

# THE NATURE AND RESULTS OF CONFLICT IN EDITH WHARTON'S SHORT STORIES AND NOUVELLES

by Joan Voss Greenwood

In analyzing the conflicts for which the characters in Edith Wharton's short stories and *nouvelles* provide raw material, one is tempted to divide the tales neatly into those in which the conflict takes place within an individual, the basic unit in a struggle, those in which two or more individuals are involved, and those in which the individual battles society. Edmund Wilson emphasizes the last category, stating that the catastrophes in Mrs. Wharton's stories almost invariably result from the tensions between an individual, the victim of a group or a person hungry for experience, and society.<sup>1</sup> His generalization is often valid; in "Mrs. Manstey's View," for example, the hostile forces of the world outside her window seem to conspire against her, and in *Madame de Treymes* the traditions of French society offer Fanny de malrive the choice of giving up the man she loves or losing her son. But there are stories one can view another way. One can say that "Atrophy" is a tale of conflict between two individuals, the mistress who wishes to see her sick lover, and the sister who does not want Mrs. Frenway in her home. "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" definitely shows an inner conflict. A man living in isolation must fight his prejudices against the behavior of a woman he knows to be saintly. All these examples, like most of Edith Wharton's other works, have more complexity than one glance indicates. In "Atrophy" the mistress' social position is made more tenuous and difficult by her

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", *The Wound and the Bow*, p. 198.

fear of the social reprisal which would follow discussion of her visit to her lover. In her desire to keep up the facade of respectability and to keep her children with her after going to the man she loves, she must recognize society as a potential enemy. Even the hermit, whose conflict seems to be within himself, is the vessel for prejudices of his society. He does not originate the idea that it is wrong for a religious person to bathe. The battle within an individual or between two people does not take place in a vacuum.

The reason what appears to be a fight between persons often has a whole society behind it is that one of the persons can epitomize the group in a struggle,<sup>2</sup> without thereby softening the conflict. In Mrs. Manstey's case the force she is fighting is the neighboring landlady who has decided to increase the size of her building so that it blocks Mrs. Manstey's view, which is made up of many yards owned by many people. For Fanny de Malrive the inimical society is represented by a dignified mother-in-law and an imperfect sister-in-law. But their victory is not clear cut; in the inner turmoil which accompanies the outward disagreement Fanny determines to give her child as much of the life she approves as she can within his father's family.

Often it is harder to recognize the existence of conflict because society or its exponents can be mute, unaware antagonists, factors which make up part of the individual's fate, which are in conflict with him just because he must live in relationship to them. Even in *Madame de Treymes* it takes Durham a long while to discover what he faces in the de Malrive family. There is less obvious struggle in "The Angel at the Grave", the quietest of stories about a woman who spends her life tending the old home and studying the works of a writer whose fame fades uneventfully with her youth, after she decides not to leave with the young man who proposes to her. The conflict within Paulina Anson, which exists at least at

---

<sup>2</sup> Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, p. 38.

the time of her decision not to marry, is probably won by a subtle combination of her idolization of the dead man, her sense of family obligation, and her awareness of the atmosphere of the town enshrining Orestes Anson.

Studying a story like this, one can understand why Edmund Wilson feels Mrs. Wharton is haunted by the myth of the Eumenides and has "a general sense of inexorable doom for human beings".<sup>3</sup> His sonorous terms sound ridiculous applied to anything as calm as a lengthy New England spinsterhood, but there is the kind of truth in them which prompts Larry Rubin to call Mrs. Wharton a part-time naturalist. He is careful not to fail to see the importance of free will to her characters,<sup>4</sup> for Miss Anson can marry the young man, Fanny can leave her son to the de Malrives, Charlotte Lovell can give up Tina to assure herself of a traditional marriage, but Rubin also thinks that the "molding and determining forces of environment and heredity, the protagonist trapped and crushed by society, an indifferent, apparently amoral universe, and a host of specific details..." are strains of naturalism sometimes evident in her work.<sup>5</sup> It is not necessary to exaggerate the case for naturalism to recognize that any conflict of the individual with his society, of a child with his parent, like that of Lewis Raycie with his father, involves forces of environment and heredity which Mrs. Wharton does not ignore.

Not all her stories must be considered conflicts, for Mrs. Wharton is often chiefly interested in the revelation of a character, a situation, or a group of facts, for example, in a frivolous story like "The Velvet Ear-Pads", in which a long string of coincidences exhibit several humorous people, their relationships and their motives. Revelation, amusing or serious, however, raises the problem of method and the problem of who is to be enlightened: one character, a group

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Rubin, "Aspects of Naturalism in Four Novels by Edith Wharton", *Twentieth Century Literature*, II, No. 4 (January, 1957), 189-92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

of them, the narrator alone, the reader, or some combination of these people. Characters like Anson Warley in "After Holbein" and Thursdale in "The Dilettante" are never aware of all the facts about themselves which Edith Wharton makes plain to others, but after the reader of "The Eyes" quickly sees the nature of the man who is exposing himself and the narrator then realizes that Culwin has been plagued by his own evils, the man himself finally comes to this understanding as he looks in the mirror and "he and the image in the glass...[confront] each other with a glare of slowly gathering hate."<sup>6</sup> In "Joy in the House" the revelation of the depths of Devons Ansley's character comes suddenly and simultaneously to his wife and the reader, but Mrs. Wharton does not discuss the extent of his self-knowledge. On the other hand Keniston's understanding of his inadequacy in "The Recovery" comes to him with a shock which the reader, knowing he has been lionized in his city, and even his wife, who has begun to doubt this adulation, do not share in full. To achieve a different effect, Mrs. Wharton can complicate a character's life by withholding information from him. Mrs. Paul Dorrance in "Diagnosis" keeps secret the fact that the fatal diagnosis her husband sees is not his, and though he learns later that he is not doomed, he does not learn until after her death that the diagnosis was never meant to be applied to him. Mrs. Wharton can also emphasize the moment of revelation and realization itself, the moment, for example, when Christine Ansley, who does not fight with her husband, understands the extent of the evil within him.

Mundane conflict and the revelation of facts seem to have nothing to do with "ghost stories", which deal with the supernatural. There is no evidence, however, that Mrs. Wharton, while she is aware of the entertainment value of the tale involving or seeming to involve another world, has any belief in traditional ghosts or visitations. Her technical discussion of the special prob-

---

<sup>6</sup> Edith Wharton, "The Eyes", *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, p. 274.

lems these tales pose indicates if anything a rationalistic approach. In *The Writing of Fiction* Mrs. Wharton stresses the technical necessities of being artful, of giving the reader a feeling of security, and of mixing horror into the tale very economically.<sup>7</sup> She feels the writer can play on people's paradoxical emotional belief in ghosts, though the rational one no longer exists.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the ghost stories, moreover, do not differ basically from Mrs. Wharton's other works. The technical problems in them are often superficial, while conflict or significant revelation is central. Edith Wharton's ghosts, like those of Henry James which she admired,<sup>9</sup> are usually projections of a disturbed mind or visitations issuing from an emotional battle. As Robert Kelly writes about James' ghostly tales,

All that is requisite is a situation in which a large number of exact coincidences lead to the seeming probability of a supernatural explanation without, however, creating the actual necessity of one.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Wharton is rarely explicit about her haunts, but in tales in which only the supernatural explanation seems possible, one has the feeling that something is wrong with the story, no matter how entertaining its trappings.

"The Eyes"' ghost obviously personifies Culwin's evil, as the apparition behind John Lavington in "The Triumph of Night" represents his. A new observer like George Faxon who thinks little about himself can perceive the man's nature more easily than his usual associates, especially since Faxon, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, is susceptible to delusion of this kind yet capable of understanding the human fact which produces it, the hidden conflict between the greedy uncle and his nephew. In "Afterward",

---

<sup>7</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, pp. 37-9.

<sup>8</sup> Edith Wharton, *Ghosts*, pp. vii, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, pp. 37, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kelly, "The Ambiguity of Experience: A Study of Henry James' Treatment of the Supernatural", p. 45.

too, Mrs. Wharton deals with "moral issues through the symbolism of the supernatural."<sup>11</sup> An apparition of the man he has harmed might appear to Ned Boyne in any circumstances, but living in a reputedly haunted house also puts his wife Mary in a receptive enough mood to "see" the ghost whom they have been warned about when her husband draws her attention to it. Knowing nothing of her husband's guilt, she can only think it a house ghost until the end of the tale. Mrs. Clayburn, in "All Souls", alone and feverish, waited on by Celtic servants on Hallowe'en, after she has seen a strange woman on the road, is also likely to imagine the day of horror she thinks she lives through but which no one else can verify because of an incredible series of coincidences involving her doctor. In "Bewitched" Saul Rutledge's admission that he is being visited by his dead sweetheart is his excuse for carrying on an affair with her younger sister, and the exorcising of the spirit takes the form of murder subtly prompted by Mrs. Rutledge, who shows great smugness at the funeral, after the girl has supposedly died of natural causes. Mary Pask capitalizes on a gloomy Breton atmosphere to try to capture a man who has been ill and thinks that perhaps he is in a state to be deluded.

But explanation is not always so simple, One can understand that Kenneth Ashby in "Pomegranate Seed" is being pulled apart by his love for his second wife and his sense of duty to the memory of his first, but it is harder to decide who, if not the guilt-driven man himself, writes the letters in the dead woman's handwriting which come periodically after Ashby's remarriage, letters from which he would like to escape but because of which he disappears, as his wife and mother conclude, permanently. These normal women both see the letters. Only one person, modern, sensible Lady Jane, sees the dominating Mr. Jones. After living in another old house with a mystery, she might well imagine him and his dusty foot-

---

<sup>11</sup> Robert Morss Lovett, *Edith Wharton*, p. 13.

prints, which her friend Stramer sees, too, but, there is also no explanation for the bruises on the dead housekeeper's neck after Lady Jane has disobeyed Mr. Jones or for the moving of the family papers. That the housekeeper, possessed by fear of a strange new mistress' disturbing the order of the past she has cared for so long, does all these things up to the time of her death is not completely plausible. Then there are the ghostly dogs in "Kerfol" who appear to a modern visitor before he hears their history. This tale, more mysterious than those which combine modern house fixtures and modern obsessions, has still the one factor of human conflict in common with the rest: the struggle between Anne and her husband is different from but not less credible than that within the sick woman trying to overcome her irrational fears in "All Souls" or within the guilty husband of "Afterward". The forces within people and societies which cause difficulties and complications are at work in Mrs. Wharton's stories of the supernatural just as in the rest of her tales and *nouvelles*.

Blake Nevius, in stating that one of Edith Wharton's two main themes is the mistreatment of a larger nature at the hands of a smaller one,<sup>12</sup> or the use of one person by another, mentions an act involving egotism, one of the qualities which most often creates conflict. Though ego can be good or bad, taking different forms in different people, it is easiest to look first at egos which have bad effects on someone or something. At the mildest level Mrs. Ransom's imaginings in "The Pretext" lead to egotistical dreams in which she forgets her husband, like Nalda Craig in "Permanent Wave", who almost elopes. The would be rescuers in "The Refugees", who are selfishly looking for excitement, too, compete for unfortunate people to busy themselves with and talk about. The new widow in "A Journey" also thinks first of herself.

Egotism can create more lasting and serious results. Merrick

---

<sup>12</sup> Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, pp. 9-10.

in "The Long Run" poses as a noble gentleman who will not let a woman lose her reputation for his sake; he is actually catering to his own ego, which fears conventional disapproval and costs him happiness as "The Dilettante" is fear of commitment costs Mrs. Vervain hers. The charming Corbett of "The Lamp of Psyche" betrays his self-centeredness by letting it be known he is sacrificing himself to visit Boston for his wife's sake; his behavior is a clue to the greater egotism which kept him out of the Civil War. Vincent Deering also has a much smaller nature than his wife, who accepts his marrying her as his means of support in "The Letters" and ironically decides she enjoys being used more than she would enjoy being neglected.

Mrs. Wharton's more sinister egotists include Andrew Culwin, Ambrose Trenham of "The Day of the Funeral", and the perverted Dr. Lombard in "The House of the Dead Hand". Less eerie but almost as evil in his implacability is Mr. Halston Raycie, whose dynasty fails to materialize in *False Dawn*. "Joy in the House" exhibits several destructive kinds of egotism at work: that of the irresponsible artist who lets himself run off from his family with any woman who fancies him, that of Christine, who can leave her own family to follow him, and then, for the sake of her own security, desert him when he needs her, and that of her calm husband, who, if all is tidy in his small world, does not care about the suffering of others. His spirit, narrowest of the three, wreaks the final havoc.

There are more subtle types of egotism which shade characters rather than shape issues. Lewis Raycie, gentle art lover that he is, for example, is more self-willed than his young wife, while Delia Ralston in *The Old Maid* notes that her husband and his young cousin rarely give up anything they want. The Kouradjines of "Charm Incorporated" are all egotistical in some way; even Nadeja takes things of her husband Jim's over when she marries him.

Hypocrisy often accompanies egotism, though the motives behind



it are not always as obviously evil as those of the man in "Les Metteurs en Scène" who uses the co-worker who loves him and the young girl he is introducing. Because of the unspoken nature of the lovers' relationship in "Atrophy" the battling women feel they must be hypocritical, but Merrick probably does not realise the extent of his hypocrisy when he tells Mrs. Trant he will not let her come to live with him. Hypocrisy takes many forms in "The Blond Beast". That of the young secretary looking for his financial chance is most apparent, that of the manipulator trying to appear philanthropist is almost as patent, but one must judge in a different way the hypocrisy of the young son who continues his mission activities to avoid hurting the father he thinks virtuous. The same kind of hypocrisy prompts the artist to prostitute himself, despite abuse, in "The Pot-Boiler".

Those with uncurbed egos often develop obsessions, some with results as unfortunate as Dr. Lombard's deification of Leonardo or Gosling's determination to go to an English exhibition at Wembley in "A Bottle of Perrier". The gentleman murderer of "The Bolted Door" is obsessed by several things: the desire for money, hatred of a stingy old relative who has it (and who is himself incredibly obsessed by melons), concealment of his crime, determination to succeed in the theater, and finally the compulsion to confess and be punished. Harmless obsessions are also egotistical. The art collector who spends most of his life gathering together and housing a collection, but who decides that he has not acquired it with enough difficulty and must sell it so that he can learn the pain of working for each piece, is certainly obsessed with method. He does not think about making his art available to the public or simply enjoying it himself.

Egotism can also be accompanied by delusion, by visions like Andrew Culwin sees when his conscience bothers him, by wishful thinking like Margaret Ransom's, by belief like Mrs. Clingsland's in what she is told "from beyond the grave". In "The Pelican"

Mrs. Amyot, only partly conscious of her limitations, ambitious, pleased with public life, is deluded for years in thinking she must still go on lecturing to support her grown son. When similarly combined with personal inadequacy egotism can also result in mistakes like that of the noble rescuer of "The Refugees".

In a number of cases in which the problems arising from ego are sufficiently important, Mrs. Wharton makes the most noticeable egotist the narrator or point of view character, so that one sees him through himself. Andrew Culwin in the main part of "The Eyes", Geoffrey Betton, whose limits of awareness complicate "Full Circle", Paul Dorrance in "The Diagnosis", "The Dilettante", and the male "metteur en scène", as well as the less harmful Nalda Craig, have this function.

The quality opposite to destructive egotism may range from simple kindness or unwillingness to use others for personal ends to great self-sacrifice. The art curator in "The Rembrandt" and Lillo in "The Portrait", at the risk of their own reputations, are kind one to an old lady and one to a young one. Jim, in "Charm Incorporated", is selfless about taking care of his wife's family and suiting his way of life to their very different one. Paulina Anson in a different sense quietly gives up her life to her family. The discarded father in "The Last Asset" gives up his pride and principle to make his daughter's marriage possible, thus letting himself be used by his demanding wife. In one of Mrs. Wharton's most sentimental tales, "Friends", the former teacher leaves her job to her less able friend and plans to move away rather than to upset her hopes. Lizzie in "The Letters" also sacrifices herself, though at the time she only thinks she is getting what she wants. Ned Stanwell, in "The Pot-Boiler", is most selfless when he gives up his artistic integrity to court the financial success which enables him to help the girl he loves.

Among Mrs. Wharton's more striking examples the compulsive martyrdom in "The Seed of the Faith" is extreme self-sacrifice at

first glance, but it is caused by the need for self-justification. The life-long sacrifice of the mother in *Sanctuary* is incredible, and those of Waldo Cranch to his retarded dwarfed children in "The Young Gentlemen" and Lizzie Hazeldean to the necessity of keeping ends together in *New Year's Day* may also seem so. The act of the young French girl in "Coming Home" is more dramatic, but more in keeping with a war time story.

These people who show some degree of selflessness, from kindness to dramatic sacrifice, are often, though not always, victims, sometimes unintentionally, in a conflict with an ego belonging to a smaller nature. Ann Eliza Bunner, apparently the stronger of the two sisters, sacrifices what she sees to be her only chance for marriage to keep her sister's dream from being destroyed and gives this sister her life savings as well. Evelina's is the smaller nature, humble, but given to illusions and vanities; both women, however, are victims of the smallest nature among their acquaintance, that of Herman Ramy. Evelina has no intention of sacrificing herself, but the results of her ignorant decision to marry Ramy are poverty, desertion, illness, and eventually death. Ann Eliza does not die; she is saved from the horror of marriage to Ramy. But she does learn that intentional sacrifice like hers is not always effective, that it does not necessarily secure the good for which it is undertaken. Ann Eliza loses, in fact, her quietly viable life as a small shop-keeper through her attempts to help her sister, and must go on struggling to find a livelihood. Mrs. Wharton does not concern herself with what happens to Ramy.

For other characters the rewards of self-effacement are also negligible or even tragic. Mrs. Glenn, in *Her Son*, gives everything to people whom she dislikes because she takes them for her child's beneficiaries. She does have the joy of thinking she has found her lost son, but she pays for it with years of misery. The imposters gain from her sacrifice, but no good is accomplished except that the dying young man repents of his part in fooling Mrs. Glenn.

There is no reward for the young artist who prostitutes himself in "The Pot-Boiler" either; the girl he wishes to marry would rather have an honest hack than someone of more talent who has been hypocritical even for good motives.

The results of selflessness are sometimes more difficult to evaluate. For Charlotte Lovell in *The Old Maid* there are a long spinsterhood and financial dependence on the cousin who loved the father of Charlotte's child. Charlotte must also face the fact that Delia has more of Tina's affection even before Delia's legal adoption establishes Tina's future. In terms of the child's happiness Charlotte's sacrifice is meaningful. In terms of what it does for Delia, the more fortunate cousin to begin with, it is ironic. In another historical piece, "The Letter", a woman's keeping a secret about the man she loves in vain can be justified as the heroism needed to free her country, though her decision deprives her of peace of mind about the man's motives in having done an apparently heinous thing. One can raise questions about the less dramatic sacrifices of Mr. Grew in "His Father's Son". Does he gain sufficient satisfaction for his own ego by participating vicariously in his son's New York success, and are the boy and his social aspirations worth the father's efforts?

Just as selflessness is not always effective, so the ego considered in its largest sense as the individual's awareness of himself is not always bad. An individual's consideration of his own opinion often results in conflict, but the form of egotism which prompts thought should not in every case be limited by another individual or by society. This ego can be a creative faculty; it can help a person act in accordance with an ideal in spite of opposition.

That courage may be one's personal ideal "A Coward" shows by enduring his daily life without complaint, though he lives in fear of failing in his aim, the strength of which he must test frequently. Political integrity gives another kind of courage to Governor Mornway in "The Best Man", as patriotic feeling for a foreign land

motivates Troy Belknap's heroism in *The Morne*.

Integrity, even courage, may have a part in the success or failure of the artist. The honest recognition of failure takes bravery in "The Recovery" and "The Verdict", as does the sacrifice of truth to kindness in "The Pot-Boiler" and "The Portrait". For the writers of "Copy: A Dialogue", as for the non-writer in *The Touchstone* the ability to understand what should not be commercialized is necessary.

Other ideals motivate Mrs. Wharton's characters to act as individuals. The mothers in *Sanctuary* and "The Quicksand" live to prevent heredity from overcoming morality. The scientist who inherits his benefactor's chair dedicates himself to the search for truth instead of to his teacher's theories. Yvonne Malo in "Coming Home" decides that saving her fiancé's family is more important than traditional female honor.

At times it is hard for the individual to govern his actions by what he knows are the best principles, as it can be hard to decide what they are. The hermit lapses in his treatment of the wild woman, for example, and Stephen Glennard puts aside his realization that selling Mrs. St. Aubyn's letters to him is wrong. The secretary in "The Blond Beast", on the other hand, determines to act on a bad principle until a better personal inclination overcomes his decision.

Often the will, despite its devotion to an ideal, is thwarted by outside forces like those which curb destructive impulses. In both cases the individual's ego is throttled by another person representing society, by the family, by the society itself, or perhaps by a different society. In some cases the results are good, but many times the best ideals, the most creative inclinations are set at naught by a dull insensitive group. Carl Van Doren writes that all the communities Mrs. Wharton studied put pressure on the individual impulse.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel, 1789-1939*, p. 277.

Society, therefore, has a collective ego, and like an egocentric person, makes victims of those who, for good or bad, struggle against it. Edith Wharton is concerned not only with the portrayal of the struggle, but with some evaluation of where the balance of power between the social and individual egos should lie, an evaluation which depends in each case on what motivates each ego. Here, according to Nevius, is Mrs. Wharton's second major theme: the attempt to define the limits of individual freedom safe for society.<sup>14</sup>

Mores, manners, conventions are the expressions of the ideals and also of the habits of a society. That one may have to look a long way back to find the bases for these conventions which the individuals within the society must live by demonstrates the society's power in perpetuating them. Van Doren states that Mrs. Wharton reproduces "in fiction the circumstances of a compact community in a way that illustrates the various oppressions which such communities put upon individual vagaries, whether viewed as sin, or ignorance, or folly, or merely as social impossibility."<sup>15</sup> One must then look to see what the role of convention is in individual lives and how and where it causes conflicts.

Ubiquitous respect for established convention is shown by its existence even below stairs. Servants not only follow the conventions of their employers for the sake of earning their salaries, but in "The Lady's Maid's Bell", for example, they also make a ritual out of taking their own tea regularly at six. Poorer societies, like that of Ethan Frome's Starkfield also have their conventions, and their places for observing them, like the parlor in the Frome household, but Mrs. Wharton of course emphasizes the host of complex observances in New York society and its international counterparts. There are the complicated appointments for afternoon tea in "The Other Two", the formal list of guests to be read out even at Mrs. Jasper's ghostly dinners in "After Holbein", the ritual of dressing

---

<sup>14</sup> Nevius, p. 10,

<sup>15</sup> Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists: 1900-1920*, p. 97.

like that which Anson Warley goes through for the last time in the same story. Examples are legion from morning to late evening, at every season of the year. The desire of outsiders for the knowledge of these many conventions which will give them entrée is what makes it possible for "The Introducers" to make a living.

Occasionally observation of the more important conventions might help the individual. In "The Reckoning" "advanced" theories on marriage lead to Julia Westall's being hurt when the husband whom she loves, but who has now found another interest, wishes to regain his freedom as he has a right to do according to the bargain wade at the time of their marriage. Mrs. Wharton does not try to prove that Julia's having had more traditional views would have saved her second marriage, or should have saved her first, in which she inflicted the pain, but a different attitude could have brought different results. Conventions advocating the permanence of matrimony do not create good matches or ensure happiness, but here they might have at least provoked more serious thought.

Though one must not forget the individual's responsibility for his actions, convention as Mrs. Wharton writes about it more often maims lives. Everyone who breaks its rules must pay.<sup>16</sup> Those who oppose convention continue to be hurt whether they conform or not. Mrs. Glenn gives up the child born out of wedlock and leads a proper life with its father after their marriage, but the memory of the child sacrificed for their respectable position mars their happiness, especially after their only other child is killed, and makes Mrs. Glenn an easy dupe. Halston Merrick endures a quieter punishment in realizing the loneliness of "The Long Run" after refusing the unconventional offer of the woman he loved. These people do avoid scandal, but in *New Year's Day*, society's correct assumption that Lizzie Hazeldean has been intimate with Henry Prest affects the rest of her life. Even if other ladies could believe in the

---

<sup>16</sup> Harry Hartwick, "Vanity Fair", *The Foreground of American Fiction*, p. 371.

goodness of Lizzie's motives, they would count for nothing before the fact of immorality. Convention still affects the thinking of its victims, moreover. Treeshy Kent, in *False Dawn*, endures poverty with Lewis Raycie because of his insistence on buying the art he thinks best, but she is a little shocked by the pictures and by the idea of a gentleman's showing them publicly in his home. Lewis Raycie's strong will helps him act as he knows best despite the consequences of disinheritance and ostracism, but Anson Warley's lacking will assures him of only superficial happiness within his society. The demands of society which constrict the lives of strong and weak seem even more oppressive to the newcomer like Lydia Tillotson of "Souls Belated", for whom "doing exactly the same thing every day at the same hour"<sup>17</sup> and living with a man who believes in this becomes unbearable.

Within the society the family reinforces convention as the powerful Parrett-Wesson clan damns Lizzie Hazelden. Such tribal agreement is often based on similarity of character as well as convention, Lydia Tillotson notes the unity of action and conventional principle in her mother-in-law and husband. Delia Ralston, in *The Old Maid*, emphasizes the stability of the Ralston family in comparison with her own Lovells and finds the similarities of the young Ralston men inescapable.

Social and tribal pressure not only affects personal lives and appearances but creates conflicts for the artist and writer, particularly when artistic ideals war with social dicta on art which have solidified into a kind of convention. Stanwell in "The Pot-Boiler" capitalises on his ability to ape the style of the reigning painter of matrons with fat strings of pearls, while the conventional acceptance of their work long shields the painters in "The Recovery" and "The Verdict" from the knowledges of their limitations.

In the lives of ordinary people convention frequently maims by keeping passion from coming to light and by thus protecting society

---

<sup>17</sup> Edith Wharton, "Souls Belated", *The Greater Inclination*, p. 87.



from the knowledge of sin and the contemplation of scandal, The passion, the value or justification of which is another question, is thereby destroyed, warped, or very quickly forced to become a memory. The Glenns' entire lives are affected by the fact that the acknowledgment of their premarital relations would bring disgrace, the fear of which also impels Charlotte Lovell to make herself look as little as possible like a participant in a brief love affair. Grace Ansley's love for Delphin Slade in "Roman Fever" remains a secret because the question of his breaking one engagement and making another does not arise in their society. The pregnant young lady's hurried marriage to another man, ignorant of the facts, successfully conceals them. New York society is not the only one which makes these exactions. The young duchess and her lover go to elaborate precautions in the seventeenth century Italy of "The Duchess at Prayer" to avoid making an empty marriage a public scandal, and the admirable nobleman in "The Confessional" upholds his unfaithful wife's honor for the sake of his family, even though in this case his feelings have been hurt by his having been supplanted by a younger man, an enemy of his country.

Sometimes conventions shift with time, but oftener their lasting power is stronger than the individual fighting against them suspects. They can change their outward forms and keep their restrictiveness. The young matron of "Atrophy" seems to lead a very modern life, playing cards, using makeup, drinking cocktails, but she finds these freedoms are trivia; the knowledge of her love affair would still create a public mess as well as private pain. The ostracized mother in "Autres Temps..." first thinks that because her daughter has been able to survive socially despite the transition, within a brief time, from one marriage to another, her own distant elopement will be viewed with the same tolerance. But Mrs. Lidcote finds that the relaxed rules of a later generation do not apply to the transgressor of former conventions. Julia Westall, moreover, cannot eradicate the conventional ideas within herself. In spite of

the theories she espouses when trying to free herself from an unhappy first marriage, she finds herself wondering, for example, at an unmarried girl's listening to her second husband's views on what amounts to free love. Julia stops to criticize herself for being an unthinking conformist.

A conventional society which tries to hide anything as untidy as illicit passion, anything which might disturb the everyday facade of life so pleasing to people like old Mrs. Tillotson, seeks to envelop in innocence those women raised within it who later become its most vocal advocates. The famous May Welland of *The Age of Innocence* illustrates this point most quickly, but she is not unique. Delia Ralston has been raised in the same way, as her reflections on her marriage and both her shock at and her jealousy of Charlotte Lovell's situation show. Kate's father and fiancé in *Sanctuary* try to keep her completely innocent, too. She finds out what she wants to know about Denis Peyton despite the fact that both their families think that she should not be aware of unpleasantness. Alexa Trent in *The Touchstone* is not quite so innocent as girls with more money, but she does not understand the rudimentary details of her limited income.

The apparent collusion of those representing convention in trying to maintain innocence is all a part of the attempt in a well ordered society to hide the abyss which lies beneath the smoothest surface of regular observances, the abyss of human evil which is often created by the individual ego convention seeks to control. Edmund Wilson states that Mrs. Wharton is always aware of the pit, even when she deals with the top strata of society, and that what he calls the Puritan in her insists on facing the ugly because not to face it is in a way the worst sin.<sup>18</sup> In *Sanctuary*, for example, the greed of one brother casting aside the other's undesirable widow and her child lies just beneath his protests that such matters do not concern his pure bride. In yet a worse way

---

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, p. 203.

Devons Ansley hides his cruel indifference to beath and suffering under his courteous treatment of the wife who has deserted him and returned in "Joy in the House."

In a foreign society different appearances may conceal different evils. That the pleasure loving Laurence Corbett enjoys a gay Parisian life but finds the moral and social atmosphere of Boston uncongenial seems trivial until one understands the sin of omission his gaiety hides in "The Lamp of Psyche". A much more striking revelation of what lies behind alien observances is *Madame de Treymes*. The tacit French tolerance of a discreet affair but not an open second marriage unrelated to the scandal of the first is heinous to John Durham. The American shrinks from the French tribal idea of perpetuating an illicit passion, if necessary to keep up traditional respectability, without worrying about abstract questions of right and wrong.

Society and its representative conventions, by molding, or misdirecting the individual, can waste his potential, can deny him experience, and can bring on frustration and failure. Edward Brown feels Mrs. Wharton believed Strether's remarks in Gloriani's garden to the effect that life should be lived, that one should not miss things;<sup>19</sup> therefore one can conclude that the waste of life saddens her. Certainly her "conception of society gains seriousness through the tragedy of waste",<sup>20</sup> both when she portrays it obviously and when it is hard to decide whether she is focussing directly on this problem.

She depicts people who have spent their lives doing very little of an active nature, like "The Coward", and people who think their lives more wasted than they need be, like Mrs. Ransom in "The Pretext", who might make more of her reality, and Mrs. Frenway, in "Atrophy", who might rise above her personal preoc-

---

<sup>19</sup> Edward K. Brown, "Edith Wharton", *Études Anglaises*, II, (1938), 19; Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 149-50.

<sup>20</sup> Nellie Elizabeth Monroe, "Moral Situation in Edith Wharton", *The Novel and Society*, p. 117.

cupations. Mrs. Wharton shows many kinds of potential thwarted in various ways. A wife and family seem to conspire against Ned Halidon's benefitting struggling artists in "In Trust". Society itself is responsible for the waste of Fanny de Malrive's life, just as it is basically to blame for Charlotte Lovell's excessive punishment and the intermittent sense of dissatisfaction which plagues Delia Ralston. Poverty, gullibility, and self-sacrifice waste the lives of the *Bunner Sisters*. Unlike them, Ethan Frome, also pressed by poverty, is aware of the likelihood of waste in his life,<sup>21</sup> but he does not know how to escape his marriage and his economic circumstances. In later years, after his suicide attempt has failed, one realizes that he understands what has happened to his potential for happiness and accomplishment.

In "The Dilettante" two lives are wasted: that of the man who has felt nothing and that of the woman he has used. The sadness of devotion unreturned and thus at least partly wasted is shared by Mrs. Anerton in "The Muse's Tragedy" and Mrs. St. Aubyn, the poet of *The Touchstone*. The excessive carefulness which wastes Halston Merrick's life has also kept the fifty year old bachelor of "A Glimpse" from daring to flaunt convention. Only the fear of death saves Paul Dorrance from similar waste; only a brief recognition at the end of her life keeps Paulina Anson from thinking her life has meant nothing, and only a centennial celebration in which she is triumphant after generations as a nonentity keeps this from being Martha Little's fate in "Duration", too. Though Mrs. Wharton does not stress the point, one wonders whether Charlie Durand's quiet life as a professor supporting his mother and sisters satisfies him in "The Refugees". The experience he represents for his English hostess, however, is far more dramatic a demonstration of the emptiness of her existence, an idle round of family formalities. Mrs. Wharton also seems to think of the sadness of an unrealized love when she treats the question of the writer's

---

<sup>21</sup> Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome* p. 131.

privacy in "Copy: A Dialogue". One can ask, too, if she did not mean to show Mrs. Feverel of "Expiation" as another partly frustrated writer. In extreme cases one can say it is the awareness of the tragedy of waste which drives Gosling to desperation and murder in "A Bottle of Perrier" and the ineffective missionary to martyrdom in "The Seed of the Faith".

A wasted life is often an isolated one in settings other than the desert. Ethan Frome endures spiritual isolation in painful proximity to the two women who burden him. The bachelors in "The Long Run" and "A Glimpse", after having failed to create permanent relationships with women they have loved, are isolated from all but polite dinner party talk and flirtation.

Aside from its frequent coincidence with waste, one must note that isolation may result from conflict with society or its conventions, inner conflict, or simply gaps in understanding. Almost grotesquely Kate Spain is set apart from others by the fact that she has publicly stood trial and been acquitted of murder in "Confession". The missionaries in "The Seed of the Faith", even when they wear the same clothes, differ from the Arabs in religion and culture and lack the knowledge to lessen the differences. Stephen Glennard is temporarily isolated from the wife he loves by his guilt. Against his will Ambrose Trenham's guilt in "The Day of the Funeral" also isolates him even from the woman who has been his mistress. Death's final separation of one Bunner sister from the other comes only after several partial separations caused by marriage, distance, and religious conversion.

The frequent bad results of conflict are the waste of human potential and the separation of people from one another. One realizes that a smaller nature often victimizes a larger, as society victimizes the individual. Perhaps the necessity of making this observation leads Blake Nevius to ask if Edith Wharton puts "a value on failure in a world she has come largely to despise",<sup>22</sup> if she lauds the unhappy ending. It does not seem so, even though

many of her worthiest characters must accept frustration. Mrs. Wharton points up no morals for her most unfortunate like Ethan Frome or Ann Eliza Bunner; she gives no indication that failure has been good for them. Only in a few limited cases, like that of "The Portrait" which is made to fail for kindness' sake, does any good come from failure. Mrs. Wharton is simply aware of the fact that the various social and personal imperfections take a toll of human life: she displays the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual in the interaction of the individual and his society or of individuals with different kinds of egos.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CONSULTED

- BROWN, EDWARD K. "Edith Wharton". *Etudes Anglaises*, II (1938), 16-26.
- 
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*. Paris: E. Droz, 1935.
- HARTWICK, HARRY. "Vanity Fair". *The Foreground of American Fiction*. New York: American Book Co., [c1934]. Pp. 369-388.
- JAMES, HENRY. *The Ambassadors*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, [c1948].
- KELLY, ROBERT. "The Ambiguity of Experience: A Study of Henry James' Treatment of the Supernatural". Unpublished thesis, Stanford University, 1949.
- LOVETT, ROBERT MORSS. *Edith Wharton*. New York: R. M. McBride and Co., 1925.
- MONROE, NELLIE ELIZABETH. "Moral Situation in Edith Wharton". *The Novel and Society*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 1941. Pp. 111-138.
- NEVIUS, BLAKE. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1953.
- RUBIN, LARRY. "Aspects of Naturalism in Four Novels by Edith Wharton". *Twentieth Century Literature*, II, No. 4 (January, 1957), 182-92.
- VAN DOREN, CARL. *The American Novel, 1789-1939*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940. Pp. 273-280.
- VAN DOREN, CARL. *Contemporary American Novelists: 1900-1920*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922. Pp: 95-104.
- WHARTON, EDITH. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: The Modern Library, [c1948].

- \_\_\_\_\_. "April Showers". *Youth's Companion*, LX-XIV (January 18, 1900), 25-6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Backward Glance*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1938.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Buccaneers*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Certain People*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1930.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Children*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1928.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Crucial Instances*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Descent of Man Other Stories*. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1904.
- WHARTON, EDITH. *Ethan Frome*. New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Charles Scribner's Sons, [c1939].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *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 Greater Inclination. The Touchstone*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *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.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Introducers". *Ainslee's*. XVI (December, 1905; January, 1906), 139-48; 61-7.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "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.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Les Metteurs en Scène*". *Revue des Deux Mondes*, XLVII (October, 1908), 692-708.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Mrs. Manstey's View". *Scribner's Magazine*, X (July. 1891), 117-22.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Mother's Recompense*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1925.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Old New York: False Dawn (The 'Forties)*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1924.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Old New York: New Year's Day (The 'Seventies)*. New York, London: D. Appleton and Co., 1924.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Old. New York: The Old Maid (The 'Fifties)*. New York, Grosset and Dunlap, Publishers, 1924.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *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, [1927].
- \_\_\_\_\_. "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.

WILSON, EDMUND. "Justice to Edith Wharton". *The Wound and the Bow*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1941. Pp. 195-213.

WINTERS, YVOR. *In Defense of Reason*. Denver . Univ. of Denver Press, [c1947].