

**The Moral Significance of Living Space : The Library
and the Kitchen in *The House of Mirth***

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要 約

住空間とジェンダー—*The House of Mirth* (1905) にみる「ライブラリー」と「キッチン」のトポグラフィー

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人類はじめ地球に棲息する生物すべてにとって「生活空間／領域」は個体特有の生態系と密接な関わりを持つ。雨風をしのぎ暖をとるための住空間は「縦6フィート横3フィート大の箱／空間」があれば十分だと、アメリカの超絶主義者のひとりヘンリー・デイヴィット・ソローは『ウォールデン』(1854)で断言した。しかし、人はその実用的機能以上に住空間／環境を拡張し装飾することで、文化遺産を構築してきた。古代のピラミッド、古墳の建設、中世の宮殿、寺院、教会の建造、二十世紀初頭の摩天楼、現代の超高層ビル建設に資材、技術、創造力と知恵を費やすのである。

文学作品にも、さまざまな建築物、住空間が登場する。単にドラマの舞台としてだけでなく、象徴的意義を付与され、作品解釈に重層的機能を発揮する。「古きよき時代」のニューヨーク出身のウォートンほど住環境に関心を示した作家はめずらしい。ニューヨークのタウンハウス、ニューボートの別荘の所有主としてだけでなく、マサチューセッツ州レノックスには自ら設計した邸宅マウントを建築し、バリ郊外のサン・プリス・ス・フォレの館の内装を手掛ける。さらにオグデン・コドマンとの共著 *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) を出版し、理想の住空間を追求した文人である。したがって彼女の作品には、多数の家、家屋内の住空間が克明に描かれる。

小論は、その題名『歓楽の家』(旧約聖書からの引用)にも「家」という空間が含まれる、ウォートンの *The House of Mirth* における「ライブラリー」と「キッチン」という生活空間のトポグラフィー考察をとおして、家屋内部のこれらの領域がヒロイン、リリー・パートのドラマと如何に関わり、その存在論的意義を呈示しているかを検証し、「住空間」とジェンダーを考察する。

"Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary." So reads the Thoreauvian economy of housekeeping. This exponent of self-reliance and of simple living goes on to say that "a large box of six feet long by three wide" will suffice to keep oneself warm and secure from rain and cold ; thereby one may have freedom in one's love and in one's soul be free. Whereas, he continues, "many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box" (30). What waste of energy and detour it is to attain freedom for one's soul's contentment! he may deplore. Indeed, a box of one's size, a coffin, is all that one needs at time of death. Just the same while in life one must have dwelling space for protection and comfort, however slight a shelter that may be, for like other creatures human species is, among other things, territorial.

This Thoreauvian code of dwelling place is the last thing that attracts heroes and heroines who inhabit the house of Edith Wharton's fiction, which, however, deserves reconsideration. As the fate of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* (1905) illustrates, Wharton comes very close to what Henry David Thoreau rules out in *Walden* as the moral significance of living space that we are given a dwelling place in an interim of our existence in this life and that nobody ever owns a house of his or her own. In other words we are all tenants in "the house of mirth" — a crazy madhouse called life — where we are equally given uncertain occupancy. The problem of dwelling space thus assumes an ontological significance in the way one lives and how one defines oneself.

In Buddhism woman is said to have no home in the three realms of existence, that is the past, present, and future. In this patriarchal religion and culture such has long been woman's destiny regardless of her social class and position. She has a temporal home in her father's house until she marries into another house, her husband's, but she will never secure a shelter of "her own" at her disposal¹⁾. Likewise, in Western societies traditionally women have been placed in a similar situation ; the life cycle of a heroine in 19th-century fiction illustrates a grim social mechanism in which she struggles to acquire a husband so as to secure a home, unless she is a natural inheritor to family estate like May Welland in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), or Catherine Sloper in Henry James's *Washington Square* (1881), or a few such exceptions of independent and not "marriageable" girls as Gertrude Farish who enjoys "the privileges of a flat" (7). Even so these heroines are portrayed as the keeper/decorator rather than the owner, much less the builder, of the houses they inhabit. As Thorstein Veblen observes, the socio-economic structure of Victorian America defines women as consumers rather than creators of material goods, while American men are invariably builders of houses and makers of money their women spend on decorations of the houses as well as of themselves.

Such gender-oriented bifurcation of economy is reflected in the space men and women occupy and the function each perform within the house. Wharton's heroines expend a good part of their time and energies decorating their houses just as they renew their wardrobes each new season. In *Dwelling in the Text* (1991) Marilyn R. Chandler

explains such activities of American Victorian middle-and upper-class women as their “few acceptable avenues of expression open to them,” and that they “poured their creative energies into their houses” (150). Building houses, roads and bridges or making money is the farthest thing in the thought of women especially “nice” women in that society. Women, trapped in the home, and excluded from the business world and marketplace, had to use their vision to create a larger space where they can breathe. In this plight they are like writers and painters in the 19th-century America, who were shut out of the “real” world of money making.

The case of Edith Wharton provides an extraordinary exception in such socio-cultural background. A veritable owner of more than a single house both in America and in France during her lifetime, Wharton literally utilized her time and energy in designing and decorating the houses where she never was a permanent resident. She built a great country manor, The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts ; she decorated the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice-sous-Forêt outside Paris and Ste. Claire-le-Château at Hyères on the Riviera. Furthermore she went so far as to write a book on the interiors of houses, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) with Ogden Codman before she completed her first important novel, *The House of Mirth*. Naturally, she paid jealous attention to the description of the houses and “the decoration of houses” that appear in her novels. In *The House of Mirth* an interesting demarcation of living space for men and women within the house becomes distinct — the library/study and the kitchen/drawing-room — each playing a decisive role in the drama of the heroine.

This paper is an exploration in the moral significance of living space in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* ; it attempts to clarify a rather enigmatic relation between the heroine, Lily Bart, and dwelling place which plays a fatal role in the drama of her life and of Wharton's novel. In the discussion that follows I'd like to examine the central locus of the drama — the library and the kitchen — and the semiotic significance each plays in the relation between Lily and Lawrence Selden in Wharton's “house of mirth.”

I

In *The House of Mirth* the stages of Lily Bart's fall is graphically traced from the rigid fixity of domestic spatial arrangement of Mrs. Peniston's brownstone house on the Fifth Avenue to the more relaxed space of the Trenors' Bellomont, to the gaudy vulgarity of the Brys' and Gormers' mansions, and to the gilded suite of the Emporium Hotel where Norma Hatch resides. The sense of dwelling space for Lily becomes less secure and more marginal as the novel progresses.

We first meet Lily at the Grand Central Station, unaccompanied, and again at the end of the novel we see Lily wandering the street near Bryant Park at dusk — an ominous implication of the homeless state of her being throughout the novel. Unlike other heroines such as May Welland or Undine Spragg or even Ellen Olenska, Lily is on the road, so to speak, travelling from one place to another ; she never finds “a private corner” and cultivates it, as James's heroine does. In this she resembles Madame Merle, another social parasite, in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, who spends her life as a “welcome” guest

making a round of visits at her friends' country houses. Such life style is not unusual among fashionable people in old New York or in European society where Wharton's drama is staged ; they are all, in James's phrase, "hotel children." Wharton's satiric rendition of such rootless life Lily as a young girl experiences is quite precise : Lily lived a nomadic life in "a house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company' " and with "a series of French and English maids" and "an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen," exposed to "quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room" (28-29). One almost hears an ironic comment being made : What kind of moral character does such domestic spatial arrangement foster in a sensitive, impressionable child, if that child is by nature prone to sensual enjoyments of living space and luxuries of life? For the author of *The House of Mirth* believed that by putting the sense of proportion and order in living spaces people can make these spaces into "a world of conversation and stimulation, of continuity and tradition" (Auchincloss 31). Lily has been deprived, since her early childhood, of such regularity and sense of continuity.

And in her adult life, orphaned and homeless, Lily has no place of her own, sojourning at the houses of other people, either of her aunt Mrs. Peniston's town house on the Fifth Avenue or of her "summer" friends, Judy Trenor, Bertha Dorset, the Gormers, or with Norma Hatch at the Emporium Hotel. Lily overstays the hospitality of these friends for better or worse ; she is fated to end her life as she does on a narrow bed in a small room at the boarding-house. To have a place of one's own, even a slip of space, is synonymous with one's existence in this life. When Lily loses her living space one after another, therefore, she simply cannot exist. Hence her death at the end of the novel has a poetic justice, whether it is suicide or not has no relevance. The great irony of her life is that in her small box of a dwelling space Lily has preserved the integrity of her person, what Thoreau prescribes as "freedom in one's love" (Lily's love for Selden who does not deserve it) ; she has always been free in her soul because ironically she is unhampered by a larger box of dwelling space. Lily has to go through a humiliating experience finally to earn a place in "the house of mourning." In this perspective *The House of Mirth* reads as a poignant comment on the moral significance of living space.

Now a closer examination of the central locus within the house — the library and the kitchen — will clarify how these living spaces define and determine the relation between Lily and Lawrence Selden and will also clarify the meaning of Lily's death at the end of the novel. In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton spares a considerable space for the architectural significance of the library, smoking-room, and "Den" which can be marked as masculine space in a private home, where men retreat either to read or to relax : "The housing of a great private library is one of the most interesting problems of interior architecture. Such a room, combining monumental dimensions with the rich color-values and impressive effect produced by tiers of fine bindings, affords unequalled opportunity for the exercise of the architect's skill" (151). The walls of the books with fine bindings constitute an important decoration of the room. The library provides a private space for reading and contemplation, one of the privileges of a gentleman in old New York (See Figures 1 and 2). Yet, Wharton comments further that the great private

library is still so much a thing of the future in America : "Few of the large houses lately built in the United States contain a library in the serious meaning of the term" (151). (In *The Age of Innocence* the library is given its full serious meaning as space for privacy and independence, and even more than that, as we shall see later.)

The semiotic significance of the library as indices of cultural values (Chandler 3) is clearly present in the description of this space in Wharton's novel. The library is portrayed so as to illustrate the taste and the intellectual habit of the owner of the house. It provides information about the characters who use the place ; it is self-referential among the owner, the books the shelves contain, and his social status. In *The House of Mirth* Wharton is critical of the uses the library at Bellomont is put to : "A few family portraits of lantern-jawed gentlemen in tie-wigs, and ladies with large head-dresses and small bodies, hung between the shelves lined with pleasantly shabby books : books mostly contemporaneous with the ancestors in question, and to which *the subsequent Trenors had made no perceptible additions*. The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading, though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation" (59. My emphasis). Clearly, the library at Bellomont is an eloquent index of the moral as well as intellectual character of the owner, Gus Trenor. He is no gentleman as he reveals himself in his transaction with Lily Bart, who on her part is miserably naive. The library at Bellomont is a fake, a sorry joke, just like Gatsby's Gothic library at the West End mansion he owns. The rows of books in Gatsby's library he never reads could have been expensive durable cardboard bookshelves which however surprise an owl-eyed guest for being "real" and authentic (45-46). Thus the library in a private home is regarded as a gentleman's status symbol. On the contrary, at Bellomont it is exactly as a place for flirtation that the library is used ; Lily comes upon Selden and Bertha Dorset sitting tête-à-tête in easy chairs there scattered around (59).

In contrast to the library at Bellomont, there are two other occasions where the library is given dramatic importance in *The House of Mirth* : Selden's library is mentioned twice in the novel, where Lily and Selden meet alone on both occasions. Yet unlike house-guests at Bellomont, this pair of a lady and a gentleman are acutely aware that they are in the library and not in the drawing-room. Therefore, each time their conversation veers toward a certain intimacy they remind each other where they are. For the pair the library is decisively not a place for flirtation. If anything at all it should be a space for conversation and stimulation, even though more than once Lily is tempted to provoke Selden, who is "indolently amused" (8) ; being in the library thus creates a significant distance in their relationship. Wharton's use of the library is subtle and ingenious as dramatic locus in the novel.

While waiting for the next train to Bellomont, Lily accompanies Selden to his bachelor apartment, the first moral mistake Lily makes on impulse, yet with full knowledge of its gravity. She is ushered in his modest flat, into a slip of a hall hung with old prints. The details of his apartment illustrate more than anything else the modest financial status, yet fastidious taste and refinement of its occupant. Lily finds herself in a "small library, dark and cheerful, with its walls of books, a pleasantly faded Turkey rug,

a littered desk, and a tea-tray on a low table by the window, where Selden rests in shabby leather chairs." All this makes Lily say "how delicious to have a place like this all to one's self!" (7). Further Lily jokingly complains at this point in the novel, "what a miserable thing it is to be a woman," that is, not to own a place of one's own. Lily is too fastidious to pay the price exacted by the society, which is to marry a rich bore, a Percy Gryce with his collection of the *Americana* or a social upstart like Sim Rosedale, so as to be given a space to decorate. At the same time, she is too fastidious to endure the fate of a Gerty Farish for that matter. Yet the joke assumes an increasingly tragic meaning for the physical and moral state of her being as the drama develops.

II

In the above-examined library scene the symbolic meaning of owning a place of one's own is spelled out as the state of independence. It is only natural that Lily expresses her envy of Selden's cozy corner, from which woman in general, and woman even of Lily's social position, is excluded because she refuses to pay for the ticket to the game she is not prepared to play. So is Newland's sister hovering on the threshold, afraid to intrude him in his study, even though it is the female hand that keeps order in the library: "A vigilant hand has, as usual, kept the fire alive and the lamp trimmed; and the room, with its rows and rows of books, its bronze and steel statuettes on the mantelpiece ... looked singularly homelike and welcoming" (42). Chandler observes that descriptions of rooms serve "as introductions to the characters and as indices of their tastes, values, and habits as well as of their place in a complex network of social relations" (156). The library belongs exclusively to men, not to women in the Victorian America. Men are ensconced there to read and to dream of their future; women on the other hand go there to dust and to decorate, not to sit and read.

In *The Age of Innocence* (1920) — the date of publication is worth noting — Wharton makes a different use of a library, where May intrudes with her workbasket and to sit with Newland either to talk or listen to him read a book of poetry. The library is not only Newland's personal private space, but it becomes a living space where May claims her right to be, thereby to establish a certain conjugal communication within the house they share, for as Auchincloss observes Wharton "never believed in a separate world for women" (31), for which we have a clear evidence from the life she herself lived if not those of her heroines and of heroes as well. But in *The House of Mirth* Lily is never allowed to share her time/place with Selden in this sanctuary of his. On her first visit there Lily saunters about the library, examining the bookshelves which encase volumes of "ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco" (10), and her eyes linger on them caressingly, appreciating their tones and textures. She knows of their aesthetic values, but she is not to demonstrate her knowledge of their contents, even if she is familiar with them, because intellect in woman is to be shunned in the society where she has her being.

Lily's interest in the first edition of Jean de La Bruyère she takes in her hand on the occasion is not in its contents but in its market value. If she realized who La Bruyère is — Virginia Woolf quotes this 18th-century French moralist as an example of misogynist

along with Dr. Johnson²³ — she could have known the true nature of Selden — he is self-complacent in his superiority as a person : he does not doubt “the universal right of a man to enlighten a woman when he sees her unconsciously placed in a false position” (280). Selden appreciates more than anyone else the ornamental worth of this exquisite woman which to him is not so different from the fine tooling and old morocco of his precious collection. Lily should have known why of all the authors and books Selden owns the first edition of La Bruyère. Instead she asks him how much it is worth, asking Selden if he minds not being rich enough to buy all the books he wants (11). In asking the question Lily is thinking of the worth of the *Americana* in Percy Gryce’s collection, an indication that Lily regards herself as much as or even more than what the *Americana* costs Percy Gryce. As Wharton’s earlier working titles for the novel indicate, she is “a moment’s ornament” or an American beauty, a special species of cultivated red rose. The flower is cultivated with fastidious care to please the eye of the observer. Earlier Selden observes that “he had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her” (5). And such frivolous civilization eventually claims what it has produced as sacrifice ; Lily has only herself to blame for self-depreciation.

Single and impoverished, Lily is deprived not only of the ownership of a house but of the privilege, enjoyed by other women of her class, of decorating the interiors of a house and of arranging furniture as she likes. She complains to Selden, “If I could only do over my aunt’s drawing-room I know I should be a better woman” (8). Too easily she forfeits the right of doing so due to her moral weakness or her fastidiousness in her choice of husbands. The identification of living space and one’s moral character is all too evident here. From the very beginning Lily is fated ; she is inadequate as a person because she is morally restless as she is physically homeless. To be homeless means, in Wharton’s politics of dwelling space, to be morally destitute, deficient in moral fibre : “In this desultory yet agitated fashion life went on through Lily’s teens ; a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need — the need of more money” (29–30). If home is to offer protection, warmth, and affection, Lily never has received such until the very end of her life in the well-lighted miraculously clean kitchen of a working woman Lily meets quite by chance.

The scene in the library examined above drives the message home ; it clearly shows the fate of the hero and the heroine in Wharton’s novel. Selden ensconced in his library at the beginning and at the end, self-complacent with a sense of his superior position in his seclusion, where Lily will never have a place as his companion in life. Symbolically, *The House of Mirth* closes with another scene in Selden’s library : “The green-shaded lamps made tranquil circles of light in the gathering dusk, a little fire flickered on the hearth” (304) ; the scene is the same, where Lily recognized “the row of shelves from which he had taken down his La Bruyère, and the worn arm of the chair he had leaned against while she examined the precious volume,” and “the shaded lamps and the warm hearth, detaching it from the gathering darkness of the street, gave it a sweeter touch of

intimacy" (304-05). But this light and warmth is not for Lily ; the intimacy is not for the fated pair, either. Selden, comfortable in his library yet a confirmed bachelor for life, is never to know the real warmth of the kitchen fire which cures Lily of "the mortal chill" in her heart in Nettie Struther's kitchen.

As has been mentioned earlier, *The House of Mirth* provides a semiotics of dwelling space and the moral significance of living space Lily comes to realize is incomplete without reference to the kitchen and the fire in the kitchen. The importance of the kitchen space for woman is apparent ; as Showalter remarks, it is "the ritual center of much nineteenth-century women's fiction" (100).³⁾ The kitchen as dramatic locus and its semiotic significance is not made so conspicuous as that of the library in *The House of Mirth*. This is no surprise as the domestic work is done off stage by a changing dynasty of maids and cooks in "the house of mirth" Lily and her friends inhabit. Naturally, in *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton spares no space for the kitchen while she lays out elaborate plans for the interiors of the house—such domestic spaces as halls, dining-rooms, drawing-rooms, and the library and smoking-rooms. In her *Felicitous Space* (1986) Judith Fryer points out an interesting social factor which influences the designs of the model American home : it is not until the beginning of the 20th-century that the kitchen has become the center of the modern house and that Wharton's book on the interiors of the house became "clearly out of date a decade after its publication" (35).⁴⁾ Fryer also observes that "the kitchen was, however, the focus of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's criticism of bourgeois domestic life" (35), and the attention paid to the kitchen in house planning points to "a growing interest in scientific values and rational planning for every sphere of life" (34). Thus, the kitchen became increasingly the center of the modern house, which however was not an issue in old New York where Lily's drama takes place. Just the same, as has been mentioned earlier, the kitchen figures as an important dramatic locus as the library in *The House of Mirth*.

Despite the deterministic and pessimistic reading so far made of Lily's fate, the denouement of the novel looks toward a brighter vision of future for Wharton's heroine, as Showalter contends in her book, *Sister's Choice* : "The scene between the two women is unique in *The House of Mirth* for its intimacy and openness..., for its setting in the warm kitchen, for the presence of the baby, and for its acknowledgement of physical need" (100). The difference is clearly distinct from the deceptive intimacy in Selden's library, which Lily eventually leaves. Out on the street Lily is then taken up by Nettie and invited in to her warm kitchen. "It's real warm in *our* kitchen, and you can rest there" (313. My emphasis). Here the possessive pronoun "our" refers to Nettie and her husband for one thing, but in the dramatic context it also refers to Nettie and her friend Lily Bart as well. Nettie apologizes that there is a parlor, but it is real warm in the kitchen. "It was warm in the kitchen, which, when Nettie Struther's match had made a flame leap from the gas-jet above the table, revealed itself to Lily as *extraordinary small* and almost miraculously clean" (313. My emphasis). Wharton's dramatic use of the kitchen space at the closing part of her novel is deliberately contrived as "the ritual center" of women's fiction and of female solidarity.

Poor as she is Nettie does not economize the fire in her kitchen. We recall Mrs. Peniston never allows fire in the living room unless there is company. Lily hesitates to burn the letters because there is no fire in her aunt's fireplace ; Lily asks Selden on her last visit to make fire to warm herself, that is to burn the packet of letters she has kept all her life. She sacrifices herself there if for one thing to save Selden's reputation, but to preserve her self-respect more than anything else, thus forever depriving Selden of the vital warmth of human fellowship.

As this paper has shown, it is the moral significance of living space that gives one the real sense of life, which Thoreau expounds in *Walden* that a shelter is what provides one protection and the vital fire of life. But "how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary." Confusion in the arrangement of one's living space coalesces with that in one's moral being and existence. In a "stranger's" kitchen Lily, for the first time in her life, "felt stronger and happier : ..., and the surprised sense of *human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart*" (316. My emphasis). Back in her boarding-house, she decides not to "pamper herself any longer, to go without food because her surroundings made it unpalatable. Since it was her fate to live in a boarding-house, she must learn to fall in with the conditions of the life" (316). This is the new and different Lily, who has outgrown her life as an ornament, and who now lives as a person in "the house of mourning" ; she is utterly reconciled to "the conditions of the life" — her rootless life. In Lily's end there even is noted a salutary and tragic sense of good life consummated — not wasted — because of the self- realization she finally achieves.

(This paper was originally presented at the Edith Wharton at the Mount Conference held at Lenox, Massachusetts from June 12th to 14th, 1997 to celebrate the centennial of the publication of *The Decoration of Houses*. It has been substantially revised with illustrations added for publication in this issue of *the Kobe College Studies*.)

Notes

- 1) Only in recent years young women of independent means can become the owner of a home or a flat in Japan without any reservation. Virginia Woolf writes that in England "after the year 1880 a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property" (116).
- 2) Woolf quotes La Bruyère as an example of misogynist with his " Les femmes sont extrêmes : elles sont meilleures ou pires que les hommes —" (29-30).
- 3) Also the semiotic significance of the kitchen is markedly made in the writing of contemporary women writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Anne Tyler, or the Japanese novelist Yoshimoto Banana.
- 4) In 1997, the 100th anniversary year of *The Decoration of Houses*, Alexandra Stoddard, a New York based decorator, updated Wharton's book and published her book under the same title — *The Decoration of Houses*. Stoddard gives full credit to Wharton's book, and is reported to say that "There's no deception. My book was meant to praise and to celebrate Edith Wharton," and that "Classical principles don't change — ... Wharton was a keen observer, and she still has relevance."

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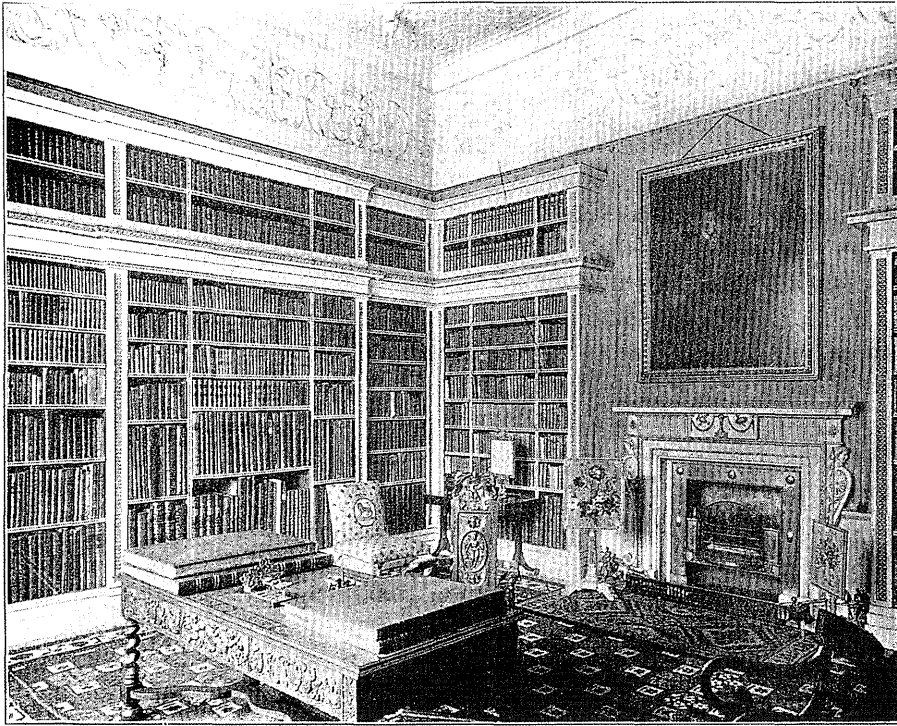


Figure 1 : Small Library at Audley End, England, 18th century. The library Wharton uses as an illustration in *The Decoration of Houses*.

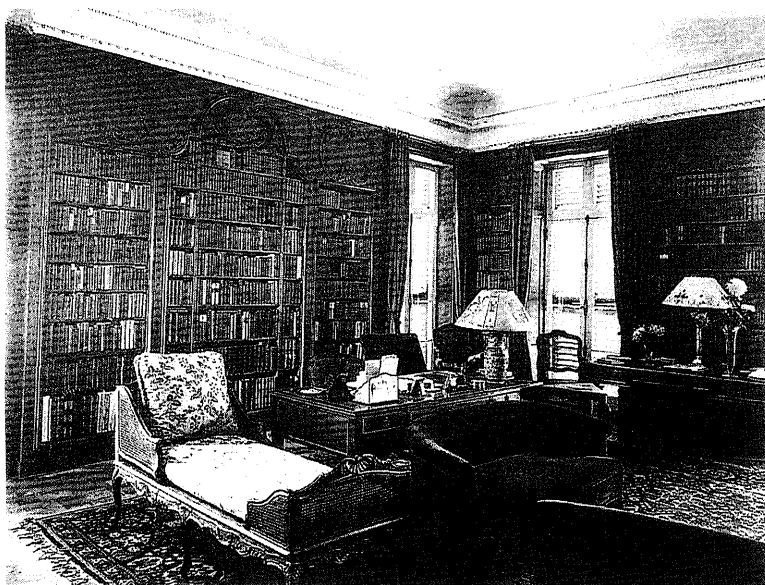


Figure 2 : The Library at The Mount, the country manor Wharton built at Lenox, Massachusetts. See the resemblance to the model in Figure 1. Oak-paneled bookcases in the library ca. 1900-1910. (Theresa Craig's *Edith Wharton : A House Full of Rooms ; Architecture, Interiors, and Gardens.*)