

Style : The Final Medium in Edith Wharton's Short Stories and *Nouvelles*

By Joan Voss Greenwood

Structure is the foundation of a story, and tone can dominate it, but its final shape depends on its style. Mrs. Wharton is of course aware of the importance of hers and of the way it should be used: she writes that a "narrative should be clothed in a style so born of the subject that it varies with each subject . . ." ¹ One look at any of her manuscripts proves that she worked toward this aim throughout her career, for there are several copies of most of them, each one of which is revised, some so extensively that they are hard to read, like "After Holbein" 's early pages or the manuscript of "Afterward," which has been painstakingly pieced together. The large number of incomplete stories testifies not only to the fertility of Mrs. Wharton's imagination but also to her ruthless selection of material for publication.

Her early style, as one might expect, is generally more verbose than her later ones, on which practice and discipline have had their effects. One first recognizes verbosity in the stories Mrs. Wharton feels are her least successful. The extent to which she goes on about the young writer's very mediocre poem, so much like her own poem "Pomegranate Seed," for example, shows that in "That Good May Come" she has not overcome her inclination to write almost everything she can imagine about things of little significance. "The Fulness of Life" more aptly demonstrates her tendency to wordiness, both in the excessive description of the places its protagonist visited and in the extension of absurd

¹Edith Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," *The Spectator* (London), CXXI (November 3, 1928), suppl., 44-5.

similes. The story begins by leading the point of view character from life into death:

For hours she had lain in a kind of gentle torpor, not unlike that sweet lassitude which masters one in the hush of a midsummer noon, when the heat seems to have silenced the very birds and insects, and, lying sunk in the tasselled meadow-grasses, one looks up through a level roofing of maple-leaves, at the vast, shadowless and unsuggestive blue. Now and then, at ever-lengthening intervals, a flash of pain darted through her, like the ripple of sheet-lightning across such a midsummer sky; but it was too transitory to shake her stupor, that calm, delicious, bottomless stupor into which she felt herself sinking more and more deeply, without a disturbing impulse of resistance, an effort of reattachment to the vanishing edges of consciousness.²

There is no need here for "tasselled meadow-grasses" or other such irrelevant details; in fact, the whole paragraph is in poor taste because it makes light of the serious and painful nature of death. There is probably nothing worse in Mrs. Wharton's writings. The unnecessary descriptions, through Wyant's point of view, of the various tourist attractions he visits and becomes excited over before his actual introduction into the Lombard house in "The House of the Dead Hand" are wordy, but not nearly as disturbing. One recalls, too, that Henry James was unable to discipline his enthusiasm in describing Italy in his early stories like "Travelling Companions," "A Passionate Pilgrim," and "At Isella."

Very few critics notice the earliest uncollected stories at all, but Edward Brown seems to be expressing a consensus that her early collected stories have perhaps been saved for the epigrams and other verbal ornaments they contain,³ like the long implied simile about the Anson house in which Paulina takes up her life-long vigil in "The Angel at the Grave":

²Edith Wharton, "The Fulness of Life," *Scribner's Magazine*, XIV (December, 1893), 699-704.

³Edward K. Brown, "Edith Wharton," *Études Anglaises*, II (1938), 22.

The House, by the time Paulina came to live in it, had already acquired the publicity of a place of worship; not the perfumed chapel of a romantic idolatry but the cold clean empty meeting-house of ethical enthusiasm. The ladies lived on its outskirts, as it were, in cells that left the central fane undisturbed. The very position of the furniture had come to have a ritual significance: the sparse ornaments were the offerings of kindred intellects, the steel engravings by Raphael Morghen marked the Via Sacra of a European tour, and the black-walnut desk with its bronze inkstand modelled on the Pantheon was the altar of this bleak temple of thought.⁴

Perhaps it is unnecessary to describe the house at such length, but it is the place Paulina lived as a kind of New England vestal, so that to show the metaphorical functions of its contents makes clearer what her service is. A more pointed epigrammatic statement, like the sharp "Mrs. Carstyle was one of the women who make refinement vulgar"⁵ brings refinement and vulgarity into proximity through the woman's tasteless interpretation of the former; the juxtaposition adds to rather than detracts from the story. The stories vary, but there is some truth in Brown's assertion that emphasis on detailed figures of speech and startling epigrams which can be distracting marks her early style.⁶ Each story can provide illustrations like those above.

Brown tries to categorize Mrs. Wharton's three styles too neatly, however, when the truth is that she has ups and downs throughout her life, like many prolific writers, and that there are a few tendencies in her stylistic development which are worth discussing briefly despite these constant fluctuations. With time, for example, even Mrs. Wharton notices that her style has become plainer. She states, "Experience. . . subdued my natural tendency to 'put things' pointedly, and I become conscious—and happily conscious—of having reduced my style to a more even

⁴Edith Wharton, "The Angel at the Grave," *Crucial Instances*, p. 39.

⁵Edith Wharton, "A Coward," *The Greater Inclination*, p. 131.

⁶Brown, "Edith Wharton," p. 22.

and unnoticeable texture,"⁷ Brown notices the more moderate, calm style of *Madame de Treymes*,⁸ which could hardly begin with a more straight-forward statement about the activities of two of the principal characters: "John Durham, while he waited for Madame de Malrive to draw on her gloves, stood in the hotel doorway looking out across the Rue de Rivoli at the afternoon brightness of the Tuileries gardens."⁹ "The Other Two," published a few years earlier, has examples, like even earlier works, of this plain style at its best. Mrs. Wharton leads up to a happy domestic scene by writing that "Waythorn, on the drawing-room hearth, waited for his wife to come down to dinner."¹⁰ Further on in the story, when his relationship with Alice's first husband has developed, Waythorn's thinking is expressed as follows:

Shamefacedly, in indirect ways, he had been finding out about Haskett; and all that he had learned was favourable. The little man, in order to be near his daughter, had sold out his share in a profitable business in Utica, and accepted a modest clerkship in a New York manufacturing house. He boarded in a shabby street and had few acquaintances. His passion for Lily filled his life.¹¹

To make plain the implication that Waythorn's desire to be fair to Haskett may force Waythorn to lower his opinion of his wife, without drawing attention to style for its own sake, is to write successfully.

To imagine Mrs. Wharton giving up her startling epigrams or her similitic characterizations entirely would be to accept the most oversimplified view of her stylistic development and consistency. "Expiation," the story which follows "The Other Two" in the same anthology, presents the following characterization: "she was

⁷Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

⁸Edward K. Brown, *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*, p. 224.

⁹Edith Wharton, *Madame de Treymes*, p. 1.

¹⁰Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," *The Descent of Man*, p. 41.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 64.

the kind of woman whose emotions never communicate themselves to her clothes . . . ”¹²

The lapse in tone which marks Mrs. Wharton's handling of World War I material at times also affects her choice of words in war stories and keeps them from being representative of her plainest writing. These lines from *The Marne* contain melodramatic clichés like “the great convulsions of destiny”:

Here he was, once more involved in one of the great convulsions of destiny, and still almost as helpless a spectator as when, four years before, he had strayed the burning desert of Paris, and cried out in his boy's heart for a share in the drama.¹³

At every point through the rest of her career, especially when, at times like this, she verges on the sentimental, she can be wordy and less precise than she is at her best. She can harp on one rather inexact romantic phrase which turns up in the early “The Lamp of Psyche,” then in “Souls Belated,” where Lydia says that she and Gannett have “seen the nakedness of each other's souls,”¹⁴ and, finally, in an improved version in “Pomegranate Seed,” when Charlotte characterizes her marriage by saying it is one in which it seemed “as if there were not air enough between her soul and his.”¹⁵

Brown goes on to theorize that if Mrs. Wharton's second, plain style marks her maturity, her third signifies degeneracy. He notes a loss of vigor, and with a loss of epigram a loss of exactness.¹⁶ Mrs. Wharton tends to imitative fallacy in “The Looking-Glass,” where the rambling talk suits an elderly Irishwoman but where, for example, the essence of the story might have been presented

¹²Edith Wharton, “Expiation,” *The Descent of Man*, p. 79.

¹³Edith Wharton, *The Marne*, p. 85.

¹⁴Edith Wharton, “Souls Belated,” *The Greater Inclination*, p. 121.

¹⁵Edith Wharton, “Pomegranate Seed,” *The World Over*, p. 78.

¹⁶Brown, *Edith Wharton: Étude Critique*, pp. 227-9.

more abruptly. At other times in Mrs. Wharton's later stories, while she does not lose the ability to write epigram, she wonders about a series of cleverly chosen words like those in which Severance describes the interior decoration of the pension where he waits for Kate Spain in "Confession." He notes, among other things, ivory inlays working their way out of the table, and ponders, as if Mrs. Wharton is thereby admitting inadequate stylistic discipline, "What is the human mind made of, that mine, at such a moment, should have minutely and indelibly registered these depressing details?"¹⁷ But generalization is most dangerous when one is dealing with these late works, for through the last of her collected volumes, as "Roman Fever" alone proves, Mrs. Wharton's style sometimes remains excellent.

Mrs. Wharton's writing can vary from the plain style one begins to note as typical within two or three volumes after she started to write and yet not degenerate. The fablistic style is suited to "The Hermit and the Wild Woman," though her language here is not limited to the simple words an illiterate hermit would know. She writes about his projected visit to the distant saint by using common words like "mountains," hills," "winter," and "summer" often enough so that one does not think of the complexity of the sentences or the more abstract words like "austerity" within them:

One day he resolved to set forth on a visit to the Saint of the Rock, who lived on the other side of the mountains. Travellers had brought the Hermit report of this solitary, how he lived in holiness and austerity in a desert place among the hills, where snow lay all winter, and in summer the sun beat down cruelly.¹⁸

Once one has made all the possible qualifications, one must return

¹⁷Edith Wharton, "Confession," *The World Over*, p. 141.

¹⁸Edith Wharton, "The Hermit and the Wild Woman," *The Hermit and the Wild Woman*, p. 9.

to the single generality that Edith Wharton's style is usually very good because of her sentence structure, diction, and clarity, though these do not usually call attention to themselves.¹⁹ Agnes Repplier does exaggerate when she says that Mrs. Wharton, who is past master of English and can write with beautiful precision, left no sloppy sentences or misused words in all her books,²⁰ but Yvor Winters praises her almost as highly when he states that her expository writing can provide nearly the perfect example of the genre at its best, for example, in "Bunner Sisters" and *False Dawn*.²¹

"Bunner Sisters," with its omniscient point of view and controlled tone, does provide excellent examples of Mrs. Wharton's style. A selection from the last pages of the *nouvelle*, after the decline and death of one sister and the bereavement of the other, is typical:

The funeral took place three days later. Evelina was buried in Calvary Cemetery, the priest assuming the whole care of the necessary arrangements, while Ann Eliza, a passive spectator, beheld with stony indifference this last negation of her past.

A week afterward she stood in her bonnet and mantle in the doorway of the little shop. Its whole aspect had changed. Counter and shelves were bare, the window was stripped of its familiar miscellany of artificial flowers, note-paper, wire hat-frames, and limp garments from the dyer's; and against the glass pane of the doorway hung a sign: "This store to let."²²

These two brief paragraphs make plain the final isolation which comes to Ann Eliza despite her efforts for her sister. The second paragraph follows the first without transition because the living sister's plight has been caused by the dead one's. The brevity of several of the sentences emphasizes the tragedy. Yet there

¹⁹Viola Hopkins, "The Ordering Style of *The Age of Innocence*," *American Literature*, (November, 1958), 345.

²⁰Agnes Repplier, "Edith Wharton," *Commonweal*, XXIX (November 25, 1938), 125.

²¹Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, pp. 39-40.

²²Edith Wharton, "Bunner Sisters," *Xingu*, pp. 433-3.

is still variation among these five sentences. The first is very short. The second, after its main clause, contains a nominative absolute and a subordinate clause, whose rhythm is broken by an appositive which characterizes Ann Eliza's isolation. Prepositional phrases vary the third sentence, which, through the words "bonnet and mantle," indicates that Ann Eliza must leave home. Another very brief emphatic sentence follows, but the fifth has a series of three short independent clauses with one containing the list of miscellaneous material objects from which the sisters have made their living. Nothing here can be misunderstood; Mrs. Wharton must have planned the sound as well as the clear meaning and emotional effect of every word.

Joseph Warren Beach feels that Mrs. Wharton shows her expertness in her management of dialogue as much as in any other way, that she could make it functional and interesting for its own sake, that it is often pointed, pruned, and crisp, springing new bits of information on the reader.²³ Dialogue can mask the truth of a situation and yet imply that truth simultaneously to those who are suspicious. In "Atrophy" Jane Aldis' apparently conventional bits of hospitality offered to someone who has come to inquire about her ill brother seem to Nora Frenway to mask very slightly the sister's insinuations about Nora as Aldis' mistress. Nora has just caught herself gasping out the truthful "'how can you?'" followed by the defensive "'I mean, I don't want any . . .'"²⁴ referring first to the fact that she cannot imagine how the sister can be so prosaic and seemingly vengeful to her when the man they both love is dying and at the same time trying to cover up her true meaning by saying she cannot imagine bothering someone by taking a cup of tea in a household with its master near death. Miss Aldis replies:

²³Joseph Warren Beach, *The Twentieth Century Novel*, pp. 298-300.

²⁴Edith Wharton, "Atrophy," *Certain People*, p. 18.

“Then I shall be quite sure that you won’t reach the station too late.” She waited again, and then held out a long stony hand. “So kind—I shall never forget your kindness. Coming all this way, when you might so easily have telephoned from town. Do please tell Mr. Frenway how I appreciated it. You will remember to tell him, won’t you? He sent me such an interesting collection of pamphlets about tree moving. I should like him to know how much I feel his kindness in letting you come.” She paused again and pulled in her lips so that they become a narrow thread, a mere line drawn across her face by a ruler. “But, no; I won’t trouble you; I’ll write to thank him myself.”²⁵

The repetitive emphasis on how Nora has put herself out, on Mr. Frenway, on Jane’s acquaintanceship with him, and on his involvement in Nora’s coming may be an ordinary fatigued attempt at conversation, but it is also Miss Aldis’ way of threatening Nora. There are no extra words for that purpose.

Though some praise Edith Wharton’s dialogue and criticize adversely her frequent use of the epigram, bright or witty thoughts tersely or ingeniously expressed can be effective in themselves. As Henry James, speaking of course early in Mrs. Wharton’s career, wrote, she is associated

with such appeals to our interest, for instance. as the fact that, absolutely sole among our students of this form, she suffers, she even encourages, her expression to flower into some sharp image or figure of her thought when that will make the thought more finely touch us. [She is at her best when] some ideal of expression has the *whole* of the case . . .²⁶

In “Bewitched,” to choose a tiny instance, the sister who keeps house for Orrin Bosworth comments on the death of Venny Brand “with the guileless relish of the unimaginative for bad news . . .”²⁷

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 18-9.

²⁶Henry James, *Notes on Novelists*, p. 355.

²⁷Edith Wharton, “Bewitched,” *Here and Beyond*, p. 119.

When the curator of "The Rembrandt" is faced with the decision of lying about an obviously bad picture with no resemblance to a real Rembrandt or telling the truth and hurting an old lady who has nothing but her pride and this possession, he thinks "the silence seemed to shape itself into a receptacle for . . . [his] verdict."²⁸ This may be the kind of cleverness to which critics object. There could simply have been an uncomfortable silence, without this ingenious emphasis on it, but the emphasis is still ingenious, and it does focus the reader's attention on the decision to be made.

Metaphors and similes are common in Mrs. Wharton's epigrams and throughout her stories. In "Roman Fever," for example, at the end of the first section during which the ladies have each been quietly thinking about each other, Mrs. Wharton sums up the situation thus: "So these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong and of her little telescope."²⁹ It is hard to imagine any phrase which would better epitomize and criticize their mutual understanding. In Edith Wharton's earlier works, where her metaphors are more common, they are sometimes less succinct and appropriate, but more obvious. Mrs. Wharton writes about Ralph Grancy's devotion to his wife in "The Moving Finger" as follows:

He faithfully irrigated his own duty patch of life, and the fruitful moisture stole far beyond his boundaries. If, to carry on the metaphor, Grancy's life was a sedulously-cultivated enclosure, his wife was the flower he had planted in its midst—the embowering tree, that rather, which gave him rest and shade at its foot and the wind of dreams in its upper branches.³⁰

None of this horticultural metaphor about what husband and wife

²⁸Edith Wharton, "The Rembrandt," *Crucial Instances*, p. 128.

²⁹Edith Wharton, "Roman Fever," *The World Over*, p. 223.

³⁰Edith Wharton, "The Moving Finger," *Crucial Instances*, pp. 153-4.

mean to each other is necessary, though it is not incorrect. Along the same lines is the metaphor in "The Rembrandt" which discusses, in terms of the bonnets, virtues that suit different kinds of people. Although it would take a special study to trace the types of terms Mrs. Wharton uses most in these figures of speech, Frances Russell seems to be right at least in saying that the first term usually refers to something about the individual.³¹ The other terms come from varied sources, as these few illustrations indicate.

Mrs. Wharton's similes are perhaps even more numerous, though again they are generally easier to find in her earlier works. In describing Mrs. Amyot of "The Pelican," Mrs. Wharton says that "the least hint of the real thing clouded her lovely eye like the hovering shadow of an algebraic problem."³² Speaking of Miss Carstyle in "A Coward," Edith Wharton states that "her mother's expositions and elucidations cheapened her beauty as signposts vulgarize a woodland solitude."³³ In second terms taken from algebra and highway travel there is originality that does not disappear from the later stories. Mrs. Wharton makes clear Anson Warley's physical state as follows:

And as soon as it was over his mind had seemed more the lucid, his eye keener, than ever; as sometimes (he reflected) electric light in his library lamps would blaze up too brightly after a break in the current, and he would say to himself, wincing a little at the sudden glare on the page he was reading: "That means that it'll go out again in a minute."³⁴

There are few stereotypes in Edith Wharton's associations of different things, but at times similarities do appear. In "The

³¹Frances Russell, "Edith Wharton's Use of Imagery," *English Journal*, XXI (1932), 452.

³²Edith Wharton, "The Pelican," *The Greater Inclination*, p. 49.

³³Wharton, "A Coward," p. 131.

³⁴Edith Wharton, "After Holbein," *Certain People*, p. 72.

Fulness of Life," when the woman is about to die, she feels the tide rising, and death also approaches in terms of the sea in Mrs. Wharton's poems "The Young Dead," "Battle Sleep," and "With the Tide," written in memory of her friend Theodore Roosevelt.

There are even smaller details of writing which Mrs. Wharton pays attention to and which help to characterize her style. Her imagination is active in the choices of names and titles, on the one hand, and yet she enjoys repeating favorite items from time to time, though on the whole she does so with care. She has thought about her titles at length and changed many of them, some even after publication, like that of "Charm Incorporated," which was first, in magazine form, "Bread on the Waters," and like "The Day of the Funeral," originally published as "In a Day." In manuscript "Atrophy" was once less strikingly titled "The Visit." Edith Wharton also considered the titles of collections as well as of individual tales. Most of her titles, moreover, are short, easy to remember, and often distinctive: "Atrophy," "Autre Temps . . .," *False Dawn*, and *The Old Maid* show these most common characteristics. Some titles are less incisive, less successful, like "Writing a War Story" and "The Valley of Childish Things and Other Emblems," the longest one she uses. "A Bottle of Perrier," something most desirable in the desert setting of this tale, remains one of her most suggestive titles, while "The Descent of Man" can be taken to apply to post-Darwinian scientific discussion or the descent into popular culture.

Probably "After Holbein" 's title has raised most conjecture. W. T. Going has speculated interestingly, though he has not proven, that the title is "a sort of thematic challenge flung at the reader," in the face of which most people make the easiest interpretation: Holbein was noted for his realistic portrayals, and those of Anson Warley and Evelina Jaspar are a brace in his manner. The fact that Mrs. Wharton first called the story "Reality" supports the

common view, but this explanation, Going feels, offers no key to the central idea and flattens out the story. He thinks the title most probably refers to the elaborate series of woodcuts, "Dance of Death," which were Holbein's most popular works during his lifetime. Going finds motifs from the series everywhere in the story; with considerable imaginativeness he compares Warley's vertigo to the plunge of sand through an hour glass. In the woodcuts death often masquerades as a figure known to the one about to die, as Mrs. Jaspar does to Warley, and in the series and the story the last scene is a banquet.³⁵

Mrs. Wharton has one favorite title, "Pomegranate Seed," which she uses in a late story, long after she had used it for a poem about Persephone, as well as for an incomplete play and the title of books written by the lady writers in "'Copy': A Dialogue" and *The Touchstone*. It does not matter why Edith Wharton harps on this title, for few people would find her poem, learn of the play, and read the several stories and the *nouvelle*, but one still wonders why this combination of two words so caught her fancy. The story "All Souls" title is also echoed in the poem "The First Year; All Souls' Day"; this was a day Mrs. Wharton made much of in her later years.³⁶

Names sometimes interest Mrs. Wharton in themselves. She makes Charles Durand's name potentially French in order to create the misunderstanding in "The Refugees" She emphasizes the plain name of the foundling about whom her new father is dubious from the first in "The Mission of Jane." She chooses the ugly names Grisben and Balch for the witnesses at the dinner in "The Triumph of Night," and she calls the downtrodden but finally triumphant poor relation in "Duration" Martha Little. She knows when names are not essential, as they are not for the distraught wife

³⁵W. T. Going, "Wharton's *After Holbein*," *Explicator*, X (November, 1951), No. 8.

³⁶Wayne Andrews, ed., *The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, p. xxvi.

and the dead husband in "A Journey." Once in a while she can be too coy, for example, when she names the books in "The Debt" *Utility and Variation* and *Arrival of the Fittest*.

Mrs. Wharton likes to repeat the names of people and places even more than titles. Starkfield, made famous by *Ethan, Frome*, is the background setting for "Bewitched," another tale of rural western Massachusetts, as well as for the unfinished "Cruise of the Fleetwing," in which Starkfield was to have been a town for some of the characters to move to. Sometimes there is a similar logical connection of characters. Observant, conventional old New Yorker Sillerton Jackson would be as naturally on hand in *New Year's Day* as in *The Age of Innocence*. Ralston Corbin, who was to have been the main character in the brief fragment called "Charity" might be a collateral descendant of the Ralstons of *The Old Maid*. Mrs. Wharton also repeats names with less reason. Darrow is quite a different man in *Sanctuary* as the architect who leaves the plans for a competition to his young friend than he is in *The Reef* as the protagonist. The Christine Ansley in "Joy in the House," the provincial housewife returning from an elopement with an artist, was named shortly before the Grace Ansley who reveals her one romantic episode in "Roman Fever."

These matters are trifles in a discussion of Mrs. Wharton's excellent plain style, but they do show the interest in detail, the meticulous care that occasionally becomes precious but that most often contributes to the stylistic mastery which adds to the best stories and makes otherwise mediocre ones seem well executed. A number of Mrs. Wharton's works deserve the full stylistic analysis Viola Hopkins has recently given *The Age of Innocence*.³⁷

³⁷Hopkins, pp. 345-57.

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