

THE IMPORTANCE OF MILIEU IN EDITH WHARTON'S SHORT STORIES AND NOUVELLES

by Joan Voss Greenwood

Edith Wharton, who is best known as the author of *The Age of Innocence*, wrote eighty-five short stories and eleven short novels, or *nouvelles*, the most famous of which is *Ethan Frome*, in addition to many other novels and a number of volumes of non-fiction and poetry. Critics have largely neglected the shorter works, but they deserve attention both because a number of them are excellent and because a study of them reveals a great deal about Mrs. Wharton's preoccupations and methods. When one is trying to attack the various aspects of the stories and *nouvelles*, however, one realizes the truth of Yvor Winters' statement that "it is primarily a context" that Edith Wharton creates,¹ and a unified context is very hard to split into small parts. If one must divide these works into component aspects for the sake of analysis, it is easiest to establish the characters' milieu or setting before putting them in it. Time and place are the two factors in which characters and action must be located.

Mrs. Wharton's interest in the physical aspects of milieu, particularly gardens and houses, was obvious before she wrote fiction, as *A Backward Glance* testifies,² and her interest prompted her to collaborate with another amateur, Ogden Codman, Jr., to publish *The Decoration of Houses* in 1901. Here she advocates the economy of means, simplicity, good proportions, and harmony which she keeps trying to achieve in her art. Her study for *Italian Villas*

¹Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, p. 37.

²Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*. pp. 90-1.

and Their Gardens only enhanced her appreciation of these principles.³ She states, for example, that it is essential to consider a room's purpose and the people it is to suit,⁴ and that a building's ...decoration must harmonize with the structural limitations..., [that] from this harmony of the general scheme of decoration with the building, and of the details of the decoration with each other, springs the rhythm that distinguishes architecture from mere construction. Thus all good architecture and good decoration...must be based on rhythm and logic. A house, or room, must be planned as it is because it could not, in reason, be otherwise; must be decorated as it is because no other decoration would harmonize as well with the plan.⁵

This statement is itself in harmony with her theory that one must work out a story, *nouvelle*, or novel in accordance with its germ.⁶ Mrs. Wharton, moreover, brought her interest in decoration and landscape into her fiction by stating that a landscape or a house in a story or novel should be related to the history of a soul and that description of it should contain only what the inhabitant or the other characters to whom it is important could or would then have noted.⁷ Edith Wharton did not mean to make the details of milieu extraneous.

She did not think that originality conflicts with tradition,⁸ so she was free to use imaginatively any physical setting, old or new. The casual reader of one or two of Mrs. Wharton's efforts immediately associates her with nineteenth century New York or the New England of *Ethan Frome*, but variety of milieu first impresses one who reads through all her works. Sometimes a number of settings are necessary within one story or *nouvelle* to implement the story

³Edward K. Brown, *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*, pp. 301-2.

⁴Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses*, p. 17.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶Edith Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," *Quarterly Review*, CCXXXIV (July, 1920), 200.

⁷Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, p. 85.

⁸Wharton and Codman, *The Decoration of Houses*, p. 10.

line; at times Mrs. Wharton uses just one small place to tighten the unity of a tale, for there are ways of varying a single scene. The conversation which comprises "Roman Fever" takes place on one Roman terrace, but it looks out over the city and many of its landmarks, and the characters also reminisce about other places. On the other hand, in the *nouvelle* *False Dawn* Lewis Raycie travels from his New York home all through the Middle East and Europe. The trip is important for the development of Lewis' taste and the acquisition of the art treasures which set him apart from his family and his society.

Certain places, which one must discuss mainly in terms of their larger components: country, region, and city, appear most frequently in Edith Wharton's fiction. Although she did not always heed Henry James' opinion that she "...must be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a back-yard in New York",⁹ more of her stories and *nouvelles* are set there than anywhere else. The milieu of metropolitan New York, the city or the immediate suburbs, dominates thirty-five of the ninety-six shorter works, as well as the novels *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, and to a lesser extent *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. The largest number of stories set in New York appeared in *The Descent of Man* and *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, perhaps because the Whartons spent a number of winters there up to 1907.¹⁰ Mrs. Wharton stated that she used New York because fate had put

⁹Henry James, Letter to Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, August 20, 1902, *The Letters of Henry James*, I, 396.

¹⁰Mrs. Wharton explains her various homes in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*. She spent her childhood and youth in New York, Europe, especially France and Italy, and Newport, R. I., where she lived immediately after her marriage in 1885. She and her husband eventually moved their summer residence to Lenox, Mass., and spent some winters in Europe, some in New York until 1907, from which time to the end of her life she lived in Paris about half the year. After World War I she spent the other months in Hyères on the Riviera.

her there and she felt she should use the material at hand. She was convinced the value of a subjects depends mainly on what the author sees in it, and her problem was to make use of the fashionable New York available to her.¹¹

The stories which share the New York milieu do so for several interrelated though different reasons. In a number of cases Mrs. Wharton is interested in the pressure of contemporary, fashionable New York society on her characters. In "A Cup of Cold Water" the desire for money with which to court a young lady of position drives a weak man to embezzlement. This might happen anywhere, but Mrs. Wharton is convinced of its likelihood in New York. New York and, again, its fashionable society are the attractions to which both father, as an observer, and son, as a participant, are drawn in "His Father's Son." Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps" must cope with New York's ostracism, and the old antagonists in "After Holbein" are obsessed in different ways with the observances and tribal customs peculiar to the city.

A larger number of stories could theoretically take place somewhere else, but in them Mrs. Wharton, doing just what James approves, uses her familiar birthplace and the details of its life and geography for background material. The unscrupulous political boss in "The Portrait" could operate anywhere. The museum curator in "The Rembrandt" might be affiliated with an institution other than what must be The Metropolitan. The dramas of the wife and her three husbands in "The Other Two", of the author and her ecclesiastical uncle in "Expiation", of the modern marital theorists in "The Reckoning", or the selfish Thursdale, "The Dilettante", could also have been played in other cities. The newspapermen of "The Quicksand", the would-be academicians of "In Trust", the artists of "The Pot-Boiler", or the murderer of "The Bolted Door" could have lived elsewhere, and their stories would have been only slightly different; still the New York details in these

¹¹Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, p. 206.

tales are usually relevant. The fact that he seems so respectable by New York standards makes Hubert Granice's confession of murder in "The Bolted Door" incredible to his friends; the changes in the city's buildings destroy the evidence against him, and his failure in the theater, centered in New York, prompts him to confess in order to hasten his death. The scientist who lives in New York and teaches at Columbia University has a large academic audience and contact with local society in "The Debt", while the writers of "Full Circle", the intellectuals, and pseudo-intellectuals of "The Legend", the young opportunist and the hypocritical philanthropist of "The Blond Beast", the refugee family in "Charm Incorporated", the Irish masseuse of "The Looking Glass", the lawyer of *Touchstone*, and the architect of *Sanctuary*, though they could all be plausibly placed in a few other large American cities, seem at home in the biggest one. "Pomegranate Seed"'s mystery, on the other hand, seems more eerie because it is so out of place in a New York lawyer's ordinary Manhattan house. Outside of Manhattan, the Ossining of "Expiation", the Irvington of "The Eyes", the Riverdale of "The Long Run", and the Montclair of "The Looking Glass" are suburbs hard to separate from the city in terms of their inhabitants' ways of life.

Not all of the stories mentioned deal with the rich, and in a number of cases Mrs. Wharton strongly emphasizes a different aspect of the city. Her first story, "Mrs. Manstey's View", shows the life of a widow of very limited means in a neighborhood of boarding houses, while the young man in "That Good May Come" is tempted to use gossip for gain because his dependents are in straightened circumstances in a New York flat. Edith Wharton touches on the poor and unambitious as well as on the aspiring New York life in "A Cup of Cold Water". The best, most thorough picture of the life of those who must struggle for the smallest pleasures in this city is "Bunner Sisters". Their shop and bedroom, the market, Herman Ramy's store, and Coney Island belong to

another world from that of, for example, the University Club which Arthur Bernald visits in "The Legend".

Besides this third of Mrs. Wharton's works, there are another fifteen in which the New York milieu is one of a number or is the background from which the characters come. The distraught woman in "A Journey" is returning to the city. The narrator and Mrs. Amyot in "The Pelican" often meet there. At least one important character is a New Yorker in "The Muse's Tragedy", "Souls Belated", "A Coward", "The Verdict", "The Lady's Maid's Bell", "Miss Mary Pask", "The Confessional", and "The Temperate Zone". The characters in *Madame de Treymes*, *The Marne*, and "Her Son" are strongly marked by their New York heritage. Mrs. Frenway in "Atrophy" takes only a day's train trip from her New York home and its problems.

Four of Mrs. Wharton's contemporary stories have no definite setting, but perhaps they can be grouped most logically with the New York works. "The Valley of Childish Things and Other Emblems" is not a story, but its vignettes of modern life would most likely be based on what Edith Wharton knew about New York. Similarly the conventional life in "The Mission of Jane" and the drawing room dialogue of "Copy: A Dialogue" might also be placed there, while it hardly matters where the lady of "The Fulness of Life" starts on her journey to Elysium.

New Yorkers, especially those with money, often escape the city, particularly in summer. The life of the resort or country seat is part of that of many fashionable New Yorkers, so resort and rural settings in which the principals are usually visitors are also common.

Mrs. Wharton spent a number of years in Newport, but she did not like its "watering-place mundanities".¹² She did not use it very often in her writing for this reason and perhaps because her years there only slightly overlapped her writing career. The dialogue

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 90.

"The Twilight of the God" takes place there, as do the marital discord in "The Line of Least Resistance" and the sea cliff bench courtship in "The Introducers". The three stories appeared by 1905. A trip there is mentioned in "The Pot-Boiler", for Newport is a place to which popular artists follow wealthy clients.

Only a few of the other stories located in the country are set so specifically. "The Lady's Maid's Bell" rings mysteriously at a mansion on the Hudson an hour or two from New York, in Ichabod Crane land. The cold and isolation of a New Hampshire house, decorated inside with plants in mid winter, are apt for "The Triumph of Night", in which evil flourishes despite appearances. The unusual architecture of an old colonial house in the fictional New England Harpleton, between Salem and Newburyport, Massachusetts, makes it a good setting for "The Young Gentlemen," who must be hidden from the curious. The secretive New York woman in "Atrophy" makes her unsuccessful deathbed pilgrimage to a country home several hours away, probably in Dutchess County, New York, or nearby Connecticut, while Mrs. Wharton definitely locates "All Souls" in an isolated rural area of the latter state. "A Coward" takes place in Millbrook, a small community which may remind one of the real town of that name in Dutchess County, or which may, according to Brown, be Lenox, Massachusetts.¹³ Its main character is a local resident, a professional man, who associates with summer people like the narrator. "The Choice"'s unnamed locale, with its lake and summer clergy, is probably in the Lenox area.

The action in some stories dominated by another setting, usually New York, often moves briefly into or mentions one of the resort areas. Some of these are admittedly on the border of New York suburbia, but they have a country atmosphere or a lower cost of living. This is almost true of the Manhattan houses near Hell Gate in *Old New York*, for in the mid-nineteenth century they were out of

¹³Brown, *Bdith Wharton: Étude Critique*, p. 40.

town, while the Tarrytown of the same period was quite a distant place in which to economize. A similar place is mentioned in *The Touchstone*, though Glennard can commute from it, and in *Sanctuary*. The outskirts of Hoboken were quite countrified in the days of the "Bunner Sisters", as was the Port Chester of "The Legend", with its open fields. The home to which the happy couple in "The Moving Finger" retire is just an hour from the city, but well removed from it.

The murderer of "The Bolted Door", however, kills his relative at a country seat two hours fast drive from the metropolis. The Long Island of *The Marne* is the epitome of a resort, and Mrs. Lidcote spends her isolated weekend in Lenox. The poor artists of "The Pot-Boiler", on the other hand, go to Atlantic City. One more person escaping from urban life is Professor Linyard, who heads from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Maine in "The Descent of Man". The southern resort hotel of the last scene in "The Pelican" is unique in Edith Wharton,

Mrs. Wharton does not use these settings carelessly. An isolated country house is appropriate for a "ghostly tale," and Mrs. Carstyle, who complains about her quiet life in "A Coward", belongs in a town to which more fortunate people come for the summer. The characters in "The Descent of Man" and "Atrophy" are put on trains to think. The murderer is also less suspect if he visits and returns from a distant place. Port Chester provides solitude for a recuperative Pellerin in "The Legend". And when neither these reasons nor the need for economy dictate a country setting, one usually finds that a milieu like that in the Long Island scenes of *The Marne* and the Lenox ones of "Autres Temps" provides another background for gracious living.

New England is not primarily an area of resorts, however. Mrs. Wharton quite often portrays its academic communities; in several stories Cambridge, Massachusetts, is disguised, for no apparent reason, as Hillbridge or Kingsbridge. The professors in

“The Descent of Man” and “Permanent Wave” teach there, and the artist Keniston and his admirers, as well as the pseudo-cultured women of “Xingu” live in the same city. Wentworth in “The Pretext” may be another name for Cambridge, though one cannot be sure that Mrs. Wharton is again using the home of Harvard, which her brothers, her husband, and most of the young men she knew attended. The Kingsborough of “The Day of the Funeral” seems more rural than Cambridge, which it may still have been.

Among other New England locations, Boston itself is the scene of the family gathering in “Duration”, while the celebration of Martha Little’s centennial takes place in an outlying community named Frostingham more likely to take note of an old inhabitant. The town is probably Framingham, Massachusetts. “The Angel at the Grave”, which deals with a colleague of Emerson, must be set in a small town near Concord. The young authoress of “April Showers” also lives in the New England countryside some distance from Boston.

The early “Friends” is the only story dominantly set in a growing, but ugly commercial port like Bridgeport, Connecticut or Fall River, Massachusetts. The harsh mountainous area of western Massachusetts, which does not have the amenities of nearby Lenox, is known through *Ethan Frome’s* Starkfield, but only, in addition, through the novel *Summer* and the story “Bewitched.”

There is a New England background to a number of other stories which it does not dominate. Mrs. Amyot starts her career in Hillbridge and returns often to the Boston area in “The Pelican,” while Danyers in “The Muse’s Tragedy” and Glennard in *The Touchstone* reminisce about their Harvard days. Harvard is mentioned as an alma mater many times in Edith Wharton’s works. The expatriates of “The Lamp of Psyche” return to visit Boston, where, on Beacon Street, a young boy listens to the amusing tale of “A Venetian Night’s Entertainment”. The scientists of “The Debt” spend their summers at Wood’s Hole, Massachusetts. The fictional

frame of "The Confessional" brings one to a western New England factory town with an Italian immigrant community, and the father in "His Father's Son" owes his fortune to his suspender factory in ugly, industrial Wingfield, Connecticut. "Joy in the House" also takes place in a provincial industrial town, which is several hours from New York and which might be in New England, though Edith Wharton does not say so.

It is easy to dismiss writers who say Mrs. Wharton knew nothing but upper class New York. The critic of *The Boston Evening Transcript* supports her knowledge of New England as anything but superficial,¹⁴ and Q. D. Leavis, realizing that Mrs. Wharton gets down to the lowest levels of rustic, urban, and manufacturing life, on occasions, calls hers the first informed realism about New England.¹⁵ Edward Brown also approves her knowledge of the whole Northeast, though he then correctly goes on to say Chicago was more alien to her than Crete.¹⁶ In her novels she only leaves New York and New England for other areas of the United States in parts of *The Custom of the Country*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, and *The Gods Arrive*, but James, who was alive to read only the earliest of these, felt that she was in the desert when she ventured to Apex City.¹⁷ Frederick Hoffman also complained of her opinion that the Middle West was a cultural wasteland. He felt her consequent distortion of the area showed in the names she gave its towns.¹⁸ Nevertheless Mrs. Wharton, admittedly speaking of others, stated that the "great American novel must always be

¹⁴E. F. Edgett, "Edith Wharton Takes a Backward Glance", *The Boston Evening Transcript*, April 28, 1934, p. 1.

¹⁵Q. D. Leavis, "Henry James's Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton", *Scrutiny*, VII (December, 1938), 262, 272.

¹⁶Edward K. Brown, "Edith Wharton", *Études Anglaises*, II (1938), 23.

¹⁷James, Letter to Edith Wharton, December 4, 1912, *The Letters of Henry James*, II, 281.

¹⁸Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties*, pp. 332-3.

¹⁹Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel", *Yale Review*, XVI (July, 1927), 647.

about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually".¹⁹ Perhaps she said this wistfully, knowing her own limitation, perhaps resignedly, but in any case aside from these parts of three novels, she seems to have set only one American story completely outside New York and New England. "The Best Man" concerns the governor of Midsylvania, a mythical state, but one which still sounds Middle Atlantic rather than Middle Western. Despite her expatriation and her wise decision to deal only with the few parts of the United States she knew well, however, Mrs. Wharton was willing to explain her considerable patriotism to the French in "L'Amerique en Guerre," as she explained her feeling for their country to her own fellow citizens.

She did mention other parts of the United States. There is the one southern resort in "The Pelican." Mrs. Warland in "The Twilight of the God" carried on her courtship with Oberville in Washington, D. C., where he is still connected with the government; Hayley Delane recalls the Civil War in the capital, and the family in "The Last Asset" have lived there, too, though they came from the upstate New York which to Edith Wharton is more Middle West than East. Mrs. Keniston in "The Recovery" also comes from a limited western New York town to the cultural center of Hillbridge. Professor Hibbart in "Velvet Ear-Pads" teaches at an upstate university, while Professor Charles Durand teaches at a western one. Mrs. Donald Paul of "The Temperate Zone" is from St. Louis, and the couple in "A Journey" have been to Colorado for his health. Mrs. Wharton takes an epigrammatically critical glance at fashionable Chicago in "The Verdict", at western academic life in "The Pelican", and at the Mid West in general in "The Choice". Mrs. Hayley Delane of *The Spark* is the only character in Edith Wharton's shorter works who travels to neighboring Canada.

More than half of Mrs. Wharton's stories and *nowelles* have an American milieu. France, where Mrs. Wharton first established her home in 1907 and where she spent most of the remainder of her

life, logically claims the next largest number. France is the center of only one story written before this move, however, though the country is mentioned in several others, for Mrs. Wharton had travelled there since childhood. Paris, Mrs. Wharton's adopted city, which figures in *The Reef*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, and *The Gods Arrive*, is also her favorite French city in the other genres. The characters in "The Lamp of Psyche", "The Last Asset", "The Letters", and "Her Son" are American expatriates there, as is the female *metteur en scene* in the story of that title, who operates in the Nouveau Luxe Hotel Mrs. Wharton created for her rich Americans abroad.²⁰ People like the Belknaps in *The Marne* stay there regularly, and the Donald Pauls surprise the American critic by choosing that hotel, after she has lived in Paris for many years with her first husband. The tale of the collector in "The Daunt Diana" is told suitably by a group of his colleagues on the Left Bank. The war brings the young lady "Writing a War Story" to the city, as it brings Greer, one narrator of "Coming Home". *Madame de Treymes* is the only one of these stories in which the protagonist is French, a second main character is married to a French citizen, and the Parisian action is dependent on French mores.

Mrs. Wharton does not confine herself to the capital. She had her second home on the Riviera, and as *A Motor-Flight through France* and *Fighting France* show, she travelled extensively throughout the country. Two "ghostly tales", "Miss Mary Pask" and "Kerfol", are set in Brittany, though the former, while making use of local isolation and fog, concerns Americans. The young authoress of "Writing a War Story" also comes to Brittany to seek quiet. "Coming Home" shows the Vosges in wartime, and both this story and *The Marne* contain scenes at the front. Frivolous "Velvet Ear-Pads" belongs to the Riviera, like "The Verdict", and Mrs. Glenn

²⁰Brown, *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*, p. 257.

and her entourage go there twice in the course of "Her Son".

Almost half the action of "The Recovery" takes place in Paris, where the treasures of the Louvre show Keniston his artistic inferiority. The painter of "The Portrait" customarily lives in Paris, where Dick Peyton, of *Sanctuary*, studied architecture. Christine Ansley, as well, has gone to France with her artist lover in "Joy in the House". Charlie Durand is drawn there by the war; he must pass through France on his way from Belgium, and he returns with the Y.M.C.A. in 918. Historical France is represented by the Norman knight and page, who later becomes a Norman abbot, in "Dieu d'Amour".

Mrs. Wharton's French critic Régis Michaud states that she knew his country well.²¹ France is usually a background for the action in her stories, some of which, like "The Verdict", might be set elsewhere, but often when the characters are artists, when the war is a part of the milieu, or when Mrs. Wharton's interest is in social contrast, the French setting is essential.

Italy, the subject of Mrs. Wharton's second and third books of non-fiction, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, and *Italian Backgrounds*, and a country in which she travelled and studied before her French residence, appears next most often in her fiction. The Lombard family of Siena in "The House of the Dead Hand" are permanent residents, through their only non-artistic connection with Italy is Sybilla's love for the young Italian count. The Americans in "The Muse's Tragedy" and "Souls Belated" enjoy the lake country, Venice, and Bologna, just as John Kilvert visits Venice frivolously, crossing to it by ferry, in "A Glimpse". The ladies of "Roman Fever" are chaperoning their daughters on a traditional tour. Young Tony Bracknell came to Venice on an eighteenth century commercial venture in "A Venetian Night's Entertainment". These last two stories are the only Italian ones Mrs. Wharton wrote after 1908, for most of her wanderings in Italy preceded that year.

²¹Régis Michaud, *Panorama de la Littérature Américaine Contemporaine*, p. 151.

Italian characters are of major importance in only four of the ten stories with dominantly Italian milieus. "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" are both Italians, and their story ranges from the north, through Tuscany or Lombardy, where they meet, to Naples. The melodrama of "The Duchess at Prayer" takes place in a villa near Vicenza, though she is from Venice. "The Confessional" and "The Letter" focus on Milan because of its political importance, with Iseo in the latter and Modena in the former also very important. It is not surprising, in view of Mrs. Wharton's enthusiasm for Italy's heritage, that half of the Italian stories are historical, though all these except "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" have contemporary frames.

Other stories have Italian portions and references. Neave, the principal collector in "The Daunt Diana", begins and ends his career in Roman poverty, though he and his colleagues travel widely. The recuperating Severance and Kate Spain come to their understanding in the Italian lake country, while the egotist of "The Eyes" spends time idling in Rome and other parts of Italy, Lewis Raycie gets his artistic education in Italy; the exiled Mrs. Lidcote of "Autres Temps" finds a quiet life in Florence; diplomats like the narrator of "The Moving Finger" often pass through Rome, the post to which Mrs. Lidcote's son-in-law aspires. Italy is a cultural center, a country in which dramatic historical incidents are appropriate, a resort area, and a refuge for various kinds of cosmopolitan individuals.

Henry James, while applauding *Madame de Treymes'* appearance, advised Mrs. Wharton not to go in too much for French subjects, but to come to England, which, he writes, "...has far more fusability with *our* native and primary material..."²² She took his advice less often than one would suspect. The unfinished *The Buccaneers* is the only one of her novels which deals extensively

²²James, Letter to Edith Wharton, November 17, 1906, *The Letters of Henry James*, II, 57.

with the English and their relations with Americans, and only three short stories take place completely in England, where Mrs. Wharton quite frequently visited friends like James and Howard Sturgis, but where she never established her residence for longer than a few months at the beginning of World War I. All of these stories reflect the country house existence she must have seen most. "Afterward" and "Mr. Jones" make use of old English houses with traditional ghosts as well as, in the latter case, a traditional family. Charlie Durand continues to act as a refugee partly in order to see a contemporary aristocratic family at their country home.

England, to a lesser extent than France and Italy, is a place for Edith Wharton's characters to visit and mention. Mrs. St. Aubyn of *The Touchstone* spends the last part of her life there, while the action of "The Temperate Zone" begins in the dead English poet's former London home. The mother of the unfortunate "...Young Gentlemen" was a beautiful English girl, and the French-American couple of "The Last Asset" begin their courtship at a British houseparty. The youngest de Réchamp brother in "Coming Home" is smuggled safely to England during the war, while Neave first falls in love with "The Daunt Diana" in London. Mrs. Ransom, dreaming of the romance which has never been hers, is enthralled by the glimpses of tradition and nobility her association with English Guy Dawnish brings into her life. England, whether in ghostly house or middle-aged dream, very often represents tradition, but Mrs. Wharton, perhaps because of lack of familiarity with this country, does not make use of it before 1910.

New York, New England, France, Italy, and England, in their many variations, are Mrs. Wharton's five common settings. Only three stories are entirely set outside these areas. "The Seed of the Faith", written not long after her trip to Morocco during the war, is only echoed in the fragmentary "Desert's Edge", though the desert life, this time somewhere in the Middle East where the Crusaders have left castles, isolates the drama in "A Bottle of

Perrier". "Dieu d'Amour" portrays medieval Cyprus; Mrs. Wharton's interest in Mediterranean islands is reflected in her incomplete poem "Antiphonissa" about an imaginary Aegean Isle.

Mrs. Wharton adds other places to her stories for variety. She mentions a European tour in "The Rembrandt", in which she emphasizes the Belgian Professor Durand studies and lectures in at the outbreak of World War I. Dorrance goes to Vienna to consult a specialist in "Diagnosis". The young scientist in "The Debt" studies in Germany. Switzerland's hotel life figures in "Her Son" and "Confession", in both of which its benefits for tubercular convalescents are important. More peripherally, Harley, the new servant in "The Lady's Maid's Bell", comes from Ireland, and Agnes in "All Souls" from Scotland. There is a proud Spanish ancestress in "The Young Gentlemen".

More distant places also appear. Carstyle's crucial experience in "A Coward" came during an earthquake on Chios. The evil husband in "Mr. Jones", like his contemporary, Lord Byron, died in Greece. The Russian and Armenian refugees in "Velvet Ear-Pads" and "Charm Incorporated" speak briefly about their pre-Revolution homes. The princess' undesirable fiancé in "Dieu d'Amour" is the ruler of medieval Antioch. Lewis Raycie also tours the Middle East on his long trip. The narrator of "Miss Mary Pask" is resting from an engineering job in Egypt, while Paul Dorrance, after his trip to Vienna, vacations and flirts in Cairo.

Mrs. Wharton often mentions the Far East and Latin America to indicate the removal of characters from their usual settings. Nalda Craig considers a Central American exploration with her lover in "Permanent Wave", while Henly Warbeck, who must return from a protracted absence in "Duration", has been in Peru. George Faxon of "The Triumph of Night" recovers from his nervous breakdown in Malaya, where newspapers which show the villainies of his New Hampshire host reach him after a long delay. The distraught husband of "In Trust", who neither wishes to ignore

his dead friend's wishes for an art academy nor to curb the luxuries of the woman who has been wife to both of them, exiles himself to a Far Eastern island, probably in the Phillipines, where he works as an administrator and soon dies. The happy couple of "The Moving Finger" meet at diplomatic post in China, where she is visiting her brother. Andrew Culwin's young victim in "The Eyes" goes to Hong Kong, where he becomes an alcoholic without his family's knowledge. That the mother in "Autres Temps" was in Bangkok at the time of her daughter's divorce and remarriage proves how far she came without delay to be a help in what she thought would be a crisis. Mrs. Wharton must have known that an exotic name can add interest, but she usually has a reason for including one in a story.

Most of the places Mrs. Wharton deals with are the comfortable ones which she lived in and knew. More of her stories take place in the city than in the country, and although she proves her knowledge of poor rural and urban life, a comparatively small number of her characters live in a lower class milieu. She depicts no brothels, and, outside of *The Fruit of the Tree*, she only mentions factories in "His Father's Son", "Confessional" and "The Daunt Diana". One can either say she was intelligent to stay away from what she did not know well, or one can assert that this analysis of her settings partly opens her to the criticism often mentioned, that she limits herself to Society. In refutation, besides citing the stories which disprove this charge, one can repeat her own realization that, whatever its values, she must use her native material. Milieu alone, while contextually significant, does not prevent a piece of literature from having value.

Edith Wharton can also make use of background references based on places or objects without making the characters act in the places or on the objects. She may do this to vary the context, to augment the cultural richness of the story, or, if criticism shows this to be the case, to prove to the reader her familiarity with and

interest in these subjects. There can be references to history which add depth and illustrate tradition. Many of Mrs. Wharton's allusions fall into the category of social history. "Roman Fever" provides glimpses of several generations of American tourists in Rome; the young artist in "The Pot-Boiler" remarks that his grandfather was a copyist there. Mrs. Wharton brings up the earlier New York in small details in stories like "In Trust", the earlier Boston in "Duration" and "A Venetian Night's Entertainment", the Calvinist heritage of New England in "Bewitched". Viscount Peregrine's escapades in Greece are brought into "Mr. Jones" as historical facts which show his separation from his wife. The references to the Guelphs and the Ghibellines are not central to the hermit's problem in "The Hermit and the Wild Woman", but they place the story. Other historical tales, like those about the 1840's in Italy, also contain references to different dates and places, like the Modena of 1833. which figures in "The Letter."

Mrs. Wharton often mentions specific art works, The crisis in *False Dawn* is based on the distinctions between Guido Reni and Carlo Dolci, on the one hand, and Giotto and Piero della Francesca on the other. A Bernini statue seals the lover's tomb in "The Duchess at Prayer". A Leonardo is the subject of Dr. Lombard's obsession in "The House of the Dead Hand", though much of the other artistic cataloging here and in the unsuccessful "The Fulness of Life" indicates an unessential excess of enthusiasm. Celtic lore seems to make the presence of the supernatural or occult more plausible in "The Lady's Maid's Bell", "All Souls", and "The Looking Glass", while church lore of a period long past, that of Saint Hilarion the Abbot, plays a small part in "Dieu d'Amour". Blake Nevius accuses Mrs. Wharton of "reflecting a self-conscious attitude toward the arts...." in her earlier stories like "The Fulness of Life" and "The House of the Dead Hand", and of being "full of the small change of literary conversation" when, for example,

in "A Coward", Montaigne and Diderot are signs of culture. Nevius admits, however, that even in the early "The Pelican" she satirizes sham culture.²³ Mrs. Wharton continues to manage these matters and curb her enthusiasm more successfully with time.

Despite Mrs. Wharton's interest in art objects and historical facts, contemporaneity is dominant in her stories. Most of her stories take place in the years during which she was writing. Very often she complicates present time with memories, perhaps of an earlier generation, like those in "Roman Fever" and "Autres Temps", but only twelve of her ninety-six stories and *nouvelles* can be called historical. Mrs. Wharton uses the medieval period twice in evocative tales set in Italy and Cyprus in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Her early poem "May Marian: A Ballad" and the poetic fragment "Chriemhild of Burgundy", a romantic picture of a typical fair maid, show her enchantment with the period. Edith Wharton sets "Kerfol" in Brittany at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Two of the Italian stories are probably outgrowths of her work on *The Valley of Decision*. "A Venetian Night's Entertainment" also takes place during the late eighteenth century, and "The Duchess at Prayer" presents a gay young Venetian woman something like the wayward nun, Sister Mary, in the novel. The Duchess' lover is also reputed to have carried off a Venetian nun. Mrs. Wharton mentions her familiarity with many eighteenth century Italian memoirs ²⁴ in which she might have found this material. In "The Confessional" and "The Letter" she makes use of the revolutions through which Italy eventually gained freedom; her reading in this field may also have been part of her research for *The Valley of Decision*, for these revolutions were the outcome of the eighteenth century intrigues she depicted in the novel. In both stories the crisis is connected with the Five Days

²³Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, pp. 16-7.

²⁴Edith Wharton, "Maruice Hewlett's 'The Fool Errant'", *Bookman*, XXII (September, 1905), 66.

of Milan in March, 1848.²⁵

The rest of Mrs. Wharton's short historical works are the four volumes of *Old New York* and "Bunner Sisters". Perhaps because several of these are successful, like *The Age of Innocence*, it is hard to realize that these six, the fragmentary *The Buccaneers*, and the unpublished bits "Happy Isles", about Revolutionary New York, and "New York: 1840" were the only ones she placed in her early girlhood, the 1870's, or before. The brief references to New York traditions like family madeira in many other stories and the acclaim these few comparatively long works have received give the impression that she spends more time on this era.

Mrs. Wharton was also conscious of what smaller units of time can add to a tale. The New England winter makes *Ethan Frome* a harsher narrative, and adds sinister loneliness to "The Triumph of Night", in which night itself also contributes to this effect. The chill of a New York winter dusk hastens the death of the invalid husband in *New Year's Day*. Woburn's vigil and decision in "A Cup of Cold Water" also take a night to enact, and in the morning, at banking hours, he goes down town as usual to confess his embezzlement. The use of evening hours adds suspense to "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and the amusing "A Venetian Night's Entertainment". Occasionally Mrs. Wharton also emphasizes the meaning of a special date. Her favorite is mentioned in the subtitle of the poem "The First Year: All Souls' Day" as well as in the story "All Souls", New Year's Day gives an excuse for observant family gatherings in the *nouvelle* of that name. "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" naturally mark the passage of time by the festivals of the church.

The description and establishment of the physical and temporal context is not an end but a means. It should add to the meaning of the story; it must be appropriate. The setting can create atmosphere or mood because of the associations the time or place

²⁵Luigi Villari, "Italy: 1848-49", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XII, 802-3.

give rise to or because of their peculiar relationship to the action. The atmosphere, like the physical context, can be of many kinds: it can evoke medieval Italy, the New York of the 1870's or the mountain areas of Massachusetts. This atmosphere can have a definite function in the story or can be a quiet reinforcement. It can be used to create suspense in "ghostly tales". The atmosphere of the old English house in "Afterward", of the somber mansion on the Hudson in "The Lady's Maid's Bell", even of the tidy, modernized New England home in "All Souls" are essential. "Afterward" 's Dorsetshire house, which seems remote to its new inhabitants, is described as follows on an evening when Mary Boyne is wondering why her husband has acted worried lately:

The room itself might have been full of secrets. They seemed to be piling themselves up, as evening fell, like the layers and layers of velvet shadow dropping from the low ceiling, the rows of books, the smoke-blurred sculpture of the hearth.²⁶

Mrs. Wharton suggests the moral tone of the court of the Lusignan kings on Cyprus in "Dieu d'Amour" by her opening description of the ascent to their castle:

One crept up the giddy stairways cut in the cliffside, and through the passages of the vaulted stone, holding one's breath; for at that hour the place was evil. In the darker angles of the tunnel-like ascent, catamawfreys hung snot downward, nuzzling the dusk.²⁷

Historical allusions are combined with the old servant's description of the crypt in which the Duchess' lover is entombed:

"...in the crypt under the chapel there has stood, for more generations than man can count, a stone coffin containing a thigh-bone of the blessed Saint Blandian of Lyons, a relic offered, I've been told, by some great Duke of France to one of our own dukes when they fought the Turk together; and the object, ever since, of particular veneration in this illustrious family."²⁸

²⁶Edith Wharton, "Afterward", *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, p. 329.

²⁷Edith Wharton, "Dieu d'Amour", *Certain People*, p. 102.

²⁸Edith Wharton, "The Duchess at Prayer", *Crucial Instances*, p. 16.

The atmosphere of "A Bottle of Perrier" is yet more suggestive of sinister happenings, although the qualities of the desert which seem most suspect do not account for the crime in the story. In the old castle an

...ancient fig tree, enormous, exuberant, writhed over a white-washed well-head, sucking life from what appeared to be the only source of moisture within the walls. Beyond these, on every side, stretched away the mystery of the sands, all golden with promise, all livid with menace, as the sun alternatively touched or abandoned them.²⁹

The description of the smaller aspects of milieu, the interiors of of certain buildings in the places Mrs. Wharton writes about most, can be effective for showing traits of character, economic circumstances, and limitations of taste. From such description one learns a lot about the Bunner sisters:

The rest of the room remained in a greenish shadow which discreetly veiled the outline of an old-fashioned mahogany bedstead surmounted by a chromo of a young lady in a night-gown who clung with eloquently-rolling eyes to a crag described in illuminated letters as the Rock of Ages; and against the unshaded windows two rocking-chairs and a sewing-machine were silhouetted on the dusk.³⁰

Edmund Wilson states that the inventories of the contents of Edith Wharton's characters' homes, and one thinks at once of the pickle dish in *Ethan Frome* as the best known example, are often the agents of tragedy; instead of being adversely critical of Mrs. Wharton's creation of very detailed physical settings, he calls her the "poet of interior decoration".³¹

Mrs. Wharton's interest in and knowledge of the interiors, exteriors, cities, and countrysides of a number of nations in several

²⁹Edith Wharton, "A Bottle of Perrier," *Certain People*, p. 21.

³⁰Edith Wharton, "Bunner Sisters", *Xingu*, p. 312.

³¹Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", *The Wound and the Bow*, pp. 200-1.

centuries can occasionally lead her astray when she becomes interested in more milieu than is functional in the story. Selection here, as in all aspects of her writing, was a first principle of hers.³² When she exercises it well, as she usually does, she makes the physical and temporal milieu of her stories and *nouvelles* impossible to separate from and constructively contributory to their structures and meanings.

³²Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, p. 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CONSULTED

- BROWN, EDWARD K. "Edith Wharton". *Études Anglaises*, II (1938) 16-26.
 _____ . *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*. Paris: E. Droz, 1935.
- EDGETT, E. F. "Edith Wharton Takes a a Backward Glance". *The Boston Evening Transcript*. April 28, 1934. P. 1.
- HOFFMAN, FREDERICK J. *The Twenties*. New York: The Viking Press, 1955. Pp. 332-3.
- JAMES, HENRY. *The Letters of Henry James* Ed. Percy Lubbock. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1920.
- LEAVIS, Q. D. "Henry James's Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton". *Scrutiny*, VII (December, 1938), 261-276.
- MICHAUD, RÉGIS. *Panorama de la Littérature Américaine Contemporaine*. Paris: Kra [c1926]. Pp. 148-151.
- NEVIUS, BLAKE. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1953.
- VILLARI, LUIGI. "Italy: 1848-49". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 14th ed. London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Co., Ltd., [c1929]. Vol. XII, pp. 802-3.
- WHARTON EDITH. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: The Modern Library [c1948].
 _____ . "L'Amérique en Guerre". *Revue Hebdomadaire*, XXVII (March 2, 1918), 5-28.
 _____ . "Antiphonissa". MS. Yale University Library. 13 pp.
 _____ . "April Showers". *Youth's Companion*, LXXIV (January 18, 1900), 25-6.
 _____ . *A Backward Glance*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1934.

- _____ . *The Buccaneers*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1938.
- _____ . *Certain People*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1930.
- _____ . *The Children*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1928.
- _____ . "Chriemhild of Burgundy". *Verses*. Newport: C. E. Hammett, Jr., 1878.
- _____ . *Crucial Instances*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.
- _____ . *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913.
- _____ . and CODMAN, OGDEN, JR. *The Decoration of Houses*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.
- WHARTON, EDITH. *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1904.
- _____ . "Desert's Edge". MS. Yale University Library. 5 pp.
- _____ . *Ethan Frome*. New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Charles Scribner's Sons, [c1939].
- _____ . *Fighting France*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915
- _____ . "The First Year: All Souls' Day". *Twelve Poems*. London: The Medici Society, 1926.
- _____ . *French Ways and Their Meaning*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1927.
- _____ . "Friends". *Youth's Companion*, LXXIV (August 23; 30, 1900), 405-6; 417-8.
- _____ . *The Fruit of the Tree*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.
- _____ . "The Fulness of Life". *Scribner's Magazine*, XIV (December, 1893), 699-704.
- _____ . *Ghosts*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1937.

- _____ . *The Glimpses of the Moon*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1922.
- _____ . *The Gods Arrive*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1932.
- _____ . "The Great American Novel". *Yale Review*, XVI (July, 1927), 646-56.
- _____ . *The Greater Inclination. The Touchstone*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.
- _____ . "Happy Isles". MS. Yale University Library. 38. pp.
- _____ . "Henry James in His Letters". *Quarterly Review*, CCXXXIV (July, 1920), 188-202.
- _____ . *Here and Beyond*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1926.
- _____ . *The Hermit and the Wild Woman, and Other Stories*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.
- _____ . *The House of Mirth*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906.
- _____ . "The House of the Dead Hand". *The Atlantic*, XCIV (August, 1904), 145-160.
- _____ . *Hudson River Bracketed*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1929.
- _____ . *Human Nature*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1933.
- _____ . *In Morocco*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.
- _____ . "The Introducers". *Ainslee's*, XVI (December, 1905; January, 1906), 139-48; 61-7.
- _____ . *Italian Backgrounds*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
- _____ . *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.: New York The Century Co., 1950.
- _____ . "The Lamp of Psyche". *Scribner's Magazine*, XVIII (October, 1895), 418-28.

- _____ . "The Line of Least Resistance". *Lippincott's Magazine*, LXVI (October, 1900), 559-70.
- _____ . *Madame de Treymes*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.
- _____ . *The Marne*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918.
- _____ . "Maurice Hewlett's 'The Fool Errant'". *Bookman*, XXII (September, 1905), 64-7.
- _____ . "May Marian: A Ballad". *Verses*. Newport: C. E. Hammett, Jr., 1878.
- _____ . "Les Metteurs en Scène". *Revue des Deux Mondes*, XLVII (October, 1908), 692-798.
- _____ . "Mrs. Manstey's View". *Scribner's Magazine*, X (July, 1891), 117-22.
- _____ . *The Mother's Recompense*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1925.
- _____ . *A Motor-Flight through France*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909.
- _____ . "New York: 1840". MS. Yale University Library.
- _____ . *Old New York: False Dawn (The 'Forties)*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1924.
- _____ . *Old New York: New Year's Day (The 'Seventies)*. Old New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1924.
- _____ . *Old New York: The Old Maid (The 'Fifties)*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Publishers [c1924].
- _____ . *Old New York: The Spark (The 'Sixties)*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1924;
- _____ . *The Reef*. New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1912.
- _____ . *Sanctuary*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.

- _____ . *A Son at the Front*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923.
- _____ . *Summer*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1917.
- _____ . *Tales of Men and Ghosts*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910.
- _____ . "That Good May Come". *Scribner's Magazine*, XV (May), 1894, 629-42.
- _____ . *Twilight Sleep*. [New York]: Grosset and Dunlap, Publishers, [c1927].
- _____ . "The Valley of Childish Things and Other Emblems". *Century*, LII (July, 1896), 467-9.
- _____ . *The Valley of Decision*. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.
- _____ . *The World Over*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Ltd., 1936.
- _____ . "Writing a War Story". *The Woman's Home Companion*, XLVI (September, 1919), 17-19.
- _____ . *The Writing of Fiction*. New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- _____ . *Xingu and Other Stories*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.