Perhaps, Annabel thought, if her beloved Val had remained with her, they might between them have rescued the old Annabel, or at least kept up communications with her ghost--a faint tap now and then against the walls which had built themselves up about the new Duchess. But as it was, there was the new Duchess, isolated in her new world, no longer able to reach back

> to her past, and not having yet learned how to communicate with her present (p. 262).

This passage illustrates how closely in this novel Wharton associates theme and image. Annabel's articulation of theme is supported by images of death and imprisonment that have been major elements of its development in this narrative and, as we have seen, throughout Wharton's fiction.

Wharton apparently intended to carry the narrative beyond the vision of alienation that destroys the protagonists of a number of earlier novels. In addition to Laura Testvalley, Annabel makes another friend in "the great lonely desert of life stretching out before her," a friend who ". . . understood not only all she said, but everything she could not say" (p. 350). Her earlier rapport with Guy Thwarte develops into mature romantic love, and though the novel breaks off before a conclusion, in Wharton's early outline, Annabel leaves her husband and, aided by Laura, elopes with Guy. In a number of passages, Annabel recognizes that the mistakes of one's life are the jailers that keep one imprisoned within it (p. 346), and Wharton seems to approve of her rebellion against her unhappiness and her escape from it.

A final irony is that Laura Testvalley loses her own chance for happiness by helping to secure Annabel's. As Wharton's outline works out the story, Guy's father, with whom Laura has established a connection of her own,

> . . . is so furious at his only son's being involved in such an adventure that, suspecting Miss Testvalley's complicity, he breaks with her, and the great old adventuress, seeing love, deep and abiding love, triumph for the first time in her career, helps Nan to join her lover, who has been ordered to South Africa, and then goes back alone to old age and poverty (pp. 358-359).

Finally, though, Laura both represents within herself the balance between "ancient order and unconventional individualism" of Walton's social reintegration and helps to bring about Annabel's personal reintegration.

These last three novels seem a fortunate closing of Wharton's long career, not because they are necessarily her best fictions but because they suggest that Wharton never stopped extending the exploration of alienation that gave her access to the deepest motivations of character. In the end, she rejected a tragic vision of the meaning of her explorations. In these last novels, she affirms that integration may overcome separation--isolated spirits may be brought into the circle of human sympathy and fractured identities may be made whole. In Wharton's fiction, it was often not enough to perceive alienation as an obstacle to happiness or even sometimes survival. Human frailties might, like Nan's "jailers," deliver one helplessly up to one's adversary. But in Hudson River Bracketed, The Gods Arrive, and The Buccaneers, human frailties are not allowed to be fatal. These last books are about survivors.

Especially notable in her last novels are Wharton's

mindfulness of art itself and her ultimate conception of it as both product and source of integration. In Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, art is the former--the fruit of the artist's integration of external experience and his inner vision. In The Buccaneers, it is the latter, creating an important bond of recognition and affinity among those whose sensibilities respond: Nan and Laura, Nan and Guy, Laura and Sir Helmsley--all variously drawn together by the poetry and painting of Rosetti, symbols of art in a more general sense.

That Wharton gives dramatic expression to the integrating function of art itself, to its power to bond and connect, to be by its very nature antithetical to separation, is particularly meaningful to this study, a contention of which is that irony, the basis of Wharton's own art, works in precisely this manner. In the narratives we have considered, narratives which represent the best work of every stage of Wharton's career, the two constant elements are alienation and irony--alienation as a force influencing "manners" in its broadest sense meaning behavior, and irony as the medium conveying to a receptive audience the nature and consequences of alienation.

Especially when Wharton's fiction is viewed as a body of work unified by its themes and techniques, it is clear that Wharton achieved in many novels spanning the length of her career the "natural magic" which was for her the measure

of excellence. What is perhaps most inevitably right about her work in the largest context is her gifted fusion of form and purpose, especially in The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, Summer, The Custom of the Country, The Age of Innocence, and The Buccaneers.

In all her work, and particularly the best, this fusion is primarily accomplished by irony, and her writing assumes its greatest coherence only when her ironic technique is accurately understood. Her most consistent ironic device, and perhaps the one that demands the most sensitivity on the part of her audience, is ironic characterization, which varies in degree but almost always involves the protagonist. Dramatic irony and ironic imagery are also crucial to her ironic method, usually having the general function of contributing to narrative unity by their subtle emphasis of theme. The juxtaposition of elements of romanticism, realism, and naturalism is another frequently employed device which produces for the reader ironic complications of characterization and value.

The special demands Wharton's ironic method places upon her readers actually mean that she must project an audience she has "created"--readers upon whom nothing is lost, sensitive receivers of nuance, ambiguity, and multiple meaning. In effect, her irony requires that writer and reader become co-creators of meaning. Irony, rather than being a distancing strategy as Ong and others have warned, actually integrates writer and audience by establishing bonds of understanding

and complicity between them. In Wharton's particular case, it creates the "marriage of true minds" that was in her personal experience a product of irony. It is fitting, under such circumstances, that Edith Wharton's vision of the destructive potential of alienation should encompass the possibility of integration and communion since irony, the elemental technique of her art, itself accomplishes a kind of integration by overcoming the alienation of artist and audience.

That concern with alienation and the damage it may inflict upon the relation of artist and audience which we have seen expressed by theorists like Ong and Barthes is just one manifestation of an extraordinarily common preoccupation. The problem of the alienated consciousness, of the human cost of spiritual, emotional, and physical isolation, has been an almost obsessive theme of American literature for over two centuries. Perhaps this isolation has seemed so intensely real because of the special risks involved in the very beginnings of the American experience, separated geographically and culturally from roots in the Old World and precariously situated in the New.[15] For whatever reason, this theme is inevitably present in the fiction of every major American writer--Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, Salinger--and certainly in all those works identified as "grotesque" and in those which reflect the existential position.

Edith Wharton's career-long attention to this theme

places her work where it belongs--in the mainstream of American literature--and gives it relevance which transcends its receding time and place. The elemental thematic tension in her fiction is between separation and integration, a tension exactly reproduced by the form of its expression. Of greatest significance is D. C. Muecke's observation, quoted earlier, that ". . . Irony may be not merely the best way, but perhaps the only way to deal with life. . . . One must separate oneself from a world which is dead, illusory, unmanageable, contradictory, or absurd. But unless one commits suicide, one must also accept it."[16] Edith Wharton's narratives are concrete illustrations which prefigure this assertion and prove its importance. Their ultimate value is the exploration of its meaning for us all.

NOTES

[1] These works are as follows: The Glimpses of the Moon (New York: Appleton, 1922); A Son at the Front (New York: Scribner's, 1923); Old New York; False Dawn; The Old Maid; The Spark; New Year's Day (New York: Appleton, 1924, 4 vols.; The Mother's Recompense (New York: Appleton, 1925); Twilight Sleep (New York: Appleton, 1927); The Children (New York: Appleton, 1928).

[2] Hudson River Bracketed (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1929). All subsequent references are to this text.

[3] The Gods Arrive (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). All subsequent references are to this text.

[4] The Buccaneers (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938). All subsequent references are to this text.

[5] Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses these weaknesses concretely and in detail in her analysis, pp. 391 ff., in A Feast of Words.

[6] Noted by Lewis, Edith Wharton, A Biography, p. 491.

[7] Walton, p. 166.

[8] Lyde, p. 183.

[9] Lindberg, p. 39.

[10] These ideals are further evidence of the unity Wharton strives for in and between both novels since they are described consistently in both. See, for example, the following passage of The Gods Arrive in which Vance reiterates those ideals in language almost identical to that used previously in Hudson River Bracketed:

> . . . but as always in the full tide of invention, he felt himself possessed by a brooding spirit of understanding, some mystic reassurance which sea and sky and the life of men transmitted from sources deeper than reason. He had never been able to formulate it, but he had caught, in the pages of all the great creative writers, hints of that mysterious subjection and communion, impossible to define, but clear to the initiated as the sign exchanged between members of some secret brotherhood (p. 187).

[11] Blake Nevius describes the weakness of Hudson River Bracketed's style as follows: "Its style . . . is for the most part glossy, mechanical, never wholly bad, but characterized by a fatal ease and occasionally betraying the hectic flush of the slick-magazine style" (p. 226, Edith Wharton).

[12] Lewis, p. 524.

[13] Walton, p. 177.

[14] Wolff, p. 403.

[15] See, for example, Darrel Abel, American Literature, Volume Two. (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1963) p. 187. This idea finds frequent expression in many references which focus on cultural/literary development.

[16] See Chapter Two, note 2.

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