

American Ways and Their Meaning:
Edith Wharton's Post-War Fiction
and American History, Ideology, and National Identity

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis argues that Edith Wharton's assessment of American ways and their meaning in her post-war fiction has been widely misread. Its title derives from *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), which she wrote to educate her countrymen about French culture and society. Making sense of America was as great a challenge to Wharton. Much of her later fiction was for a long time dismissed by critics on the grounds that she had failed to 'make sense' of America. Wharton was troubled by American materialism and optimism, yet she believed in a culturally significant future for her nation. She advocated – and wrote – an American fiction that looked critically at society and acknowledged the nation's ties to Europe. Sometimes her assessment of American ways is reductive, and presented in a tone that her critics, then and since, found off-putting and snobbish. But her skepticism about American modernity was penetrating and prophetic, and has not been given its due.

In criticism over the last two decades, a case for the place of Wharton's post-war fiction in canons of feminism and modernism has been persuasively made. The thesis responds to these positions, but makes its own argument that the post-war writing reflects broader shift in American identity and ideology. The thesis is broadly historicist in its strategy, opening with a discussion of the reputation of these texts and that of the author more generally. After that entry-point, it is organized thematically, with four chapters covering topics that are seen as key components of American ideology in Wharton's post-war writing. These include modernity,

gender equality, the American Dream of social mobility, and American exceptionalism. The thesis concludes with an assessment of Wharton's prognostications in the context of twenty-first century America.

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Introduction

The ‘Americanness’ of Wharton’s Post-War Fiction

For more than a century, critics have had a love-hate relationship with Edith Wharton. Winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for *The Age of Innocence* (1920) marked a turning point in her reputation: it was the moment at which critics held her in highest esteem, but it was also when they turned against her, dismissing much of her subsequent fiction as out of touch with contemporary American life. These critics, and subsequent generations, saw her post-war fiction as an aesthetic and thematic departure from her earlier work. She had suspected that she was being misread throughout her career, a feeling that intensified after *The Age of Innocence*. In ‘The Vice of Reading’ (1903), she argued that the derivative tastes of “the mechanical reader” and “the mechanical critic” worked against “the best in literature” and were “most harmful” to the writer (*CW* 104-5). She later voiced similar anxieties to the novelist Zona Gale in 1921, commenting that her books had been “so long and invariably criticized and approved for the wrong things!” (qtd. in LaGuardia 587). This begs the question: what did Wharton think that critics and audiences were missing – or misinterpreting – in her writing, particularly after 1920?

This thesis asserts that Wharton’s assessment of American ways and their meaning has been widely misconstrued for decades. Its title derives from that of *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), which she wrote in the hopes of persuading her countrymen of the superiority of French culture and society. In it, she summarizes Gallic culture in a relatively short space, but making sense of American ways in her fiction and non-fiction writing proved as great, if not a greater, continuing challenge for her. After the First World War, she struggled to make sense of the nation’s place in a changed world, reflecting on the role of tradition in society as well as in literature. Her loyalties were divided between her native country and Europe, with which she was in greater sympathy. She was troubled by the nation’s materialism and naïve optimism, yet also believed that her ambitious, youthful nation could have a culturally significant future ahead. This ambivalence toward the United States structures a diverse, polyphonic post-war body of

work. It is at once conservative and progressive, snobbish and egalitarian, American and European. On first glance, it may be hard to believe that novels such as *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927) were products of the mind that also produced *The Age of Innocence* and *The Buccaneers* (1938). Her post-war fiction differs widely in atmosphere, choice of social materials, and in the feelings it expresses about America.

In her critical writing of the 1920s and 1930s, Wharton advocated an American fiction that critically examined society, while more fully acknowledging the nation's historical, cultural, and ideological ties to Europe. Her critique of materialistic and superficial American ways continues arguments of her earlier fiction, while also working toward her unique vision of what the nation's literature could be. While it offers a more conservative image of these decades than we have come to expect, this conservatism has counted against her too much, fostering the inaccurate impression that she was purely critical of the United States. She never abandoned her belief in a more meaningful American way of life. Still, her assessment of American ways can often be flawed and reductive, and she was prone to express her views in an off-putting and snobbish manner. Yet even with these shortcomings, she was able to make apt predictions about the future direction of the nation. Her post-war writing asks bold questions about the nation's society and offers complex, sometimes unpleasant, answers to those questions. In doing so, she allowed her 'Americanness' to come under critical scrutiny, during her life and for decades afterward. And yet, the fact that her writing consistently wrestles with the definition of the nation's character and values, and recognizes the high stakes of that definition, makes it quintessentially American.

In seeing the post-war fiction as both a critique and a product of shifts in American national identity and ideology, this thesis departs from previous studies. Recent critical arguments have situated this work within traditions of feminism and modernism, yet the place of this writing within American literature still remains unclear. This thesis stakes a claim for the place of her post-war fiction in the American canon, situating it in the context of a nation

redefining itself in historical, political, ideological, and literary terms. I have taken a broadly historicist approach to this project, one which is attentive to contradictions and shifts in Wharton's assessments of American life. I focus chiefly on her undervalued novels, namely *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep*, *The Children* (1928), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *The Gods Arrive* (1932). I also examine her lesser-known short stories from the period, with an eye toward links and discords with her non-fiction writing. The thesis also incorporates canonical later writings by Wharton, such as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Buccaneers*, 'Roman Fever' (1934) and 'After Holbein' (1928). The similarities between these and her non-canonical texts suggest that the divide between 'good' and 'bad' Wharton – or often simply 'early' and 'late' Wharton – is more complex than scholarly debates about her writing have often tended to allow.

Chapter One discusses the undervaluation of her post-war writing as resulting from a contemporary reconfiguration of American literature, and later, from countervailing academic trends. Many critics felt – and continue to feel – that her age, gender, class, and adherence to tradition made her poorly suited to write about modern America. After this starting-point, the thesis is organized thematically, with a chapter for each of four topics central to her critique of contemporary American ways and their meaning. These include modernity, gender equality, the relationship between taste and social mobility, and American exceptionalism abroad.

Chapter Two explores the first of these, describing Wharton as at odds with mainstream perceptions of history. Her fiction characterizes modern life as defined by an absence of privacy and morality, presenting old-fashioned morality as an imperfect palliative to the modern condition. By arguing for the continued relevance of the past in the present, her post-war writings create a strong challenge to mainstream historical narratives of the period. At the same time, her aggressive defense of literary tradition overshadowed the way in which her themes and narrative style were reminiscent of modernism.

Chapter Three establishes her critique of contemporary notions of gender equality through the figures of the flapper and the mother. Little has changed for her childlike American women; like the female characters of her nineteenth-century fiction, their lives are structured by destructive ideals surrounding marriage, motherhood, beauty and sexuality. Her modern women call attention to the conservative ideologies beneath the hedonistic surface of post-war America. The chapter concludes with a brief account of the similarities between Wharton's critique of modern femininity and that of Scott Fitzgerald, suggesting that the very different reputations of these two writers has overshadowed their shared points of view.

Chapter Four considers Wharton's contention that taste should reach 'the masses' through the educated elite in relation to the emerging dominance of the middle class in American culture. Her negative depiction of middle class taste throughout the 1920s and 1930s is a feature of her skepticism about 'the American Dream.' What her countrymen optimistically viewed as the democratization of class and taste, she saw as standardization. A short comparison of her views on modern taste to those expressed by Sinclair Lewis concludes the chapter. This again suggests how Wharton was in accord with the nation's younger writers, though her writing has not become a part of the historical imagination as theirs has.

Chapter Five reads *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children* as condemnations of exploitative 'American ways' in Europe, in the context of political theories of exceptionalism and 'soft power.' The chapter also argues that *The Buccaneers* and *The Gods Arrive* provide a model of Europeanized American identity that can contribute to the historical, artistic, and intellectual culture of a broader world. Though her model is flawed in several significant respects, it attests to a dramatic shift in her attitudes toward her homeland, though she continued to be aggravated by modern American ways in a number of respects.

My conclusion illustrates how Wharton's predictions regarding the impact of contemporary American ways and their meaning have proven accurate in the context of early

twenty-first century society. The themes she explores and the characters she creates in her post-war fiction remain relevant to American life in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Chapter One

The Reputation of the Post-War Fiction

This chapter opens with a reading of Wharton's essay 'The Great American Novel' (1927), which demonstrates how the author saw herself as writing against an emerging vision of the nation and its literature, even while she sought to claim a place for herself within the American tradition. From there, it examines the contexts in which critical notions of Wharton's alienation from post-war America formed and were perpetuated. Bearing in mind that the author was partly responsible for creating an elision between her life and work, it connects the reputation of this writing to assessments of her biography. Over the years, a diverse range of critics – among them Edmund Wilson, R. W. B. Lewis, and Elizabeth Ammons – have looked to her age, gender, class, and expatriation to explain the perceived 'failure' of this work. Since the 1970s, a renewal of academic interest has affirmed Wharton's place within the American canon, yet the assessment of the post-war fiction that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s continues to influence scholarly opinion. The author was, at times, antagonistic toward the emerging modernist movement and expanding middlebrow tastes, a stance that played into the hands of her detractors for decades. Yet she also had more in common with both modernism and the middlebrow than she was willing to admit.

Wharton and American Literature

During the 1920s and 1930s, Wharton was thinking about American literary tradition and her place within it. She was also thinking about history, reflecting on the past in historical novels like *The Age of Innocence* and *The Buccaneers* and keeping a watchful eye on the narrative of the nation taking shape in the present moment. With novels such as *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *Ethan Frome* (1911), she had established herself as part of American realism. Hildegard Hoeller

argues, “a critical preference for realism blinded critics to Wharton’s consistent critique of this genre... even in their assessment of Wharton’s ‘major’ writing, critics overlooked important ironies and complexities in the process of writing the story of ‘Edith Wharton, the Realist’ (202). As Hoeller suggests, Wharton’s relationship to American realism – and the nation’s literature in general – was characterized by ambivalence. Part of her wanted to belong, yet another part of her disapproved of the direction in which American realism was moving after the war. “The Great American Novel’ exemplifies this perspective, arguing that American novels must further a simplified, idealistic view of America and its class system. Failing that, a ‘great American novel’ is one that lends itself to having this view imposed upon it. She champions Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920) as a superlative novel, but also characterizes a widespread misreading of the novel as a mischaracterization of America itself. To her dismay, she found that “The great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually” in the years following World War I (152). Her contention that audiences had misunderstood Lewis’s novel as an idealization of small town life finds support in Amy Blair’s study of the initial reception of Lewis’s novel, ‘Main Street Reading *Main Street*’ (2008). Blair looks to fan letters written to Lewis to support her claim that these readers “seem to be reacting in highly personal ways that say more about reader needs than about the text itself or Lewis’s authorial project” (145). Many of these letters praise Carol Kennicott, the college-educated protagonist who attempts to bring culture to the dreary Midwestern town of Gopher Prairie. Blair notes, “Such vicarious identification involved considerable willful misreading of many of Lewis’s criticisms of both Carol and of the whole practice of readerly identification” (148). The mainstream interpretation of the novel indicated to Wharton that the nation’s literary tastes were moving further away from the aesthetic traditions she practiced and revered.

Wharton believed that the French and English realist tradition consistently outpaced the American novel, which neglected to critically examine society. In contrast, the novels which met with her approval “were not only ‘great American novels,’ but great novels,” owing to their

creators' freedom to write "without fear of being repudiated as un-American if they wandered beyond the twelve mile limit" (*CW* 153, 156). Janet Beer and Avril Horner note that the author's "loyalty to realism, and its rougher offspring, naturalism, was rooted in her admiration of many nineteenth-century writers, particularly those such as Meredith, who managed to combine a respect for tradition with an irony that offered a searching critique of contemporary manners" (72). Wharton's reverence for continental models is also a feature of *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), a collection of articles in which she discusses the form and subject of superlative novels and short stories. In the first chapter, which traces the evolution of fiction over time and space, she observes that "in Balzac's realism there is hardly a flaw" because he treated character as "a product of particular material and social conditions" (9). Meanwhile, she argued that her country had doomed itself to literary mediocrity by refusing to look critically at what she saw as naïve jingoism.

Such a definition of superlative fiction was – and continues to be – at odds with how the 'great American novel' has often been defined. A number of novels have emerged as retrospective contenders to the title, such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). While there is no single definition of a 'great American novel,' certain traits emerge repeatedly in critical debates. An early use of the term occurs in "The Great American Novel" (1868), a review of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). In the article, John William DeForest argues that such a novel should accurately capture "the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" and display "sympathy with this eager and laborious people, which takes so many newspapers, builds so many railroads, does the most business on a given capital, wages the biggest war in proportion to its population, believes in the physically impossible and does some of it" (27-28). In this formulation, great fiction offers an image of American society as one might like it to be, not necessarily as it was. The work of critics such as Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, and Leo Marx, working during the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrates how the defining traits of a 'great American novel' steadily

moved away from its European counterpart as the twentieth century progressed. Such a novel must, to some degree, further a mythic image of the United States as a unique meritocracy, even if it also critiques that image. In *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Trilling argues that American novels share a “resistance to looking closely at society” (213). In *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), Chase contends that some of the nation’s beloved fiction might best be termed romances, since they diverge significantly from the traditional novel. He describes the European novel as reflecting “the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class” and rooted in social reality, while seeing the American variant as “less committed to the immediate rendition of reality” and often veering to “mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms” (13). In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Marx claims that superior nineteenth-century writing idealized “rural ignorance” in the face of a new age of “productivity, wealth, and power” (228, 226). These critics suggest how American literature evolved to exclude the realist tradition in which Wharton participated.

Wharton challenged American literary ideals and expectations throughout her career, though this intensified in the later decades of her life. The controversy surrounding the ending of *The House of Mirth*, in which Lily Bart dies in squalor, was a proving ground in this respect. After the dire opening night performance of the New York stage adaptation of the novel in 1906, William Dean Howells remarked to her, “What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending” (Lewis 172). Blair argues that readers ignored Wharton’s satirical commentary by seeing themselves in Lily: “Why would middle class readers – who made up the bulk of Wharton’s audience, we must assume – take a critique of high society to heart, given the general culture’s fixation on and idealization of upward mobility?” (*Mirth* 150). If a ‘great American novel’ needed to conform to Howells’ cynical model, Wharton’s subsequent fictions attest to her continued determination not to give the reading public what they wanted. One such example is *The Custom of the Country* (1913), which competed for sales against *Pollyanna* (1913), a novel about a young girl who faces life’s challenges with undeterred optimism. Millicent Bell

argues that the tale of Undine Spragg's ascent to the height of American society "headed straight against the native complacencies" that novels like *Pollyanna* reinforced ('Lady' 305). As this thesis explores in depth in subsequent chapters, her post-war writing continues this challenge to American ideals, positing alternative ways of seeing the nation and its people.

In 'The Great American Novel,' Wharton advocates an expanded way of writing and thinking about the nation. She positions herself against a popular mentality in which "the modern American novelist is told that the social and educated being is an unreality unworthy of his attention, and that only the man with the dinner-pail is human, and hence available for his purpose" (*CW* 155). During the 1920s and 1930s, the American Dream – and the 'great American novel' itself – became strongly associated with middle class status. Like her aspiring novelist, Vance Weston, she wanted to write social novels that "take apart the works of the machine, and find out what all those people behind the splendid house fronts signified in the general scheme of things" (*HRB* 305-6). While she was doing so, she also made condescending generalizations regarding her nation's idealism and taste. 'The Great American Novel' is a prime example of this, where she uses words such as "dead" "common," "average," "vapid," "humdrum," "standardize," and "rudimentary" to describe life on 'Main Street' (*CW* 153-55). Yet, as this thesis explores in later chapters, her fiction of the period also depicts certain traits of her nation as unique, even exceptional. Her struggle to preserve her vision of both novel and nation attests to a grudging faith in the future of her nation.

Wharton's essay also reveals her concerns about her legacy after winning the Pulitzer Prize. The committee had praised her presentation of "the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard to American manners and manhood" in *The Age of Innocence*, an assessment she found absurd (Lewis 433). Two letters the author wrote in 1921 hint toward the gap she perceived between her intention and the prize committee's interpretation of the novel. One was to Bernard Berenson, in which she joked that that the "tainted money" she earned with the award "will come in particularly handy to polish off the gardens at Ste Claire" (*L* 442). The

other was to her rival nominee Sinclair Lewis. Shortly after winning the award, she discovered that the committee had initially planned to honor *Main Street*, but ultimately deemed the novel too controversial. She wrote to Lewis, “when I discovered that I was being rewarded – by one of our leading Universities – for uplifting American morals, I confess I *did* despair” (L 445). She hints that Lewis may have earned the greater triumph in being rejected by the committee’s dubious standard.¹ Betsy Klimasmith notes that the novel is rarely read in a modern context or “as a response to war,” but more often as an “anachronistic throwback to a simpler time” (556). The novel has some nostalgic elements, but to read it purely as a portrait of “a simpler time” grossly oversimplifies the novel’s complex relationship to history. It forcefully demonstrates how the polite veneer of New York society belied its ruthless enforcement of social order. At the same time, it argues that the freedoms gained with modernity did not offset the loss of traditional values.

While certain aspects of American literature – and the novel in particular – annoyed and unnerved her, she nevertheless praised a superlative minority of the nation’s writers. In her estimation, few truly great American novels existed, though she counted among them Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899) and David Graham Phillips’s now neglected novel *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917). Beyond the novel, she revered Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The title of *The Gods Arrive* derives from Emerson’s poem ‘Give All To Love’ (1846). *A Backward Glance* derives its title from Whitman’s essay, ‘A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads’ (1888), in which he looks back on his career and the reception of his writing.² Whitman is also a central figure in ‘The Spark’ (1924), Wharton’s novella of the 1860s. The poet befriends Hayley Delane as he recovers from injuries during the American Civil War. The story suggests that the ‘spark’ of

¹ Hoeller reads Wharton’s letter to Lewis as evidence of her having “publicly embraced the realist tradition” and consistently speaking out “against the sentimental” (10).

² Whitman’s essay laments the lack of a solid American tradition in poetry, anticipating Wharton’s concerns about the novel in the 1920s. He writes, “as long as the States continue to absorb and be dominated by the poetry of the Old World, and remain unsupplied with autochthonous song, to express, vitalize, and give color to and define their material and political success, and minister to them distinctively, so long will they stop short of first-class nationality and remain defective” (671).

Whitman's philosophy and personality instills within Delane a moral compass that guides him through life. Even so, Delane remains oblivious to Whitman's identity – as well as his prolific literary status – for many years, remembering him only as a “queer fellow” and a “big backwoodsman” (ONY 215). Her references to these writers tell us that she did not discount American literature entirely, even though she found the contemporary novel a source of vexation. Sarah Bird Wright sees ‘The Great American Novel’ as evidence of Wharton's questionable taste in American literature, noting that the author was wholly unmoved by Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain (*A to Z* 108). Wright is correct to point out that Wharton tended to be mercurial in talking about other American novelists. For instance, though she praised Lewis in ‘The Great American Novel,’ she also parodies him – and his sudden rise to fame – through Weston in both *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Even so, Wharton's arguably limited capacity to appreciate American writers does not invalidate her arguments about the growing influence of ‘Main Street’ in cultural life, nor does it mean she universally dismissed the nation's writers and intellectuals.

Contemporary Perspectives on the Post-War Fiction

The critical emphasis on Wharton's biography has been inescapable. After she won the Pulitzer, critics intensified their focus on her life-story, especially her class pedigree and age. Reviews often mentioned that she had been born to a New York family that was part of ‘the Four Hundred,’ then the highest echelon of society.³ They knew that she came from money; her father's family is thought to have inspired the idiom ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’ They thought of her as an observer of the aristocratic world of Old New York, a writer at her best when

³ ‘The Four Hundred’ derived from the number of guests Mrs. Astor could accommodate in the ballroom of her palatial Fifth Avenue home.

looking backward historically. This view was supported by the fact that she was in her sixties and seventies during the 1920s and 1930s, and was alternating her contemporary novels with historical fiction. Furthermore, as her commercial success – particularly among middle class women – peaked in the 1920s, her reputation among critics declined. In her lifetime, she published twenty-one novels, nine book-length works of non-fiction, and eighty-five short stories, convincing some that she had become too prolific to maintain consistent quality.

The economic boom of the 1920s inspired a climate of jingoism in the United States, and critical perceptions of Wharton were influenced by assessments of her patriotism. After the war, the extent to which she was ‘Europeanized’ was a source of debate and discomfort among them. They knew that she traveled extensively in Europe throughout her life, and moved to France permanently in 1911. After the war, she observed her nation from afar, returning to the United States only once, to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale in 1923. Many saw her physical distance from America as evidence of her mental and emotional distance from it. Often, they seemed to overlook her war journalism, as well as her extensive involvement with relief efforts. She had been a firm advocate for American involvement in the war, and established several hostels for French and Belgian refugees as well as a sewing room for Parisian women.⁴

Wharton’s fiction has been read in terms of her social context, but the contemporary interpretation of her work has not been subject to the same level of rigorous, constant scrutiny. In order to explore why her post-war fiction has not enjoyed the canonical status of her earlier writing, it is important to have a sense of the factors that shape assessments of literary merit. Reception theorists such as Stanley Fish suggest that a common background between audience and reader may explain why some readers accept a given reading of a text, while others reject it (Fish 147-174). Stuart Hall argues that specific readings of a text become hegemonic through retelling, with the result that an initially subjective reading can be elevated to the level of

⁴ Beer points out that Wharton’s American Hostels for Refugees aided 9,330 displaced people and raised more than \$100,000 (*Traveller* 45).

common sense, or even fact. This leads readers to assume that a work is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ before even reading it (Hall 117-127). Jane Tompkins applies a similar model to the nineteenth-century American canon in *Sensational Designs* (1986), claiming that critics continuously reconfigure standards of value, even while invoking the timeless qualities of these standards. Tompkins concludes that the fluctuating reputation of a literary work reflects an ongoing cycle of social and historical change. The literary works that were seen as superlative in one era may be derided or forgotten in the next. Each of these critics point out that assessments of literary value are always and already contextual. It is impossible for the critic to fully set his or her evaluation of a work of art apart from the myriad influences of his or her environment.

Wharton was correct in seeing herself as writing against a vision of the nation and its literature that differed significantly from her own. The Pulitzer raised questions about her status as an exemplary American writer, rather than settling them. In keeping with this Shari Benstock has observed, “As critics revised upward the quality of her prewar writing, they more they demanded of her, and the less they agreed on what directions her work should now take” (*Gifts* 384). Both implicitly and explicitly, critics scrutinized the ‘Americanness’ of the author as well as her fiction. Some saw her in a favorable light; the *New York Times Book Review* described her as “a writer who brings glory on the name America” in its assessment of *The Age of Innocence*, and observed in 1922 that the release of a new Wharton novel was “probably the most important thing that can happen in any current year of American fiction” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 285, 307). However, as time went on, more saw her as a poor fit with contemporary society.⁵ One critic of *The Glimpses of the Moon* observed, “Mrs. Wharton was born in America at exactly the wrong time (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 313). Reviews of her from the 1930s acknowledge her past achievements with respect, though almost universally dismiss the relevance of her fiction in a national context. One review of *The World Over* (1936) describes her as an icon of “a

⁵ A minority of critics found her out of touch prior to the post-war period. In a review of her travelogue *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), G. R. Carpenter wrote, “Her writing is not that of an American today, not even of a woman, but merely of the art-antiquarian” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 101).

tradition of American life that has now almost disappeared, while May Lamberton Barker of the *New York Herald Tribune* notes in her review of *The Buccaneers* that Wharton “had long since lost touch with America as it is” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 536, 546). Critiques rooted in class, age, gender, and national affiliation eroded the author’s reputation from 1920 onward.

Wharton’s upper class pedigree was a pernicious threat to her artistic credibility during this period. Vernon Parrington’s article, ‘Our Literary Aristocrat’ (1921), dismisses the cultural relevance of her fiction on these grounds:

She belongs in spite of herself to the caste which she satirizes, and she cannot make herself at home in the households where the mother washes the dishes and the father tends the furnace. If she had lived less easily, if she had been forced to skimp and save and plan, she would have been a greater and richer artist, more significant because more native, more continental. But unfortunately her doors open only to the smart set; the windows from which she surveys life open only to the east, to London, Paris, Rome. She is one of our cosmopolitans, flitting lightly about and at ease with all who bear titles. And this the stay-at-home American secretly resents. (Howe 153)

As Lyn Bennett comments, Parrington’s review is “as much about Wharton as it is about her novel” (Totten, *Memorial* 29). It links her alleged aesthetic flaws to her perceived personal ones. His article is an exercise in reverse snobbery, equating economic struggle with literary greatness. Wharton does not fit with his vision of America; he sees the nation’s authenticity being rooted in the expanding rural Midwest and South, rather than among the wealthy in the large cities of the East Coast. In claiming that her cosmopolitanism disqualified her from speaking authoritatively about the nation, Parrington falls victim to the very prejudices he condemns. Also, while he purports to defend the tastes of the average reader, referring to them as “stay-at-home Americans” enacts the same condescension of which he accuses her. The article demonstrates how her background made her easy to demonize, and it also shows that she was not alone in taking a conservative, unpalatably dismissive view of the reading public.

Parrington was not the first to discredit Wharton on account of her class, but he threw open the door for subsequent critics, many of whom seemed to read her novels looking for snobbery. This tendency led Kristin Olson Lauer to observe, “the word snob appears destined

to follow James and Wharton forever” (Joslin and Price 84). Among them was *New York Tribune* critic Burton Rascoe, who observed of *A Son at the Front* (1923), “Mrs. Wharton has not lost her gift for anatomizing people she dislikes, which is to say the majority of those who compose the human race” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 331). In his view, since Wharton could be a snob in certain instances, she could only write a war novel for snobs. The limited instances of her “anatomizing people she dislikes” come through in her characterization of social climbers who use the war to advance themselves.⁶ Alan Price argues that it reflected her frustration with the “vast centralizing wave” that the American Red Cross presented to her charity work (xi). Rascoe misses the novel’s sympathy to those experiencing life behind the front lines, and overlooks her sympathetic portrayals of the rural lower class in earlier novels such as *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome*, and *Summer* (1917). He seems to have read *A Son at the Front* in light of a perceived ‘Whartonian formula,’ yet it is not so much a novel of manners as it is a character study of a divorced American painter whose son dies as a result of combat injuries. Above all, the novel critiques the United States’ refusal to join the war, a central theme Rascoe does not seem to pick up on. This tendency to ‘read’ Wharton herself before reading her fiction offered little relevant insight into her writing. It did, however, reveal that the critical establishment no longer revered the qualities she was seen to represent.

Wharton’s age also became fair game for critics who sought to knock her down from her Pulitzer pedestal. Whether they politely described her as old-fashioned, or dismissed her as merely old, they saw her as having little business commenting on modern culture. In her review of *The Children*, Tess Slessinger remarks that the author had “shingled her intellectual hair and shortened her intellectual skirts with the obvious aplomb of one not accustomed to do either” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 454). In her view, Wharton’s presumption to write about the Jazz Age was tantamount to the author posing as a flapper. V.S. Pritchett’s review of *Hudson River*

⁶ Wharton’s concern that “silly idiot women” from the American Red Cross had taken work away from working class inspired her to build her Paris workroom. She felt it unjust that the “*femmes du monde* do the work the others ought to have” (L 334). For further detail on her clashes with the organization, see Price 107-140, 174-179.

Bracketed also invokes her advanced age, describing her as “a court painter of the old order” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 474). Critics also relegated her to the literary past by continually linking her to Henry James, with whom she had a close and well-documented friendship. An unnamed reviewer of *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) argues that Wharton “would be content to write books that are exactly like” those of James, and Graham Greene’s review of the story collection *Certain People* (1933) offers the backhanded praise that her wit had become “almost equal to that of her master” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 315, 509). Her links with James have overshadowed the stylistic divergence that marked their late careers. She did not approve of his experimental late style, as evidenced in a 1902 letter to William Crary Brownell of Scribner’s, which ended with the exasperated comment: “Don’t ask me what I think of *The Wings of the Dove*” (L 71). As Benstock points out, the comparisons to James were damaging in their time, as he “symbolized for young moderns all that they hoped to overthrow” (*Gifts* 370). Yet when the mid-century New Critics embraced James’s novels as forerunners of modernism, her reputation did not enjoy a similar boost.⁷

Wharton’s appeal to middlebrow taste – and, in particular, middle class women – also attracted critical ire. Amy Kaplan contends that she “wrote at the intersection of the mass market of popular fiction, the tradition of women’s literature, and a realistic movement which developed an uneasy dialogue with twentieth-century modernism” (66). The term ‘middlebrow’ first emerged in the early twentieth century to describe the popular taste of a globally expanding middle class. In 1916, Virginia Woolf described this ignominious figure as “a pest which is the bane of all thinking and living” (*Moth* 118). In America, Russell Lynes later linked the term to the nation’s class hierarchy in *The Tastemakers* (1954), characterizing lowbrows as poor laborers and connecting highbrows to the “ill-paid,” intellectually elite professions of academia and the

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Wharton’s personal and literary relationship with James, see Bell, *Friendship*; Benstock, *Gifts* 111, 113, 436; Lee 212-216, 243-249, 390-391; Lewis 85-86, 88-89, 254-255, 349-343; Wright, *A to Z* 133-135.

arts.⁸ He aligns white-collar professionals with the middlebrow, suggesting that the stigma attached to the middlebrow stemmed from economic jealousies from opposing ends of the spectrum (311). In both Woolf and Lynes' definitions, the middlebrow writer is a pretender to culture, putting profits and popularity ahead of aesthetics. Wharton would never have willingly described herself as middlebrow, but also knew that she no longer enjoyed the protected status of the highbrow elite in the 1920s and 1930s. Waldo Frank's review of *The Writing of Fiction* in *The New Republic* illustrates this. Frank claims that younger male authors – among them Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, and John Dos Passos – provide readers with “spiritual and aesthetic nurture,” while dismissing Wharton's fiction as “fashionable letters” (47). Frank's attack stems from the fact that Wharton's serials and stories frequently appeared in publications such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Women's Home Companion* during the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Sustained by advertisements for clothing and cosmetics, these magazines could afford to pay her more than highbrow “little magazines” or even established literary publications like *Scribner's Magazine*.

Frank was not the only critic to assert that she had placed profits ahead of quality. One reviewer of *The Glimpses of the Moon* comments, “Edith Wharton has no business to be writing such trash” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 318). Another wrote, “we would recommend nobody to buy it or to read it... it is difficult to understand how this sort of writing can be any value to any human being” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 319). This outpouring of disdain for *The Glimpses of the Moon* suggests how critics were beginning to see her purely as a novelist of historical fiction; seemingly anything contemporary she wrote from the 1920s was a shameless attempt to cash in. This led one reviewer of *The World Over* to comment, “Why Mrs. Wharton should ever have allowed these slick little bits to be exhumed from the files of the ladies’

⁸ Lawrence Levine points out that the terms ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ derive from phrenology, an outmoded scientific practice that assigned capabilities or limitations based on cranial shape, a trait often determined by race. He asserts that this language was “designed to preserve, nurture, and extend the cultural history and values of a particular group of peoples in a specific historical context” (*Highbrow* 223).

⁹ Wharton also regularly published novels and short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *McClure's*, *Redbook*, *Delineator*, and *Pictorial Review* in the 1920s and 1930s (Bell, ‘Lady’ 306).

magazines is difficult to determine. Probably they read very nicely between the advertisements, but here they seem a very ordinary vintage” (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 537). These critics wrongly concluded that her contemporary fiction was disposable fluff, indistinct from surrounding articles about spring hemlines and advertisements for hosiery.

Though she attacked the middling taste of post-war America in essays like ‘The Great American Novel,’ Wharton’s links with the middlebrow influenced the reputation of the post-war fiction for decades. The Book of the Month Club also contributed to her financial success, as well as her concomitant fall from critical favor. Thompson points out that the Club’s recommendations often resulted in a substantial increase to a writer’s sales, which quickly attracted the ire of *avant-garde* writers. The animosity was mutual. Many of the Club’s board members were “staunch supporters of writers like Wharton and harsh critics of modernism” (Thompson 108-110). Janice Radway sees the Club as evidence of a split within American literature, separating a masculine, highbrow elite from a feminine, middlebrow mainstream (215). The Club excluded writers such as Dos Passos, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Eliot, and Anderson, while journals such as *The New Republic* came to regard female audiences as contemptible. The highbrow set itself apart from mainstream audiences, helping it to gain credibility among critics throughout the century.¹⁰ Ezra Pound derided commercial publishing as America’s “foremost literary disease,” and Wharton’s best-seller status affirmed the poet’s “suspicion that she had ‘sold’ her talents on the open marketplace” (Lentricchia 62; Benstock, *Left* 62). Writing for middle-class women may not have earned Pound’s approval, but Wharton certainly found it lucrative: *Ladies Home Journal* paid Wharton \$5,500 for the novella ‘False Dawn’ in 1922 and *The Delineator* offered her \$42,000 for the serialization of *The Children* in 1928 (Lewis 444, 472). *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children* were Book of the Month Club selections, earning the author

¹⁰ Despite their vocal stance against large-scale publishing, writers such as Pound, Eliot, and Joyce signed with the house of Boni and Liveright, a house reputed for aggressive marketing. At times, they literally could not afford to put principle into practice, and had to make ends meet. Eliot worked as a banker at Lloyds, while Joyce worked odd jobs, including teaching language for Berlitz in Paris and Trieste while writing *Ulysses* (1922) (North, *Reading* 78; Lentricchia 113).

\$60,000 and \$95,000 respectively (Lewis 444; Wright, *A to Z* 306). Thompson's study, *Influencing America's Tastes: Realism in the Works of Wharton, Cather and Hurst* (2002), demonstrates that Wharton's popularity during the 1920s and 1930s has continued to be a source of consternation to critics and scholars.

As writing fiction for middle class women was seen to be beneath her, gender matters also influenced the reception of Wharton's commentary on the war. Rascoe's review of *A Son at the Front* alleges that the author was "wholly oblivious" to the reality of war (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 329). Yet Wharton made numerous trips to the front, both to deliver supplies and to describe her experiences for American readers in *Scribner's Magazine*. Her articles were later reprinted as the collection *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915). Though his claim was inaccurate, he was not the only one to make such an assumption. This led Benstock to argue that Wharton's war stories "went unmentioned by literary historians or were treated scornfully by critics who measured the standards of war fiction by Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*" (SF x). In *A Son at the Front*, Wharton expresses scorn for vacation soldiers, perhaps with these authors in mind. She likens these young men's enthusiasm for combat to "the baseball spirit: just an ignorant passion for fisticuffs" (112). The negative reception and poor sales of her novel belied her knowledge of the life in the trenches as well as behind the front lines. In *Fighting France*, she describes the "murdered houses" left behind by fleeing families and gravely ill soldiers, and her praise for French valor in battling against "the extinction of their national ideal" is inspiring and evocative (153, 238). *A Son at the Front's* continued status as an oddity in her oeuvre suggests the narrow parameters of acceptable war fiction, as well as war writers themselves.

Wharton's Influence on Her Post-War Reputation

Wharton presented two contradictory faces to the public late in the 1920s and 1930s. Her writing of the period merges the old-fashioned and the modern, and European with American. Some of her writing looked at the past in critical, yet sometimes nostalgic terms. Examples include *The Age of Innocence*, the novella collection *Old New York* (1924), her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), and her unfinished final novel, *The Buccaneers*. Meanwhile, she was also asserting herself as a thoroughly modern social critic through novels like *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *Twilight Sleep*, as well in as short stories such as 'Her Son' (1932) and 'Charm Incorporated' (1934). Between these works, her tone ranges from satirical to deeply serious. In both her fiction and non-fiction, she expressed ambivalent views about America, with the result that her critics did not quite know what to do with her, sometimes with good reason. In Janet Flanner's review of *The Children*, she observes that Wharton's publishers presented her exclusively as a writer of historical fiction, noting "her standard press photograph shows her in pearls and décolletage, dressed for her public as for a ball," but also argues that her "real excellencies" as a writer "are never marketed" (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 464). Lauer describes Flanner's article as a "greatly misinformed, vicious little profile," which simplistically adheres to the "formula" of the author as *grande dame* that dominated critical perceptions from the 1920s onward (Joslin and Price 89). However, Flanner argues against this reductive view, and Lauer misses an early defense of the post-war writing. By not allowing – or asking – her publishers to change her publicity photographs, Wharton furthered the perception that she was an old-fashioned snob.

As 1920s and 1930s wore on, Wharton's doubts regarding her place in American literature intensified. One can see this in her response to *A Son at the Front's* poor sales and reviews. She was shaken by the disappointment, and pondered taking "a long holiday – perhaps to cease from writing altogether" in response to her sense of being "incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art" (BG 369-70). This crisis in confidence

was exacerbated by her lingering uncertainty about ‘Literature,’ an unfinished novel chronicling a young writer’s artistic development. She wrote to her publisher, “The war dealt that masterpiece *Literature* a terrible blow... what repercussions did 1914-1920 have on my young man? ... Can’t get enough perspective yet” (qtd. in Leach 341). It took her nearly a decade to update her concept for the novel and to transform her hero Dicky Thaxter into Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*.¹¹ The persistence of these doubts into the 1930s is evidenced by her preface to the 1932 edition of *Ethan Frome*, in which she felt the need to defend the novel on the basis of her “ten years residence in the New England hill country” (*CW* 262). Her doubts regarding her place in the American canon would never be completely allayed during her lifetime.

Her sense that she was losing credibility with critics made her angry, but her tone of animosity in responding to them did not help her reputation for snobbery.¹² In ‘A Cycle of Reviewing’ (1928), she dismisses the allegation that “I write only about the rich! I will not pause to controvert this by giving a list of my tales, which deal with divers classes of people” (*CW* 161). Elsewhere in the essay, she describes the critic as a lackey, charged with the lowly task of helping artists improve:

A novel is good or bad in proportion to the depth of the author’s nature, the richness of his imagination, and the extent to which he is able to realize his intention. If the reviewers would judge novels by those criteria they would render services greater than they guess to the writer who thirsts to know how much of the inward vision he has succeeded in making visible to others. (162)

Her ideal critic possesses an intuitive understanding of the author’s “nature” and “intention.” But they were the exception; most modern critics actively hindered both the writer and the audience. Her war against the critics rages on in *A Backward Glance*, where she attacks “the modern critic” who “requires every novelist to treat the same kind of subject, and relegates to

¹¹ Wharton described transforming Dicky Thaxter of ‘Literature’ into Vance Weston in a 1930 letter to Elisina Tyler: “After the war it took me long to rethink & transpose it onto the crude terms of modern America; & I am happy to find that my readers think I have succeeded” (*L* 525). For an examination of ‘Literature’ alongside her published work, see Leach’s ‘Edith Wharton’s Unpublished Novel.’

¹² Wharton complained about her critics privately as well as in public. In her journal from the 1920s, she likens reading reviews of her fiction to “watching somebody in boxing-gloves trying to dissect a flower” (*UW* 211).

insignificance the author who fails to conform” while judging a work of fiction “according to *what it ought to have been about*” (206, italics in original). While her arguments have some weight, addressing the issue in this haughty manner may have been worse than not addressing it at all.

She also played into the hands of her critics through her unfortunate tendency to generalize about her countrymen. As evidenced by the earlier discussion of ‘The Great American Novel,’ she often described her countrymen as a materialistic, naïve and tasteless bunch. She observed, “America’s acute literary nationalism has developed in inverse ratio to the growth of modern traveling facilities, and in exact proportion to the very recent Americanism of the majority of our modern literary leaders” (*CW* 156). At a time when Americans enjoyed the financial liberty to explore Europe, she was dismayed to see them becoming more provincial. At the same time, her post-war fiction condemns the behavior of wealthy Americans abroad that transform Europe into a glamorous playground. Her attacks on Americans as both parochial and vulgarly jet-setting cut both ways, and often pleased no one.

Wharton’s condescending tone was not out of keeping with that of other social observers, yet her critiques were often perceived differently to theirs. H. L. Mencken had also challenged the nation’s superficiality and materialism, and saw an enlightened aristocracy as vital to grooming mass taste. He wrote in 1925, “I believe the worse curse of life in America is that it is impossible to think of one’s self as an American without blushing” (*Gist* 4). This sounds like something Wharton might have said, though his words were not taken to be snobbish. His readers knew that his sharp-tongued critiques were rooted in a love for his country. ‘The Sage of Baltimore’ had lived in his childhood home in that city for all his life, and took an embracing, warts-and-all view of the nation. Edmund Wilson observed that the critic “did indeed worry and hope with the American people in the throes of their democratic experiment” (Stenerson 68). Meanwhile, Wharton’s national allegiances were less clear, particularly given her long residence in France. Though her sympathies with the United States were sometimes hard to see, they were

there. Her hostile, haughty expressions can belie the subtlety of her opinions, yet the post-war fiction tells a more inflected story of her engagement with her country.

Wharton's ease as a literary businesswoman helped her to achieve popularity among American audiences, though this also damaged her credibility among critics. Millicent Bell observes that "she was never sentimental about the meaning of success or fame; she believed they should and could be made to reward the artist materially" ('Lady' 296). Louis Auchincloss also argues that the author "learned to make use of all popular media" such as magazines, the stage, and the movies (*Her Time* 148). A key part of this, in Wharton's view, was aligning herself with the publishers who would most aggressively promote her writing and compensate her most generously for it. Her view as to which was the best house for the job began to shift around 1910. Charles Scribner's Sons had published her previous work. Yet Wharton bristled when the house reduced her advance for *The Custom of the Country*, after sales of *The Fruit of the Tree* had proven disappointing. She also felt that their proposed advertising budget for *Ethan Frome* was too low. These factors prompted her to accept a \$15,000 advance from rival Appleton for *The Reef*. From then on, the house became her principal publisher (Wright, *A to Z* 11, 226). Wharton allowed Scribner to publish some of her writing – including *Xingu and Other Stories*, *A Son at the Front*, and *The Writing of Fiction* – though Appleton enjoyed the rights to many of her most successful works. Scribner regretted the loss, as he expressed in an imploring letter to Wharton after she won the Pulitzer: "I have not abandoned the hope of securing future novels. The loss of your books was the greatest blow ever given to my pride as a publisher" (qtd. in Bell, 'Lady' 313). While Wharton's choice could be seen as mercenary, Bell points out that the author "seems to have come to this decision with some regret" ('Lady' 309). Though she clearly liked Charles Scribner as a friend and editor, the alliance with Appleton made better financial sense. Moreover, her relationship with editor Rutger B. Jewett was lucrative in more ways than one, shaping her reputation and body of work.

Though she possessed formidable entrepreneurial savvy, crafting a public persona was not one of Edith Wharton's strengths. Boswell claims, "Although Wharton had enjoyed great prestige and had been marketing her celebrity for many years, after World War I she was at the mercy of a newly energized mass market that might have catered to women but was still almost exclusively powered by men" (33). Though she enjoyed a kind of celebrity status, she also kept herself private and did not want her life story to be known. She wanted to control how her books were read and how audiences saw her. In 1924, she wrote, "When I get glimpses, in books and reviews, of the things people are going to assert about me after I am dead, I feel I must have the courage and perseverance, some day, to forestall them" (*UW* 211). Her attempts to do so are evident in her memoirs. She redacted *A Backward Glance* from a more candid unpublished version, 'Life and I.' *A Backward Glance* offers insight into the life of the author, though reveals little about the life of the woman, omitting most information about her marriage and family relationships. Wharton preemptively shaped her posthumous life with same fastidiousness. By her request, Gaillard Lapsley sold the bulk of her private letters and manuscripts to Yale University in 1938, stipulating that the materials could not be used to produce biographical studies for thirty years. The collection holds nearly fifty thousand items relating to her, including personal diaries and correspondence (Lewis 549). The terms of her will kept the nuances of her life, personality, and opinions hidden from view for decades.

Mid-Century Attitudes Toward Wharton

The 'Main Street' values Wharton lamented in 'The Great American Novel' came to dominate the nation's literature in the wake of the financial collapse of 1929. Michael Denning's study of the legacy of the 1930s radical left, *The Cultural Front* (1997), describes the 1930s as marked by a "proletarianization of American culture," which enabled the working class to enjoy

an increased influence in art and politics (xvii). The realist narratives of the decade, like those of the 1920s, reject the nineteenth century French and English novel form that Wharton revered. The leading critics of the time – among them Granville Hicks, F. O. Matthiessen, and Malcolm Cowley – identified themselves with the Popular Front, a faction of the Communist Party in the United States that opposed the rise of fascism. The Popular Front’s vision of a more egalitarian nation continued to influence literature and criticism long after America had disavowed its brief flirtation with communism, and Wharton continued to be seen as a *grande dame* throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Through critics of these years were obviously not all of one mind, her writing found few passionate defenders. The New Critics had relatively little to say about her, valorizing the modernist tradition that she had written against.¹³ Writing anonymously for *The Egoist* in 1918, Eliot had attributed to her “the distinction of being the satirist’s satirist” in his review of *Summer* (Tuttleton, Lauer, and Murray 263). He does not mention her in his writing after this. In *The Great Tradition* (1948), Leavis mentions her three times, though does so exclusively in connection with Henry James (11, 162, 166). Had the New Critics looked past the ‘novelist of manners’ label and the middlebrow status of her later writing, they would have found shared sympathies with her. Notable among them was the belief in the cultural necessity of an educated intellectual elite. Moreover, as I discuss in Chapter Two, the novelist had more in common with modernist literary style than she recognized.

Scholars interested in the study of American literature at mid-century also neglected a potentially fertile field of inquiry by dismissing her writing. Parrington’s *Currents in American Thought* (1928) became the founding text of the American Studies movement, valorizing symbols and myths as vital ingredients in the nation’s literature. Though Wharton’s fiction of the 1920s and 1930s consistently examines the role of myth and illusion in American life, Parrington would never revise the assessment of her he had reached in ‘Our Literary Aristocrat.’ In *The Liberal*

¹³ Acocella notes that Cather faced a similar posthumous problem: “her prose did not have the formal intricacies that were the New Critics’ meat” (32).

Imagination (1950), Lionel Trilling asserts that American Studies had transformed the nation's literature into an "*object of study*" rather than a subject of study, suggesting that the nation's literary traditions were retrospectively imposed rather than organically formed (292, italics in original). He argues that critics shape national identity through choosing which works of fiction 'accurately' depict American life and values. This resonates with the contentions Wharton makes in her critical studies from the 1920s. To some extent, Wharton and Trilling held similar views about American literature and the novel. Both shared a deep reverence for the European social novel, and were concerned with what Trilling describes as "the intellectual weakness of American prose literature" (*Liberal* 293). However, Trilling sees Wharton's writing as "following where others lead," describing *Ethan Frome* as embodying "the bad sense of the word 'literary'" (*Fugitives* 40, 35). Though the novel had become a classic in her lifetime, two decades later, it had been reduced to melodrama.¹⁴ While her assessment of 'American ways and their meaning' shared points of critique with future scholars, they simply did not see her as someone who spoke authoritatively about America in the modern period. Her fears about her future of her reputation within the nation's tradition had proven to be well founded.

The critics who were retrospectively shaping American literary history characterized Wharton as a peripheral player. In *On Native Grounds* (1942), Alfred Kazin argues that the nation's rejection of European social tradition after the Civil War had fostered a homegrown realism. Though he claims that her contributions to the tradition had been underrated, he nevertheless characterizes her as a stepping-stone for better writers to follow (78). Notably, his vision of realism departs significantly from the European models to which Wharton adhered. In a chapter comparing her to Dreiser, Kazin calls her "the biting old dowager of American letters," contending that in her later years she "poured out a series of cheap novels" and that she had ultimately "suggested more distinction than she possessed" (82). His arguments suggest that the

¹⁴ Bell observes of Trilling's assessment, "once reproached for her preoccupation with the wealthy, now she was criticized for having strayed from familiar scenes" (*Cambridge* 10).

critical tendency to attack the author while purporting to examine her fiction had not dissipated. More than half a century later, Andrew Delbanco's remembrance of Kazin hints toward a justification for his hostility toward her. He describes Kazin as a critic that "demanded hope from every writer he assessed" and was outraged by fiction which "fell short of its obligation to disclose some ground for building a better future" in America. Meanwhile, much of Wharton's fiction depicts a flawed society, to which an ideal alternative cannot be imagined. Consistently, her characters must compromise in the face of the ideals – social and personal – that structure how they perceive the world and act in it. Her narratives often run contrary to the vision of the nation that Kazin saw as essential to great American fiction. Yet, novels such as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Gods Arrive*, and *The Buccaneers* offer alternatives to the systemically rooted disappointments of American lives, even if those alternatives are tempered by compromise. Neither the author nor the critic was inclined to meet one another's perspective halfway. Kazin could not see Wharton outside existing perceptions of her snobbery, and, though she was writing before his time, she was unable to fully embrace an American realism defined by optimism.¹⁵

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Wharton's defenders were often difficult to separate from her detractors. Through its title alone, Edmund Wilson's essay 'In Defense of Edith Wharton' (1937) indicates the extent to which perceptions of the author had impeded her canonical status by the time she died. Wilson called her one of the "few American writers worth reading" between 1905 and 1917 (Howe 62). Yet his defense was far from unequivocal. He dismissed everything she wrote after *Summer* as commonplace, including *The Age of Innocence*. The essay reiterates Granville Hicks' contention in *The Great Tradition* (1933) that the author was merely the best of "a very narrow field" (217-218). Wilson felt she had captured turn of the century life, but that living abroad had caused her skill to fade. Beer argues that he had been

¹⁵ A number of critics have contradicted Kazin by arguing for Wharton's place in American naturalism. Donald Pizer asserts that Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and *The Age of Innocence* were major examples of the genre (Bendixen and Zilversmit 130-131). *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (1995) locates the author in a tradition of naturalism and realism, with Bell noting in her introduction, "current redefinitions of Realism and Naturalism include her in a new historical context, and her works now are being studied as part of the complex cultural and political dynamics of the early twentieth century" (15).

wrong to conclude that “physical distance disqualifies Wharton from penetrating... to the root of the social malaise she wished to portray” (*Traveller* 91). Though he championed Wharton at a time when few other critics remembered her, Wilson’s views were also clearly shaped by earlier assessments of her work and increasingly persuasive arguments regarding what American literature and novelists ‘should’ be.

The first biography written about Wharton after her death, Percy Lubbock’s *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (1947), also offered an ambivalent account of the author. After her death, her literary executor, Gaillard Lapsley, entrusted Lubbock with the project. However, Wharton and Lubbock’s friendship had all but ended in 1926, which made the appointment surprising.¹⁶ More surprising still was Lubbock’s approach. He constructs his portrait through letters of remembrance solicited for the occasion, which Hermione Lee suggests may have served to “fill in his own gaps” in remembering her (750). The biographer’s ambivalent feelings come through clearly, while his admiration for Henry James is distracting. At times, James seems to occupy the centre of Lubbock’s portrait, with Wharton appearing merely “under his banner” or behind his “massive figure” (Lubbock 137, 220). The biography draws from and intensifies perceptions of her difficult personality. She comes across as fussy and temperamental, agonizing over her gardens or exasperating her guests by wheedling over the details of a ‘spontaneous’ picnic lunch. Lubbock characterizes her as a “shining intruder” and “angel of devastation,” and at times we are left to wonder – as he clearly did – why James was ever fond of her in the first place (17). Lubbock maintained the established view of her creative decline after 1920, observing, “The time was to come when she had so controlled her craft that it had little history to relate” (43).

Since its publication, Lubbock’s biography has occupied an ignominious place in Wharton scholarship. Shortly after its debut, a number of the author’s surviving friends voiced

¹⁶ Wharton and Lubbock fell out after he married Lady Sybil Cutting Scott, who had previously married two of the author’s friends, one of whom died of tuberculosis in 1910, the second of whom she divorced in 1926. These marriages convinced Wharton that Lady Sybil was “aggressive and manipulative” (Wright, *A to Z* 156). The rift between Lubbock and Wharton was never healed, though he unsuccessfully pleaded for her understanding after a chance encounter in Salzburg in 1933 (Lewis 515).

their disapproval. Among them was Kenneth Clark, who angrily remarked, “It is really impossible to imagine that the polished American duchess of Mr. Lubbock’s biography could have written *Summer*; and she didn’t” (qtd. in Lee 698-699). Decades later, William Royall Tyler condemned Lubbock’s “systematic personal hostility” toward her (94). In his essay, ‘Personal Memories of Edith Wharton’ (1973), he treats her more generously: “She was the most buoyant human being I had ever known, or shall, doubtless, ever know” (96). His account of her gentle disposition contrasted with Lubbock’s tiresome, ornery dowager. Around the same time, R. W. B. Lewis, whose biography of Wharton in 1975 first drew on her archival materials, argues that Lubbock’s study displayed “a subtly distributed malice toward its subject, a careful, muted downgrading of Edith Wharton as a human being and as a writer” (515-516). Subsequent scholars have this perspective on Lubbock, with Joslin calling his image of her “cold, austere, snobbish” and “not much of a writer” (*Wharton* 130). Lee also argues that Lubbock had “a baleful effect” on the author’s reputation, effectively “embalming” her as a “grand, fussy, imperious Jamesian” (644, 750). Though Lubbock and Lapsley likely hoped the study would endear Wharton to a new generation of readers, it failed to correct many of the misleading conclusions that critics had reached about her during the final years of her life.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Wharton’s novels were languishing on bookstore shelves – if merchants were selling them at all. Many of her books had gone out of print, and Scribner’s reported selling only “between seven and fifteen copies” of *The Custom of the Country* between 1948 and 1952 (Lee 751). The author found a rare defender during these years in Blake Nevius. His study, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (1953), places the author among the nation’s foremost social historians and novelists of manners. While Nevius maintains that James outclasses her in this respect, he also takes a more complex look at the relationship between the two writers. Like Wilson and Lubbock, he regarded the post-war fiction as flawed, yet he also claimed that more of her writing merited attention, arguing that her ghost stories had been “strangely neglected” (94). This neglect would persist for decades, until these stories captured

the attention of critics like Margaret McDowell and Annette Zilversmit. Nevius began in earnest the work of mending the author's reputation, though he wrestled with persisting notions of her difficult personality and creative decline.

Spurred on by Nevius's study and the publication of *The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton* (1958), academic interest in the author began to build in the early 1960s. This is evidenced by Irving Howe's *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962), which includes the aforementioned articles by Parrington and Wilson, as well as others from Diana Trilling, Q. D. Leavis, and Kazin. In his introduction, Howe argues that she deserved greater recognition within the American canon (1). Even so, in a number of respects, the collection fails to further this argument convincingly. These essays reiterate the *grande dame* image of Wharton, characterizing her writing as limited in historical and socioeconomic terms. Howe points out that his contributors unanimously describe the later fiction as "shoddy" and notable only for the "truculence of temper" the author displayed in it (5, 13). Trilling and Leavis were the only two female contributors, a discrepancy Donald Stone has argued suggests a "condescending attitude of most of the commentators" toward female intellectuals (149). In keeping with this, Diana Trilling's essay treats the author the most favorably, arguing that she has wrongly been denied "her proper place in the main stream of American literature" (Howe 103). Still, the spark of the feminist cause in the academy had yet to be ignited, and there was much about her that critics found difficult to defend.

Elsewhere, female critics were beginning to take note of how personal criticisms permeated debates about her fiction. Still, these emerging defenders continued to find her difficult to relate to on a personal level. Bell characterizes Wharton as plagued by the "emotional limitations" of a life that was "dry and empty" (*Friendship* 310). Bell's *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship* (1966) explores the personal and artistic connections between the two writers. It also offers a rare defense of Wharton's post-1920 fiction. In defiance of the majority of her predecessors, Bell argues that the later writing shows the author having reached

her “full maturity of her powers as a social satirist” (298). Bell goes on to assert that negative comparisons with James and the dismissal of the later work had resulted in “a double misestimate of her achievement” (303). Bell’s stance was audacious in its time, though Lee notes that her project was hindered by “trouble with the Wharton estate for trying to quote from the embargoed papers” (751). Grace Kellogg points out in her study, *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work* (1965), that studying Wharton as a graduate student left her with a powerful dislike of the author (312). She attacks the roots of these kind of disagreeable impressions of the author, relying on previously unpublished interviews and letters she had written to Louis Bromfield between 1932 and 1936. Kellogg’s work offered new insight into Wharton’s later years, as well as her continued engagement with contemporary literature, culture, and society.

Both Bell and Kellogg recognized that the negative image of Wharton was not entirely accurate, and had pulled scholarly and mainstream attention away from her writing.

Things began to look up for Wharton. Louis Auchincloss’s *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (1971) offers a high-spirited, endearing account of the author. Auchincloss, a novelist of New York’s upper crust, drew from his personal collection of Whartoniana in bringing the project together. His labor of love sought to refute the stereotypes that had accumulated around her. Like others during these years – with the exception of R. W. B. Lewis, who had begun researching his biography in 1966 – Auchincloss did not have access to her archives at Yale. Like Lubbock, he constructs his portrait through the words of those who knew her, yet while their methodologies were similar, Auchincloss shows far greater sympathy with his subject. Lubbock characterized her as domineering, while Auchincloss suggests that her intrepid exterior belied shy, sensitive ways. He encourages readers to see her differently – as friends like William Royall Tyler and Kenneth Clark remembered her – with his claim that “her gaiety, her buoyancy, her laughter, her love of life” had not been stressed as often as her formality and reserve (151). He also challenges assumptions regarding her opulent background, characterizing her as

someone who often felt like an awkward outsider in high society, and arguing that the Jones family had been “well off but not rich” (18). He claimed that her wealth and passion for European aligned with her countrymen, rather than setting her apart from them: “If anyone says that what she did was not worth doing, I can only answer that the society of which she wrote was an integral part of the American Dream—the American myth—the American illusion” (191). Though Wharton criticized American idealism – particularly the American Dream – Auchincloss points out that she also recognized its power, and embodied its principle of self-improvement. While his biography offers a refreshing take on Wharton on the whole, it also strikes a few discordant notes. He notes that her “satire of the china shop is almost as heavy as the horns and hoofs of her young bull” in *Hudson River Bracketed* (176). He has little good to say about her other fiction from the period, describing it as a “grotesque caricature of American life” and commenting, “Edith’s preoccupation with vulgarity had for the moment vulgarized her perceptions” (173, 171). The work’s most significant flaw is suggested in its title: it limits Wharton to ‘her time,’ neglecting to consider her observations about American society between the World Wars. By thinking about her purely in terms of the turn of the century, he reinforced longstanding notions that she drifted away from the United States as she aged.

Wharton’s Rebirth

R. W. B. Lewis’s *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975) was the first account of her life that drew from the archives at Yale. It occasioned a significant turnaround in her reputation, one so dramatic that Helen Killoran has referred to the forty years between her death and its publication as simply “The Lull” (6). It earned the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for biography, the Bancroft Prize, and the National Critics Book Circle award for non-fiction. In his preface, Lewis sets out his goal of changing the established view of her, arguing that Lubbock had described her as “too much of

the *grande dame*' (xii). He dispels notions of her coldness, focusing on her close friendships and wartime charitable endeavors. He refutes her old-fashionedness, pointing out that both *The House of Mirth* and *Summer* had generated public outcry for their candid treatment of the 'woman question' (xii, 398). The biography recontextualizes her 'snobbery' as something which enhanced her fiction, describing her as "not snobbish in the familiar American way," but as "*très snob* in the then contemporary Parisian manner." This attitude, Lewis asserts, was "an integral part of her historical imagination" and essential to her success as a writer (212). For many Wharton scholars and fans, the revelation of her romantic affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton forever shattered her *grande dame* image. The frustration the affair provoked in the biographer is clear throughout: she was besotted with him, and he often treated her with lukewarm ambivalence. Lewis also brings Wharton's private diaries and notes to the public for the first time. Among these documents was a revealing love poem to Fullerton called 'Terminus,' as well as the 'Beatrice Palmato' story fragment, in which she sketched an incestuous encounter between a father and daughter. He defends publishing these revealing materials with his claim that she "took determined steps to see that later generations would know her as she truly was" though she remained "properly discreet and evasive in her lifetime" (525). Overall, his vision of Wharton is that of a resolutely modern woman, despite her Old New York pedigree.

In some respects, however, Lewis's biography maintained the status quo. Most obviously, it reiterates the secondary status of much of her 1920s and 1930s writing, dismissing the short stories as a quick income source. These works were "acceptable to popular magazine editors and tolerable to magazine readers" but a far cry from her "best fiction" (447). A few of the novels from these years – *The Mother's Recompense*, *The Children*, and *The Buccaneers* – earn his measured praise. However, he argues that *Twilight Sleep* and the Vance Weston novels are "seriously and variously marred" (523). He also classes *The Glimpses of the Moon* as symptomatic of the "weaknesses and dangerous temptations by which she was beginning to be beset" (446).

His claim that an exploration of the “maternal imagination” hampered the later fiction became the impetus of a decades-long debate about gender in her later fiction that continues today.

Wharton was relevant again, and more of her writing was being read for the first time in decades. Slowly but surely, her novels and stories were being reissued (Lee 752). Lewis’s biography inspired many to apply the new knowledge about her life to her fiction, among them his former research assistant, Cynthia Griffin Wolff. Her book, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977), builds upon the humanity Lewis had restored. She argues that to take a new approach to her fiction, “we must turn to less easily verifiable elements in Wharton’s life—to her memories and emotions as she has reported them—to the reality of her inner world” (12). She sees Wharton’s romantic disappointments and relationship with a “disapproving, impatient, and unloving” mother as inspiring characters such as Lily Bart and Charity Royall (12). She argues that Wharton embraced Old New York “only after it had passed her by” and that this nostalgic mood marred her writing after *The Age of Innocence* (342). Like Lewis, Griffin Wolff takes a largely dismissive view of the later fiction. She reads *The Glimpses of the Moon* as a weak retelling of *The House of Mirth*, states simply that *A Son at the Front* “should have been better,” and comments that the Vance Weston novels show the author at “her old-fashioned, lecturing worst” (346, 348, 393). Her claim that Wharton was “growing dangerously out of touch with the world that she felt forevermore to be *her* world—American society, the society of fashionable New York especially” echoes some seventy years of critical tradition (373). Still, Griffin Wolff’s readings of Wharton’s canonical novels were innovative, and instigated a great deal of inquiry into her writing.

A number of compelling studies of her life and fiction appeared alongside those of Lewis and Griffin Wolff, with gender issues at the center of critical debate. As a result of this, new areas of her oeuvre – namely *The Reef* (1912), *Summer*, and the ghost stories – gradually

assumed canonical status.¹⁷ Margaret McDowell's *Edith Wharton* (1976) argues that the author's treatment of female desire was more progressive than previously recognized: "Certainly no American author before 1939 produced such penetrating studies of women who, instead of marrying, decide to risk social ostracism by contracting temporary alliances based on mutual trust and sexual desire" (82). As McDowell's words suggest, the new vision of the author that emerged in the late 1970s was an ambitious, sensual heroine. This inspired a backlash from some critics, among them James Tuttleton, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. They felt that a more accurate understanding of the author fell between the extremes of Old New York and passionate modern heroine. Tuttleton's article, "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton" (1989) alleges that a "sorority" of scholars had mischaracterized the author as "an exemplary victim of the male patriarchy," taking a reductive view of her fiction as either sympathetic or traitorous to the feminist cause (8, 10). However, the tendency to defend or dismiss Wharton cannot be simply divided between feminists and non-feminists. In their investigation of the history of female authors, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1989), Gilbert and Gubar devote a chapter to Wharton, in which they work to dismantle the lingering vestiges of her stuffy image of her.¹⁸ They contend that she was "emphatically not a feminist in the ordinary sense of the word," but rather seemed "to have gone out of her way to present herself as an old-fashioned 'man's woman' who felt nothing but contempt for New Womanly strivings" (126). They correctly point out that Wharton's views cannot simply be classed as either progressive or conservative, and allude to the difficulty in placing Wharton within a tradition of women writers while acknowledging her old-fashioned inclinations.

¹⁷ Beer defies the trend of female critics that include *The Reef* among Wharton's best fiction: "In reading this novel you could be forgiven for believing that Wharton never attained a coherent voice of her own in either fiction or criticism; both its subject and language are a deferral to James." She adds, "the novel is in many ways a reprise of James's 1881 novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*" (*Writers*: 58).

¹⁸ Bruce Bawer points out that Gilbert and Gubar give Wharton short shrift elsewhere. Their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) accords her "only a few pages," while including entire novels from "less accomplished writers" that Bawer sees as "more compatible with the editor's brand of feminist politics" (23).

Feminist scholarship has played a tremendous role in how we see Wharton and her fiction today. It transformed her from an icy, irrelevant dowager to a passionate, progressive woman. Yet in some instances, the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. Joslin has complained that some scholarship of the author verges on gossip about her “sex life” (*Wharton* 19). Several of Wharton’s critics in the 1990s looked to find the dark side beneath the composed surface of America’s literary matriarch.¹⁹ Gloria Erlich’s *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (1992), offers some compelling readings of Wharton’s fiction, but also argues that romantic disappointments and a disapproving mother inspired virtually everything she ever wrote. Erlich links *The Mother’s Recompense* to the author’s failed engagement to Harry Stevens, commenting that his mother’s disapproval “remained a bitter potion for life. Her dismissal seems to have resonated with all the maternal rejection that Edith carried over from childhood and served as an acceptable lightning rod for her feelings” (147). She confusingly claims that the author’s private disappointments enhance some of her fiction, such as *The Reef* and *Summer*, but that these same events diminish the quality of her later novels, among them *The Mother’s Recompense*. A similar approach to Wharton can be seen in *Edith Wharton in Context: Essays on Intertextuality* (1999), where Adeline Tinter observes that she wrote very few stories “in which there is any significant relation between daughter and mother” (75). Tinter links this to her “hatred of mother” and “incestuous feelings for her father” (77). Where earlier critics had used a selective reading of Wharton’s biography to justify their attacks on her, more recently critics have used a radically different narrative of her life to defend her writing. The elision between her life and work has shifted, perhaps softened, but has not entirely dissipated.

Even groundbreaking studies of Wharton are not immune to the need to psychoanalyze her. Elizabeth Ammons is arguably the most notable example. Her insightful commentary in *Edith Wharton’s Argument With America* (1980) justifiably earned her a place at the fore of Wharton

¹⁹ Joan Acocella makes a similar argument regarding scholarship of Willa Cather, wryly observing, “No tree can grow, no river flow in Cather’s landscapes without this being a penis or a menstrual period” (75).

scholarship. Ammons' claims about the author's criticism of the turn-of-the-century 'new woman' are compelling, yet her reading of the post-1920 writing is less convincing. She argues that the later fiction fails in its attempt to characterize motherhood as "woman's best and most fulfilling job in life," because Wharton "was not the author to make mothers and their lives credible and important and at the same time human. She had never resolved her feelings toward her own mother, toward whom she harbored a blighting, disproportionate anger that often comes out in her less-than-perfect mothers in the fiction" (186). Ammons's claim that the later work purely advocates a return to the traditional roles of wife and mother is an oversimplification. It recognizes the self-sacrificing mothers and wives of the post-war fiction, but fails to account for the frivolous flappers Wharton presents as a counterpoint. While the author's difficult relationship with her mother is established fact, it is less tenable to assume that she "never resolved her feelings" and that her anger was "disproportionate." To dismiss seventeen productive years of a Pulitzer Prize-winning author's work because she might have still hated her mother – who died in 1901, very early in her writing career – also seems "disproportionate," to say the least. Ammons's implication that conservative domestic values yield bad fiction also seems restrictive from the perspective of third-wave feminism, which came to the fore during the mid-1990s. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards describe this iteration of feminism as a matter of individual choice, observing, "We're not doing feminism the same way that the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn't mean copying what came before but finding one's own way – a way that is genuine to one's own generation" (ix). They give equal credence to the traditionally minded as well as the progressive leaning. By merging liberal and conservative views, Wharton's post-war writing lends itself more readily to this pliable model. Her views on gender and relations between the sexes were conservative in many respects, but her fiction also refuses to accept that social progress for women – or for America as a whole – can be measured in terms of shorter skirts, easier divorce, or more things to buy. In that respect, she was decades ahead of fast-living flappers.

Reconciling the Two Edith Whartons

Wharton had been savaged by the highbrow left in the 1920s, condescended to by the New Critics of the 1950s, and was reborn through the efforts of liberal-minded scholars in the 1970s.²⁰ Bearing in mind Tuttleton's exhortation about the "feminist takeover" of Wharton scholarship, critics since the 1990s constructed a more balanced image of her, with many also defending her post-1920 fiction. Janet Beer's *Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters* (1990) explores the relationships the author establishes between landscapes, cultures, and literary genres. Beer characterizes *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep* and *The Children* as part of a "distinct American group," and points out that these novels had been "substantially ignored in the past" (3, 4-5). Lev Raphael's *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on Her Neglected Fiction* (1991) argues that post-war works center around episodes of humiliation. Raphael reads Pauline Manford of *Twilight Sleep* as the author's self-deprecating caricature of herself, and describes Vance Weston's saga as an "unromantic" portrait of America's cultural deprivation (151, 225). While it largely focuses on *The Custom of the Country* and *The House of Mirth*, Nancy Bentley's *The Ethnography of Manners* (1995) asserts that Wharton's fiction, "far from being anachronistic, returns to us as one of a number of emergent and modern discourses on culture" by translating the European model of the novel of manners to twentieth century America (69). While Bentley defends her unique capabilities as a social observer, she unfortunately chooses not to approach her works of the 1920s and 1930s from this intriguing perspective.

The notion that Wharton was out of touch with American life in the 1920s and 1930s has also been challenged. Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1996) contends that the post-war fiction reflects her engagement with contemporary political issues, among them birth control and eugenics. Bauer also notes the author's interest in the deepening menace of Fascism in Europe during the 1930s, linking it to a softening in her attitudes about the United States.

²⁰ Acocella makes a similar argument about Cather, pointing out that the author's reputation suffered "deadly kiss of the right" and that "the axe that came down in the twenties shifted its angle over the years, but it went on splitting American literature through the sixties, and Cather always ended up on the wrong side" (29, 35).

Joslin and Alan Price's collection, *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe* (1996), challenges notions that her move to France diminished her talents as a writer. In 'Can France Survive This Defender? Contemporary American Reaction to Wharton's Expatriation,' Lauer calls attention to the "four fallacies of contemporary Wharton criticism." These include perceptions of the author as primarily a "disciple of James," as a "woman author," as limited by her upper class background, and as more sympathetic to France than to the United States (Joslin and Price 80). *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton* (1999), also hints toward new ways of thinking about Wharton's relationship with the United States, drawing upon *In Morocco* (1920), *The Fruit of the Tree* and *The Children* to reconsider the relationships she establishes between her homeland, Europe, and Africa. Elsewhere, Hoeller's *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* challenges "the most commonly told critical narrative of Wharton's career, which describes her early triumph as a realist and her decline into sentimental fiction after the publication of her last 'masterpiece,' *The Age of Innocence*" (x). Hoeller's study is compelling, though the ambivalence that exists within Wharton's later writing cannot exclusively be attributed to literary genre. Nationality, gender, history, and class play a greater role in structuring that ambivalence than these parameters allow. Beer's *Writers and Their Work: Edith Wharton* (2002) asserts that the "second rank" reputation of her writing during the 1920s and 1930s has been wrongly "predicated on the assumption that the texts are written by someone alienated or estranged from the subject of her fiction" (65). Beer acknowledges the author's complicated relationship with her nation, while encouraging new Wharton scholars to free themselves from its shadow.

Wharton scholars have also bolstered the reputation of her post-war writing by linking it with the modernist movement. In *Women of the Left Bank* (1987), Benstock extends modernism beyond the formalism of the New Critics to include identity politics. She argues that female artists were integral to the movement, through their own artistic endeavor and in their support of male artists. While acknowledging Wharton's conservatism, Benstock brings the author partially

into the modernist fold, describing her as drawn to the “certain experimenting with life” that Paris afforded her (*Left* 61). She expands on this vision in her biography of Wharton, *No Gifts From Chance* (1994), which focuses on Wharton’s business-minded approach to her writing career, and refutes allegations that she had sold out to women’s magazines in from the 1920s onward. Judith Sensibar’s essay in Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit’s collection *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays* (1992) compares Martin Boyne of *The Children* to the emotionally stunted bachelors of Henry James and T. S. Eliot, placing Wharton in dialogue with modernism. Elsewhere in the collection, Ammons links anxieties about social acceptance and ‘passing’ in her fiction to that of Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Fauset. Her argument anticipates that of Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* (1997), which explores linkages between African-American literatures and modernism. In *Influencing America’s Tastes*, Thompson examines Wharton’s fiction and aesthetics in terms of a clash between the middlebrow and modernism. She contends that “feminist attempts to revise modernism” in order to place authors like Wharton within the modernist canon are “misplaced” and reflect the predominance of a “high modernist paradigm” within the study of American literature (ix, xi). Also, Jennifer Haytock’s *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (2008), sees Wharton as sharing modernist ideas and concerns. The monumental significance of modernism in twentieth-century literature has helped these studies to elevate Wharton’s reputation within the academy. Yet they have also placed a writer who held very passionate views about American culture in a denationalized context. These studies have brought the author the attention and acclaim, but do not consider how nationality shaped her post-war writing and its reputation.

Examinations of material culture have also fostered new insight into Wharton’s later writing and helped to change established views of her. Edie Thornton’s 2001 essay, ‘Selling Edith Wharton’ explores *The Mother’s Recompense* in its original serialized context, tracing how the illustrated Kate Clephane’s attractiveness and age changes in concert with adjacent advertisements. Despite Thornton’s overly optimistic conclusion that the text overrides the

accompanying illustrations, affording “an expanded vision of age, sexuality, and self definition to women readers,” it explores the later fiction in an innovative way (30). Gary Totten’s collection, *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors* (2007) investigates the author’s relationship to industries such as advertising and cinema. In the collection, Bennett points out, “Wharton’s work, by and large, did not accord with the contemporary horizon of expectations, the expectations of a critical community intent on identifying a uniquely American idiom” (35). Such a critique could aptly have been applied to her fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. However, the collection focuses on *The House of Mirth* to a far greater extent than Wharton’s other novels and stories. Deborah Zak’s essay, ‘Building the Female Body: Modern Technology and Techniques at Work in *Twilight Sleep*’ is a notable exception, though it does not look at the later fiction in the context of American identity. Later, in *Edith Wharton and The Making of Fashion* (2009), Joslin argues that women’s fashion – whether from turn-of-the-century couturiers or modern department stores – serves as a critical vehicle for her shifting views on American art and society. Joslin correctly points out that she describes nineteenth-century fashions in greater detail, but by in favoring *The Age of Innocence* and *The Buccaneers* over the later fiction, she neglects Wharton’s commentary on post-war femininity, sexuality, and taste in the fiction that deals with contemporary America.

There continues to be demand for new information about Wharton’s life and work. Lee’s biography *Edith Wharton* (2007), offers unprecedented insight into the author’s life. Lee’s portrait of the author is one of constant dynamism and ambition, suggesting that being her nation’s foremost female novelist was simply one of many things Wharton did daily, well, and with exhaustive attention to detail. Lee challenges lingering comparisons between Wharton and James, noting that where Wharton does “use James as a literary model, it is more often to write against him than to write under him” (218). Unlike Lewis’s biography – which devotes more attention to the early decades of her career – Lee gives every phase of the author’s life a thorough assessment, calling attention to her lifelong fascination with America. Laura Rattray’s recent collection, *The Unpublished Writing of Edith Wharton* (2009), brings texts such as ‘Literature’

and 'Fast and Loose' to a wider audience, along with uncollected life writing and plays. In addition to these new approaches to her life and work, Wharton continues to have a place in contemporary culture.²¹ Still, as Lee has noted, "much still remains to be done with the posthumous life of Edith Wharton." The collection of her letters edited by R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis includes less than ten percent of her correspondence. The short story collections *Here and Beyond* (1926) and *Certain People* (1930) remain out of print (Lee 753). While her reputation has enjoyed a remarkable rejuvenation over the past quarter-century, the extent to which Wharton's fiction uniquely assesses American life and ideology during the 1920s and 1930s has not been fully explored.

²¹ One small example of this comes from a reporter covering New York Fashion Week described a look in Marc Jacobs' Fall 2011 runway show as "Edith Wharton-esque lace beneath a slim smoking jacket" (Craik 13).

Chapter Two

Wharton's Defense of History in Modern America

Wharton's defense of the relevance of the past in the present contributed to her fall from critical favor in the 1920s and 1930s, and continues to shape the reputation of her post-war writing. This chapter makes three claims about her complex relationship to history. First, while she had criticized the restrictiveness of late nineteenth-century America, she came to see value in social and moral tradition after the war, believing that modern life had dispensed with distinctions between public and private. In fictions such as *The Age of Innocence*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, and 'Roman Fever,' she asserts that the network of privacy, secrets, and taboo that had governed conduct in previous generations had enriched individual lives and society as a whole. She argues for the relevance of tradition in contemporary life through her old-fashioned characters, while acknowledging that retreating to the past was an imperfect solution to modern problems. Second, her fiction of the period challenges emerging 'boom and bust' narratives of history as an iteration of the American tendency to view life and society in ideal terms, which she critiques in 'The Great American Novel.' Third, her defense of tradition extended to literary history, leading her to reject notions that modernist form represented worthwhile literary innovation. However, her own writing had more in common with the movement than she recognized.

The 'Gulf Between Those Days and These'

Wharton had long thought of her fellow Americans as being oblivious to history. Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country* is a case in point: she is bored to tears by the cultural and social traditions of Europe, merely interested in perpetuating the customs of her own country by marrying up the social ladder. She lives her life in the present tense, Miss U. S. of

Apex City, by every measure the product of a nation with a relatively short history. Wharton may not have been entirely surprised by the resumption of life as usual in America after World War I, but it troubled her enormously. This dismay comes through in her descriptions of Americans in Paris during the concluding scenes of *A Son at the Front*: “The idle and the useless had reached their emotional limit, and once more they dressed and painted, smiled, gossiped, flirted as though the long agony were over” (172). Like many of her contemporaries, she saw the war as a monumental event in world history, exceptional relative to all that had happened before it. She often described the conflict in terms of its bewildering magnitude, writing in 1914 that she felt as if she were living “in the year 1000, with the last trump imminent” (L 342). John Campton, the protagonist of *A Son at the Front*, echoes her reaction to the outbreak of hostilities, having “never for an instant believed it possible” (36). The threat it posed to established ways of life was incredible to her.²²

For Wharton, an awareness of the past was an essential component of personal morality and a functional society. Though she acknowledged that America had changed dramatically since the late nineteenth-century, she also saw the nation’s post-war “moral impoverishment” as both created and perpetuated by “a gulf between those days and these” (BG 9). Society had become more tolerant, allowing greater economic mobility, access to divorce, and freer personal expression. Yet, in her estimation, America had also grown steadily more materialistic and individualistic. She wrote *French Ways and Their Meaning* in the hope of fostering a deeper appreciation of history among her countrymen. In it, she characterizes “a sense of the past” as integral to happy lives, a solid society, and an enduring nation (97). She also stresses the importance of cultivating “intellectual honesty,” which she defines as the “courage to look at things as they are” (58). She greatly admired George Santayana, and her implication that Americans willfully ignored the past echoes his oft-cited prediction, “those who cannot

²² For further insight into her reaction to the early days of the war, see Lee 446–8 and Price 7-37.

remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”²³ *French Ways and Their Meaning* asserts that while America’s optimism and love for entertainment have their place, these traits may inhibit the forward progress of the nation and its people.

Her fiction of the 1920s and 1930s explores how the absence of a “sense of the past” gives rise to America’s valorization of modernity and youth. As the 1920s wore on, she found “the bewildered disenchanted young people who had grown up since the Great War” consistently lacking in “intellectual honesty” (*TS* 12). To reflect this, her fiction exaggerates the distance between generations. Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, the narrator speaks of Old New York as irretrievably gone, with the tongue-in-cheek implication that its people and values will seem as strange to modern readers as the inhabitants of the lost city of Atlantis. One such example comes with fashionable New York’s shock at news of a new opera house under construction in the “remote metropolitan distances” above 40th Street (*AI* 3). By the time Wharton published the novel, the location was at the center of the bustling heart of Manhattan. The novel also critiques the flattering distance that younger Americans saw between themselves and older generations by referring to the “immemorial custom” of the Archer family, the “unalterable rules that regulated American mourning,” and the formalities that “made a nineteenth century New York wedding a rite that seemed to belong to the dawn of history” (*AI* 34, 48, 147). This sense of generational distance carries through in her other fictions of the 1920s. In *Twilight Sleep*, Nona makes a joking reference to the “brown-stone age” (200). Elsewhere, George Campton identifies himself in terms of “my generation, of whatever nationality” (*SF* 21). While George’s willingness to fight is laudable, Wharton also found the way in which his generation pitted itself against the world to be problematic. Though she could poke

²³ See Santayana 284. Wharton was “enraptured” by Santayana’s *The Last Puritan* (1935) and found its “immense sales” an encouraging sign of a budding “American literary maturity” (Lewis 521). She spoke highly of the philosopher in her letters, describing his work as “delicious” and remarking “whatever Santayana has to say one eternally thinks him for saying it so perfectly” (*L* 423, 386).

fun at the perceived disparity between generations, she also recognized its significant social consequences.

To Wharton, this divide attested to America's ignorance of how previous generations had enabled society to become more permissive. She complained, "we who fought the good fight are now being jeered at as the prigs and prudes who barred the way to complete expression" (*BG* 127). She positioned herself as one of the few surviving defenders of a vanished civilization, commenting in *A Backward Glance*, "the compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter" (7). Elsewhere, in 'A Little Girl's New York' (1938), published shortly after her death, she comments, "Everything that used to form the fabric of our daily lives has been torn in shreds, trampled on, destroyed; and hundreds of little incidents, habits, traditions which, when I began to record my past, seemed too insignificant to set down, have acquired the historical importance of fragments of dress and furniture dug up in a Babylonian tomb" (*CW* 274). Her words suggest that post-war America had reduced the traditions and values of past generations to trifles and curiosities, to be glimpsed in a museum and promptly forgotten. Though she asserted that the "incidents, habits, traditions" of past generations had weight in contemporary life, she was not purely nostalgic, and her autobiographical writing suggests that her distance from the past enabled her to speak about it authoritatively. Her archaeological language also suggests her hope that her writing could represent a treasure trove of knowledge to a future reader.²⁴

For Wharton, the divide between past and present was rooted in collapsing distinctions between private and public life, and the moral consequences thereof. She did not characterize the transformation between old-fashioned and modern America as instantaneous. Rather, her nation's obliviousness to the war and the vulgarities of 1920s were, to her, the final nails in the coffin of America's genteel past. She had consistently examined privacy as a reflection of

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Wharton's fiction and the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology, see Bentley's *The Ethnography of Manners* 160-211 and Saunders's 'Portrait of the Artist as Anthropologist: Edith Wharton and The Age of Innocence.'

morality in her early writing, one example being *The Decoration of Houses* (1899), in which she and Ogden Codman argue that well-designed homes ought to clearly distinguish between intimate spaces and those for entertaining. From their perspective, “privacy would seem to be one of the first requisites of civilized life” (25). This anticipated James’s criticism of the typical American home in *The American Scene* (1907). He notes, “every part of the house shall be as nearly as may be, visible, visitable, penetrable, not only from every other part, but from as many parts of as many other houses as possible” (167). Both passages suggest the moral threat posed to the intimate family home by its transformation into a stage for entertainments.

The absence of privacy and taboo evidences the decline of morality, social responsibility, and civilization itself in Wharton’s post-war fiction. Three texts spanning her post-war career – *The Age of Innocence*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, and ‘Roman Fever’ – suggest how the loss of traditional morality impoverished American lives. The final scene of *The Age of Innocence* depicts Newland Archer’s refusal to reunite with Ellen Olenska, the woman he had loved from afar and given up decades before. As he gazes up at her window, he remarks, “It’s more real to me here than if I went up” (298). This decision befuddles his son, Dallas, who comments, “You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact! Well I back your generation for knowing more about each other’s private thoughts than we ever have time to find out about our own” (294). Dallas’s modern sensibility cannot conceive of a valid reason for putting social obligations ahead of personal desires, and he rebukes his father’s choice. He does so regardless of the fact that it would have resulted in the betrayal of his mother, likely preventing him from ever having been born. Dallas has followed his heart casually and carelessly, and has never been threatened with any consequences for doing so. He has romanced Fanny Beaufort, leading to a marriage that would have been inconceivable in Archer’s youth. Yet the union is viewed as a positive one, and Fanny’s reputation is not beholden to the scandals that plagued her father. Through this squabble between father and son, the novel

suggests that Archer's thwarted romance offers greater emotional fulfillment than the effortless courtship of his son. The experience imparts to him an emotional depth that his son will never possess. The scene also suggests how class distinctions had shifted, to the detriment of those who made sacrifices for the sake of respectability, like Archer. The Archers and the Beauforts now inhabit the same social level. Archer, like his creator, must simply accept it.

Elsewhere, in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, the failure of Suzy's marriage to Nick has become common knowledge amongst her friends. They make the proper statements of consolation to her, but quickly return to their usual routine of flitting around hotels and cafés. Their blasé reactions to the separation intensify her feelings of isolation and exposure. She thinks, "That was the way of the world they lived in. Nobody questioned, nobody wondered anymore—because nobody had time to remember. The old risk of prying curiosity, of malicious gossip, was virtually over: one was left with one's drama, one's disaster, on one's hands, because there was nobody to stop and notice the little shrouded object one was carrying" (122). Suzy is initially grateful that her life returns to normal after Nick's departure, yet comes to see their nonchalant behavior as carelessness rather than kindness. Her closest friend, Ellie Vanderlyn, is simply too concerned with her romantic entanglements, travel plans, and new spring wardrobe to consider for a moment that Suzy might actually be suffering. The fact that Ellie often forgets to tell her staff to feed her daughter, Clarissa, only reinforces her disregard for others (35). She frames the split as a positive development, freeing Suzy to marry someone wealthier. Suzy, meanwhile, comes to appreciate the depth of her attachment to Nick after losing him. The "little shrouded object" she holds is eerily reminiscent of a dead infant, a ruined vision of two lives productively joined. Her burden grows as she realizes there is no one in whom she can confide, yet she must also affect a blasé attitude, particularly if she is to ensure her financial future by romancing the newly wealthy Lord Altringham. Through this episode, Wharton asserts that while a more conservative society could expose one to "malicious gossip," it also allowed for more significant and enduring emotional connections. In a world that has become a stage, there

are few places conducive to truly intimate, revealing moments between friends or lovers.

Furthermore, though the details of one's private life have become common knowledge, no one seems to make any sort of emotional investment in others that exceeds the level of gossip.

Lastly, 'Roman Fever' depicts two former romantic rivals, Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade, discussing the prospects of their daughters and reflecting on their own past romances. As they take in the spectacle of the Forum and Coliseum, Mrs. Slade ruminates, "what different things Rome stands for to each generation of travellers. To our grandmothers, Roman fever; to our mothers, sentimental dangers – how we used to be guarded! – to our daughters, no more dangers than the middle of Main Street! They don't know it – but how much they're missing!" (10). Mrs. Ansley's experience as a young woman in Rome was constantly shadowed by the threat that her affair – with Mrs. Slade's future husband, later revealed to be the father of both girls – would be discovered and punished. Mrs. Ansley views the climate of secrecy and danger that surrounded her love affair as enriching. It made her life more difficult, but also given it meaning. The story argues that while the modern world of Main Street may be more permissive, no action or emotion can truly have meaning when everything is permitted. In each of these texts, Wharton confronts readers with the costs of historical change and social 'progress' – the loss of morality, privacy, and, ultimately, meaning. For Archer, Suzy, and Mrs. Ansley, an intense – if circumstantially limited – attachment to another person has a profound impact in their lives. Modern society offers increased freedoms, yet her characters are consistently victimized by a world in which relationships and morality have become disposable. As such, these works assert that freedom alone could not ensure individual happiness or social stability.

Wharton's Old-Fashioned Characters

Wharton did not abandon all hope for a vibrant “sense of the past” in post-war America, and she firmly believed that literature had a critical role to play bringing about an appreciation of the past. As she appeals to average Americans in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, she appeals to the nation’s writers in *The Writing of Fiction*, arguing that a “good subject” in literature must shed light “on our moral experience” (WF 24). The old-fashioned characters scattered throughout her fiction of the 1920s and 1930s do precisely this, seeing the world through a more traditional perspective. Through them, Wharton endeavors to preserve a society in which “scruples existed” (L 480). At the same time, her fiction also suggests that while certain elements of America’s past were worth preserving, it was necessary to adapt to change. As John Halperin observes, Wharton treated Old New Yorkers with both “harsh rejection and haughty defence” (192). She believed that older ways of life should not be dismissed as aberrant curiosities, yet she also saw retreating into an exclusively American past as an imperfect solution. Her old-fashioned characters are easy to spot, many openly declaring their allegiance to tradition. In the final scene of *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer acknowledges that while he may have missed out on passionate romance, “there was good in the old ways” that forced him to do so (287). In *The Children*, the middle-aged bachelor Martin Boyne comments that the generations before his own “were a lot better than we are” (270). In other instances, Wharton simply tells us of their pedigree, describing Arthur Wyant of *Twilight Sleep* as having “Old New York blood” (15). Wyant sits near a “yellowing photograph” of himself, in which he is “clad in the grey frock-coat and topper of the early ‘eighties” (41-2).

These characters are often literally old, though not exclusively; Wharton creates younger old-fashioned types as well. Among them is Nona Manford, who struggles to find “new ways” of “being decent” in modern times (TS 206). She is “oppressed by responsibilities and anxieties not of her age,” removed from other people of her generation (TS 45). She particularly despises the sheik playboy Tommy Ardwin, “his sleekness, suppleness, assurance, the group he ruled, the

fashions he set, the doctrines he professed” (*TS* 76). Similarly, in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Suzy turns her back on “the feverish pursuit of notoriety” that typifies her friends (122). Both Nona and Suzy are old souls, thoughtful and deliberate in a way that their peers are not. Even her thoroughly modern characters have momentary flashes of old-fashioned insight, as in Strefford’s observation, “Habits—they outstand the Pyramids,” and Pauline Manford’s thought that “Human nature had not changed as fast as social usage” (*GM* 132, *TS* 198). Strefford and Pauline lack the depth of Nona and Suzy, yet they dimly recognize how the values that structured American life in past generations were at the core of ‘human nature’ and ‘habits.’ Morality, Wharton suggests, is something that people instinctively need in order to live well.

A clearly defined moral code distinguishes the old-fashioned characters from their modern equivalents. They put traditional values into action in a resolutely modern world. In *The Children*, Rose Sellars remains faithful to her husband “in spite of [Boyne’s] pleadings,” and only entertains the prospect of a romance after her husband’s death (40). Rose has managed to “quietly, unobtrusively” establish a reputation for “cleverness and originality” among her “dull New York set,” and concludes that “her originality, in the present day, lay in this consistency and continuity” (39). Her stable principles keep her moored throughout the novel, even in the face of what has been described as Boyne’s “utopian, ‘crazy,’ and counter-biological project” in attempting to adopt the Wheater brood (Saunders 94). This “consistency and continuity” eventually allows Rose to end her relationship with Boyne. In *Twilight Sleep*, this same quality encourages Nona to refuse Aggie Heuston’s offer to divorce her husband. She hopes to behave in a way that is morally right, even though she is in love with Stan Heuston, telling Aggie, “Even if I’ve been a coward, that’s no reason why I should be a cad” (206). Yet Nona finds her choice burdensome on reflection: “She dimly remembered having acted in what seemed a mood of heroic self-denial; now she felt only as if she had been numb. What was the use of fine motives if, once the ardour fallen, even they left one in the lurch?” (238). The novel’s ending does not suggest that Nona eventually finds fulfillment as a result of having adhered to her principles.

Her choice cannot be construed as an act of self-preservation, as she would not have faced ostracism by marrying Hueston. In the unclear moral schema of the post-war world, *Twilight Sleep* suggests, some decisions can never be resolved. One is left to torturously ruminate the path not chosen, rather than confidently leaving it in the past. Characters like Nona and Suzy suggest that while Wharton appreciated the value of traditional morality, she was also under no illusions that contemporary society would reward selfless virtue.

In thinking about old-fashioned values in the modern world, Wharton also acknowledged that a life locked in the past is no life at all. In *The Age of Innocence*, Archer thinks of Mrs. van der Luyden “as having been rather gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence, as bodies caught in glaciers keep for years in a rosy life-in-death” (42). Mrs. van der Luyden may have managed to avoid a scandal, but Archer’s perspective suggests that she has never truly lived. Another example comes from *Twilight Sleep*, which describes Arthur Wyant as “poor useless ‘Exhibit A’” (15). His adherence to Old New York values prevents him from thriving in the modern world. The other characters regard him as a comic curiosity, yet the text hints toward a darker battle with alcoholism that eventually engulfs him. His obsolescence reveals itself fully when he mistakenly shoots Nona at Cedarledge; he had hoped to shoot Lita for her terrible treatment of his son, Jim. The narrator notes, “Wyant stood motionless, his arms hanging down, his body emptied of all its strength, a broken word that sounded like ‘honour’ stumbling from his bedraggled lips” (300). ‘Honour,’ Wharton suggests, has become as meaningless in modern Manhattan as Wyant himself. His bold action has little impact on the family; Nona remains unhappy and alone, while Dexter and Pauline’s relationship continues to quietly flounder, as does that of Jim and Lita. Though “some insinuated that a private inebriate asylum in Maine was the goal of his journey,” the narrator concludes, “no one really knew, and few cared” because “he had long since lost his place in the scheme of things” (305). As was the case with Suzy in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, the private pain of Wyant’s addiction has become a matter of gossip and comment, yet no one around him

actually does anything to help him or to preserve his dignity. He becomes a footnote to the novel's conclusion, suggesting that like Mrs. van der Luyden, his existence has been a grim, meaningless "life-in-death."

In keeping with this, these old-fashioned characters often take on the qualities of ghosts. They observe and contemplate society, but their sense that they belong to another time hinders them from exercising any sort of power in the world. 'After Holbein' offers a devastating account of people who have lived beyond their time. Lee describes the story as one of "living death," and notes, "the idea of an atrophied remnant, a life withering away inside its fixed conventions, haunts [Wharton] terribly" (714-715). It depicts two aging Old New Yorkers, Evelina Jasper and Anson Warley, imprisoned by their deteriorating bodies and minds. Neither is fully aware of the extent to which their health has declined. Warley cannot remember where he is to dine for the evening. Coincidentally, Mrs. Jasper mistakenly thinks she is hosting a lavish dinner party – a misapprehension her staff cannot bear to correct – and Warley turns up at her door. The pair act out an old-fashioned dinner party, oblivious to the fact that they are the only people in attendance. Throughout, Mrs. Jasper's young staff observes them in horrified pity; again, their private decline has become a public spectacle. The story ends with Warley leaving, aglow "with satisfaction of the memory of the wine and the wit," neither of which he actually experienced. Then he takes "a step forward, to where a moment before the pavement had been – and where now there was nothing" (S 496). He has either had a stroke or another episode of dementia, which may have triggered his initial journey to Mrs. Jasper's house. His ambiguous fate reinforces Wharton's assertion that one cannot "step forward" by remaining mentally and ideologically in the past.

The Mother's Recompense also links living death to an adherence to the past, both mentally and morally. The narrator repeatedly likens Kate Clephane to a ghost. When Kate observes Lilla in the park, she notes the girl's likeness to herself in the past, but quickly dismisses it, claiming "she owed no kinship with that unhappy ghost!" (84). Later, when she speaks with

Fenno, a younger man now engaged to her daughter, with whom she had a brief affair, she feels “as if her voice were a ghost vainly struggling to raise her own grave stone” (103). Throughout the story, she obsesses over the affair with him. In the end, she reveals the affair to Fred Landers, an older man who has asked her to marry him. Kate concludes that his “pity had been the most precious thing he had to give her, so her refusal to accept it, her precipitate flight from it, was the most precious thing she could give him in return” (271). She asserts that the affair with Fenno alone will give her life meaning, anticipating the dramatic conclusion of ‘Roman Fever.’ She views Landers as too old for her, and refuses to play the role of mother-in-law to the lover that spurned her. Kate cuts herself off from the world of the living; as she had been a ghost in New York, she remains one by returning to France. The ending is ambiguous, and could be read as Kate’s retreat to principles rendered meaningless in modern society as a means of preserving her illusions of youth. It can also be seen as reflecting Kate’s desire to maintain a private, moral space for herself, a kind of space Wharton believed the modern world had eroded.

The Problem of Historical Myth

Wharton’s defense of history and tradition places her fiction at odds with received histories of both the 1920s and the 1930s. In order to examine how she worked against these histories, it is important first to have a sense of what these narratives are and how they potentially distort our understanding of the period. Phrases such as ‘the Jazz Age’ or ‘the Great Depression’ contextualize a novel, but they also structure our expectations of what fiction should be and do. We have come to believe that novels of the 1920s will paint a picture of youth, freedom, and breaking with tradition. Meanwhile, we anticipate that those of 1930s will center on privation, struggle, and politics. Wharton’s post-war fiction refutes these expectations, and this may partially explain why the reputation of this work has lagged behind. It is generally

assumed that the superlative fiction of a given period will offer a more 'accurate' account of it, yet these texts often rehearse dominant historical narratives with which we are already familiar. Richard Maltby argues that criticism perpetuates misleading accounts of the past (57). Geoff Gilbert also contends that critics often "mythologize or even falsify history in order to make easier the task of assessing works produced at this or that historical period" (107). Their arguments tell us that the 'accuracy' of a narrative is often a matter of our familiarity with it. Elsewhere, Lawrence Levine asserts that debates about the literary canon conceal debates regarding the "historical canon," with the result that some authors or texts may be undervalued as a result of failing to meet expectations ('Clio' 853). Conflicts arise when a text forces readers to consider history as malleable; Levine contends that in these moments, "it is as if reason itself is being challenged" ('Clio' 866). Through repetition over time, subjective interpretations of the past can become indistinguishable from fact.²⁵ Their theories encourage an examination of the role historical myth has played in shaping the reputation of Wharton's post-war fiction.

Historians such as Ann Douglas and Paula Fass suggest that those coming of age in the 1920s conceived of their relationship to history differently than members of earlier generations. Douglas argues that the view of a decade as having a unique significance in and of itself first appeared during the 1920s, and it was also at this time that narratives of the twentieth century as a repudiation of the nineteenth emerged dominant (481). According to Fass, the nation was actively "re-creating itself" (120). The younger generation self-consciously fashioned itself as modern, with the result that the 1920s was widely thought of as the first modern decade as it was happening. This new relationship to history coincided with the rise of a consumer society closely resembling that of present-day America. Economic prosperity, youth, innovation, the expansion of the middle class, and urban growth take center stage in Fass and Douglas's accounts of the period. Other historians, like John D'Emilio, Estelle Freeman, Jackson Lears and Joshua Zeitz

²⁵ Frank Kermode makes a similar argument in *History and Value* (1988), claiming that historical narratives operate "as formulas, as algorithms, to programme the past and make it manageable." He rebuts the notion that aesthetic standards exist beyond a given historical moment: "existing canons are the production of neither time nor of infallible taste" (5).

highlight the liberalism and permissiveness of the decade, classing it as one in which popular psychology defined repression as secular sin. Fitzgerald's description of the 1920s in 'Echoes of the Jazz Age' (1931) evokes the decade's glamorous mood of youthful ease: "It was pleasant to be in one's twenties in such a certain and unworried time. Even when you were broke you didn't worry about money, because it was in such profusion all around you" (*Crack-Up* 21). Looking back on the decade, Hugh Kenner observes, "no other twentieth century decade has yielded in that way to being summed up by images" (120). His words hint toward the way in which narratives linking the 1920s with the positive aspects of modernity have become intermingled with historical fact.

The image of the 1920s with which many of us are most familiar is not a comprehensive representation of the period. Though it was a time of dramatic change and upheaval, it was also one that saw the retrenchment of conservative values throughout American society. While popular accounts of the period are rife with images of gin-soaked hedonism, it was also the age of Prohibition. In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment, or the Volstead Act –banning the sale, manufacture, and transport of alcohol – went into effect. The law reduced the consumption of alcohol, but also encouraged the proliferation of speakeasies and organized crime until Franklin Roosevelt repealed it in 1933. Much of the social and cultural change of the period did not, as popular imagery tends to suggest, come about overnight. Political movements, such as suffrage and temperance, derived from the progressive political movements of the 1890s. Also, industries commonly linked with the boom economy – such as automotive production, advertising, and film – were prominent and lucrative before the First World War. America's women gained the vote in 1920, yet few were engaged with political issues. The Klu Klux Klan, a white supremacy group, expanded its membership during the decade, garnering most new members from Eastern cities rather than the rural South. While the period is often considered a time of sexual revolution, intimate relations before a couple was engaged to be married continued to be frowned upon (D'Emilio and Freedman 222-235). The progressive image of the decade

demonstrates the extent to which historical memory is selective. In dismissing Wharton's account of post-war life as out of touch with contemporary America, critics may further an image of the period that fails to account for its conservative elements.

Situating a work of fiction in the context of the 1930s also brings with it a unique set of challenges. Michael Denning and Michael Parrish have argued that the decade also reshaped the American character, though did so differently than did the 1920s. The nation turned its back on the radical left after the Second World War revitalized the economy, and the socialist politics of the period have largely been forgotten. Denning and Parrish set those politics against what has emerged as the popular imagery of the period – namely the Dust Bowl and the New Deal – to suggest how Americans have shaped their past to accord with present ideology. Parrish explains the cultural legacy of the 1930s:

The hard economic times of the decade engendered class conflict, disrupted normal family life, and put many private dreams on hold. They forced Americans for a while to think more communally, to see themselves in one social boat buffeted by a common storm, and to consider the fate of the other person. But hard times in addition encouraged Americans to look longingly to the recent more prosperous past when getting and spending and living like kings and queens of Hollywood had seemed within the grasp of all. That powerful fantasy, too, stayed alive despite the Depression. (420)

The enduring legacy of the decade has been its mingled atonement and yearning for the excesses of 1920s. After Black Tuesday in 1929, the nation's writers were quick to romanticize the nation's troubles as a fortunate fall. Malcolm Cowley likened the stock market crash to a glaring winter morning after a long night spent in a bar (301). Meanwhile, Fitzgerald wrote in 'Echoes of the Jazz Age,' "it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings anymore" (*Crack-Up* 22). While Americans resolved to learn from the indiscretions and excesses of the 1920s, they were also willing to forget those lessons should the opportunity to live "like kings and queens of Hollywood" return. The capitalist individualism of the 1920s persists within American culture today, while the egalitarian, populist legacy of the 1930s has proven less pervasive.

The Post-War Welter

Wharton often used the term “welter” to describe contemporary life in the 1920s and 1930s, a word evoking the fluctuations of a turbulent sea. Kate Clephane likens her love triangle to “a welter of darkness” (MR 128). Frenside, the literary critic of *Hudson River Bracketed*, comments, “it’s a bad time for a creator of any sort to be born, in this after-war welter, with its new recipe for immortality every morning” (376). Wharton later uses the term to compare modernity to a passing storm in *A Backward Glance*: “The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country” (5). Her sense that “duration” would eventually emerge victorious against “the welter of change” suggests her faith in the continued relevance of morality and tradition in American life.²⁶

Her post-war fictions also suggest that she found much to test that faith, by depicting the modern welter in its full ferocity, characterizing modern Americans as participating in and victimized by a culture of myth-making. Generational exceptionalism, Hollywood stardom, stock market success, and the American Dream are part of the texture of her fictions, which cause the boundaries between reality and illusion to blur. In the past, as she demonstrates in *The Age of Innocence*, reality had largely referred to one’s responsibilities to a larger social body. Archer thinks of May, the woman he knows he must marry, in terms of social obligations: “Here was the truth, here was reality” (115). Meanwhile, Ellen represents his inner life and romantic illusions. Decades later, Archer accepts that a passionate relationship with her could never have been all that he had hoped, and comes to accept himself as “a mere gray speck of a man compared with the ruthless magnificent fellow he had dreamed of being” (292). While the ending of the novel argues that people needed rules and taboos to distinguish between fantasy and actuality, her

²⁶ Further examples of Wharton’s use of the word include in *A Son at The Front*, where the narrator describes Paris as a “huge wicked welter” (49), and in *Twilight Sleep*, where Lita Wyant’s sitting room features a “welter of ebony velvet cushions” (TS 32).

satirical novels examine the consequences of lives lived without these boundaries. In the modern milieu of *Twilight Sleep*, meanwhile, reality has become a marketing tool and a meaningless catchphrase. One of Pauline's gurus reminds her of "the utter unimportance of the Actual—of the total non-existence of the Real" and Tommy Ardwin asserts, "everything in life should be false" (274, 78). Though society had grown more tolerant and permissive, Wharton suggests that this had only made it easier for people to sink into a world of delusion and false ideals.

As her characters ascribe to the myth of the modern, they actively construct mythic images of themselves. Few characters are truly what they present themselves to be in her contemporary fictions. They live, dress, and speak as though playing the starring role in a lavish Hollywood production of their own lives. In this respect, they can trace their roots back to earlier Wharton characters; Beer argues that *The House of Mirth* depicts an earlier transformation "of the social elite into a more public, less exclusive, and showier mode of operation" (*Writers* 25). This comes through in 'Joy in the House' (1932), in which Christine Ainsley thinks about leaving her lover as if it had "been part of a sensational film she had sat and gazed at" (S 632). In *The Children*, Martin Boyne observes of the high-living Wheaters, "Life's a perpetual film to those people" (101). His words could apply to any number of Wharton's characters of the 1920s and 1930s. Hollywood looms on the periphery of several of her novels and short stories: one of Cliffe Wheater's ex-wives, Lady Wrench, is an actress. In *Twilight Sleep*, Tommy Ardwin schemes to get Lita the starring role in a film production of *Herodias*, and in 'Charm Incorporated' (1934), Boris Kouradjine marries – and divorces – the film star Halma Hoboe. Stardom promises to validate what these characters already assume about themselves: they are attractive, unique, and everyone ought to adore them. All the while, Wharton hints toward the two-dimensionality of these celluloid characters. While they may not arouse our sympathies – which may partially explain why her later fictions have been so often disliked – they rebuke prevailing notions regarding the authenticity of the modern sensibility.

Getting into the papers is another means through which her characters construct idealized images of themselves. In *Twilight Sleep*, the ‘Looker-On’ tabloid photographs Lita nude on the roof of a Harlem speakeasy. She capitalizes on the scandal to ingratiate herself to the director Klawhammer, with the ultimate goal of becoming the next ‘it girl’ to grace the silver screen. Later in the novel, the ‘Looker-On’ reports Pauline’s sensational dinner reception for a cardinal, which helps her recover from the trauma of Nona’s shooting at Cedarledge. In *The Gods Arrive*, Floss Delaney renews her adolescent romance with Vance Weston – the bitter ending of which had driven him to the brink of suicide – to boost her own notoriety. On renewing their acquaintance, one of the first things she says to him is, “So you’re a celebrity?” (210). Their relationship depends upon Weston’s ability to continue being newsworthy. When his star plummets, Floss moves on to greener pastures, which he finds out about in the papers. In ‘Charm Incorporated,’ Nadeja reads the morning papers announcing Boris’s second marriage, to a rich Midwestern girl, noting that “Boris has a little exaggerated our father’s rank” among the Russian nobility. Targatt justifies his son’s fibbing with the observation, “No one can exaggerate the Guggins’ fortune” (S 666). The pretense of an aristocratic title and the notoriety of a Hollywood romance make Boris a desirable commodity in the eyes of one of America’s richest women. Yet neither Vance nor Boris are the people that the glossies report them to be, and both *The Gods Arrive* and ‘Charm Incorporated’ illustrate that fame and fortune were hollow triumphs.

Newspapers in the post-war fiction also reflect how intimate relationships had increasingly become a matter of public spectacle, emptied of meaning. Blair claims that popular misreadings of *The House of Mirth* contradicted Wharton’s “frequent criticism of society journalists” (‘Misreading’ 160). The author makes her animosity for the press much more evident in her writing of the 1920s and 1930s, where the daily paper becomes a potential minefield of public humiliation. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Nick and Suzy Lansing keep themselves informed as to one another’s doings during their separation by reading the society

columns. When she reads that he has been spending time aboard the Hicks' yacht, her hopes for a reconciliation dwindle: "No wonder he had not written – the modern husband did not have to: he had only to leave it to time and the newspapers to make known his intentions" (200). "The modern husband," it seems, has little sense of obligation to anyone other than himself. Halo's separation from Weston in *The Gods Arrive* also finds her seeking information in the dailies, and she is crushed to come across the following item: "Among Mr. Weston's most enthusiastic hearers on this very exclusive and privileged occasion was his lovely compatriot Miss Floss Delaney" (327). The paper takes on the voice of a cutting social rival, rubbing Halo's face in Weston's success and the beauty of the new woman on his arm. Elsewhere, in 'Joy in the House,' journalists exploit Christine's misery to entice scandal-hungry readers. She has returned to her husband after having fled to Europe with a lover, Jeff Lithgow, only to realize that her husband's warm welcome was an act of passive-aggressive revenge: he had been fully aware that Jeff had killed himself when she left. Mrs. Ainsley is haunted by his "black restless ghost," a suffering made all the more acute when she discovers that "a journalist" had come "to see how she had taken the news of the suicide" (J 651). The reporter clearly would have seen – and written about – the large banner emblazoned with "Joy in the House," which her husband hung in the entryway for her arrival. In each of these examples, the newspaper distorts relationships, and the pain of abandonment is intensified by the public nature of the humiliation. The intrusion of third parties, in the form of journalists and readers, furthers miscommunication and misunderstanding between people. These enhanced communication technologies become a red herring of social progress; a medium intended to keep people better connected with the world often leaves Wharton's characters feeling betrayed and isolated.

The author characterized her countrymen's hunger for notoriety as partially rooted in jazz culture, and she was not alone in taking a hostile view of this burgeoning subculture. Zeitz points out that many feared that nightclubs, drinking, and men were corrupting the nation's young women. He opens his account of the period with the story of a nineteen-year-old woman,

forced to stand trial on account of her mother's fear that she would "become depraved" from "an insatiable appetite for jazz, cigarettes, absinthe, and brandy" and going to "six cabarets a night" (2). Wharton's preparatory notes for *Twilight Sleep* simply state, "Lita is – jazz," and Lee points out that she used 'jazz' as a term of abuse, often referring to drug use or a labored trendiness in art (602). Its insidious influence shines through in her novel, where the narrator observes: "That was all life meant to Lita—would ever mean. Good floors to practice new dance-steps on, men—any men—to dance with and be flattered by, women—any women—to stare and envy one, dull people to startle, stupid people to shock" (242). In *The Children*, we first meet Cliffe and Joyce Wheeler "jazzing at Venice," and the pair seems to have spent the bulk of their adult lives in a similar fashion, drifting between hotels and spouses with careless ease (38). Though Wharton's distaste for the jazz lifestyle is clear, the musical form's lack of formal structure also allows it to become a fitting metaphor for modern times in her novels. Lita and the Wheelers inhabit a world with no past, no future, and no consequences. Her Jazz Age Americans lead syncopated, flamboyant, and ultimately directionless lives.

Twilight Sleep links the rapid pace of modern life to an avoidance of introspection and "intellectual honesty." Wharton's characters, young and old, make the most of their time, leading Wyant to joke to Nona, "I suppose in your set and Lita's a young man who doesn't jazz all day and drink all night – or vice versa – is a back number" (43). Though he intends the comment as a joke, his exaggeration nevertheless suggests that there is more to life than socializing and carousing all the time. Wharton's quintessential modern American woman, Pauline Manford is more of an automaton than a human being: she is always busy, but does little of lasting value. She devotes her time to beauty regimens, social clubs and planning dinner parties. She wants to make herself perfect, preferably in as short a time as possible, devoting hours per day to activities like "Mental uplift" and "Eurhythmic exercises" (3-4). Her obsession with quick fixes draws on 1920s self-improvement fads, such as Couéism, which promised

practitioners an improved quality of life through the power of suggestion.²⁷ Pauline grows anxious after leaving New York for the family's country home, Cedarledge; she "could never wholly believe – at least not for many hours together – that people could be happy in the country without all sorts of social alleviations; and six days of quiet seemed to her measurable only in terms of prehistoric eras. When had her mind ever had such a perspective to range over?" (224). In her view, people could only "be happy" with plenty to distract them from themselves and from each other. Throughout the novel, however, Wharton hints toward a different approach to life. As she looked to traditional morality as a potential – if often flawed – antidote to modernity, she also saw an old-fashioned pace of living as a potential palliative. When Nona looks at Wyant's old-fashioned portrait, she feels "a pang of regret that she had not been born in those spacious days of dog-carts, victorias, leisurely tennis and afternoon calls" (42). These "spacious days" Nona longs for are the "prehistoric eras" her mother dreads, and are key ingredients of a more fulfilling life.

While Wharton's fiction clearly engages with 1920s modernity, it addresses the economic and cultural shifts of the 1930s in less obvious ways. In keeping with this, Auchincloss has lamented, "think what the author of *The House of Mirth* might have had to say about the New England boarding schools, about Yale and Harvard, about the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and the advent of the New Deal" (*Vanderbilt Era* 161). He curiously overlooks *Twilight Sleep*, *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *The Mother's Recompense*, and *The Children* in his comment, and his point about university life conjures up the odd image of a Whartonian *This Side of Paradise*. As discussed later in this chapter, Wharton did comment on the nation's higher education system in *Hudson River Bracketed*, though did not offer the extended meditation on collegiate culture to which Auchincloss refers. Though he underestimates her engagement with

²⁷ Emile Coué's self-help method encouraged practitioners to repeat affirmations aloud to themselves before a mirror, the most famous being "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better" (Lee 608).

American life in the 1920s, his assertion that her fiction does little with the Great Depression and the New Deal is a fair one.

This was a deliberate choice on her part. She was fully aware of the crash and had experienced its consequences first hand. She wrote to Royall Tyler in 1934, expressing the need to write another novel “for the basest pecuniary reasons” (qtd. in Bauer 147). Benstock argues that this year marked “the low point of her literary income, which had been reduced by 70 percent from a few years earlier.” A new French law subjected the author’s American earnings to double tax, and her French taxes “went unpaid” for some time (*Gifts* 441). Lewis, Benstock, Bauer, and Lee also linked her concerns regarding the American economy to fears about the rise of fascism in Europe.²⁸ Wharton had also been keeping an eye on the news coming out of the States during the 1930s. She was riveted by the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, as evidenced by a letter she wrote to Minnie Jones: “It really looks from this distance as if Franklin Roosevelt were the man we needed. At any rate the bank clean-up is all to the good. May he get beer licensed at once, & then I shall feel we are on the upgrade again... How does it feel to have a *man* at the helm at last?” (Lewis 504). She felt herself to be in increasingly unfamiliar territory as the decade progressed, pointing out, “even centenarians can seldom have had to look back across such a barrier of new towers of Babel (or their ruins) as divides my contemporaries from the era of the New Deal” (*CW* 274). Wharton was aware of what was going on in the world during the 1930s, but she was less clear on how to make sense of it all and distill that understanding into her fiction.

Her fiction characterizes the 1930s as a continuation of the modern. She does not present Black Tuesday as the death of the 1920s as many of her contemporaries did, and as many of her successors continue to do. In this respect, she anticipated the nation’s eventual return to materialism and excess after the Second World War. Despite the populist rhetoric circulating within the nation and its literature in the 1930s, she knew that the nation’s love affair with

²⁸ See Benstock, *Gifts* 447-449; Bauer 147-164; Lee 733-35, 739-40, and Lewis 505, 510-11.

capitalism and celebrity culture was far from over. This perspective comes through in *The Gods Arrive*. Harrison Delaney, Floss's father and former real estate rival of Vance's father, has become a wealthy cosmopolitan. The narrator reveals only that "a fortune suddenly fell into his lap" and that Delaney "quoted Pope and Horace the way Lorin Weston quoted prices on the Stock Exchange" (252). Lorin Weston knows about the markets, not Delaney. These descriptions suggest that he made his money outside the realm of stocks and bonds; it was a fluke of fortune. Delaney is ostentatious with his money, hoping to "impress some of the most eminent head-waiters in Europe" (232). Even in a terrible economy, her characters still find ways of getting rich and lording their money over others. The novel also criticizes the wealthy's obliviousness to the Depression during Weston's conversation with the Italian duke, Spartivento. Spartivento encourages him to become a client of his investment bank: "If course I know of your celebrity; your sales must be colossal – not? But very often you successful brilliant artists don't know how to invest your earnings. If that is your case I should be most happy to offer you expert advice" (225-6). In his zeal, Spartivento seems to overestimate Weston's earning potential somewhat. The novelist never takes him up on the offer, but the Duke's head for business impresses his materialistic new girlfriend, Floss. She renews her broken engagement to Spartivento after ditching Weston. The novel points out that not only were rich people engaging in the same insipid activities they always had, but that people were continuing to make their fortunes through becoming celebrities and trading stock. The world had not changed to the extent that the common perception held.

'Charm Incorporated' offers a similar assessment of America during the 1930s. The narrator describes New York as remaining "at the high tide of its prosperity" (S 653). The protagonist, Targatt, prides himself on his costly valet, who used to "charge a dollar a minute for such services," in the heady days "before the depression" (S 654). He considers the loss of his German maid the "biggest blow" he has suffered since having been "been on the wrong side of the market," and "like many of the very rich, manifested no interest in those whose misfortunes

did not immediately interfere with his own comfort” (J 655, 661-662). He remains in safe oblivion, annoyed by petulant maids and a spendthrift family. He is unable to conceive of the conflict raging in the world around him, nor of the impoverished fellow New Yorkers queuing for bread downtown. Though Wharton was justifiably skeptical of the proletarian mythologies of the 1930s that emerged as it was happening, she left many aspects of American society and values during this period unexplored. There were opportunities for her to do so, particularly in *The Gods Arrive*. Bunty Hayes, the entrepreneur of *Hudson River Bracketed*, would have provided an interesting study for the rise and fall of American fortunes in New York. Yet he does not appear in the second novel at all. It is unclear if his department store continues to thrive while Halo and Weston are in Europe.

Defending Literary Tradition

Wharton’s defense of the literary past – like her critique of the historical past – was, at times, contradictory and flawed. During the 1920s and 1930s, her critique of younger writers blurred distinctions between modernism and the mainstream marketplace. At the same time, her sense that the past remained relevant to the present set her at odds with writers who conceived of modernity as a climactic break with history and aesthetic tradition. In ‘Character in Fiction’ (1924), Woolf offered what has since become an oft-cited starting point for literary modernism, with her observation that “on or about December 1910, human character changed” (*Essays* 421). Pound’s exhortation that artists “make it new” asserted that existing forms needed revision after World War I and the intellectual movements of the 1910s (Berman 16). Both felt that a new era demanded new forms of expression.²⁹ Wharton, meanwhile, did not believe the war had

²⁹ The observations of Woolf and Pound have become convenient shorthands, yet some posit a less abrupt evolution. Levenson traces the movement’s roots through four artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (79). Meanwhile, Nicholls sees modernism as beginning with Baudelaire in 1845 (5).

fundamentally changed humanity or art. She saw it as cause for serious reflection on the past.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, she was bold in her defense of the European novel during the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout her life, her sense that strict adherence to formal tradition produced great art extended to all artistic disciplines. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she compared architecture to poetry, noting that in both disciplines “originality consists not in discarding the necessary laws of rhythm, but in finding new rhythms within the limits of those laws... Once this is clearly understood, it will be seen that the supposed conflict between originality and tradition is no conflict at all” (11). Yet her characterization of modern fiction in the Vance Weston novels is convoluted and confusing. She comments through Halo Tarrant, “At the very moment when even *Home and Mother* is feeding its million readers with a novel called *Jerks and Jazzes*, it strikes me that the newest note to sound might be the very quiet—something beginning,” or, in other words, “Something quiet, logical, Jane Austen-y” (*HRB* 223-4). Elsewhere, the narrator describes all of modern fiction as “incoherence and brutality” which had proven tiresome to audiences (*HRB* 377). Wharton’s correspondence with younger writers indicates that she was aware that modern fiction could not be summarized in such reductive terms. However, a comment she made in a letter – “my young Americans don’t talk the language as spoken by the Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis *jeunesse*” – suggests that she also felt the need to defend her territory against them (*L* 471). She expressed a confused and confusing range of opinions on modern fiction.

For the most part, Wharton derided formal experimentation among younger writers as a triumph of fashion over enduring aesthetic value. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she condemned the belief held by “certain schools” that “formlessness is now regarded as the first condition of form” as having led to “pure anarchy in fiction” (15). She discounted such experimentation as a pretentious rehash of French realism, particularly the stream of consciousness (*WF* 13). This led her to comment in *The Gods Arrive*, “ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it was sheer ignorance and illiteracy that made people call things new” (445). She articulates the false

newness of modernist form through Weston's artistic failures in both *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Weston's novel, *Colossus*, bears a clear resemblance to Joyce's *Ulysses* in its title and ambitions. The narrator describes it as "much too long, nothing particular happened in it, and few people even pretended to know what it was about" (GA 355). This was a more polite version of Wharton's take on Joyce.³⁰ In both of the Vance Weston novels, Wharton asserts that rejecting formal tradition hindered an artist's creative expression, rather than fostering it.³¹ Thompson defends the novels' attack on modern fiction, reading them as Wharton's assertion that "modernist prose was in fact an extension of naturalist fiction" (88). Thompson may be giving Wharton a bit too much credit here. The Weston novels problematically conflate modernism, American realism, and the middlebrow. While distinctions between these categories were not as clear as we may like to assume in retrospect, that should not distract from Wharton's unfortunate tendency to paint her literary adversaries with a very broad brush.

The relationship between the post-war fiction and modernism has been a popular subject of recent Wharton scholarship, given that ways of thinking about the movement have expanded to encompass a diverse group of 'modernisms.' Opinion remains divided as to how Wharton's writing aligns with and diverges from the movement. Wegener and Peel contend that her distaste for modernist form and class background distance her from the movement.³² Thompson, Haytock, Sensibar, Zak, Klimasmith, Beer and Horner argue that her subject matter distinguishes her as a modernist writer. From their perspective, Wharton's adherence to the traditional novel form and the genre of historical fiction does not exclude her from the movement. Klimasmith claims that *The Age of Innocence* uses "the accessible form of the historical novel to construct and make readable a version of modern consciousness in which behavior and

³⁰ In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton describes the fictions of Joyce and Lawrence as "laborious monuments of schoolboy pornography" (50).

³¹ She was not alone in her distaste for modernist experiments with form. As Thompson observes, "The concept of literary 'movement' that encourages late-twentieth-century critics to see Wharton's work as reactionary ignores that many critics of her own day say modernist aesthetics as intellectual *regression*" (109, italics in original). Among them was Clive Bell, who in 1921 condemned Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* as excessively influenced by African-American folk culture (North, *Dialect* 10).

³² See Wegener in Colquitt, Goodman, and Waid 116-138 and Peel 15-16, 80.

emotion, public time and private time, tradition and inspiration all coexist,” anticipating later modernist fiction (556-557). Beer and Horner also argue that she “eschewed obvious modernist experimentation in favour of reworking traditional narratives and imbuing them with a twentieth-century consciousness” (71). By undermining the stability of historical narratives via traditional formal avenues, not only did Wharton challenge hegemonic ways of thinking about history in the 1920s and 1930s, she engaged in a modernist literary endeavor.

The author shared her idea of the significance of the literary past with Proust and Eliot, but her condemnation of modernist form has overshadowed these similarities. In the final chapter of *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton positions herself as an early champion of Proust. In it, she observes, “his strength is the strength of tradition. All his newest and most arresting effects have been arrived at through the old way of selection and design” (*WF* 109). Halperin points out that the writers shared common interests: “Through both their lives runs a stream of snobbishness and conservatism, from which they periodically drew back. Both saw the social barbarities of their younger days with kinder eyes as they grew older and those days grew more remote – and more appealing by comparison with what followed them in New York and Paris” (199). Both Wharton and Proust had a strong appreciation for history on a personal, collective, and artistic level. Thompson also points out that Wharton shared Eliot’s reverence for tradition in literature.³³ His essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), was published the same year as *French Ways and Their Meaning*. In it, he argues that a writer must cultivate a ‘historical sense,’ which entails “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (14). This “historical sense” is of a kind with Wharton’s “sense of the past” from *French Ways and Their Meaning*. Eliot went on to assert that tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor” (14). Wharton, meanwhile, had also cautioned would-be writers against assuming “that no time need be wasted in studying the past history of his art” (*WF* 17). Both

³³ Wharton had read both ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1917) and ‘The Waste Land’ (1922), finding ‘Prufrock’ more the more endearing of the two. Neither, however, left her awestruck (Lewis 442).

envisioned tradition as something that can only be acquired through diligence and study, and were strident defenders of the relevance of past art in the present moment. However, they translated these similar views into artistic practice in very different ways. Eliot's verse alludes to older works within unconventional forms, while Wharton's fiction treats traditional structural elements as indispensable.

As her praise of tradition brought her in line with leading modernist writers and thinkers, her sense that America lacked a rich culture was in accord with some Lost Generation writers, who linked the shortcomings of the nation's literature to its education system.³⁴ In *Exile's Return* (1934), Malcolm Cowley argued that young Americans had been schooled to revere European culture above their own (28). Lacking a worthy literary tradition, these writers sought to create one. Fitzgerald fictionalized their dilemma in his debut novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920), describing this "new generation" of college undergraduates as having "grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, and all faiths in man shaken" (307). Wharton was also frustrated by provincial attitudes in education, even though she thought that America's distancing itself culturally from Europe was the wrong solution.³⁵ This comes through in her references to Weston's college days in *Hudson River Bracketed*. Though he has been to college, he has not learned a great deal there. His experience consists of "sports and more sports, secret societies, class scraps and fraternity rushing, with restricted intervals of mechanical cramming, and the glib unmeaning recital of formulas" (119). Halo Tarrant echoes the voice of her creator, commenting that state universities "take the bloom off our greatest treasures by giving them to young savages to maul" (64). Weston's university experience is tailored to land him a job in business, perhaps to follow in the footsteps of his father and enter the real estate trade. It is a

³⁴ Fass supports this assessment, arguing that the college experience of many young Americans in the 1920s was marked by "the low evaluation of academic work" and a "shallowness of intellectual life," in which scholastic achievements were "neither honored nor rewarded" and social success became "the measure of accomplishment" (178, 180, 172).

³⁵ Wharton also linked the inadequacy of America's universities to literature in her non-fiction writing. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she observes, "One is sometimes tempted to think that the generation which has invented the 'fiction course' is getting the fiction it deserves" (18). Also, in *A Backward Glance*, she laments the substitution of "University degrees" for "the more complex art of civilized living" (60).

social experience, a coming-of-age journey in a controlled laboratory environment. In contrast, Wharton shows us that his education begins and his maturity develops only after he leaves the university. *Hudson River Bracketed* argues that thoughtful students like Weston cannot benefit from a business-oriented education; it does not expose students to the world's literary traditions, nor does it prepare them to participate within them. As Cowley and Fitzgerald describe an American education as a process of alienation for the artist, Weston's experience suggests that his true literary talents are stifled until he leaves the campus grounds.

The Children takes Wharton's critique of the American university further. The institution systemically winnows creativity out of the younger generation in order to make them more 'productive' citizens. Princess Buondelmonte, trained in "Eugenics and Infant Psychology, at Lohengrin College, Texas," persuades the Wheeler children to play a game called "Ambition," designed to "direct children's minds as early as possible to the choice of a career" (277, 294-5). The youngsters have little interest in a career, having learned from their parents that work is dull compared to yachts, hotels, and dinner parties. Beechy scribbles that his ambition in life is to "never brush meye tethe" (295). While the episode contains an implicit critique of the parents and the unsettling standardization of American lives through the educational system, it also celebrates the natural cleverness and vivacity of the children: Beechy completely deflates the Princess's pretensions with his answer. Her education has failed her spectacularly, leaving her completely ill at ease around children, despite her years of training to handle them. In simply taking care of the children she already has, the novel implies, the Princess would have learned a great deal more than Lohengrin College's textbooks and lectures have taught her. As is the case with Weston, her education fails to prepare her for reality in any worthwhile respect.³⁶

Wharton's concern with thwarted communication in relationships also evidences her shared sympathies with modernism. Though modern American society affords greater freedom

³⁶ This criticism of America's universities also features in Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925). The fact that a group of writers as diverse as Fitzgerald, Cowley, Wharton, Cather, and Lewis (as I argue in Chapter Four) offer similar commentary about higher education at this time is an intriguing avenue of potential scholarship.

of expression than had that of previous generations, her characters repeatedly face situations in which they cannot effectively communicate with those closest to them. Their images of what a relationship should be – with a parent, child, or a lover – consistently fails to live up to expectations. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate fails to establish a deeper connection with her daughter, despite her hope that the biological link between them will transcend the decades they have spent apart. Elsewhere, in *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline's dissatisfying conversations with Dexter force her to confront "those invisible barriers against which she had so often bruised her perceptions" (149). She continually attempts to persuade him of her love, only to push him further away. Haytock likens Pauline's "invisible barriers" to Woolf's descriptions of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Haytock argues that the depiction of "soul-telegraphy" by both novelists suggests that "women modernists were deeply engaged in questions about identity, relationships, and literary representations of both" (149). The comparison has some validity, but it cannot be taken very far. *Twilight Sleep* may have more modernist elements to it than has generally been acknowledged, though this alone does not make Edith Wharton America's answer to Virginia Woolf.

A Son at the Front's investigation of the war's effect on personal relationships, and how this effect is reflected in art, also links the novel with modernism. Haytock argues that in the novel, "physical pain becomes a metaphor for all experience that cannot be conveyed in words and consequently become reminders of the isolation of the individual" (115). Throughout, Wharton emphasizes the incomprehensibility of George's combat experiences to the family members he leaves behind. John routinely misinterprets his son's decision to fight, as well as the young man's romantic involvement with Adele Anthony. The boy remains a mystery to his father, one that only deepens after his injury – and eventual death – renders him unrecognizable and uncommunicative. Like Caddy in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or Jacob in Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) – George becomes a structuring void at the center of Wharton's novel. Yet John is eventually able to recover from the loss of his son; he does not become

frozen in time like Arthur Wyant or Evelina Jasper. He does so by returning to his art. Rather than heeding the call to ‘make it new,’ John picks up where he left off, adapting traditional forms to a new era. He revisits one of his favorite subjects, his son, and uses art to bring himself back to life. Wharton also makes a case against ‘making it new’ in ‘Writing a War Story’ (1919), which chronicles the disappointments of an aspiring female writer, Ivy Spang. She attempts to make a name for herself as a female war-writer. Yet few of the soldiers she visits in hospital have read her story; most of her ‘audience’ simply wants a picture of her, since she is an attractive young woman. Her disenchanting experience suggests how the American literary marketplace continued to limit female writers to certain subjects, despite contemporary notions of artistic and political progressivism. Both *A Son at the Front* and ‘Writing a War Story’ suggest Wharton’s skepticism towards literary iconoclasm, for better and for worse. As she believed that established traditions would continue to assert themselves in modern art, she also saw that old prejudices within the literary marketplace continued to linger.

Like other modernists, Wharton was interested in the nature of creative genius and the conditions in which it thrived. Throughout the course of both the Vance Weston novels, she tests out various theories of how the artist should live. On the course of his journey, Weston comes across various people – among them Tarrant, Frenside, Hayes, Alders, and Churley – who shape his views of fiction’s proper form and subject. He eventually develops “the nerve to go back to a quiet, almost old-fashioned style” in his writing as well as his private life (*HRB* 166). Before he manages to do so, however, he often lapses into pretentious diatribes about his talent. During one of these self-aggrandizing spells, he tells Halo, “I’m sure the lexicon of art has no hard-and-fast words like always and never. I do what I’m moved to do; any artist, even the greatest of ‘em, will tell you it’s all he *can* do... Nobody but a writer can understand” (*GA* 65). Though he does not publish his manifestos and credos in little magazines, he often forces his girlfriend to sit through his diatribes about the nature of genius. In this instance, Halo politely demurs from pointing out what Wharton clearly implies: his bloviating is a transparent excuse

for writer's block. At various points in both novels, Weston invokes his 'genius' to justify procrastination, selfishness, and pleasure seeking. When he is at his most theoretical – or 'modernist,' in Wharton's characterization – he produces his worst novels and behaves like a smug brat. A number of critics have pointed out the vitriol in Wharton's portrayal of the modern male genius: Bauer sees the novels as evidence of her "scorn" for the "misguided and distorting idealization of male genius" championed by modernist writers (142). Thompson also claims that these texts figure modernism as "inherently corrupt" (114). Sensibar, meanwhile, views *The Children*, as Wharton's move to discredit the modernist view of a "Prufrock figure," or sexually and emotionally stunted bachelor, as the archetype of a "great creative artist" (Joslin and Price 159). Wharton does impart positive traits to Weston – the trajectory of his career bears more than a passing resemblance to her own, and his rise to fame mirrors that of Sinclair Lewis. Still, his occasional tendency to assume the persona of a disaffected male genius suggests that Wharton saw this archetype as a revolting publicity stunt conjured up by businessmen hoping to sell more books and newspapers.

Though a number of critics have written about Wharton's interest in modernist themes, few have noted that she also adopted a narrative style reminiscent of modernism in certain instances. She did so in spite of her vocal condemnation of "formlessness" and faddishness among contemporary writers in works like the Weston novels and *The Writing of Fiction*. *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *Twilight Sleep* offer multiple perspectives on the same events and characters, rendering perception and narrative authority unstable. In the earlier novel, Nick and Suzy misinterpret one another's actions after their separation, a result of following one another's exploits through the newspaper. *Twilight Sleep* takes this further, dividing the novel's narration between Pauline, Dexter, and Nona. This structure illuminates how little these characters actually understand one another. While Pauline's sections of the novel hint toward the problems she refuses to recognize, Nona and Dexter's sections demonstrate how everyone else recognizes these things immediately. Chief among them is her insecurity: she constantly mulls over various

procedures and techniques to improve her appearance. Yet Dexter and Nona see her obsession with beauty as a waste of time and money. Similarly, she refuses to admit that Jim's marriage to Lita is in peril, yet the fragile state of their marriage is one of the central focuses of Wharton's novel.

Both *The Mother's Recompense* and *Twilight Sleep* convey information about characters through a form of the stream of consciousness. Wharton does not employ this device in a heavily stylized manner, as did Joyce or Faulkner. Yet, like that of many modernist writers, her writing explores how individual subjectivity exists beyond physical realities and boundaries. One such example occurs in *The Mother's Recompense*, when Kate watches Lilla in the park, assuming the girl waits for a lover: "she remembered meetings of the same kind—but was it her own young figure she saw fading down those far off perspectives?" (84). Kate's rumination collapses boundaries between past and present, self and other, reality and imagination. Elsewhere in the novel, there are prominent gaps within Kate's narration, encouraging speculation as to why significant details have been omitted. Anne's wedding is one such example. Kate does not recount the event for us; we see the sleepless night that precedes it, Fenno waiting at the end of the aisle, and we rejoin Kate after the couple leaves for their honeymoon. The omission invokes the trauma caused by seeing her daughter marry the man she wanted for herself. Kate cannot comprehend her own pain, nor can she articulate it to us. Trauma occasions a similar gap in Pauline's consciousness in *Twilight Sleep*. From Cedarledge, she writes to Jim to assure him that all is well with the family. This is a fabrication: Nona is dejected, Lita remains determined to go to Hollywood if given the chance, and Dexter continues to pursue other women – first Mrs. Toy, then Lita. Even so, Pauline feels "reassured" after having written the letter: it had "given her the feeling, to which she had always secretly inclined, that a thing was so if one said it was, and doubly so if one wrote it down" (257). She attempts to transform her reality through fiction, in a manner which affirms her distance from herself and the people around her. Surprisingly,

both Kate and Pauline embody modernist subjectivity, even though their creator regarded that very subjectivity as a contrived fad.

I have only dealt briefly with the thematic and narrative points of overlap between Wharton and the modernists. Thompson, Haytock, Sensibar, Beer and Horner offer a fuller account of this relationship. Nevertheless, these examples suggest how her aggressive defense of tradition has distracted from a more ambivalent relationship to contemporary literature displayed elsewhere in her post-war writing. In refusing to recognize her shared interests with many younger writers, Wharton sought to defend her artistic principles. Yet this resulted in unnecessary damage to the reputation of her writing as a result. She misjudged the breadth, depth, and impact of modernist innovation. In defending tradition, she neglected to account for its potential to expand, as she neglected to consider the ways in which her own narrative approaches had broadened. In so doing, she unwittingly gave future critics evidence to argue that she was out of touch with contemporary life, though her post-war fiction is as much a product of the 1920s and 1930s as it is a critique of it. Wharton's keen 'sense of the past' uniquely enabled her to capture America's complex, contradictory relationship with social and cultural history during this period.

Chapter Three Flappers, Mothers and Post-War Gender Equality

During the 1920s and 1930s, Americans thought about gender equality in terms of women's greater sexual freedom and access to the vote. Wharton's post-war fiction challenges these terms of equality, pointing out how women's choices and opportunities continued to be severely limited in the modern period relative to those of men. Her American women of the post-war period have conceded ground in some respects, whilst gaining it in others. In this respect, her writing continues some of the themes and arguments of her earlier work, examining women's difficult negotiation of ideals regarding beauty, sexuality, romance, and motherhood. In some instances, the post-war fiction depicts traditional roles as fulfilling alternatives to the shallow promises of modern femininity, embodied in the figure of the flapper. The flapper encourages Wharton's female characters to remain in a state of arrested development, leaving them plagued with insecurities. Marriage and motherhood become potential traps for her characters, a virtual minefield of unfulfilled promises and disappointments. The author also challenged the prevailing wisdom of the time by pointing out that women continued to be held to a damaging double standard: while they were encouraged to be rebellious in youth, they were expected to 'settle down' in to conventional roles after reaching 'a certain age.' In its assessment of the dubious 'progress' her nation offered women, her fiction shares points of critique with that of Scott Fitzgerald, further undermining notions that she was out of touch with American life. Popular misreadings of both writers remind us how retrospective interpretations of the modern period often neglect to account for its conservative elements, particularly with regard to gender.

The Flapper in American Life

Imagine, for a moment, Edith Wharton, the flapper. With slick bobbed hair and stockings rolled below her knees, she wriggles her hips and bats a pair of sultry dark lashes as she dances the Charleston. The incongruity of this image suggests the difficulty we still have in thinking about her in relation to the Jazz Age. Yet, the fact that she was not a flapper does not preclude her from making valuable commentary about American women of the time. While acknowledging how women's lives had changed since the late nineteenth century, her fiction incisively critiques the flapper as a false symbol of liberation. Wharton was conservative in many respects – yet so were the 1920s, and so was the flapper.

Who was the flapper, and what did she represent in American cultural life? She was a symbol of rebellion against traditional male-female relationships, of a defiant secular reaction to Prohibition, and of a mainstream affinity for primitive cultures and psychology. She was not confined to the glamorous nightspots of Chicago and New York, but a national and international phenomenon – a menace to small towns as well as a product of British slang, Hollywood glamour, and French fashion. In the twenty-first century, the term evokes the movement of bobbed hair and tasseled dresses. Yet its etymological roots suggest a more overtly sexual earlier meaning that has been muted over time. In 1631, the British used 'flap' to describe "a very young prostitute," with the usage softening by the 1910s to refer to a disobedient teenage girl (Hendrickson 199). This symbol of modern femininity took Hollywood by storm in *The Flapper* (1920), a film starring Manhattan chorus girl Olive Thomas. The star epitomized the style and hedonistic attitudes of young, rich urbanites, onscreen and off. A hard-living socialite who enjoyed gin and crashing cars, she died in mysterious circumstances in Paris, just months after the release of the film that catapulted her to stardom.³⁷

The silver screen made the flapper a global phenomenon, but she was not exactly a

³⁷ Thomas married the brother of Mary Pickford, a silent era leading lady. Newspaper reports alleged that Thomas had overdosed on cocaine in Paris, yet Bruce Long's recent study of Thomas suggests that she poisoned herself by mistakenly ingesting topical mercury, prescribed for her husband's syphilis (Long 1).

Hollywood original. She drew upon a long tradition of *femmes fatales* across narrative forms (Gilbert and Gubar 3-45). The flapper was an evolution of an earlier screen seductress, the baby vamp, who wore heavy cosmetics to appear sultry and exotic.³⁸ Vamps and flappers were cast opposite ‘sweethearts,’ such as Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish, who were styled to appear wholesome and natural.³⁹ This suggests that while the flapper gave women something to aspire to, they also understood that they were meant to maintain a sweet docility beneath their vampy modern exterior. In her study of Wharton and film, Parley Boswell argues that Lita resembles one of the original baby vamps, Theda Bara (56). Bara starred in a 1918 production of *Cleopatra*, a role that Wharton’s flapper also hopes to play.⁴⁰ Though Wharton “had only mild interest in the movies themselves” she was nevertheless fascinated “by the ways in which movie culture affected her characters” (Boswell 15). This interest in actresses and their impact on the women watching them is suggested through a number of her characters, among them Lita, the actress Lady Wrench from *The Children*, and leading lady Halma Hoboe of ‘Charm Incorporated.’

The flapper’s appearance set her apart from the women of previous generations. Her slouchy, adolescent look derived from the French *garçonne* style, famously pioneered by designer Coco Chanel. Chanel’s fashions rejected the voluptuous body shapes of the turn of the century, instead favoring supple fabrics that draped to a woman’s natural contours. It stripped away the artifice of costume and corsetry and revealed more of the body in terms of skin and silhouette. Though the low necklines and leg-of-mutton sleeves popular in Wharton’s youth had gone out of style, attention-seekers found compensation through slinky frocks that revealed the legs and back. As Zeitz points out, the practicalities of life in wartime inspired these sartorial shifts, first in France and eventually spreading throughout the West: “They couldn’t build munitions or man

³⁸ The baby vamp’s origins merge high and low culture; the figure is attributed to *A Fool There Was* (1915). The film’s title derives from the refrain of Kipling’s poem ‘The Vampire’ (1897), which describes a female sexual predator (Gilbert and Gubar 26).

³⁹ Boswell claims that Edith Wharton would have hated a Mary Pickford, though she would have been fascinated by the star’s impact on impressionable young women like Charity Royall. See Boswell 1-2, 19-22, 39-40.

⁴⁰ Boswell also describes Lady Wrench as “taking a cue from Gloria Swanson” and sees Klawhammer as a fictionalization of film impresario Samuel Goldwyn (59, 83).

typewriters and telephone lines while wearing crinolines and corsets. Strict wartime rationing of raw materials like silk and cotton also inspired a move toward minimalism and simplicity” (154). The rigors of life in wartime changed how women saw themselves and how men perceived them. They had proven themselves capable outside the domestic realm, and when the war ended many were no longer content to return to the old ways of life or old styles of dress.

Legal changes in America also altered perceptions of women’s place in society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, women earned the vote in 1920, but many were not concerned with regional, national, or global politics. For years, the significance of enfranchisement remained largely symbolic, and many female voters simply echoed their husband’s choice (Lynd and Lynd 415-20). Growing tolerance of divorce also altered perceptions of women’s role in society. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the law took a Christian view of marriage as an indissoluble union. This meant that a divorce could destroy a woman’s otherwise spotless reputation. Though American law permitted divorce in certain cases, it was also extremely rare and often prohibitively expensive. Making matters more complex was the fact that laws varied from state to state, with some declaring divorce illegal across the board, while others allowed it in cases of proven adultery, abandonment, or physical abuse. Mutual desire to separate was not considered just cause in any state until the late twentieth century. Though divorce remained a costly, difficult proposition, many Americans had become desensitized to the stigmas surrounding it in the 1920s. Legal scholar Roderick Phillips observes, “The flood of divorces after the war cannot but have increased the exposure of ordinary people to divorce on a scale unthinkable ten years earlier” (191). He contends that a divorce boom in the United States and Europe reflected a desire for a fresh start after the war. Wharton had chronicled the transformation of American attitudes in novels like *The Custom of the Country*, and her post-war fictions trace how these shifts continued to shape society and relationships throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Though the flapper was a product of significant political and cultural transitions, she was also a profoundly shallow creature. A woman's youthful appearance and slender shape was an asset to be prized above all else. Histories of the period – including those by Fass, Douglas, Zietz, and Angela Latham – consistently point out that post-war beauty standards sparked widespread insecurity in American women. Advertisements for clothes, cosmetics, and rejuvenation techniques enticed buyers with the prospect of renewed youth or a slimmer waistline. Often, they threatened the opposite if a purchase was not made, with the implication that maintaining one's appearance was essential to avoid remaining “on the shelf” (Fass 35, 50). The modern beauty industry was born in the twenties, selling women the illusion of control over time and genetics through the power of the purse. American society placed “a premium on the immediate signs of regularity – facile conformity in dress, manner, taste, and language – while deriding other qualities like abiding interest, diligence, earnestness, and inner convictions” (Fass 230). What was on the outside mattered enormously, but what was on the inside mattered little.

Adding to women's anxieties about their looks was the increasingly common sight of the nude (or near-nude) female body in popular entertainment. The Ziegfeld Follies in New York, a theatrical spectacular featuring performances by beautiful chorus girls in revealing clothing, is a prime example. A number of future Hollywood stars got their start in the Follies, such as Paulette Goddard, Barbara Stanwyck, Louise Brooks, and the original flapper, Olive Thomas. Ziegfeld also ran the after-hours *Midnight Frolic* on the rooftop of the New Amsterdam Theatre. This more risqué version of the *Follies* was intended exclusively for celebrities and socialites. At one performance, the female performers were clad only in balloons that male patrons were encouraged to burst with lit cigars. Hollywood was another leading peddler of flesh in the 1920s, and films frequently featured sexual innuendo, profanity, and women in their undergarments. The fact that the Hays Code, promoting ‘traditional values’ in the cinema, was not widely enforced until 1934 allowed for the sexual objectification of women in film (La Salle). The greater integration of sexuality in American public discourse is also suggested by a dramatic

increase in rates of abortion and contraceptive use. The Comstock Law of 1873 had made the sale of contraceptives – and other materials deemed “obscene,” such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* – illegal in the United States. However, the birth control movement had helped to erode sexual taboos, encouraging people and businesses to find ways of circumventing the law. Its leader, Margaret Sanger, encouraged women to pursue “the greatest possible expression and fulfillment of their desires” (D’Emilio and Freedman 66-67). The flapper was a mixed blessing to American women in this respect. She inspired and reflected more tolerant views about sex, yet she was part of a broader cultural pattern that compelled women to view themselves as sex objects.

While American society had developed a greater appreciation for the female body, it also became more intolerant of bodies that did not measure up to the narrow parameters of modern beauty. This is evidenced by a 1921 incident in which a woman was arrested in Atlantic City for wearing a one-piece swimsuit. The sight led one outraged observer to complain in his local newspaper, “civilization thrives in climates which require covering most of the year” (Latham 49). Newspaper reports exaggerated the woman’s stature and age, characterizing her as a hulking brute that had nearly overpowered a male police officer. Ironically, her arrest fell on the same weekend that Atlantic City hosted the Miss America pageant, whose slender, youthful contestants wore similar one-piece styles. These women failed to incite any negative comment, leading Latham to argue that the beachgoer’s mature, fuller figure had provoked the outpouring of disapproval in the paper. She also points out that, despite the shock caused by the beachgoer’s attire, one-piece bathing suits became a staple of American beaches and pools by the end of the decade (86-88). Though American women were no longer forced to wear the restrictive garments of generations past, they could also no longer rely on them to provide a shapely figure. For those who lacked the girlish silhouette that the flapper popularized, the fashions of the 1920s were more exposing than liberating.

The flapper also had a tremendous impact on relationships between men and women in post-war America, and embodied the double standard that post-war women faced. Though

women in the 1920s enjoyed greater sexual freedom relative to previous generations, it was assumed that as a woman approached thirty, she would embrace the traditional roles of wife and mother. They were meant to be self-indulgent in their youth, and utterly selfless in adulthood. Sex appeal and titillation were important components of post-war courtship, as suggested in Fitzgerald's controversial debut novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which brought the 'petting party' out of dance halls and dormitories into American living rooms. Amory Blaine attends a party where he sees "girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible" (60). Though *This Side of Paradise* was risqué and shocking for its time, the scene essentially describes what we would now refer to as 'making out' – rather tame by twenty-first century standards. The sexual values of the nation were changing, but not as rapidly as the racy image of the period would imply. The wild hedonism of the flapper was simply another step on the inevitable route leading to marriage and motherhood. Levine observes that while flapper films were marketed salaciously, they promoted marriage as a route to middle class respectability (Bradbury and Palmer 51). Zeitz has also argued, "the flapper phenomenon emphasized individuality, even as it expressed itself in conformity" (8). Yet while the flapper shone on the silver screen, capturing the attention of America's men and women, the mother receded from films and advertisements, replaced by "flappers or erotic wives" (Latham 10). Manuals on child-rearing from the period focused intensely on early childhood development, attributing a child's troubles to poor mothering (Humble 242). Wharton recognized that while the flapper espoused an ethos of rebellion and progress, she was as much a conformist to social expectations as were the cloistered women of Old New York.

The Menace of the Flapper

Notions of modern women's progress left Wharton incredulous, yet her historical fiction shows how women had made some significant gains since the middle and late nineteenth century. In "New Year's Day" (1924), set in the 1870s, her narrator observes, "Among the young women now growing up around me I find none with enough imagination to picture the helpless incapacity of the pretty girl of the 'seventies, the girl without money or vocation, seemingly put in the world only to please, unlearned in any way of maintaining herself there by her own efforts" (ONY 312). For women of her mother's generation, securing a husband was essential to one's survival; they had no other way of supporting themselves. For better and for worse, marriage in America was no longer such a serious business by the 1920s. For the most part, however, she was not convinced that women's prospects had expanded to the extent that popular wisdom held. In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, she likened the women of her nation to children, arguing, "the French woman is *grown up*" in comparison to her American equivalent (100, italics in original). Immature stateside women inhabit "a baby world" that she likens to a Montessori school, in which "shut up together in the most improved hygienic surroundings, a number of infants noisily develop their individuality" (101). *The Children* reiterates this perspective, questioning the maturity of modern adults relative to their offspring. So too does *Twilight Sleep*, with Pauline's observation that "The young people nowadays, for all their long words and scientific realism, were really more like children than ever" (198). In the face of a nation that prided itself on modern progress, *French Ways and Their Meaning* asserts that modern America had regressed relative to previous generations and in comparison to other cultures.

Flappers are the most obvious examples of these American child-women in the post-war fiction. Wharton characterizes them as insubstantial, whimsical, and shallow. They are "young women made for leisure and luxury," and little else (HRB 274). In *Twilight Sleep*, Lita's skin possesses a "milky translucence," her lanky body causing her to appear "in perpetual motion, as a tremor of air lives in certain trees" (35). Later in the novel, the narrator comments that Lita's

“sole affair was to shower radiance” (74). Her beauty stands beyond “any interior disturbance” and something that “nothing from within would alter” (281). Lita’s breezy inhumanity anticipates her disregard for the tumult within the Manford and Wyant families, much of which she has directly caused. Her deepest passion is whatever has most recently entered her field of vision: sport, health foods, Tommy Ardwin, the film director Klawhammer, and even her adoring father-in-law, Dexter. None of these things manages to hold her attention for very long. Her depthlessness defines her, and there is nothing more to her than her beauty. Even so, as Boswell has suggested, Lita remains a force to be reckoned with: “Lita is the only character in *Twilight Sleep* whose looks are described in elaborate detail by every one of the main characters. They cannot take their eyes off her” (50). Descriptions of Judith Wheeler in *The Children* create a similarly ethereal, yet disconcertingly powerful image: “Her silk dress was of that peculiar carnation-pink which takes a silver glaze like the bloom on a nectarine. The rich stuff stood out from her in a double tier of flounces, on which, as she stood motionless, her hands seemed to float like birds on little sunlit waves” (346). These images are exquisitely delicate, but also lifeless and doll-like. Though Wharton was critical of the flapper’s insipidity, she did not underestimate her power in American society.

The hair and makeup of Wharton’s characters also evokes their artificiality and depthlessness. Our first glimpse of Kate Clephane’s flapper niece, Lilla Gates, reveals her “dyed hair, dyed lashes, drugged eyes and unintelligible dialect” (MR 50). Elsewhere, Floss Delaney spends “every cent she could get on paint and perfume,” while Lady Wrench wears so much mascara that her eyes appear “like jewels in a raying-out of enameled lashes” (GA 214, TC 64). In ‘Her Son,’ Mrs. Brown is the “perfect specimen of the middle-aged flapper,” yet the narrator also reveals that “the freshness of her face was largely due to artifice, and the golden glints in her chestnut hair were a thought too golden. Still, she was a very pretty woman, with the alert cosmopolitan air of one who had acquired her elegance in places where the very best counterfeits are found” (J 541, 538-9). Each of these women seems alluring at a distance but

appears grotesque up close, covered in “paint” and “enamel” like an elaborate doll. Zak argues that “modern cosmetic products and techniques such as ‘rouge’ and drawn-on brows” are tools these characters use to compensate for the shortcomings of the female body (Totten, *Memorial* 118). Yet Wharton repeatedly highlights the obviousness of these women’s efforts, forcing us to imagine the cracks in their facades: the caking foundation, the wrinkles, and the gray hair. When beauty and sex appeal can be bought, applied, and stripped off with relative ease, little distinguishes one woman from another. They are all a product of the same mass-produced items: mascara, lipstick, and bleach.

Judith Butler’s concept of performativity holds that the traits we commonly associate with either men or women reflect a “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions.” In her view, manners and outward appearances play a critical role in the production of one’s identity. Gender allows us to organize our thinking about certain behaviors, but also functions as an insidious mechanism of social control. Butler argues that one’s performance of masculinity or femininity can be “punitively regulated” by the broader social group (Butler 522). Wharton’s female characters – before and after 1920 – anticipate Butler’s concept. Joslin reads Lily Bart as “the perfect heroine for performative theory” (Beer, Knights, and Nolan 99). Totten makes a similar claim about *The House of Mirth*, which he sees as anticipating Foucault’s contention that individuals attempt to “fashion their lives as art.” He claims that the *tableaux vivants* scene represents Lily’s attempt to “reassert her subjectivity and re-establish her social worth” (“Art” 76-77). Elsewhere, Bentley describes Undine of *The Custom of the Country* as a “wax woman alarmingly come to life” and as a “living mannequin” (173, 175). These descriptions could apply to virtually every woman in Wharton’s post-war fiction. Each is an actress in some capacity; they constantly shape their behavior or appearance in order to fit the dominant image of womanly beauty.⁴¹ They are especially apt for

⁴¹ Bentley makes an intriguing comparison between Wharton’s actresses and prostitutes that also applies to the author’s handling of the flapper’s promiscuity: “In fiction, the actress and the prostitute embody a powerful but

thinking about Pauline Manford, who we see fastening on her “jeweled ‘Motherhood’ badge” before mistakenly delivering a speech on the virtues of contraception to the Mother’s Day Association (*TS* 97). Elsewhere, her daughter describes her smiles as something “she snaps on with her tiara” (*TS* 75). Hers is a never-ending performance, and there is no discernable boundary between her public and private selves.

Wharton connects the modern cult of beauty to lingering perceptions of women’s intellectual inferiority in ‘Writing a War-Story,’ in which Ivy Spang writes war fiction for a soldier’s magazine.⁴² The ailing servicemen Ivy visits praise her appearance, but “it was evident none of them had read her story” (*S* 257). She later meets with a male author, who candidly tells her that she has “rather mauled” her subject, then proceeds to ask her for a photo (*S* 259). She wants others to recognize her creativity, yet they only value her looks. Gilbert and Gubar cite the story as evidence of Wharton’s “hostility to women of letters,” describing Ivy as “pretty but brainless” (127). However, it is not immediately clear in the context story that Ivy cannot write well. Wharton only describes how others assess her work, offering little insight as to her actual talents. Gilbert and Gubar’s reading suggests that Wharton tacitly places her readers in the position of enacting the same judgment of Ivy; we cannot help but judge the book by its cover. Through the story, Wharton argues that the Lita Wyants and Floss Delaneys of the world had rendered it impossible for a woman with a brain to be seen as such. The story challenges the systemic factors that force even intelligent and culturally savvy women, like Wharton herself, vulnerable to insecurities about their age and looks.

Wharton’s flappers perpetuate a longstanding ‘custom of the country’: bartering sex for social and economic advancement. In *Twilight Sleep*, Lita’s nude photos offer her a tantalizing chance for Hollywood stardom. Her in-laws weakly confront her for embarrassing the family, but cannot bring themselves to condemn her too harshly. Pauline fears that Dexter will forbid

compromised agency: the actress commands public attention but is only miming a fictive self; the prostitute, though starkly visible, is selling and thus losing a self” (189).

⁴² Ivy’s editor encourages her to write “a tragedy with a happy ending,” echoing William Dean Howells’s advice to Wharton following the failed stage production of *The House of Mirth* (*S* 248).

her from using the Mahatma as a spiritual guru, and Dexter is too titillated by the images to make a coherent argument about them. The photos seem to place her in the enviable position of obtaining a starring role in a film without even having to go through the formality of a screen test, leading her aunt to ask her in-laws, “has the child told you what Klawhammer has offered her to turn just *one film* for him, before even having seen her dance...?” (165). Though the offer never materializes, Wharton’s point is clear. Klawhammer does not need to see Lita dance to know if she has what it takes to make it in pictures; she has literally put everything out there for all to see. Like Lita, the Cran girls of *Hudson River Bracketed* also use sex as a means of advancement. They seek the approval of Bunty Hayes and his crowd, and are willing to do whatever it takes to earn it. Wharton’s descriptions immediately clue us in that these girls are trouble. They smoke, wear short skirts, and have dyed hair; the narrator even describes one as a “brazen minx” (136). They live up to this potential after the rowdy group has indulged in a few drinks:

They were going to the Crans’, and he found out, he didn’t know how, that these two were the Cran girls—Cutty with the dyed hair at the wheel, and the younger, ‘Smeralda they called her, sitting behind them on the hood with the two fellows, so that his head rested against her knees, and he felt, through his hair, the warm flesh where her scant skirt had slipped up. (135)

This attention-seeking behavior proves effective on Weston, who spends the night with Esmeralda and is expelled from his cousins’ home as a result. Not only are the girls incoherently drunk, they are virtually impossible to tell apart from one another. After the encounter, Weston feels “self-disgust” cling to him “like a bad taste in his mouth” (141). The incident suggests that these sisters are not empowered, but desperate and common.

The flapper perpetuates a longstanding culture of rivalry between women in the post-war fiction. Ammons has described this competitive animosity as “May Wellandism” in relation to Wharton’s earlier work, and the term is equally applicable to her later writings (159, 160). In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton observes, “American women are each other’s only audience” (102). In her post-war fictions, women are constantly looking at themselves and

looking at other women. In *Twilight Sleep*, a scene in which Nona compares herself to Lita exemplifies this:

Her glance caught her sister-in-law's face in a mirror between two panels, and the reflection of her own beside it; she winced a little at the contrast... Though Nona was as tall and nearly as slim, she seemed herself to be built, while Lita was spun of spray and sunlight... The comparison added to her general vague sense of discouragement. "It's not one of my beauty days," she thought. (35)

Little sets the sisters-in-law apart from one another physically, yet Nona sees herself as "built," something shaped over time. Though she frames that substantiality in negative terms, it suggests her more intellectual and introspective character. In contrast, Lita possesses the quality of a spontaneous event.⁴³ The difference between them is not physical, but one of comportment. Lita's free-spirited sexual attitude provides her with tremendous power over men in the novel, among them Jim, Klawhammer, and Dexter. Nona is not substantially less attractive, yet she is weighted down by her sexual ethics. She loses the attention of the man she wants, Stan Heuston, to a flashy flapper rival, Cleo Merrick, after refusing his wife's offer to divorce him.

The flapper's sexual allure threatens to corrupt otherwise innocent women in Wharton's fictions. In *The Children*, the notorious Doll Westway never actually appears in the story, having committed suicide before the story begins. Even so, Boyne fears that her "wretched" and "drug-soaked" ways will influence the impressionable, beautiful Judith from beyond the grave, since both girls are the product of negligent parents (202). He reacts with horror when Judith follows her example by stealing money from her father. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Lilla also takes on this menacing quality. Throughout the story, Kate tries – and fails – to obtain information about her niece's behavior, ominously hearing only that "Lilla had behaved really badly" (60). Though Lilla commits no transgression under Kate's watchful eye, the older woman continually suspects the younger of unspoken, unspeakable misdeeds. Kate initially believes that Lilla is Fenno's lover when he turns up in New York. Later, when she finds out that Anne and Fenno are seeing one

⁴³ Zak reads the passage in a similar fashion: "Nona's thoughts suggest that she believes Lita requires no body work in order to achieve the 1920s ideal of beauty; Lita has simply 'spun' out of nature into the ideal form of beauty. Nona feels 'built,' suggesting that she must work on her body to achieve her culture's idea of beauty" (Totten, *Memorial* 122).

another, she infers that Lilla has been a licentious influence on her daughter. Neither of these assumptions proves to be true. Kate's anxieties stem from the similarities she sees between herself and her niece; Kate has also "behaved really badly," having fled to Europe with a lover twenty years before. In the scene where she watches Lilla in the park, Kate looks on Lilla with condescending pity, seeing the younger woman as headed for the same disappointing fate she has found (84). However, when Lilla secures a well-pedigreed fiancé, she enviously notes the girl's "rich careless voice," "peroxyde," and "even more easy, self-confident and indifferent" demeanor (181). Her resentment stems from her fear that no dashing bachelor will come to her rescue – her time has run out. She sees her niece as a romantic rival, rather than as a part of her family. While Lilla has not actually asserted a corrupting influence over any other women in the story, the fact that she possesses all the external trappings of a flapper make it impossible for Kate not to read her as one.

The flapper's influence is not only a force of corruption, but one of standardization. The consequences of this can be seen in their children as well as the women around them. Where there is one flapper in the post-war fiction, there is always the insidious prospect of more to come. In *The Children*, Boyne's final glimpse of Judith reveals the "sweetly vacuous" woman she has become; her attire and hair are his focal points, her speech muted by the distance from which he observes her (48). She assumes the depthlessness of the mature American woman in her "baby world" by adopting a derivation of Joyce's marcelled hairstyle, "moulded to her head in close curves" (346). As Joyce avoids making facial expressions out of "fear of disturbing" her "facial harmony," Judith seems to have comfortably eased in to the role of an enchanting doll (48). She says and does nothing in the novel's penultimate scene, she merely *is* beautiful. As such, she steps into a fate Wharton has hinted toward throughout the entire novel, becoming her mother in a natural culmination of her "embittered shrewdness and nursery simplicity" (265). The author's disdain of these kinds of "standardized beauties" and "redundant women" comes through in a comment made by Boyne elsewhere in the novel, as he gazes at a room full of

women: “I’m not sure if I owned one of these new beauties I shouldn’t always be able to pick her out in a crowd” (*S* 711, *TS* 248, *TC* 105). By behaving as though there is nothing more beneath their pretty surfaces, Wharton’s flappers make it so: both for themselves and for future generations as well.

The flapper’s girlish appearance inspires profound insecurity among older women “in a society where youth so indisputably rules” (*MR* 71). In *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline is obsessed with preserving her youthful appearance devoting several hours each day to beauty treatments, exercise, and relaxation techniques. Her bathroom resembles “a biological laboratory, with its white tiles, polished pipes, weighing machines, mysterious appliances for douches, gymnastics and ‘physical culture’” (23). The description of Pauline’s bathroom recalls a mad scientist’s laboratory, suggesting that the socialite takes on the roles of both Dr. Frankenstein and his monster in her pursuit of the body beautiful.⁴⁴ She even considers a facelift and a radium treatment to aggressively combat her wrinkles (117, 279). Though plastic surgery became much more common later in the century, in Pauline’s time it was a more dangerous and drastic approach to dealing with one’s insecurities. These modern beauty technologies lead to disaster in ‘The Looking Glass’ (1933), where a botched facelift leaves Mrs. Clingsland looking as though she has suffered a stroke. She surrounds herself with mirrors, obsessed with her distorted face: “From the day she saw the first little line around her eyes she thought of herself as an old woman, and the thought never left her for more than a few minutes at a time” (*S* 767). For them, beauty is a constant occupation and a source of constant anxiety.

These older women consistently disparage themselves in comparison with their young rivals. In *Twilight Sleep*, when Pauline’s hopes for a romantic evening with Dexter are dashed, she gazes jealously at a photograph of Lita: “Men, no doubt, would think it all enchanting.” She then compares the girl’s face to her own: “the rouge had vanished from the lips, their thin line

⁴⁴ Wharton derided ‘physical culture’ as “the artless exercises of an infant class” (*FW* 101). The term refers to what we would now describe as working out.

looked blue and arid. She turned from the unpleasing sight” (176). Lita’s picture embodies the youthful ideal Pauline carries in her mind, yet the signs of age she sees in the mirror confirm her inability to live up to that ideal. Though Pauline may seem to be overreacting in this scene, Dexter has an affair with Lita later in the novel, which suggests that her anxieties have been justified. Similarly, in *The Mother’s Recompense*, Kate’s self-doubt intensifies after her twenty-something daughter and niece reappear in her life. Throughout the novel, Kate agonizes over the physical signs of her age. She cringes at the sight of “the first streak of gray on her temples” and the “little lines” emerging “about her lips and eyes” (10, 229). Upon finding out that she is to return to New York – and being reminded that she has a daughter in her twenties – Kate cancels an order for several dresses that she now considers “inappropriate” for a woman her age (16). She orders a number of more restrained pieces, worriedly thinking that “her way of dressing and her demeanor must have thoroughly fixed in all these people’s minds the idea that she was one of the silly vain fools who imagine they look like their own daughters” (17). She desperately hopes to avoid looking “like a flapper” (17). However, in other instances she lapses into delusion, hoping that others will mistake she and Anne for sisters. Also, when Anne reveals her engagement, Kate’s jealousy manifests itself in terms of age: “They said grief was ageing – well, this agony seemed to have plunged her into a very Fountain of Youth” (126). Though she feels unchanged on the inside, her grief does prove to be ageing – precipitously so. Her daughter’s marriage causes her to age twenty years in the span of a few months, and her eroding appearance reflects the extent of her unhappiness. She physically transforms from the youthful woman she has always been in her mind into the tired, haggard creature of her worst imaginings. As the dreaded wedding day nears, “People were beginning to notice how tired and thin she looked” (229). Both Pauline and Kate are vain, at times foolish, but more tragic than silly. Though they cannot outwit time, they will certainly try. Though Wharton is critical of both characters, she also suggests that in devoting their energies to making themselves attractive, they simply do what modern America expects of them.

This obsession with maintaining a girlish appearance often makes Wharton's characters less attractive to the men in their lives. Dexter's brief affair with Mrs. Toy in *Twilight Sleep* is one example of this. He encounters Mrs. Toy by chance on a golf course, initially believing her to be everything that Pauline is not: "Decidedly, he admired a well-made woman, a woman with curves and volume – all the more after the stripped skeletons he had dined among the night before. Mrs. Toy had height enough to carry off her pounds, and didn't look ashamed of them either" (30). Mrs. Toy is not a young woman, or a slender one by 1920s standards. Pauline sees a couple of extra pounds or wrinkles as an occasion to embark upon an expensive, weeks-long quest for rejuvenation. Yet for all her efforts, her husband merely sees her as a "stripped skeleton." In contrast, Mrs. Toy's air of natural confidence endears her to Dexter. He sees her as a beguiling echo of a time "before money and fashion imposed their artificial standards," a passage which hints that the author, too, preferred womanly figures to adolescent flappers (231). The encounter leads him to reflect that Pauline enjoys entertaining "as much as other women do love-making" (252). Yet when he meets Mrs. Toy again, she has become "purpler and more self-conscious" and he exasperatedly thinks, "God, why did she have her clothes so tight?" (248). She has put in an enormous effort to look appealing, but her over-the-top ensemble backfires. To him, she becomes just another shallow woman, like Pauline. By undermining our initial sense of Mrs. Toy's self-confidence, the novel again condemns the terrifying, standardizing power of modern beauty.

Through frequent references to clocks and the passage of time, *The Mother's Recompense* and 'The Old Maid' (1921) assert that a profound fear of ageing was the dark consequence of the glorification of youth. Though the story is set in an earlier period than the novel, the women of both texts see growing older as bringing with it the death of their romantic aspirations. Kate personifies 'Time' as a cruel fiend that transforms Fred Landers from "the loose jointed friend of her youth" into a "heavy grizzled man" (MR 30). During a sleepless night after seeing Fenno, her "throbbing brain" beats in time with "the pompous tick of the hall clock, as loud as a

knocking in the silence” (MR 93). The constant rhythm brings to mind both her anxious pulse and the steady forward march of time. In contrast, the intervening years find her former lover, Fenno, merely transitioning from bachelorhood to marriage. ‘Time’ may be cruel to all, yet *The Mother’s Recompense* suggests that it treats men more generously. Kate contrasts her “slower motions of middle age” to the “perpetual alarm-clock” she sees beating in the chest of younger women like Lilla and Anne (53). She cannot acknowledge her true age, even in her mind. As the story opens, she thinks of herself as forty-two, only to correct herself that she had “really” turned “forty-four last week.” Shortly thereafter, she thinks, “Or, goodness, was she actually forty-five?” (4). Toward the end of the story, Kate tells Landers that her relationship with Fenno took place six years before, only to later claim that eight years had passed (256). The noise of the clock is always with Kate, but she cannot bring herself to face time directly by admitting her real age to herself. She is a too-firm believer in the aphorism, ‘You’re only as old as you feel.’ Meanwhile, in ‘The Old Maid,’ Delia receives a clock from the object of her unrequited affection, Clem Spender, depicting a “bold shepherd stealing his kiss” (ONY 90). She keeps the clock in her bedroom, effectively freezing in time her private dreams and unexpressed desires for Clem. Both Delia and Kate seek to freeze time in their minds, allowing them to inhabit a fantasy world with the objects of their affection. Yet, Wharton reminds us, time continues to move forward, even while these women hide from reality.

In characterizing women’s lives as a race against the clock, these stories echo a central theme of Wharton’s earlier short story ‘Bunner Sisters’ (written 1892, published 1916).⁴⁵ Two ageing sisters, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner, develop an unspoken rivalry for the affections of Mr. Ramy, who works as a clock-maker in a shop down the street from them. Wharton mentions clocks some twenty-eight times in the story, an unsettling reminder that both women’s window for marriage narrows with each passing second. As Ann Eliza wonders which of them he will

⁴⁵ Wharton’s editor at Scribner’s, Edward Burlingame, found ‘Bunner Sisters’ lacking when he first read it in 1892. The story went unpublished for twenty-four years, first reaching a wide audience in 1916, as part of the collection *Xingu and Other Stories* (Lewis 66).

propose to, she looks at the clock he has given them, finding its “loud staccato click” has become “a part of her inmost being” (S 174). Shortly thereafter, Ann Eliza refuses his proposal, but then he marries Evelina instead. His effortless transfer of affection suggests that he sees little difference between the sisters; he desires a wife more than he wants either Ann Eliza or Evelina in their own right. Left alone, clocks become a torturous reminder of Ann Eliza’s solitude, as in the scene when she goes to Tiffany and Co. in search of her sister. An employee tells her that Mr. Ramy has been fired due to his drug use, and after the revelation she is surrounded by a terrifying clattering of clocks: “the cackle of the innumerable clocks came to her like the yell of waves in a storm” (S 226). The timepieces evoke the grim fate that lies ahead for Evelina as the wife of an addict, Ann Eliza’s own lost youth, and the lonely days looming ahead of her.

Wharton also uses clocks to invoke women’s anxieties about aging and younger rivals through references to Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* in her post-war writing.⁴⁶ The opera follows the aristocratic Marschallin and her young lover, Octavian. In the second act, she acknowledges that Octavian will leave her for a younger woman in the future, as a clock strikes thirteen inauspicious times. *The Gods Arrive* directly refers to the opera, in the scene where Halo recalls enduring the performance in the company of the tedious Mrs. Glaisher (95). The reference foreshadows Halo’s dejection after hearing of Vance’s affair with Floss; when she discovers that he has betrayed her, the narrator transforms her into a malfunctioning clock: “it was as if her central spring had broken” (356). This broken spring seems to signal the end of her romantic dreams, as the cacophony of clocks in Tiffany’s does for Ann Eliza Bunner. The opera also lingers in the background of *The Mother’s Recompense*. Lee notes that the opening of the novel, in which Kate ponders how much time has passed since leaving her husband and parting with Fenno, resonates with the Marschallin’s desire to “stop all the clocks in her house” (628).

⁴⁶ The author recalled having seen a performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* in Berlin during “the summer of 1912 or 1913” with Bernard Berenson, describing it as the “crowning joy” of the time they spent there (BG 332, 333).

Like Strauss's heroine, she wants to freeze time, remaining in suspended animation with her lover. The perpetual girlishness of the flapper only intensifies the ticking of the clock for Wharton's post-war Marschallins.

Post-War Relations Between the Sexes

Wharton's post-war fiction argues that relationships between the sexes had only changed superficially in the modern period. Romances in these texts mingle pessimism and passion, ranging from a comedy of errors (*Twilight Sleep*), to dull confinement ('Joy in the House'), to a sweeping romance (the intended ending of *The Buccaneers*). In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton argued that happy marriages were possible, though rare. In her view, the most enduring relationships are those in which men and women have distinct roles, and "the power of each sex is balanced by the other" (113). She envisions women as enlivened by a supportive role, observing "a 'man's woman' is never fussy and seldom spiteful, because she breathes too free an air, and is having too good a time" (119). Lewis interprets *French Ways and Their Meaning* as arguing that American ways of thinking about marriage see love as separating sex and sentiment, while the French way strikes "the ideal combination" between the two (422). Wharton argued that the French approach to matters of the heart pragmatically allowed for occasional bouts of "ugliness and ambiguity" between a couple (*FW* 127). Her fiction of the 1920s and 1930s acknowledges the new freedoms that American women enjoyed with regard to choosing a mate or dissolving a marriage. At the same time, that fiction also points out the ways that contemporary views of marriage imperil women's happiness and stability.

Throughout her career, Wharton's fiction conceives of women as negatively affected by romantic illusions.⁴⁷ An example comes from her early short story, 'The Fullness of Life' (1893), which describes a recently deceased woman meeting her soulmate in the afterlife, having endured a tepid marriage for decades. Unexpectedly, the woman elects to spend eternity with her dull husband rather than her soulmate; habit proves a more enduring attraction than passion.⁴⁸ Later, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart spends the entire novel strategizing to secure the best marriage possible. Yet she eventually alienates all her prospects, dying alone and penniless. Even an imperfect match would have given her a better outcome than does her dogged pursuit of a romantic ideal. This gloomy perspective on matrimony also comes across in an error from the first edition of *The Age of Innocence*, where the vows offered by the clergyman during May and Newland's wedding are actually from a burial service. This error was "hastily removed in the second printing" (Lewis 430). In each of these texts, the heady promises of marriage are left unfulfilled, leaving both parties disappointed and disillusioned.

Wharton's modern American women think they have greater opportunities for romance, yet their lives often turn out like those of her characters of previous generations. In a society that valorized social mobility, companionate marriage, and the unfettered expression of one's desires, storybook romance seems deceptively more attainable. The marriage plot continues to structure women's ambitions in the post-war fiction, often with damaging consequences. Hoeller observes that *The Glimpses of the Moon* "renders Nick and Suzy as both sentimental characters and authors of their own sentimental fiction," and that the couple remains "unable to distinguish between their roles as lovers and as impostors, as sincere characters and as scheming authors" (131-2). Even when the two reunite at the end of the story, it is not clear if they are in

⁴⁷ Men are not immune to the destructive power of such romantic fantasies, as evidenced by Mattie and Ethan's sledding crash in *Ethan Frome*, Archer's hopes of eloping with Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*, and Halston Merrick's disenchantment after the thrill of the chase in 'The Long Run' (1912).

⁴⁸ Lewis reads the story as "a fairly direct literary transcription of her married life" and suggests that the author abandoned girlish dreams of the perfect marriage with the deterioration of her marriage to Teddy, commenting in the context of the Fullerton affair, "Such evanescent moments of womanly happiness were, Edith suspected, the most that life would ever accord her, and she was half willing to accept the fact" (65, 208).

love with each other as much as they are in love with the idea of a romantic ending. ‘Joy in the House’ also features characters who suffer from the romances they have dreamed up for themselves. Jeff describes his romance with Christine like a fairy tale, telling her: “you’re a lovely buried lady that I’ve stumbled on in a desert tomb, shrouded in your golden hair, and being a sorcerer I’m breathing life into you” (*S* 636-7). He assumes that he can give her life meaning and erase her past, yet he manages to ‘breathe life’ into her only for a short time. Her momentary willingness to be seduced by the myth of ‘happily ever after’ seals the tomb of tedious domestic monotony that Jeff poeticizes. Kate Clephane shares this tendency to think about her romantic life in terms of fiction, melodramatically comparing herself to the heroine of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* as she leaves her husband (*MR* 15). Later, she notes that Chris Fenno had spoken to her “like a character in a sentimental novel” during their brief affair (*MR* 88). Lee suggests that “like a modern Vronsky,” Fenno “becomes restless in wartime and leaves her” (628). Set alongside one another, however, the passages suggest Kate’s bitterness toward and disappointment with her lover. She sees herself as the central character in a literary classic, while he is just a throwaway rake in a nameless piece of genre-fiction. Fenno fails to be the Vronsky of Kate’s dreams, and she finds herself in the unenviable position of Miss Lonely-hearts. All of these novels and stories draw connections between modern myths of romance and those regarding fame and social mobility. These contemporary ideologies conspire to lead her characters down a path of delusion.

The post-war fiction treats divorce as another symptom of this pervasive romantic ideal. This also carries over from her earliest works, such as ‘Souls Belated’ (1899), in which Lydia Tillotson observes that while divorce has “released her” from her husband, it has also simply “given her to Gannett” (*RF* 92). Lydia likens her revelation to “having walked into the trap of some stupid practical joke” (*RF* 95). This joke was still relevant in post-war America, as evidenced by Kate Clephane’s rumination “that all her suicidal impulses seemed to end in the same way; by landing her in the arms of some man she didn’t care for” (*MR* 228). In *The Gods*

Arrive, Halo experiences a similar letdown when she flees Tarrant to go to Paris with Weston. Even in this alleged haven of bohemian ideals, she is judged critically for living with a man other than her husband. That Weston quickly decides that he would rather spend time with his pretentious *avant garde* circle than with her only makes matters worse. The narrator observes “from the first she had felt herself an outsider in this world which was to set her free” (84). Weston is not the romantic hero she had envisioned, just as Paris is not the bastion of social tolerance she had hoped. In her fiction set and produced across historical periods, these kinds of disappointments plague Wharton’s women, suggesting the destructive power she attributed to romantic fantasy.

Her writing questions the growing tolerance of divorce as a universally positive development, treating divorce both sympathetically and unsympathetically. In *The Gods Arrive*, Halo’s split with Tarrant is a necessary evil, allowing for the separation of incompatible but well-meaning people. Elsewhere, however, divorce and separation become an objectionable quick fix, indicting a new American vision of marriage whereby one’s obligations could be abandoned on a whim. In *The Children*, Judith compares her parents’ marriages to tents, to be “folded up and thrown away when you’ve done with them” (23). The Wheaters’ irresponsibility results in the stepchildren being split from one another, destroys the relationship between Boyne and Rose Sellars, and contributes to baby Chip’s death. This novel’s grim conclusion demonstrates the potentially enormous consequences of divorce, which often extended far beyond the particular man and woman involved. Elsewhere, the narrator of *The Glimpses of the Moon* notes, “Dividing couples dined together to the last, and met afterward in each other’s houses, happy in the consciousness that their respective remarriages had provided two new centers of entertainment” (259). In that novel, Nick and Suzy marry with the intention of ‘marrying up,’ as does Boris of “Charm Incorporated,” who divorces the nation’s most prominent actress for a wealthy Midwestern heiress.

In Wharton's earlier writing and that set in earlier time periods, women most often marry for financial and social stability. In 'New Year's Day,' she observes of Lizzie, "marriage alone could save such a girl from starvation" (*ONY* 312). Lizzie becomes a self-described "expensive prostitute" in her affair with Henry Prest and refuses to feel shame for it (292). She sees little difference between being Henry's mistress and being his wife. Both roles entail his sexual control over her in exchange for money. This link between marriage and money persisted into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the moment in *The Custom of the Country* in which Wharton describes the economic security of marriage as "simply the big bribe [a woman]'s paid for keeping out of some man's way" (132). In both stories, set four decades apart, women must make physical and emotional concessions to men to ensure their social and financial survival.⁴⁹

Money also structures relationships in Wharton's contemporary post-war writing. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, Halo's lack of options compels her to accept Tarrant's marriage proposal. She thinks, "how she envied the girls of her age who had their own cars, who led their own lives, sometimes even had their own bachelor flats in New York! Except as a means of independence riches were nothing to her," yet she must conclude, "What else was there for her but marriage?" (104). She does not love Tarrant, but finds him tolerable and knows he can take care of her. Her only other option is to live off her parents, whose finances are insecure as it is, having already sold their home in Manhattan. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Nick's departure forces Suzy to rapidly change course in order to preserve her economic future. Rather than marry a wealthy man she does not love, she takes a job as a nanny to the five boisterous Fulmer children. In contrast, Nick spends the same period relaxing aboard a yacht in the Mediterranean, pondering whether to marry his wealthy benefactor, Coral Hicks. He remains unchanged by his time away from Suzy. Meanwhile, she must renounce her materialistic ways and assume blame for their rift to win him back. She acknowledges that "only by marrying according to its standards" can she

⁴⁹ Bentley argues that commercial and social relationships in *Undine*'s story become "indistinguishable," and that "the modern state of things thus invokes an ethnographic world in which the exchange of wives is at the heart of the tribal economy" (162).

hope to “escape such subjection” (177). She does not pay for her fall from the smart set with her life, as Lily Bart had. Yet in order to do so, she must compromise in a way that her predecessor simply refuses to. Nevius points out that Wharton’s later protagonists “find it easier to make her adjustments, compromises, concessions” (98). Rather than finding empowerment in the new social order, women continue to sacrifice, where men often do not. They convince themselves that being shortchanged is just as good as ‘happily ever after.’

In Wharton’s modern America, competition for husbands also remains cutthroat as it had been in Old New York. Women’s first loyalty remains to men, as suggested by *The Mother’s Recompense*, when Kate reluctantly agrees to give Anne away at the wedding. For a brief moment, “their thin-edged smiles seemed to cross like blades” (235). Their rivalry for Fenno’s love is, momentarily, palpable. Anne vows to be “the most perfect pals that ever were” with her mother, a statement she revokes after discovering that Kate had instructed Fenno to break off the engagement (109). “You gave up all your rights over me when you left my father for another man,” Anne asserts (160). Her love for her mother is completely conditional, and she dangles the prospect of public condemnation in her face. She keeps her mother around strictly for appearances, and Wharton suggests that no romantic notion of filial piety will stand between her and the man on whom she has set her sights. *The Glimpses of the Moon* also explores how matrimonial scheming was less modern than many liked to think, particularly in the scene where Ellie advises Suzy to marry Strefford as soon as possible: “You can’t conceive of the wicked plotting and intriguing there will be to get him – on all sides, and even where one least suspects it. You don’t know what horrors women will do – and even girls” (174). Not for a moment does Ellie consider Suzy’s lukewarm feelings toward him to be a factor. Women continue to scheme, as Bertha Dorset and May Welland had done in their time. Their modern counterparts are simply more candid and upfront about it.

Divorce proves a formidable weapon in these women’s quest for social status. They dredge up old stigmas that they often do not ascribe to, purely to disadvantage their female

rivals. By ‘cutting’ one another, they assert their social dominance. In ‘Disintegration,’ an incomplete novel Wharton began in the 1920s, Mrs. Dulacey remarks, “Before long the divorced will outnumber us, and then it may be the fashion to cut anyone who hasn’t been to South Dakota” (*UW* 103). Divorce provides an easy excuse for social rejection, but any so-called lapse could be invoked to the same end. *The Gods Arrive* features a scene in which Mrs. Glaisher cuts Halo. At first, Halo dismisses the rebuff as a pretense, “the outcome of a prolonged and conscientious study of what her particular world approved and disapproved of” (96). Yet Mrs. Glaisher’s attack has real consequences, and the slight comes to mar Halo’s time in Paris. The socialite invites Weston to a number of events, which promise to further his career. Halo, meanwhile, is not welcome. The Spear family’s earlier rejection of Mrs. Glaisher back in New York renders her ‘moral indignation’ suspect. Mrs. Glaisher avenges this by condemning Halo. Mrs. Glaisher forces Weston to choose between Halo and his career, and he chooses his career. ‘Cutting’ in the post-war fiction exposes the arbitrary nature of contemporary prejudices against divorce; it is merely a part of the social game.

Through the fictional relationships of her later writing, Wharton also questioned whether women could achieve authentic sexual independence, as opposed to the mere promiscuity of the flapper. In *The Mother’s Recompense*, Kate suffers for having succumbed to Fenno’s sexual advances too readily. Looking back on their affair, she had quickly noticed the first signs of “his growing tired of her,” leading her to remember “their first long dreaming days, far from jazz bands and baccarat tables” and to wonder how “the other rubbishy things excite the same kind of emotions in him?” (16). Fenno’s dwindling attraction contrasts with his fiery devotion to the relatively prudish Anne. The novel routinely compares Anne to her mother-in-law, emphasizing her old-fashioned sexual politics. The “obstinate brows of old Mrs. Clephane” mark her face, and Wharton’s narrator describes her as “taller, statelier” and “old-fashioned” (53-54). These descriptions hint that she and Fenno have not been sexually intimate before their marriage, even though this had become more common among engaged couples from the 1920s onward. Old-

fashioned sexual morality yields a better relationship outcome than modern, liberal attitudes. Through Kate's dilemma, Wharton argues that post-war attitudes toward sex reward men for moving from one woman to the next as it suits them. Fenno tires of Kate, then literally trades her in for the younger model. He never questions the ethics of his choice; he assumes that he is entitled to what he wants, and he gets it. Meanwhile, women were encouraged to use sensual wiles to lure men, but were also expected to rein in those desires in order to secure a husband.

Though Anne Clephane is something of an exception, many of the women that Wharton portrays sympathetically in the post-war fiction often display more traditional sexual values. This contrasts to her portrayal of earlier characters like Sophy Viner in *The Reef* and Charity Royall in *Summer*. Nona Manford's refusal to elope with Stan Heuston saves her from becoming like her flapper rival Cleo Merrick, who "hasn't a rag of a reputation to lose" (*TS* 179). Similarly, Suzy Lansing finds Strefford's first attempt to kiss her "disturbing" and "sordid," intensifying her "disgusted recoil from the standards and ideals of everybody about her" (*GM* 182, 183, 177). The unwelcome kiss drives her to reflect on the state of her soul, which she imagines having had "a ring slipped upon" it (*GM* 182). Nona and Suzy equate giving their bodies away to rendering themselves spiritually destitute. However, Wharton points out that both women face an uncertain future in rejecting the flapper norm. They meet with different outcomes – Nona without a husband, Suzy reclaiming a wayward one – in seeking to reclaim the agency that contemporary sexual mores deny them. They refuse to regard themselves purely as objects of sexual desire and economic barter, but the rewards for ethical behavior are less clear.

Wharton's critique of women using sex for social advancement was not a reflection of the prudishness that sometimes comes with age. Like other writers of the post-war period, she was exploring sexuality in her fiction more candidly than had writers of previous generations. Lewis observes that "in her early seventies Edith Wharton entered a new mood of sensuality, as women of that age are said not uncommonly to do" (520). During these years, she read scientific studies of sexuality, including those by Freud and Krafft-Ebbing, and found the

eroticism of French writers like Gide, George Sand, Colette and Proust compelling (Benstock, *Gifts* 389-390). Although she was “knowing and tolerant” of homosexuality in her male friends, she was more inclined to judge women as pretentious bohemians or degenerates (Lewis 443-444). Lewis also suggests that Wharton mulled over the erotically charged ‘Beatrice Palmato’ manuscript between roughly 1920 and 1935 (544). Her later writing reflects her interest in the cultural impact of new ideas about gender and sex, and handles such topics openly, if not explicitly. One such example is the scene in *The Mother’s Recompense* in which Kate intrudes upon Anne and Fenno’s embrace: “They were looking at the dress; but the curves of their lips, hardly detached, were like those of a fruit that has burst apart of its own ripeness” (221). Though Wharton was not adverse to thinking or writing about these matters, she was justifiably doubtful that more permissive attitudes toward sex had made romantic life easier for America’s women.

Maturity, Motherhood, and Sexuality

As I discussed in Chapter One, critics have looked to Wharton’s biography to explain the role of motherhood in her post-war fiction from the 1970s onward. Ammons suggests that the author’s “personal reasons for becoming sentimental about mothering” include her childlessness, the deaths of old friends, and encounters with children as part of her charity work (168-171). Others, such as Erlich, look to the “repressive” nature of her relationship with her mother in their analyses of her later writing (16). Yet Wharton’s writings about her mother are more ambivalent than these critics have suggested. This ambivalence encourages taking a second look at the author’s modern mothers, with an eye toward the how these characters criticize the contradictory expectations faced by post-war women.

A Backward Glance features an episode from Wharton’s youth that has become infamous in post-Lewis Wharton scholarship, in which Lucretia Jones greets her daughter’s first attempt at

fiction writing with the icy critique, “Drawing rooms are always tidy” (73). Kaplan reads the scene as troubling on two levels: “The young Wharton here received a chilling double message: first, that woman's work is never done – in the less than ordinary sense that it should never be performed in public; and second, that nice girls do not write novels” (69). The episode has widely been read as Lucretia’s discouragement of her unusually gifted child, and Wharton’s subsequent revelation that she abandoned her ambitions to write for years afterward seems to support this. The episode has rarely been read in connection to the first book that Wharton published, *The Decoration of Houses*, a work that reflected her maturing sense that domestic spaces offered profound revelations about their inhabitants. The scene in *A Backward Glance* may also be read as the author’s early recognition that dialogue and setting were indispensable components of fiction writing. Disappointing though the incident may have been, it furthered her understanding of how to create a fictional portrait of the world. Though Wharton was sometimes cowed by her mother’s impressive, intuitive understanding of high society, it also shows how the author revered – and was eventually able to draw upon – that knowledge. This is supported by Wharton’s observation that her mother’s “memory for the details of dress was inexhaustible” (*BG* 17). To some extent, her mother’s fastidiousness anticipated the relish with which Wharton would describe the clothing of her female characters as an adult. While Lucretia Jones may have hindered the development of Edith Wharton’s art temporarily, her exacting standards and impeccable taste were also a clear source of inspiration.

‘Life and I’ features another episode that has widely been seen as evidence of Lucretia’s detrimental impact on her daughter. In it, Wharton describes her mother’s refusal to answer her questions about sex on the eve of her marriage, observing that this reticence would “falsify and misdirect my whole life” (*Life* 1088). Benstock contends that this “painful encounter” suggests that “the force of Lucretia’s anger and her blindness to her daughter’s needs could only have increased Edith’s terror of what would happen after marriage” (*Gifts* 58). Erlich offers an interesting counterpoint with her suggestion that “the kind of total ignorance that Edith

professes must be attributed as much to her own repression as to her mother's prudery" (29). Though the extent of the author's "repression" must remain a matter of conjecture, Erlich's contention beckons toward a less villainous reading of Lucretia. Though Wharton may have had what we now think of as a 'dysfunctional' mother, Lucretia's detached stance from her children was commonplace among women of her social class. It only became common for American parents to 'nurture' their children and cultivate their personalities during 1920s (Erlich 83-95). Immediately after describing the incident, Wharton states that her mother's lack of candor ultimately "did neither" falsify or misdirect her life, but "only strengthen[ed] the conclusion that one is what one is, and that education may delay but cannot deflect one's growth" ('Life' 1088). This observation, less often excerpted, may indicate that Wharton retrospectively saw these clashes with her mother as something of a mixed blessing. As she had admired her mother's ability to see connections between domestic spaces and literary character, she came to understand how the morality of Old New York shaped her mother's behavior. At the same time, she also saw herself as having broken with some of these traditions, becoming a more liberal-minded person than her mother in the process.

The tendency to read Wharton's relationship with her mother as adversarial has also meant that few scholars of her work have accounted for how positive maternal relationships – if not explicitly mother-child ones – may have influenced her writing. Erlich is an exception to this, noting that Wharton was very close to her childhood nurse, Doyley, who became "a standard of comfort against which Lucretia Jones looked inadequate" as a young girl (22). Wharton referred to Doyley as "the warm cocoon in which my infancy lived safe and sheltered," and clearly benefited from her supportive maternal presence throughout her childhood (*BG* 26). She also experienced close maternal relationships as an adult, and was deeply fond of Catherine Gross, her head of domestic staff from 1884 to 1933.⁵⁰ Like Doyley, Gross was a consistent

⁵⁰ Lee suggests that Gross influenced Wharton's late-in-life interest in Catholicism. Bernard Berenson, Kenneth Clark, and Bill Tyler had all predicted that she was on the brink of conversion to the faith, though she concludes

presence of warmth and affection (Joslin, *Gifts* 59). Wharton was also close with the children of her extended network of friends and family, even though she could find them irritating at times. She came to depend on her friendships with the younger people in her life as she aged (Lee 296, 701-703). William Tyler, the son of her friends Royall and Elisina Tyler, was a “favorite” of hers from his infancy; she welcomed the young man to convalesce at Pavillon Colombe, her home outside Paris, following his tuberculosis scare in 1929 (Lee 495; Wright, *A to Z* 242-243). She was also very close to her niece, Beatrix Farrand. Her involvement with these maternal figures, young people, and confidants was likely to have shaped her opinions about motherhood, and the different shapes a maternal relationship could take.

American women of the 1920s and 1930s were expected to become nurturing wives and mothers after a certain age, as they had been in generations past. In their youth, however, they were also expected to be sexually aware beings, individualistic and disdainful of social tradition. Ammons’s dismissal of Wharton’s fictional post-war women on the grounds that they abandon their desire for freedom in the face of “the higher duty of serving their families and the culture as mothers” misses the author’s critique of this very double standard (185). Wharton clearly regards Lita of *Twilight Sleep*, Joyce of *The Children* and other neglectful flapper mothers as irresponsible and morally suspect. Yet there are significant links between these characters and the author’s women of previous generations, who are burdened with children they may have only half-heartedly wanted. In other words, the post-war fiction frames motherhood in negative as well as positive terms. In certain contexts, motherhood represents one of few potential avenues to happiness available to women. On the other hand, Wharton’s flapper mothers are also victims of unrealistic expectations surrounding motherhood.

Portions of *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Mother’s Recompense* present motherhood as a longed-for surrender to an instinctual gender identity. For Suzy and Kate, motherhood imbues

that the author’s “attraction to Catholicism was as much aesthetic as devotional,” rooted in her lifelong fascination with “Italian religious spectacle” (713-714).

life with a timeless, biological significance. Suzy's desire for a stable family compels her to reevaluate her earlier indifference toward children, recalling how she and Nick had neglected Clarissa Vanderlyn during their stay in Venice: "now, she felt, no sorrow however ravaging, no happiness however absorbing, would ever again isolate her from her kind" (*GM* 281). Suzy's "kind" is no longer comprised of status-hungry socialites like Ellie. By embracing motherhood, she finds the 'species' to which she belongs. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate's desire for closeness to Anne becomes a primal need: "She thirsted to have the girl to herself, where she could touch her hair, stroke her face, draw the gloves from her hands, kiss her over and over again, and little by little... disengage the round child's body she had so long continued to feel against her own, like a warmth and an ache, as the amputated feel life in a lost limb" (30). Her feelings for her daughter defy complete articulation, like hunger and pain. It is a force that she cannot fully understand or control. Suzy's choice to bring children into her life and devote herself to their care differentiates her from Kate, who stumbles into motherhood rather than deliberately choosing it. Kate's decision to embrace life on her own terms rather than simply as 'Anne's mother,' also sets the two women apart. Yet, momentarily, the sense of a physical and genetic connection to another human being transcends even the romantic relationships to which both these women devote the majority of their energy and attention.

In other cases, the post-war fiction – that dealing with both nineteenth and twentieth century America – depicts children as disappointments to their mothers, who have expected them to compensate for their underwhelming marriages. In 'The Old Maid,' Delia reflects on "the babies who were supposed to 'make up for everything,' and didn't – though they were such darlings, and one had no definite notion as to what it was that one had missed, and that they were to make up for" (*ONY* 88-89). It does not enter into Delia's mind to say that she never wanted children, though the glimpse Wharton offers into her thoughts certainly suggests this. Judith Fuston correctly argues that 'The Old Maid' attests to the "muted and greatly diminished" possibility for women's happiness in Old New York (Bendixen and Zilversmit 156-157). When

placed alongside descriptions of the birth of Lita's unnamed son in *Twilight Sleep*, however, the sentiments Delia expresses become more difficult to consign to the past. The birth is hardly a life-changing event; Lita "drifted into motherhood... lightly and unperceivingly" (18). Though now a mother, Lita remains a child herself, devoting "every moment of her life" to "dancing, riding, or games" (18). Despite the hopes of Jim's family, the birth does not bring the couple closer. As is the case for Delia in "The Old Maid," Lita and Jim's baby becomes simply another dull reminder of daily reality and misguided idealism. Though Delia and Lita face a very different set of opportunities and challenges, each of them has "missed" out on the chance to live a life that is not constrained and limited by the fact of their gender.

Motherhood remains inevitable for Wharton's allegedly liberated modern women, less a matter of individual choice than one of timing and obligation. She mentions inevitability as a unifying theme of her writing in *A Backward Glance*, pointing out that "the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very beginning of my tale, and that my characters should go forward to their ineluctable doom... From the first I know exactly what is going to happen to every one of them; their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record" (204). A moment between Pauline and her grandson in *Twilight Sleep* hints toward this; her almost scripted grandmotherly cooing makes "loveliness and poetry sound like the attributes of an advanced industrialism, and babies something to be turned out in series, like Fords" (18). In modern America, women's lives are also subject to this "advanced industrialism," and babies are a compulsory status symbol. Women settle down simply because it is expected of them, and other viable long-term options continue to be few and far between. Motherhood demanded selflessness from modern women, without giving them any kind of social power in return. In previous generations, women had greater control behind the scenes, as in *The Age of Innocence*, where Newland Archer "married one woman because another one told him to" (243). In contrast, Haytock points out that Lilla Gates and Anne Clephane of *The Mother's Recompense* "do not expect or want their parents' help in arranging their marriages" (70). While Pauline Manford

can throw a lavish dinner party and invite whomever she likes, she lacks the ability to keep Jim from marrying Lita, as Mrs. Welland or Mrs. Mingott could have done.

Wharton's mothers are largely relegated to the background, devoting their energies to nurturing and entertaining others, rather than acting in their own interest. Lewis hints toward this in his description of the portrait of a typical American housewife in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, describing her as someone who "disappears from sight upon marriage and withers away in the company of her children and the wives of other men" (Lewis 422). Pauline's Mother's Day speech critiques the selfishness of American motherhood in dark-comic fashion: "there are days when the mother is so fagged out that she thinks she'd give the world if there were nothing at all to do in the nursery... the only time when there's nothing at all for a mother to do in the nursery is when there's a little coffin there. It's all quiet enough *then...* as some of us know...'" (Pause, and a few tears in the audience)" (*TS* 84). A mother putting herself first, even for a minute, becomes the equivalent to wishing one's child dead. Though ridiculous, the speech invokes the disturbing cultural messages women were hearing about motherhood and the sacrifices it demanded during this period.

In a similar vein, 'Joy in the House' and *The Mother's Recompense* characterize having a child as potentially the biggest mistake a woman could ever make. Their female protagonists are bound to the past by the irreversible decision to become mothers, condemned to a kind of death in life. In 'Joy in the House,' Christine's desire for autonomy and passion are overpowered by "the sense of her iniquity, her inhumanity" for having abandoned her son (*J* 634). When she returns home, the boy's blunt words, "I thought you were dead," reveal how her husband had explained her absence (*J* 642). His words foreshadow the symbolic death she suffers in returning to America, renouncing her dreams of romance, and assuming a peripheral role in her own life. Kate Clephane, meanwhile, thinks of motherhood as a state of "blessed anonymity," an existence of non-existence (*MR* 64). Lee argues that the lack of "forgiveness" and "reward" with which Kate meets in the novel suggests that "the woman has to atone, not for having left

her husband, or for being divorced, or for having had an affair, but for having abandoned her child” (631). Ultimately, Kate rejects this life of atonement. She thinks about Anne very little in the novel’s final scene, noting only that “she was halfway across the Red Sea” on her honeymoon, and “there would be no news of her for several weeks to come” (MR 264). The deep, instinctual desire to reconnect with her child has faded away, and she seems relieved not to have Anne in her life. Both texts assert that a woman cannot be fulfilled by a life that defines her as only “the background, the atmosphere” of a child’s life (MR 69). The myth of motherhood as woman’s ultimate fulfillment proves potentially cataclysmic: Kate manages to escape, but Christine does not.

In order to be ‘good’ mothers, Wharton’s women must leave their sexual desires in the past and accept their status as women of ‘a certain age.’ In *The Mother’s Recompense*, Kate attempts to reconcile her sexuality with her role as a mother, a task she ultimately finds impossible. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the novel consistently describes her using ghost imagery. This imagery also evokes her fears of sexual irrelevance, as evidenced by the scene in which she silently observes Anne and Fenno embracing:

Kate Clephane stood between them like a ghost. It made her feel like a ghost to be so invisible and inaudible. Then a furious flame of life rushed through her; in every cell of her body she felt that same embrace, felt the very texture of her lover’s cheek against her own, burned with the heat of his palm as it clasped Anne’s chin to press her closer. (221)

The sexual revolution of the 1920s was purely the domain of the young, yet Kate’s predicament indicates it is not only young bodies that crave gratification. The jilted mother is “physically jealous” of their sexual attraction, not just their emotional bond (221). She has no outlet for these feelings, which are considered to be inappropriate in women of ‘a certain age.’ Similarly, in *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline is expected to stop wanting “that sort of nonsense,” because “for a grandmother it ought to be enough” to be “only friends” with her husband (236). She wants this kind of physical affection from Dexter, but the only way she can conceive of getting it is by making herself appear younger.

Notions of a woman's sexual naïveté do not cease to exist in Wharton's modern America. Instead, one's 'age of innocence' is dislocated from girlhood to middle age. Wharton's critiques of turn-of-the-century notions of feminine sexual innocence echo the arguments she was making about older women in contemporary society. In 'The Old Maid,' she describes Delia's terror on her wedding night in 1840 as "the startled puzzled surrender to the incomprehensible exigencies of the young man to whom one had at most yielded a rosy cheek in return for an engagement ring; there was the large double bed; the terror of seeing him shaving calmly the next morning" (*ONY* 88). Funston reads the novella as Wharton's critique of the expectation that the "proper woman of Old New York" will center her attention "on the family and the home and not on her sexual and emotional needs" (Bendixen and Zilversmit 146). The mentalities of the 1840s structure the lives of Wharton's women of the 1920s.

Wharton's depictions of older women argue that little about American sexual values had actually changed since the turn of the century. In her ghost story 'Miss Mary Pask' (1925), the narrator visits the home of an elderly acquaintance, Mary, having heard that she had died a year earlier. Shocked to find her there, he believes her to be a ghost throughout their entire conversation. Later, he finds out she is still alive, although she leads such a pointless existence that her family neglects to correct the story. Mary's amorous intentions toward her visitor are clear: "she flung herself" at him, begging him to "stay with me ... just tonight ... It's so sweet and quiet here... no one need know" (318-9). The sexual nature of her longing also comes through in her daydreams about "if a man came along someday and took a fancy to [her]" (*J* 318). Throughout the story, Mary repeatedly describes herself as "lonely," repeating some form of the word seven times. Her terror at the thought that a man will never "fancy" again echoes that of the elderly Delia in 'The Old Maid.' Though the stories take place many decades apart, they were published just a few years apart and make similar arguments about sexual desire. A lifetime of unrequited passion for Clem Spender leads the now-elderly Delia to describe herself as a "cloistered nun" (*ONY* 150). She likens the walls of her house "to the walls of her own

grave,” and sits awake thinking that “never had she kept a moonlight watch with a lover’s arms around her” (*ONY* 150, 152). Both Mary and Delia become aimless ghosts while they are still alive. In a world in which a woman’s value is wholly determined by her desirability, they have nothing to live for. This is underscored by the fact that the narrator of ‘Miss Mary Pask’ is content to assume Mary dead, and his revulsion at being propositioned by an elderly woman outweighs his fear of the supernatural. Both tales question the value of modern sexual equality that applies only to some women, not to all of them.

The post-war fiction’s treatment of modern sexuality, marriage, beauty standards, and motherhood demonstrates the extent to which conservative gender ideologies continue to hold sway in modern American life. Wharton’s women remain second-class citizens, locked in competition with one another, and forced to repress their desires to suit social expectations. The author summarizes this perspective in ‘Atrophy’ (1927), a story recounting Nora Frenway’s failed attempt visit to her dying lover:

What nonsense to pretend that nowadays, even in big cities, in the world’s great social centres, the severe old-fashioned standards had given way to tolerance, laxity, and ease! You took up the morning paper, and you read of girl bandits, movie-star divorces, ‘hold-ups’ at balls, murder and suicide and elopement, and a general welter of disjointed disconnected impulses and appetites; then you turned your eyes onto your own daily life, and found yourself as cribbed and cabined, as beset by vigilant family eyes, observant friends, all sorts of embodied standards, as any white-muslin novel heroine of the ‘sixties! (*S* 436)

Nora’s failure to conform to the “embodied standards” reveals the false face of modern “tolerance, laxity and ease.” The passage suggests that not all women had it in them to be flappers, and that even those who conformed to new standards found themselves hamstrung by lingering prejudices.⁵¹

⁵¹ Wright interprets ‘Atrophy’ slightly differently, commenting that Nora’s “adherence to convention, her complicity in submitting to her hostess’ pretence and her inability to be daring enough to insist on saying goodbye to her lover” has been her undoing (*A to Z* 14).

Substitutes for Living

A number of Wharton's post-war women find that contemporary society holds no place for them, and are made to feel that their lives are unworthy of narration or attention.⁵² Whether in Old New York, rural New England, or modern Manhattan, they must settle for "innumerable substitutes for living" and "narcotic tricks of evasion and ignoring" (*S* 310, *MR* 266). For some, marriage and motherhood are these substitutes. For others – as the following chapter explores – objects and diversions provide the necessary distraction. Suzy Lansing's substitutes for living are "money, luxury, fashion, pleasure: those were the four cornerstones of her existence" (*GM* 111). Meanwhile, Pauline Manford "had come to depend" on sessions with her spiritual guru Alvah Loft as "addicts' do on their morphia" (*TS* 153). In *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate Clephane embraces a life among other outcasts on the Riviera: "It was to escape from reality and durability that one plunged into cards, gossip, flirtation and all the artificial excitements which society could so lavishly provide for people who want to forget" (*MR* 5). Modern American society had not expanded women's opportunities so much as it gave more ways to distract themselves from their unhappiness.

Wharton does, however, envision a path through the many adversities and hypocrisies women faced in contemporary America. The characters that earn her sympathy are not necessarily mothers, or the old-fashioned, or even the women who rebel from these things. They are women who are self-aware and socially aware. In 1908, Wharton wrote to Sara Norton on the subject of regret, with Sara having asked 'could I have done differently?' with regard to the care of her ailing father, to which Wharton offered the ambiguous response: "I should like to get up on the house-tops and cry to all who come after us: 'Take your own life, every one of you'" (*L* 163). The comment can be read cynically, as telling future generations of women to essentially 'drop dead,' because life can only offer a series of crushing disappointments.

⁵² This echoes Wharton's earlier novels, such as *Summer*, in which Charity Royall finds that "in the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure" (235).

However Lewis, Gilbert, and Gubar have interpreted her comment as an appeal to women to assert control over their own lives (Lewis 238, Gilbert and Gubar 156-157). This mentality is at the core of her arguments about gender roles in post-war America. Her self-aware women choose the path in life best suited to them, even as they acknowledge that their field of options is limited. During her final plea to Tarrant for a divorce in *The Gods Arrive*, Halo tells him, “I want to be alone; to go my own way, without depending on anybody. I want to be Halo Spear again – that’s all” (368). Afterward, she chooses to “serve the genius while she adored the man” by taking Weston back (30). She has recently inherited the Willows, and therefore has no economic motive to renew their relationship. A similar personal awareness brings about Nan’s elopement in the projected ending of *The Buccaneers*. Nan loses sight of her identity after becoming ‘Annabel Tintagel,’ thinking of her married self as “a strange figure with whom she lived, and whose actions she watched with a cold curiosity, but with whom she had never arrived at terms of intimacy” (164). She sees herself in a “vain hunt for her real self,” in which she eventually emerges victorious in the projected conclusion to the novel, leaving her dreary husband for the dashing Guy Thwarte (164). In rejecting the name of ‘Annabel Tintagel,’ she reasserts herself as the high-spirited Nan St. George, as Halo becomes Halo Spear once more.

Critics have debated the significance of the ending of *The Gods Arrive*, with some reading the couple’s reunion as empowering to Halo, and others seeing it as a concession of her power. Abby Werlock interprets it as foreshadowing her future creative triumph: “Halo Spear, the woman warrior, will create more than a child: she will create literature” (Bendixen and Zilversmit 196-197). Thompson and Goodman offer more pessimistic assessments. Thompson argues Halo can never be Weston’s “equal,” though she sees the couple as “two halves of a creative personality (119, 117). Goodman thinks that Halo’s “ruinous altruism” transforms her from “a self-confident, independent woman into a self-doubting recluse” (130-131). None of these readings seem right. Werlock’s conclusion seems flawed given that Halo explicitly abandons any ambition for an artistic career: “If only her eager interest in life had been matched by some

creative talent! She could half paint, she could half write – but her real gift (and she knew it) was for appreciating the gifts of others. Even had discipline and industry fostered her slender talents they would hardly have brought her a living” (*HRB* 104). All three critics overlook similarities with the author’s description of the ideal marriage in *French Ways and Their Meaning*. In this formula, the woman takes on a supportive role, but it does not automatically relegate her to the background of family life. Halo and Vance may not be “equals,” but their creator did not see relationships in these terms. While Thompson rightly perceived the couple as two parts of an artistic whole – creator and critic – both their arguments seem to suggest that any woman who finds fulfillment through a romantic relationship has debased herself on the altar of the patriarchy. Halo and Vance do not come into a perfect marriage, but one that the author characterizes as realistic and rewarding, despite its shortcomings. Each of them has a different – though important – role to play in the relationship.

In certain respects, the ending of *The Gods Arrive* echoes that of *The Glimpses of the Moon*, particularly with Suzy’s recognition that while Nick may not be the fairy tale hero of her imagination, the two of them share “the common humble average of human love” (277). Wharton’s notes for an unwritten sequel to the novel reinforce the couple’s similarity with Halo and Weston. Nick’s literary success tempts him to begin a love affair with Coral Hicks, as Weston is temporarily beguiled by Floss Delaney. Eventually, Nick returns to the devoted Suzy, as Weston returns to Halo. In the end, they become “a humdrum married pair” (qtd. in Hoeller 138). Hoeller argues that the projected sequel represents the author’s “furious condemnation of love and motherhood as empty fictions” (140). Hoeller correctly sees Ammons, Griffin Wolff, and Lewis’s accounts of Wharton’s fixation on motherhood as overlooking the nuances of the post-war fiction. Yet she goes too far with the contention that the author wholly condemned these traditional roles. Becoming a “humdrum married pair” is neither a terrible fate nor a dream come true, but simply a realistic outcome. Young, old, wealthy, upwardly mobile, single, married, divorced, childless, and mothers – all of her female characters are uniquely shaped,

victimized, or rewarded by the expectations of modern American society. Her depictions of women choosing to marry and have children – and choosing not to – reveal her opinions of the motives behind those decisions, rather than the decisions themselves.

Common Ground With Fitzgerald

Social commentators of the 1920s have often commented that Scott Fitzgerald ‘invented’ the flapper, perhaps even the Jazz Age itself. He has become a common point of reference in discussions of American life in this decade. Zeitz devotes three chapters of his study of 1920s femininity to Fitzgerald, Fass’s *The Damned and the Beautiful* (1979) derives its title from his second novel and references him throughout, and Parrish’s *Anxious Decades* (1992) mentions him six times.⁵³ These are only a few examples of many, yet they suggest how Fitzgerald has become an integral part of our thinking about America during the post-war period. In contrast, histories of these years rarely mention Edith Wharton. On the surface, the two authors seem worlds apart from one another. In 1925, Fitzgerald was twenty-nine and Wharton was sixty-three. He hailed from a middle-class family in St. Louis, she from Manhattan aristocracy. Yet the disparity between their ages and backgrounds belies the similarity of their critique of post-war femininity.

Several Wharton scholars have discussed the relationship between the writers, among them Benstock, who argues that Fitzgerald “saw himself in the tradition of Edith Wharton, as a chronicler of an American leisure class that, in his opinion, had ‘no consciousness that leisure is a privilege, not a right, and that privilege always implies a responsibility’” (*Gifts* 382). The pair engaged in a brief correspondence in 1925, in which Wharton praised *The Great Gatsby*.⁵⁴ She

⁵³ See Zietz 39-70; Fass 17, 29-25, 51, 128, 373; and Parrish 117, 149, 183, 184, 193, 426.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald had also read *The Mother’s Recompense*, which was published the same year. He found Wharton’s novel “lousy,” but did not relate this to her (Benstock, *Gifts* 383).

also invited him for tea at Pavillon Colombe, though by all accounts the meeting did not go well. He allegedly told a story about a nameless couple – implicitly he and Zelda – that ‘mistakenly’ stayed in a brothel for several nights, assuming it was a hotel. Benstock argues that Wharton “missed (or feigned to miss)” the point in Fitzgerald’s story, and found his drunken behavior repulsive (*Gifts* 383). Lewis offers an altogether different version, in which Wharton cuts short the young writer’s attempts to be naughty. “Rather rough stories,” Lewis notes, “were what Edith Wharton relished.” He claims that she objected to the story not because of its racy content, but because she found it lacking in “data” (467-468). Fitzgerald biographer Matthew Bruccoli paints yet another image of their meeting, in which “Fitzgerald had been trying to make her dull party go better” by flattering her relentlessly (*Epic* 228). The story, it seems, cannot be told without resulting to the stereotypes of one or more of the strong personalities involved. Often, the blame for ruining the occasion depends on where the storyteller’s loyalties lie: Fitzgerald’s biographers often give the impression that Wharton was haughty and aloof, while Wharton’s imply that Fitzgerald was crass and drunk.⁵⁵ Though the two never became close friends, Robert Martin and Linda Wagner-Martin point out that Fitzgerald continued to follow Wharton’s writing and the sales of her books. As late as 1937, he wrote to his editor Maxwell Perkins to find out if *The House of Mirth* continued to out-sell his own novels (Joslin and Price 100-101).

Critics have devoted less attention to the similarity of Wharton and Fitzgerald’s concerns about contemporary American society than they have to this inauspicious meeting. Both characterize the flapper as giving rise to a generation of women riddled with insecurities. The glamorous insubstantiality of Fitzgerald’s flappers is exemplified by Nick Carraway’s first glimpse of Daisy and Jordan in *The Great Gatsby*:

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in

⁵⁵ For more on the meeting between Fitzgerald and Wharton, see Lee 616-617; Bruccoli, *Epic* 227-228; Benstock, *Gifts* 382-384; Wright, *A to Z* 86; and Lewis 465-468.

white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house... Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor. (7)

Through Nick's eyes, we initially find these elegant creatures intriguing. Their billowing white dresses suggest Olympian goddesses, while the reference to 'a short flight around the house' lends them a witchlike quality. At the same time, the image is tinged with soporific laziness. The women recline passively, unwilling to simply stand up and shut the window themselves, rendering them indistinct from the other objects blowing about the room. The passage anticipates – and likely influenced – Wharton's descriptions of Lita Wyant and Judith Wheater as visually compelling beauties lacking in depth. Both authors portray the flapper as a series of random events rather than as a cohesive personality, though she differs in her unflinching attention to women's artificiality, bringing us cringingly close to faces caked with makeup, lines creeping through blotting powder, and brassy bleached hair. Meanwhile, like Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald remains somewhat beguiled by his female characters, even though he is aware of their insipidity.

Like many of the fictional women Wharton created throughout her career, Fitzgerald's flappers regard their appearance as a determinant of their value in the world. The narrator's description of Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) provides a case in point: "She had never seen beauty like her own. What it meant ethically or aesthetically faded before the gorgeous concreteness of her pink-and-white feet, and clean perfectness of her body, and the baby mouth that was like the material symbol of a kiss" (319). Gloria is doll-like and inanimate; American society has never demanded anything of her than simply to be beautiful. In a manner similar to Wharton's writing, *The Beautiful and Damned* positions reaching 'a certain age' as a kind of death for the American woman, as evidenced by Gloria's agony over her upcoming birthday: "She would be twenty-nine in February. The month assumed an ominous and inescapable significance—making her wonder, through these nebulous, half-fevered hours whether after all

she had not wasted her faintly tired beauty, whether there was such a thing as use for any quality bounded by a harsh and inevitable mortality” (318). The thought of reaching thirty is inconceivable to her; twenty-nine seems horrible enough without thinking about what lies beyond. While the passage hints toward a dim recognition of the futility of defining herself purely in these terms, Gloria cannot structure her existence in any other way. Like Wharton’s Kate Clephane, Pauline Manford, and even Lily Bart, she equates ceasing to be young with ceasing to exist altogether, and avoids admitting the truth of her age.

Both writers characterize modern women as overgrown children. In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy’s comment that “the best thing a girl can be in this world” is a “beautiful little fool” resonates with *Twilight Sleep*, where Lita, Wharton’s own “beautiful little fool” consistently triumphs (*Gatsby* 21). Vapid beauty remains the path of least resistance in the modern world. Both writers also call attention to the infantilization of women through references to incest, and are attentive to how physical and personality traits typically associated with girls had taken on an insidious sexual connotation. *The Children*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Mother’s Recompense* all feature attractions between men and women of different generations, who are often connected to one another through family bonds. Boyne hopes to marry Judith in *The Children*, but she merely hopes he will adopt her and her siblings. In *Twilight Sleep*, Manford has an affair with Lita, his step-daughter-in-law. However, the situations of Boyne and Dexter differ from that of Kate. Their desire for a younger woman is socially acceptable, while hers for a younger man remains taboo. *The Mother’s Recompense* calls attention to the hypocrisy of a society which allows – even encourages – old men to lust after young girls, while maintaining that older women should not have lust at all. Fitzgerald uses incest as a metaphor for modern relationships in *Tender is the Night* (1934), linking Nicole’s schizophrenia to childhood sexual abuse by her father. Dick nurses Nicole back to health, unwittingly becoming another sexually predatory father figure. He again repeats the father’s crime through his affair with the teenaged Rosemary Hoyt, star of the ironically titled film *Daddy’s Girl*. Both Rosemary and Nicole exist purely as the objects of male

desire, and *Tender is the Night* argues that the result of that desire must be either dependence or destruction. The cycle of victimization that begins with Nicole and ends with Rosemary suggests that a generation of ‘Daddy’s Girls’ were doomed to a life of heartache and dysfunction.

A fascination with the impact of celebrity culture on women also informs the work of these writers. Fitzgerald worked in Hollywood sporadically throughout his career, usually when he was short on funds. His final unfinished novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941), is a *roman à clef* of producer Irving Thalberg. The writer even helped pen a screenplay of *The Glimpses of the Moon* in 1923, though the version that made it to theaters bears little of his mark.⁵⁶ Despite his dalliances with Hollywood, Alan Margolies argues that Fitzgerald had mixed feelings about Hollywood (Prigozy 189). So too did Wharton, as evidenced by her portraits of Lita and Lady Wrench. Like Fitzgerald’s Rosemary and Gloria, these women want to make it in Hollywood at any cost. Moreover, as Wharton expresses her fears for the future of the American literary tradition in ‘The Great American Novel,’ Fitzgerald’s ‘Pasting It Together’ (1936) comments on the detrimental influence of Hollywood on the novel. In the essay, he observes, “As long past as 1930, I had a hunch that the talkies would make even the best-selling novelist as archaic as silent pictures... there was a rankling indignity, that to me had become almost an obsession, in seeing the power of the written word subordinated to another power, a more glittering, a grosser power” (*Crack-Up* 78). From the perspective of both authors, stardom was the ultimate validation of American vanity, idealism, and escapism.

Newspapers exploit private embarrassment for entertainment and encourage rivalries between women in the fictions of both authors. Fitzgerald, often a subject of newspaper gossip himself, alluded to the New York scandal sheet *Town Topics* in *The Great Gatsby*, with Myrtle Wilson buying a copy of *Town Tattle* on her way into Manhattan and keeping several past issues in her apartment (27, 29). Sharon Hamilton argues that the reference is “a New York in-joke

⁵⁶ The studio ultimately rejected Fitzgerald’s adaptation of *The Glimpses of the Moon* in favor of that written by Lloyd Shelton and Edfrid Bingham (Benstock, *Gifts* 372; Wright, *A to Z* 86; Prigozy 190).

and an incisive criticism of the period's loss of moral direction with the rise of the gossip industry," which recalls Archer's fear that the papers will expose his relationship with Madame Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* (34, 43). As it looks back to *The Age of Innocence*, Fitzgerald's reference to *Town Topics* also anticipates Wharton's fictional *Looker-On*, which hovers outside the lives of the Manford and Wyant families like a lurking paparazzo in *Twilight Sleep*. The tabloid prints the nude photos of Lita and covers Pauline's lavish dinner parties. It also keeps fashionable New York informed about the shooting at Cedarledge, but moves on to more gripping stories after the family attempts to keep the story quiet: "The newspaper public, bored with the inability of the police to provide fresh fuel for their curiosity, ceased to speculate on the affair, and interest in it faded out as soon as it had flared up" (304). Hollywood and gossip magazines work in tandem to further unrealistic fantasies of the glamorous life while driving people further away from one another.

Wharton and Fitzgerald both saw the flapper's self-absorption as being at odds with the demands of motherhood. Wharton's post-war fiction features women that are both devoted to and negligent of children. Meanwhile, the women in Fitzgerald's novels display a unilateral carelessness toward children. Daisy and Nicole have only a fleeting interest in their children; they are amusing toys to be played with for a few moments, quickly passed off to a nanny. Gloria is the most vain of his flapper mothers, and persuades Anthony to take her for an abortion on discovering she is pregnant: "She had never wanted children. The reality, the earthiness, the intolerable sentiment of child-bearing, the menace to her beauty—had appalled her. She wanted to exist only as a conscious flower, prolonging and preserving itself... her ironic soul whispered that motherhood was also the privilege of the female baboon" (*Beautiful* 319). Gloria sees motherhood as animalistic, beneath the capacities of the modern woman. It is also likely to ruin her figure, too high a price for her to pay if she hopes to make it in the film industry. A number of the flappers in the fiction of both Wharton and Fitzgerald are married with children, persisting in their infantile behavior even though they have ostensibly 'grown up.'

They detach themselves from the responsibilities of motherhood in order to preserve their desirability, potentially to the detriment of their own happiness and certainly to that of their children.

Idealized visions of romance have destructive consequences in Wharton and Fitzgerald's work. Both depict romance as something beyond one's control, with roots in the primal, biological, and spiritual. Wharton compares this feeling to a "fierce animal longing," while in Fitzgerald's writing it takes the form of a pseudo-religious surrender to female beauty (R 231).

The first kiss between Daisy and Gatsby is as foreboding as it is romantic:

He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (*Gatsby* 71)

Gatsby willingly succumbs to the idea of 'happily ever after,' allowing his mind to be forever confined by thoughts of Daisy. The kiss is an "incarnation," something sinister and otherworldly that enables love to gain an almost demonic power over him. In this respect, the novel echoes and anticipates the ways in which Wharton characters define and destroy themselves in pursuit of fairy-tale romance.

As we have seen, some of Wharton's writing presents marriage as consistently disappointing high expectations. In order to be successful, compromise is often necessary. The fictional marriages of Fitzgerald prove consistently disappointing, presenting even fewer potential avenues of success. This is illustrated by a scene in *The Beautiful and Damned*, in which Gloria puts aside her diary immediately after her wedding: "she printed FINIS in large capitals, put the book in the drawer, and crept into bed" (125). Yet, Gloria and Anthony eventually realize that their wedding vows do not mark the happy end of courtship, but merely the beginning of a disenchanting marriage. They find it increasingly difficult to tolerate one another's company, increasingly seeking to dilute it with guests and alcohol. Even in these bleak marriages, the modern lover is beset by fears of their partner's disloyalty. As Wharton's Pauline

Manford and Kate Clephane constantly worry about the fidelity of the men they love, Fitzgerald's men are lovelorn and jealous. In *Tender is the Night*, Dick Diver is haunted by thought of Rosemary's sexual experiences with other men:

Only the image of a third person, even a vanished one, entering into his relation with Rosemary was needed to throw him off balance and send through him waves of pain, misery, desire, desperation. The vividly pictured hand on Rosemary's cheek, the quicker breath, the white excitement of the event viewed from outside, the inviolable secret warmth within. (100)

For Dick, this entirely imagined previous lover constitutes a bitter personal slight. The passage echoes the physical jealousy Kate Clephane feels while watching Anne and Fenno together, and both novels demonstrate that while modern relationships may be less restrictive, they were also less secure and stable.

That we continue to see the writing of Wharton and Fitzgerald as having little in common attests to the continued difficulty in seeing her as a significant observer of American life in the 1920s and 1930s. While feminist scholarship brought her neglected fiction back into print, these works continue to be considered secondary, owing to their perceived retreat to conservative values. Many of the views Wharton expresses about modern women, marriage, and motherhood are, in fact, conservative. Yet, so are Fitzgerald's. Both their fictions reflect the idiosyncrasies of a society that was becoming more liberal, but also remained more conservative than has been held in the common perception. Where her conservatism can be overstated, his is often understated. When historians evoke Fitzgerald as an icon of the period, the glamour of Gatsby's parties often overshadows *The Great Gatsby's* critique of American shallowness. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, *The House of Mirth* has often been misread in a similar fashion, as a defense of Old New York, rather than a critique of it. Fitzgerald's condemnations of Jazz Age life have been diluted by their – and his – iconic status. We do not question Fitzgerald's relevance to the Jazz Age, nor do we question the accuracy of Wharton's portrayals of Old New York. Their writing shaped the standards by which we measure that accuracy. Fitzgerald, however, never had to contend with a career that spanned forty years, or a lifetime

that encompassed the Confederacy, the Kaiser, and the rise of Hitler. He did not live long enough to be seen as a relic in his own lifetime.

Their differing approaches to managing their reputations may also explain why we approach them with different expectations in mind. With his wife Zelda's help, Fitzgerald created a wild image of himself and transformed the press into "a strong ally," which enabled him to achieve the celebrity status that was critical to his literary success (Prigozy 4). He wrote newspaper editorials throughout the 1920s that advocated 'starter marriages' and praised the virtues of the flapper, encouraging the public to see him as rebellious and exciting.⁵⁷ This persona belied the fact that the sexual morality of the age unnerved him in a number of respects. Though his hard-living ways have become the stuff of American legend, Fitzgerald saw himself as a moralist and family man. He remained devoted – if not always conjugally faithful – to Zelda throughout her difficult battle with schizophrenia, and supported his daughter through her childhood and college years, even at times when he could barely make ends meet (Brucoli, *Epic* 51, 131). His views were more conservative than his public persona initially leads one to believe, just as Wharton's relationship with America was more complex than the established view of her often allows.

Furthermore, Fitzgerald actively persuaded audiences to read his fiction as a reflection of his life, while Wharton did the opposite. In a quote on the back jacket of his posthumous essay collection *The Crack-Up* (1945), he states "I don't know whether I'm real or whether I'm a character in one of my own novels." His willingness to immerse himself in America's burgeoning media culture helped *The Great Gatsby* to become what Brucoli has termed "a supplementary and even substitute form of history" (*Essays* 6). That showmanship also led Hugh Kenner to comment that Fitzgerald's fiction had become difficult to separate "from his years as a public performer" (xvii). After his popularity dwindled in the late 1920s, Fitzgerald

⁵⁷ Zeitz also comments that the Fitzgeralds "basked in publicity," noting that "they arrived at parties with Zelda cheering from the roof of a taxicab and Scott perched on its hood." On other occasions, "Zelda arrived at other people's homes for parties and casually shucked her clothing to take long hot baths" (57).

capitalized on his reputation as an alcoholic and creative failure. He won back audiences and critics through a series of confessional essays that appeared in *Esquire*, including 'Echoes of the Jazz Age' and 'My Lost City' (1932). These works shaped the "tragic romance" of his own decline, sparking a renewed interest in the man and his writing that continues to draw new generations of readers (Brucoli, *Essays* 18). He consistently put himself on display, warts and all, in the literary marketplace, which afforded him greater control over how audiences saw him. In contrast, Wharton's reticence encouraged critics to draw their own conclusions, which were often negative.

Chapter Four

The Middling of Class and Taste in America

The economic boom of the 1920s brought with it an unprecedented degree of mobility in American society. The mainstream view held that traditional class hierarchies – like those of Old New York – were outmoded, and that the American Dream of prosperity was accessible to all. Wharton, meanwhile, saw the expansion of the middle class and the valorization of the American Dream as concomitant with the decline of elite taste, her most valued criterion for distinguishing between people. This led her to comment, “It is not because we are middle class but because we are *middling* that our story is so soon told” (*UCW* 154). In her estimation, bad taste was a sure-fire recipe for mediocre art and ideas, and post-war America had both in abundance. Her writing of these years maintains that consumerism damages individual lives and impoverishes the nation. It does so by scrutinizing what people spend their money on, how they spend their time, and whom they spend it with. There is an element of snobbery in her descriptions of clothing, houses, and the ‘smart set.’ She acknowledges that the wealthy enjoy greater opportunities to develop taste, and is more disparaging toward those that used an abundance of resources stupidly. Yet reading her assessment of modern materialism exclusively in these terms can overshadow her persuasive argument about the importance of taste in fostering a richer culture and society. The post-war fiction exposes the motivations behind choosing a dress, a hotel, or a group of friends, rather than criticizing these things in and of themselves. In doing so, it asserts that economic distinctions between people still mattered enormously, even in a society that prided itself as having dispensed with rigid class hierarchies. Intriguingly, as I explore in the final section of this chapter, Wharton’s critique of the impact of middling taste on American culture explores territory similar to that of Sinclair Lewis.

Post-War Class and Taste

Before turning to the specifics of her critique of post-war taste, it is important to establish the significance of the middle class in the period, and to clarify her view of the appropriate relationship between class and taste. In *America's Capacity to Consume* (1934), Leven, Moulton, and Warburton define the 1920s middle class as “business and professional families” earning between six and ten thousand dollars per year (78). However, economics were a small component of the cultural significance of this group. Middle class aspirations, attitudes, and values were at the heart of the American Dream, a term coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931.⁵⁸ This vision holds that one’s social standing can be bettered through a combination of education, hard work, and luck (Cullen 6). One hundred and fifty years earlier, the Declaration of Independence assured American citizens the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. During the 1920s, the American Dream linked those rights with prosperity: goals such as buying a house in the ‘right’ neighborhood, or owning the latest model Buick. As mentioned in Chapter One, the phrase ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ originally referred to Wharton’s family, and this concept was central to conceptions of the American Dream during the 1920s and 1930s. The massive popularity of Arthur ‘Pop’ Momand’s comic strip, ‘Keeping Up With the Jones,’ during these years suggests how the display of wealth, even among people who were not conventionally defined as wealthy, was integral to both middle class and American identity.⁵⁹ Wharton’s turn-of-the-century observation that “everyone is unconsciously tyrannized by the wants of others” anticipated the economic rivalries of her post-war characters to a far greater extent than she could have predicted when she first wrote it (*DH* 19).

The ubiquitous desire to keep up with the Joneses belies the fact that few of the nation’s citizens had actually achieved middle class status. Though more Americans had entered the

⁵⁸ Lentricchia has traced the American Dream’s implication that “to be born American is typically to be born without a sustaining economic past to Benjamin Franklin’s ‘Poor Richard’ and Horatio Alger’s ‘rags to riches’ stories (127).

⁵⁹ Momand’s strip first appeared in the *New York World* in 1916, and ran for twenty-eight years. The series was adapted into several films, musicals, and books. The titular Joneses were never seen in person; the focus was on the neighbors struggling to emulate them (Hendrickson 297).

middle class than ever before, nearly seventy percent of families earned below \$2,500 in the years leading up to 1929, thereby qualifying as working class (Leven, Moulton, and Warburton 119).

Even so, middle class status was an attainable dream to this working class majority.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Americans were not keeping up with the Joneses that lived in a mansion on Fifth Avenue, but with the Joneses that lived in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house a couple of blocks down Main Street. This shift in collective aspiration away from the wealthy was a significant departure from earlier generations. In *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, sociologists Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd documented life in a typical American city during the 1920s. They conducted anonymous research of Muncie, Indiana in order to investigate the impact of “cultural change” (8). They concluded that the nation’s society effectively condensed into two castes during this decade: middle and lower class. The Lynds concluded that “the mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed roughly formed by these two groups is the most significant single cultural factor tending to influence what one does all day long throughout one's life; whom one marries; when one gets up in the morning; whether one belongs to the Holy Roller or Presbyterian church; or drives a Ford or a Buick” (23-4). That society remained divided was not particularly surprising, but the study’s insights as to who was left out of social life in Muncie is particularly revealing here. The Lynds found that the “eight or nine” wealthy households in the town had little impact on broader social and cultural life. In the past, the authors note, these would have been the people the rest of the city sought to emulate (23, fn. 2). Their observation reflects how the post-war boom had transformed the nation’s middle class into the new caste of tastemakers.

This shift was a problematic one from Wharton’s perspective. She saw the expansion of popular, middling tastes as a threat to the edifying influence of the upper class. This belief lies at the core of ‘False Dawn’ (1922), a novella set in the 1840s, in which Lewis Raycie meets the English critic John Ruskin. The two men strike up a brief friendship that allows Raycie to

cultivate a refined taste in art. Ruskin recognizes Raycie as “one of the privileged beings to whom the seeing eye has been given,” and the young American comes away from his experience with the critic feeling as though “his eyes had been unsealed” (*ONY* 43, 45). Raycie has come to Europe to find art for his wealthy father, and Ruskin’s influence convinces him to purchase paintings by the then-unknown Italian primitives. Enraged, Raycie’s father abandons his plan to fund a gallery and dies, leaving Raycie and his wife to spend their lives persuading visitors to come to their small gallery, with little success.⁶⁰ Wright describes the novella as Wharton’s “oblique comment on the cultural abyss” that her writing aggressively “attempted to counter” (*A to Z* 79). The story contends that one needs both cultural experiences and inspiring company to develop taste. Even then, it takes a bold person to embrace those tastes. Raycie’s love for his paintings gives his life a meaning it may otherwise have lacked, though most of the people around him fail to understand that passion.

Wharton’s writing of the 1920s and 1930s argues for the continued relevance of a cultural elite. In the past, refined tastes and behaviors had moved down the social hierarchy from the upper class, as suggested by her comment in *The Decoration of Houses* that “changes in manners and customs, no matter under what form of government, usually originate with the wealthy or aristocratic minority, and are thence transmitted to the other classes” (7). Good taste is hard to find in the post-war fiction; one character that possesses it is Halo, with her aforementioned gift “for appreciating the talents of others” (*HRB* 104). Rose Sellars of *The Children* is another among this small minority; she “turns over new books and reviews” with Boyne and possesses a library he envies (86). Notably, neither woman is ostentatiously rich, though both are financially secure owing to family inheritances. Still, Wharton recognized that taste could not be developed without money. Her fictions do not advocate fleeing from consumer society as a plausible solution. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, Weston attempts such an

⁶⁰ The plot of ‘False Dawn’ was based on a true story. James Jackson Jarves sought out European art for wealthy American patrons, and “became a collector of previously neglected Italian paintings of her 13th through the 16th centuries, only to find them unappreciated by his fellow countrymen” (Wright, *A to Z* 79).

escape, living in a cabin in upstate New York. The arrangement does not last, and he is forced to find a job in order to survive. He does so by writing advertisements for Bunty Hayes and by working at *The Hour* with Lewis Tarrant. Though she acknowledges that taste could not be cultivated without a certain degree of material comfort, Wright points out that her views “became more untenable in the period after the First World War” and that her “continued assertion of her role as an arbiter of taste contributed to the erosion of her reputation” (*Travel* 23). Similarly, Robert Morss Lovett commented in 1925, “the popular sense of intellectual and cultural democracy in America was outraged” by her “display of superiority” in her writing (72). Wharton’s defense of the elite was interpreted as snobbery throughout the twentieth century, as middle class respectability became more closely interwoven with ideas of ‘Americanness,’ particularly during the McCarthy Communism trials of the 1950s. What she saw as middling, many others – like Morss Lovett – saw as democratic.

Unfortunately, Wharton does not distinguish the intellectual elite from the broader category of the wealthy in her non-fiction commentary on taste and class. It is easy to read her comments as simply defending the wealthy while disparaging the middle class. In ‘The Great American Novel,’ she argues that “inheriting an old social organization which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct, modern America has simplified and Taylorized it out of existence” (*CW* 154). Her reference to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s method of industrial efficiency implies that America’s culture and manners had been standardized, rather than refined by the rise of the middle class. This, she felt, diminished the nation artistically as well as intellectually. Yet her contempt was not directed toward for the middle class itself, but for the acquisitive mentality she felt that group increasingly represented as the century progressed. Moreover, her relationship with the middle class was not purely pedantic. In *A Backward Glance*, she claims, “My own ancestry, as far as I know, was purely middle class.” While her family moved within the “little aristocratic nucleus” of Old New York, she denied “any blood relationship with it” (11). Read alongside one another, her comments suggest the extent to

which she saw materialism as a threat to taste across the economic spectrum. They also highlight her problematic, shifting invocations of the middle class.

Thorstein Veblen had argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that elite social status derived from the display of wealth, and his views influenced Wharton's fictions of Old New York.⁶¹ Veblen argues that "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure" and that "vicarious consumption at the hands of the wife" was a "requirement" of elite social status (*Leisure* 75, 83). For the wealthiest members of society, gainful employment was considered "a mark of inferiority," while a life of leisure was "beautiful and ennobling" (*Leisure* 36, 38). Veblen also provided Wharton with a model for thinking about modern consumerism. Though her fictions consistently criticize the leisure class, they do not discount their contributions to society to the extent that Veblen did. She believed that the middle class had adopted an aristocratic affinity for conspicuous consumption, without retaining a capacity for aesthetic appreciation or philanthropy. Meanwhile, she felt that the wealthy bore a unique responsibility — *noblesse oblige* — to provide the public with resources to develop taste in art, music, and literature. Though she acknowledged that few managed to live up to this responsibility, she esteemed the New Yorkers of her parents' generation that had devoted a share of their fortunes to institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, founded in 1870 with the goal of "advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects" and "furnishing popular instruction and recreations" (Disturnell 101). Many of the nation's most significant libraries, museums, and theatres would not exist without these benefactors.⁶² Karin Roffman argues that Wharton's writing considers the museum "as an intimate space in which complex personal and social issues intersect," evocative of the "tense relationship" between "art and money" (Totten, *Memorial* 213-214). Her sense of the proper balance between "art and money" is also critical to her views about taste. In her portrait of modern America, the philanthropic

⁶¹ For a discussion of Veblen's influence on Wharton's earlier fiction, see J. Michael Duvall's "The Futile and the Dingy: Wasting and Being Wasted in *The House of Mirth*" (Totten, *Memorial* 159-193).

⁶² Klimasmith observes that Wharton was "practically related to the Metropolitan Museum; her uncle Frederick Rhineland was a major force behind its development" (571).

impulse has been perverted into a self-aggrandizing spectacle. One such example is the ‘fire drill’ at Cedarledge in *Twilight Sleep*. Pauline justifies the ostentatious display – several new fire trucks paid for by the Manfords – with false modesty: “Dexter and I thought it was time the village was more properly equipped. It’s really more on account of the farmers” (251). At no point does the narrator suggest that the local fire department would actually benefit from such a donation; the ‘gift’ merely serves to broadcast the Manfords’ wealth. While Pauline’s guests may be impressed by her charity, her creator clearly was not; this kind of *déclassé* grandstanding attested to the demise of *noblesse oblige* in America.

‘Her Son’ contrasts *noblesse oblige* with modern materialism. In the story, the Glenns represent the Old New York elite; in keeping with the Lynds’ assessment of the diminished role of the upper class, they are regarded as living in a different world. The narrator observes, “someone said they must go to bed with their crowns on” (S 528). Beneath their impressive wealth, however, the Glenns are admirably devoted to their family. When their (legitimate) son dies in the war, their reaction unsettles the common perception: “People saw that the Mr. and Mrs. Glenn they had known was a mere façade, and that behind it were a passionate father and mother” (S 529). The loss takes the couple down from their pedestal: they are no longer viewed in terms of their wealth, but as human beings who have suffered a terrible loss. The story chronicles how the aging flapper Mrs. Brown exploits the now-widowed Mrs. Glenn, pretending that the young man posing as her son is the child Mrs. Glenn had put up for adoption decades earlier. Where Mrs. Glenn would spend every cent she has for her son, Mrs. Brown will stop at nothing to get money, and cruelly reveals that she has been having an affair with the ‘son’ and “faked up that ridiculous adoption story” (S 585). Mrs. Glenn’s timely stroke – which looks back to ‘After Holbein’ – leaves her oblivious to her rival’s malice. Even so, the triumph of Mrs.

Brown over her Old New York rival links the acquisitiveness of American Dream with the nation's moral decline.⁶³

Wharton's fiction makes a compelling argument that America had grown steadily more materialistic as the twentieth century progressed and the middle class gained cultural dominance. Among the turn-of-the-century elite, she had noted, "the crude fact of money-making was still regarded as derogatory" (103). In contrast, her Americans of the 1920s and 1930s regard money as "something intrinsically meritorious," believing that "the real business of life" was simply "to get 'there'—and 'there' was where money was, always and exclusively" (*FW* 107, *HRB* 15).

Wharton's phrasing is similar to that of the Lynds in *Middletown*, where they observe, "Everybody who gets a living in Middletown is theoretically in the process of 'getting there'; the traditional social philosophy assumes that each person has a large degree of freedom to climb the ladder to ever wider responsibility, independence, and money income" (65). Though Wharton was literally one of 'the Joneses,' she argued that there was more to life than simply keeping up with them. This perspective comes through when Dexter puzzles over his wife's spending in *Twilight Sleep*: "What came of it but bigger houses, more food, more motors, more pearls, and more self-righteous philanthropy?" (162). He yearns for an immaterial meaning to life in a nation Bauer has described as one where "individuality has become an effect of advertising and wealth" (79). In Wharton's vision of modern America, good taste has become worryingly indistinguishable from the merely expensive. Conspicuous consumption and the American Dream act as forces of standardization, causing the nation to merge into a "collective American face" (*MR* 51). She was not alone in seeing a decline in independent thought and taste after the war. The Lynds concluded the their study of life in Muncie on this ominous note:

Every aspect of Middletown's life has felt something of this same tendency: standardized processes in industry, nationally advertised products used, eating, worn in Middletown homes; standardized curriculum, textbooks, teachers in the

⁶³ Hoeller reads the story differently, as the "innocence" of Mrs. Glenn triumphing over the "vulgarity" of Mrs. Brown (164).

schools; the very play-time of people running into certain molds, with national movie films, nationally edited magazines, and standardized music contests. (491)

Her perspective also anticipated that of later historians, such as David Kyvig, who has observed that the rise of mass media “contributed to a growing uniformity in American culture” (187). Also, Michael Parrish sees post-war advertising as encouraging “a belief that Americans were entitled as a matter of right and destiny to an ever-rising standard of living” (81). Like the inhabitants of Muncie, money is everything for Wharton’s characters. They inhabit a world much like the United States of the twenty-first century, one in which products and advertisements are inescapable, shaping people’s perceptions of themselves and of the world around them.

‘The Mysterious Utility of the Useless’

Generally speaking, the tastes of Wharton’s post-war Americans can be seen as “buying off suffering with money” (*TS* 261). The spending habits of her characters allow them to avoid unpleasant realities, rather than improving their lives or those of others. In certain instances, however, there is no intervening object: characters use money specifically for the purpose of avoiding pain. The title of *Twilight Sleep* refers to a sedative given to women during childbirth, which Lita receives during the birth of her son. Elsewhere in the novel, Wyant drinks what remains of the family money to numb himself to the modern welter that holds no place for him. Pauline devotes a sizable sum to pay for the treatment of her maid’s ailing mother. She does so partly out of kindness, but also so that she will not have to find a new maid or console the current one. In *The Gods Arrive*, the author suggests that avoiding pain is avoiding life itself, through Mrs. Scrimser’s last words to Weston: “maybe we haven’t made enough of pain, been

too afraid of it” (409). Pain enables people to appreciate things of lasting value – art, ideas, and relationships – rather reducing the meaning of life to the acquisition of expensive things.

Though she recognized that expensive things were not the meaning of life, Wharton also recognized that these things had profound meaning *in* life. Lears argues that the author “saw material artifacts as a mode of making meaning rather than merely concealing it” (*Fables* 379). Totten also stresses the “connections between material objects and cultural meaning in her life and work” (*Memorial* 1). Wharton’s descriptions of material objects reflect her sense of the interconnectedness of class, taste, and personality. She saw decorative items, clothing, and spaces as critical elements of her art. She commented in *The Writing of Fiction*, “the bounds of personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line,” adding that “each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things” (10). She frequently invokes the deeper significance of trappings and trifles in her fiction, using the phrase “the mysterious utility of the useless” to describe this in *Hudson River Bracketed* (249). In *Twilight Sleep*, she also asks, “where did one’s own personality end, and that of others, of people, landscapes, chairs or spectacle cases, begin?” (*TS* 201). Her words suggest how objects can reveal a great deal about character in her fiction, as well as the American ideologies that inspire desire for these objects and imbue them with value.

The relationship between personal taste and the cultivation of one’s social identity links her fiction to that of James. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Madame Merle debates the significance of clothing with Isabel Archer, commenting, “Every human being has his shell and you must take the shell into account” (253). Isabel refutes this, claiming her clothes offer little insight into her emotions and mind. In response, Madame Merle suggests that Isabel go without clothes, unsettling Isabel and effectively challenging her belief in “the integrity of the self” (*Buitenhuis* 111). Though Isabel considers herself above the pretense of a “shell,” she alters herself in accordance with Osmond’s idea of the suitable wife. Yet she cannot become someone else simply by dressing the part: “there was no pretending, wearing a mask or a dress” (*Lady*

475). Isabel finally learns what Madame Merle had already known: objects are critical in constructing the image one presents to the world. Even if we do not recognize the power of objects to shape how others see us, that power continues to operate. In Wharton's fiction, external markers reflect the critical importance of taste in the engineering of social identity. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily tells Selden, "If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it" (12). Lily's words suggest that there is no level of identity that exists beyond the realm of objects; they are a form of social currency. In Wharton's fictions of the 1920s and 1930s, however, these objects often become overdetermined, asked to bear inordinate weight and expected to wield tremendous power.

Women's clothing is a key avenue of Wharton's commentary on contemporary American taste. She was passionate about clothes, and possessed a sharp memory for sartorial detail, having become aware of "the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment" as a young child (*BG* 2). Even then, she recognized that a woman's attire revealed a great deal about her, often more than the woman herself was aware. Her autobiographical writing features numerous descriptions of memorable dresses she owned throughout her life, such as the dress she wore for a childhood walk with her father and the pink Doucet confection she chose for her first meeting with James. Her memoirs occasionally mention a particularly striking garment or accessory of a complete stranger, among them the bonnet worn by "New York's first fashionable hetaera" in 'A Little Girl's New York' (*CW* 276). The woman's distinctive attire and yellow brougham captured her attention, though her mother scolded her for paying heed to this scandalous figure. Still, the woman makes a lasting impression. Wharton remembers her "as dark-haired, quietly dressed, and enchantingly pale, with a hat-brim lined with cherry color which shed a lovely glow on her cheeks." While she obeyed her mother's order not to look at the brougham when they chanced upon it on future occasions, "that one and only glimpse of the loveliness within it peopled my imagination with images of enchantment from Broceliande and

Shallot... my first doorway to romance” (*CW* 276). The mysterious woman was clearly a beauty, but her well-chosen attire amplifies her natural charms to an otherworldly degree. Rhonda Skillern suggests that her striking headgear inspired the bonnet worn by Charity Royall in *Summer* (Bell, *Cambridge* 122). Wharton first saw this woman in the 1880s; indeed, she only saw her once in her life. Yet she wrote about her repeatedly, many decades later, lavishly memorializing her as “the mirage of palm trees in the desert” in contrast to the “impoverished emotional atmosphere of Old New York” (*CW* 276). The woman opened her mind to the possibility that life could be different from what she had known, and the staying power of her image attests to the immense symbolic power the author attributed to clothing.

Wharton’s descriptions of 1920s and 1930s fashions reflect wider shifts in the garment industry, as well as a homogenization of women’s sartorial taste through the figure of the flapper. Women’s clothing became more relaxed and functional during these years, and mass production more commonplace. Though her descriptions of post-war attire lack the detail of earlier periods, she did not object to contemporary design.⁶⁴ Her women no longer wear custom made tea-gowns from Parisian couturiers like Doucet and Worth, but opt for unstructured frocks from New York’s high-end department stores. These garments were either imported from France or mimicked current Gallic designs. As discussed in the previous chapter, the style pioneered by 1920s designers departed from late nineteenth-century feminine confections. Their looks were more practical, though Joslin observes that flapper dresses had a “homogenous style and standard black color” (*Fashion* 152). The potential for homogeneity within modern women’s fashion is a feature of Wharton’s later fiction. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, Hayes’ department store, Storecraft, carries Parisian designers such as Chanel, Vionnet, and Patou. In evoking these brands, Wharton captures what American women coveted in the 1920s and 1930s, while also suggesting that businessmen like Hayes had too much influence on women’s taste. The

⁶⁴ Wharton was not a flapper, but she was an uncommonly chic older woman, as evidenced by two photographs in Joslin’s book. In the first, she wears a cubism-influenced dress with a jagged, angular hemline, while sporting a knit ensemble reminiscent of the Chanel style in another (49,160). Benstock also notes that Wharton “marcel-waved and tinted her hair, wore cloche hats, straight-waisted dresses with midcalf hemlines” (*Gifts* 398).

incursion of business into the world of fashion is also reflected in *The Children*, where Blanca reads *Tatler* for information about upcoming autumn styles, comments that Princess Buondelmonte wears her clothes “awfully plain,” in a style she describes as “like Scopy young, if Chanel could have dressed her” (272-3). That a ten-year-old girl can speak authoritatively about Chanel suggests that the ubiquity of modern design diminishes it relative to nineteenth-century *ateliers*, which personalized the garments of each customer. The interchangeable appearance of flappers like Lilla, Lita, and the Cran sisters (discussed in Chapter Three) also attest to her belief that some modern styles were antithetical to personal expression.

The limitations of modern design did not inhibit Wharton from using it as a tool for creating characters and commenting on American society. In *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline’s endless wardrobe could be a Muncie housewife’s ultimate fantasy. To borrow Madame Merle’s term, she is all ‘shell.’ Her personality shifts with her clothing choices as the occasion demands. She believes without question that there is an appropriate outfit for every occasion. Conversely, she fears that an incorrect choice of garments and accessories could undermine her hopes. She owns an ensemble suited to every occasion, even specially selected sleepwear for midnight crises: “her hair smoothed back under her fillet-shaped cap of silver lace, her ‘rest-gown’ of silvery silk slipped over her night-dress. This emergency garb always lay at her bedside in case of nocturnal alarms” (297). Its silk shimmers like precious metal: it is sleek, delicate, and costly. Later, she imagines “Nona’s blood spattering the silvery folds of the rest-gown, destroying it forever as a symbol of safety and repose” (299). The garment threatens her illusions of a stable family life, and must be disposed of. Similarly, when her plans for a romantic interlude with Dexter go sour, she feels as though her wardrobe has betrayed her: “she was no more to him – mauve tea-gown, Chinese amethysts, touch of rouge and silver sandals – than a sheet of glass through which he was staring... she had never before felt so inexistent” (175). By attributing such immense power to the tea gown and sandals, she remains ignorant of her role in the deterioration of their marriage. By the same token, the dressing gown suggests how she avoids

taking responsibility for enabling family tensions to escalate to the point of violence by acting as though nothing is wrong. Her extravagant fashions allow her to distract herself from herself.

Across historical periods, Wharton measured good fashion sense in terms of how well garments suited the wearer. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she observes, “the beauty of all features depends upon their appropriateness” (14). This statement applies to her views on women’s clothing as well as architecture. *The Age of Innocence* describes Ellen Olenska as “heedless of tradition” in choosing to wear a “perverse and provocative” yet “undeniably pleasing” dress when Archer visits her at home, “a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur” (85). The soft textures of Ellen’s dress invite touch, suggesting the natural contours of her body. Her appearance is alluring and feminine, rather than brazen or overt. Ellen’s dresses, including the blue Empire-waist she wears to the opera in the novel’s opening scene, consistently favor ease of movement, comfort, and a womanly silhouette (Joslin, *Fashion* 123-125). Nan and Laura of *The Buccaneers* also wear “garments and ornaments that follow the simple lines of a woman’s body, the straightforward style of dress popular in the twentieth century” (Joslin, *Fashion* 176). Wharton’s best-dressed women defy the prevailing tastes of the day; they do not aggressively whittle their waists by means of a “close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk” in the 1870s, nor do they slim their curves with an “elastic sheath” in the post-war period (*AI* 85, *TS* 248). Looser styles also convey a woman’s sensual confidence in *Twilight Sleep*, in a passage contrasting Lita’s attire with Mrs. Toy’s too-clingy frock: “Lita, in her straight white slip, slim and unadorned as a Primitive angel, with that close coif of goldfish-coloured hair, and not a spangle, a jewel, a pearl even, made the other woman’s clothes look like upholstery” (247). Lita possesses a dimmer iteration of the assuredness Archer sees in Ellen, “a sureness in the carriage of head” that puts the women around her to shame (*AI* 50). Also, like the mysterious woman in the yellow brougham in ‘A Little Girl’s New York,’ the flapper possesses a quiet elegance in this scene, emphasized by her lack of jewelry and the simple lines of her dress. All three women are unexpectedly linked through Wharton’s belief that striking fashion inclined

toward subtlety and understatement. To borrow Lily Bart's words, Wharton's captivating female characters are framed by their clothing. Lita and Ellen choose garments that allow their natural beauty to shine, rather than those they hope will transform them into someone else.

Fashion also becomes an arena for 'keeping up with the Joneses' in the post-war fiction, though none of her female characters are breadwinners in the conventional sense. In *The Economic Theory of Women's Dress* (1894), Veblen argues that

The best, most advanced, most highly developed societies of our time have reached the point in their evolution where it has (ideally) become the great, peculiar, and almost the sole function of woman in the social system to put in evidence her economic unit's ability to pay. That is to say, woman's place (according to the ideal scheme of our social System) has come to be that of a means of conspicuously unproductive expenditure. (200)

In *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline's wardrobe is perhaps the most valuable tool in her social arsenal. When she hopes to impress the Rivingtons, whom she considers the "the last step of the Manford ladder," after much deliberation, she selects a "distinguished and exclusive-looking" ensemble of silver moiré, a chinchilla coat, and pearls (159-60). She puts on a costume of the woman she wants to be: Mrs. Rivington's equal. A moment in the unfinished novel 'Disintegration' sees clothing being put to the same social end, describing Mrs. Tillotson Wing as "the Muse of Millinery. Her gowns are poems, her bonnets sonnets" (UW 87). Mrs. Wing has divorced her husband for a wealthier man, and justifies her actions to everyone in Newport by parading around in elaborate hats and dresses. With such beautiful and luxurious possessions, she assumes, no one could reasonably condemn her choice. She also enjoys the opportunity to flaunt her newfound wealth in the face of the daughter and husband she has left behind. Both Pauline and Mrs. Wing want it known to everyone around them that they can afford the 'best' clothing and accessories. In broadcasting this information, they transform themselves into trophies, whose only purpose is to be beautiful, expensive, and envied.

Jewelry also reflects how the conflation of expense with taste reinforced women's ornamental status in post-war society. This, too, was in keeping with Wharton's earlier fictions,

as evidenced by a scene in *The House of Mirth* where Lily and Gerty Farish view Miss Van Osburgh's wedding jewelry: "The glow of the stones warmed Lily's veins like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (90). Lily does not want the jewels for their own sake, but for the power they will impart to her in the eyes of others. The real romance here is between women and gems; the groom hovers in the background as a tedious logistical burden. In the post-war fiction, jewelry also becomes a badge of a woman's Faustian bargain. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate Clephane recalls that her husband, John, had been "fond of jewels, and particularly proud of his wife's, first because he had chosen them, and secondly because he had given them to her. She sometimes thought he really admired her only when she had them all on" (61). The image of himself reflected in the gems gratifies John, rather than the way the baubles highlight Kate's beauty. Though his wife initially sees these objects as her trophies, she comes to realize that they transform her into his chattel. When Kate returns to New York, she loathes the sight of the jewel box. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Suzy undergoes a similar transformation when Nick places the wedding ring on her finger: "from the moment she had become his property he had built up in himself a conception of her answering to some deep-seated need of veneration" (54). Like John, Nick sees Suzy's purpose in life as bolstering his status in the eyes of others. She is not her own person in his eyes, but a reflection of his inflated image of himself. The wedding ring also appears as a symbol of feminine subordination in *The Children*, which references Rose's "newly imprisoned" finger moments after her ill-fated betrothal to Boyne (176).

The engagement scene in *The Children* also sets up a complex comparison between the tastes of the old-fashioned elite and those of the middling moderns. Boyne mistakenly gives Rose a "curious crystal pendant in a network of worn enamel," which he had intended for Judith. He quickly revokes the pendant, but recognizes "she would never forgive him for

pocketing the trinket he had first produced” (173). The unique pendant reflects the unusual attraction Boyne feels for Judith, while the “utterly commonplace” sapphire engagement ring intimates that his feelings for Rose are likewise unremarkable (173). The scene suggests that inexpensive objects may more accurately communicate the love of the giver, and that good taste need not necessarily be expensive. At the same time, the devaluation of the sapphire in favor of the cheap pendant reinforces Wharton’s view of America as devalued traditional institutions in its love for ephemera. The sapphire is the more valuable object, though no one seems to recognize it as such. In the same vein, Rose is a rare woman, where Judith is just another pretty little flapper. Yet in this instance, ‘one of a million’ trumps ‘one in a million.’ Middling tastes cannot distinguish an object of timeless quality from fleeting fancy.

Private Spaces, Public Ambitions

Post-war domestic spaces are a laboratory in which Wharton studies American ways and their meaning. The author believed that houses must be personalized, their furnishings thoughtfully chosen, in order to become inviting and inspiring homes. Her writing career began with an impassioned assertion that interior spaces were a barometer of the hearts and minds of their inhabitants. Such personal decorative touches did not need to be costly; she defended modest dwellings in *The Decoration of Houses*, claiming, “There is no lack of models for manufacturers to copy, if their customers will but demand what is good” (29). This conviction remained with her throughout her life, even leading her to stop and admire soldiers’ makeshift villages during her trips to the front: “they are real houses, with real doors and windows... In other cheery catacombs we found neat rows of bunks, mess-tables, sizzling sauce-pans over kitchen-fires. Everywhere were endless ingenuities” (FF 126). This admiration for humble, yet distinctive living spaces is also a feature of *The Age of Innocence*, and Archer marvels at the way in

which Ellen transforms a “shabby hired house” in a bad part of town into “something intimate” (58). Similarly, in *The Children*, Rose’s design sense also earns her a reputation for “cleverness and originality” among her friends (39). While Wharton took pleasure in well-appointed surroundings, she also found much to admire in simplicity and improvisation.⁶⁵

Still, not all modest homes earned her approval. As in many matters, Wharton was bold in expressing her distaste where interior décor was concerned. She reflects in *A Backward Glance*, “my photographic memory of rooms and houses – even those seen briefly, or at long intervals – was from the earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness” (28). As she found the extravagances of the late nineteenth century repulsive, the cheap homogeneity of the twentieth century proved equally off-putting. This is evidenced by a description of Euphoria, Weston’s hometown in *Hudson River Bracketed*. This Midwestern city belongs to a “standardized world,” measuring one’s “social qualifications” in terms of “telephones and bathtubs” (210, 257). The thoroughly generic Weston home boasts a “lawn, sleeping porch, and sun parlour” and has been “photographed for the architectural papers” (4). Judging from this description, there was little about the Weston home that would have inspired a true architectural enthusiast like Wharton. Modern conveniences take priority in residences such as these; neither their construction nor décor reflects the character of the family living there. During the 1920s, prefabricated homes could even be purchased via mail-order catalogue, “shipped by rail to the customer for construction on his own lot” (Kyvig 58). Weston comes to understand what a real home can be only after he visits The Willows. It is “a solemn high-ceilinged house,” architecturally intriguing and steeped in family history (*HRB* 60). It is worth noting that the title of *Hudson River Bracketed* refers to a distinct architectural style of upstate New York, which was briefly in vogue during the middle of the nineteenth century. When

⁶⁵ Van de Werf offers an opposing view, taking *The Decoration of Houses* as evidence that Wharton “abhorred” the “average bourgeois American home,” which is extreme (180).

juxtaposed with *The Willows*, the Weston home's status as a symptom of the nation's homogeneity and tastelessness becomes all the more evident.

Across historical periods, the post-war writing criticizes homes that are designed to incite the jealousy of one's neighbours, rather than to meet the needs of the people actually living there. Wharton believed that homes should be appointed in the manner "best suited to the master or mistress of the house which is being decorated" (*DH* 19). In her novels of Old New York, elaborate Fifth Avenue mansions become monuments to wealth rather than functional family homes. In *The Age of Innocence*, the Beaufort family has a ballroom that is "left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag" (16). A monument to conspicuous waste, the room serves no practical purpose. Shifting the focus to contemporary America, *Twilight Sleep* demonstrates how these ostentatious tastes translate into modern times. After Pauline's extensive renovations of Cedarledge, this formerly rustic country home takes on the impersonal opulence of an expensive hotel. Like the Beauforts' ballroom, it is a testament to wasted money, one which allows Pauline to pretend to be 'roughing it' for a few days a year. The narrator notes, "She even succeeded in persuading herself... that it was really all as primitive and impromptu as it looked, and that she herself had always shared her husband's passion for stamping about in the mud in tweed and homespun" (222). Undermining the home's folksy veneer, its bedrooms are fitted with "every practical convenience—from the smoothly-hung window-ventilators to the jointed dressing-table lights, from the little portable telephone, and the bed-table with folding legs, to the tall threefold mirror" (239). Pauline takes enormous pride in having planted over seventy-five thousand new bulbs in the gardens, delights in the opportunity "to spend more money each year," and relishes having "stamped her will and her wealth on every feature" (212-13). Though the modernization of Cedarledge suits Pauline's insatiable spending habits, it ignores the needs of her family, who

see the place as a welcome respite from hectic Manhattan living.⁶⁶ Nona and Dexter do not avail themselves of the residence's creature comforts, but appreciate its natural surroundings, devoting their time to contemplative walks and long scenic drives. In her eagerness to install the opulent comforts of home, Pauline neglects to consider the appeal of getting away from it all.

Sterile spaces in Wharton's fiction often call attention to a character's desire to remove him or herself from reality. Tidiness gives Pauline a sense of control that eludes her in other areas of her life. Her elaborate bathroom encourages her to believe she can outfox the ageing process, and she wears perfume that smells like a "superior disinfectant" (*TS* 55). She comments that she would like to have her life "disinfected and whitewashed at regular intervals, like the cellar" (*TS* 22). Claire Preston suggests that modernizing Cedarledge is Pauline's attempt to whitewash the cellar of her memories. The project allows her to physically erase the record of her marriage to Wyant, and scour away any lingering traces of guilt for having rendered him "useless and helpless" (29). An orderly house also hints toward disordered personalities and relationships in 'Joy in the House.' After she returns home, Christine initially finds the "tidiness and cleanliness" of her home refreshing after her messy – literally and emotionally – experience living abroad with Jeff (*S* 717). By acting as though she never left, her husband ignores the problems that drove her to flee in the first place. She comes to see her home as sterile and lifeless, just like the relationship she has returned to.

Halperin has commented of Wharton's writing, "she was Edith Jones, and she was Edith Wharton" and part of her, "like her mother, believed instinctively that... drawing-rooms are always tidy. Another part of her, very unlike her mother, was prone to peek under the carpet" (184). This latter part of her emerges in her observations about the American fetish for sanitization, a trait that she was not alone in seeing as evocative of modern ideology. H. L. Mencken remarked, "I wouldn't swap an American bathroom for the Acropolis" (*Gist* 92). He

⁶⁶ Beer suggests that Pauline's passion for gardening marks her as Wharton's "self-that-might-have-been," were it not for her writing career (*Traveller* 93-95).

even wrote a satirical biography of the bathtub, 'A Neglected History' (1917), in which he jokingly argued that Americans initially feared bathing as a health hazard. His story was so widely believed that he was forced to publicly retract it in 1926. Fitzgerald's play *Porcelain and Pink* (1922) also mocks America's fixation on sanitation and waste, with one character commenting, "Tell me if there are any bathtubs in history; I think they've been frightfully neglected" (*Tales* 123). In the works of all three writers, America's preoccupation with hygiene suggests a lack of "intellectual honesty" on individual as well as national level.

Beyond issues of cleanliness, Wharton's novels point out how interior spaces allow people to construct personal illusory worlds. It does so through scenes that remove characters from their own carefully manufactured environments, placing them in hostile domestic territory. The decorative styles of others force Kate and Pauline to confront emotions, ideas, and responsibilities that they otherwise choose to ignore. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Anne renovates the Clephane home while Kate is living in France. While Kate is initially pleased by the change, she later notes that Anne's room is "ungirlish" and not very "cozy," as though "a rather serious-minded son were showing her his study" (33). Though she makes much of her physical resemblance to her daughter elsewhere in the story, Anne's room reminds her of the radical differences between them. In *Twilight Sleep*, meanwhile, Pauline visits Lita at home to persuade her to stick with her marriage to Jim. Lita arrives late and flings herself "on a pile of cushions," before offering Pauline a seat on the floor, causing the "whalebone in Pauline's perfectly fitting elastic girdle" to clench "apprehensively" (193). The young woman can easily sprawl in this haphazard seating arrangements, yet the tightly girdled Pauline is not at such physical liberty. The "ugly and dreary" modern space becomes an echo chamber for the older woman's insecurities and fears (*TS* 192). In these spaces, both women must acknowledge the weaknesses in their relationships. Though the taste with which both rooms are decorated is questionable, both women seem cowed by modern styles, fearing that rejecting them will be seen as evidence of their age and irrelevance.

Outmoded decorative styles in Wharton's post-war fiction often suggest old-fashioned tendencies, a character's inability or refusal to adapt to life in the 'welter' of modern America. Aggie Heuston's sitting room in *Twilight Sleep* is littered with musty family furnishings that date back to the 1870s. It is filled with "hostile gilt seats," "blue china dogs," and embodies "the New York luxury of the 'seventies in every ponderous detail, from the huge cabbage roses of the Aubusson carpet to the triple layer of curtains designed to protect the aristocracy" (200). Her allegiance to Old New York is most obvious in the rug, which recalls the "cabbage-rose-garlanded carpets" owned by Mrs. Mingott in *The Age of Innocence* (*AI* 22). Aggie does not select judiciously from her decorative inheritance, embodying Wharton's contention that heirloom furniture is "an unconscious extension of the conscious habit which old-fashioned people have of clinging to their parents' way of living" (*DH* 19). Her incompatibility with the modern world is as obvious as the china dogs on her mantel. She refuses to divorce her husband, though she knows he does not love her. Yet living in a house decorated to look like the Gilded Age cannot bring the morals and values of that time back into circulation. Nona reflects, "if only Aggie Heuston had changed those sour apple curtains, everything might have been different" (*TS* 200). Aggie's embrace of old-fashioned spaces and values becomes her version of Pauline's 'whitewashing the cellar,' another way of using money to avoid pain. In this respect, her passé taste is a symptom of a widespread national disease.

Décor also suggests how the nation's society had ceased to give precedence to the needs of the family, shifting its focus toward the individual. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she had argued that the "purpose" of the American home was to serve as a "family apartment" (*DH* 126). In *Twilight Sleep*, when Arthur Wyant returns to Cedarledge for the first time in years, he finds "everything so much the same" (287). To Pauline's chagrin, he fails to notice her improvements, immersing himself in memories of the place "where he and she had spent their early life together, and their son had been born" (278). For him, the family roots of the house persist beneath the new glossy surfaces. In contrast, Lita's drawing room evokes the domestic

instability of post-war life: it is “expressive of the modern marriage state... more like the waiting room of a glorified railway station than the setting of an established way of life” (31). The centerpiece of the room is “a huge spherical aquarium,” in which Lita leaves the “electric bulbs” on day and night, with the result that the “sleepless” fish continue to die and need replacing (31). At the turn of the century, Wharton complained that electric lighting robbed a home of “all air of privacy and distinction” (*DH* 128). She had most likely grown used to electricity by 1927, and her description of Lita’s room reminds us of the flapper’s desire to inhabit the Hollywood limelight. Some form of light is always on in her home, and an unseen observer may view the actions of another living creature at any time. Lita’s treatment of the fish parallels her lack of interest in her family. The narrator remarks that the fish “too were transients,” implying that people and things only stay in Lita’s life for a brief period. The room does not serve as a setting for family gatherings, but passive-aggressive battles between Lita and Pauline. Lita and Jim rarely spend time there; throughout the novel, they rarely spend any time together at all. Like Cedarledge, the room fails to serve the needs of those that use it the most.

American taste reflects the nation’s affinity for public spectacle in descriptions of characters peering into one another’s bedrooms. These “visible, visitable” spaces recall James’s critique of turn-of-the-century homes in *The American Scene*, referenced in Chapter Two. In *The Age of Innocence*, Mrs. Mingott’s largesse requires her to move her bed to the ground floor; “as you sat in her sitting-room window with her, you caught... the unexpected vista of a bedroom with a huge low bed upholstered like a sofa, and a toilet-table with frivolous lace flounces and a gilt-framed mirror” (23). Awkwardly amused, Archer imagines the setup as evoking “architectural incentives to immorality” (23). While Mrs. Mingott is unlikely to be getting up to any truly scandalous activities, Archer is momentarily forced to think about her in a radically different way; her bedroom provides him with more information about her than he would like to have. At the same time, Wharton reveals the venerable Mrs. Mingott to be a person of questionable,

“frivolous” taste. Her furnishings seem strangely girlish and dubiously ornate for a woman of her established New York pedigree.

Twilight Sleep depicts the New York woman’s bedroom in its modern incarnation, characterizing Lita’s boudoir as a sensual lair rather than a girlish retreat. The bed she shares with her husband – and, potentially, her many admirers – sits in open view of the sitting room. In their reading of *The Mother’s Recompense*, Beer and Horner argue that Wharton “uses bedroom scenes to intimate sexual desire and the emotional complexities which result from it” instead of “open dialogue between her characters” (82). Their argument carries over to *Twilight Sleep*, in which the Wyants’ marital bedchamber becomes a forum for public spectacle, comment, and even participation. Pauline is troubled by the sensual, tactile mood of the room. She reacts with a “terrified gulp” to the “welter of ebony velvet cushions” and the “indecent” of a nude Cubist statue she spies within (31, 32). The room reminds Wharton’s readers that Pauline is old-fashioned and Lita is modern, and in this respect the dynamic between them echoes Sophy Viner’s sexual intimidation of Anna Leath in *The Reef*. Yet Wharton’s description of Lita’s boudoir also challenges contemporary notions of Jazz Age hedonism. Immediately after describing the room’s furnishings, Wharton wonders, “what would a woman like Lita be likely to do if she suddenly grew tired of the life she was leading?” (32). Like Pauline, Lita is frustrated by the lukewarm ardour of her husband, and her leaving seems inevitable. Yet Lita ultimately bows to inertia and the promise of security. Through this choice, Wharton points out that while Lita’s bedroom may be thoroughly modern, her opportunities in life continue to depend on old-fashioned male munificence.

Middling Culture and Society

Wharton's critique of modern taste extends beyond material objects to encompass how modern Americans spend their time. It also examines their manners, interests, and the company they keep. Time is a precious commodity for many of them, and they live in constant apprehension that they may be missing out on some more amusing activity. Like the inhabitants of Muncie in *Middletown*, they "spend" time as if it were money (Lynd and Lynd 225-226). As a result, maintaining the appearance of the good life through leisurely diversions becomes stressful and onerous. In *The Children*, Syb Lullmer exasperatedly comments, "I always said that we're the real laboring classes," when the diving contest that she and Cliffe are meant to be judging runs late (165). Her joke reflects the widespread entitlement to diversion that Wharton saw in post-war America, as well as the fatigue resulting from 'keeping up with the Joneses.' Her characters are constantly busy yet accomplish little. In *Twilight Sleep*, dinner parties are the central activity in Pauline's life, and she spends enormous amounts of time and money to ensure that her lavish productions seem effortless. For one occasion, she entrusts to her staff "the vast operation of making terrapin and champagne appear simultaneously on eighty-five small tables" (77). These elaborately staged, costly events lead Nona – and, by extension, Wharton – to wonder, "What was it all for, and what was left when it was over? Only a huge clearing-up for Maisie and the servants" (80). She engages in pointless activities simply because she has nothing better to do, managing only to capture moments of fleeting brilliance. Though she lives the American Dream, it seems like an enormous waste of time and money. In contrast to Pauline, Dexter longs for an activity that involves "using his brains, muscles, the whole of him, body and soul, to do real things, bring about real results in the world, instead of all this artificial activity" (71). Wharton's writing suggests that these kinds of activities could do post-war Americans a world of good. In contrast to women like Pauline, she had seen other women transformed by charity work during the war: "The call on their co-operation had developed unexpected aptitudes which, in some cases, turned them forever from a life of discontented idling, and made them into happy people"

(BG 356). Clearly, Wharton believed that philanthropy had a positive impact on the lives of benefactors as well as recipients.

Wharton's fiction of the 1920s and 1930s sees bad manners and bad taste as going hand-in-hand with one another. One of the American ways that particularly rankled her was the alteration of the English language. In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, she writes, "The lover of English need only note what that rich language has shrunk to on the lips, and in the literature of the heterogeneous hundred millions of American citizens who, without uniformity of tradition or recognized guidance, are being suffered to work their many wills upon it" (50). In contrast to American English, the author found French particularly rich and expressive. The nation's rich linguistic traditions can be traced to government's active role in protecting and preserving the language. Meanwhile, she felt that Americans had reduced the subtle shades of English to its most basic elements. This led her to wonder, "What has become, in America, of the copse, the spinney, the hedgerow, the dale, the weald? We have reduced all timber to 'woods'" (FW 83). American speech of the period was peppered with slang and colloquialisms, which she found coarse and irritating. In contrast, the intellectually refined characters of her fiction possess an innate appreciation for the richness of language. In the abandoned novel 'Literature,' Dicky is intoxicated by the musicality of words, deriving "extreme pleasure" from "reading [words], or rather chanting them aloud" (UW 145). His rapturous reading experiences recall Wharton's childhood episodes of 'making up,' fits of extemporaneous storytelling in her father's library that she describes as an "ecstasy" and a "frenzy" (BG 42). Her parents had instilled a reverence in her for the lyricism of language, which led her to comment, "I have never quite understood how two people so little preoccupied with letters as my father and mother had such sensitive ears for pure English. The example they set me was never forgotten" (BG 49). In her post-war fiction, she uses slang very rarely, only in dialogue. Her narration adheres to more formal verbiage. When her characters speak or write in the modern manner, it often calls attention to their poor taste, bad manners, or lacking education. For instance, in *The Children*, the crass actress Zinnia

Wrench uses words like “fudge” and “how d’ye do,” while the naïve Judith Wheater is practically illiterate, spelling ‘yacht’ as “yaht,” ‘excited’ as “exited,” and ‘heiress’ as “airess” (*TC* 65, 89).

Wharton gives her middling modern Americans abrasive accents as well, describing Zinnie Wheater as having “a sharp metallic American voice, with which she might almost have peeled the fruit” (*TC* 29). In her view, the modern American language – and a strong American accent in fiction – was tasteless by default. However, her refusal to adapt to contemporary patterns of speech likely strengthened the convictions of critics who were inclined to see her as old-fashioned.

Wharton condemns modern candor by setting it in juxtaposition with the tactful reserve of Old New York. In earlier generations, certain topics were avoided in polite company, particularly those relating to one’s economic status or romantic entanglements. She points out that “one of the first rules of conversation” her mother taught her was to “never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible” (*BG* 57). As I discussed in Chapter One, Wharton’s autobiographical writing was far from candid or forthcoming: it downplays her well-to-do background and makes only the vaguest of references to romantic and family relationships. Her more measured mode of expression contrasts sharply with that of her characters in *The Children*. While as a child Wharton was rarely seen or heard by her parents, the boisterous Wheater brood openly discusses their parents’ romantic entanglements, and refers to their elders by their surnames. They demand presents from every visitor, and have few qualms about discussing money, Judith sees little problem in stealing from her father. In Marilyn French’s introduction to the 1985 edition of the novel, she contends these indiscreet conversations help to characterize the family as “vulgar, showy, pretentious, utterly irresponsible” (vi). In other words, the younger generation inherits the tastelessness of that which preceded it. At the same time, the novel suggests that Wharton remained mindful of the problems caused by a reserved, Old New York manner of speaking. While Boyne initially admires Rose for her thoughtful avoidance of certain topics, he eventually finds himself drawn to the freer expression of the

children. By the end of the novel, he comes to dismiss this stalwart defender of traditional American ways as an unwelcome reminder of the “obstinate stability of Old New York” (227). *The Children* argues that both are extreme poles: Old New York had masked true intentions behind polite and evasive language, while post-war candor renders secrets and intimacy open to the commentary of the masses. In her fiction, Wharton endeavors to strike a balance between candor and reserve in her handling sensitive topics, even though she saw this balance as lacking – and underappreciated – in the society she was writing about.

Wharton links declining literary taste to the deterioration of intellectual life brought about by the rise of America’s middle class. Between the 1890s and the 1920s, magazines and newspapers became more widely read than books in the nation (Lynd and Lynd 234). Even with less rigorous material, the Lynds observe, “more things are skimmed today” (236). Two-thirds of the average Muncie newspaper in the 1920s was devoted to advertisements, and its content reflected “Middletown’s dominant views” (Lynd and Lynd 471-472, 476). *The Glimpses of the Moon* reflects this shift in American reading habits. Suzy has “grown up among people who dreaded ideas as much as if they had been a contagious disease” (151). Meanwhile, young Clarissa Vanderlyn only cares about “gossip and the fashions,” and would rather receive “trinkets” as a gift from her father instead of “a book” (246). Suzy and Clarissa see reading as a precious expenditure of time, which could otherwise be spent socializing or shopping. Nick is one of few characters in the novel that reads for enjoyment and edification; he compares writing the archeological study *The Pageant of Alexander* to the artistic quest of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister (53). Though the comparison allows him to flatter himself excessively, he has read significant works of fiction, and attempts to make a contribution to culture. He is an exception to the rule of middle class taste that had become dominant in America by the 1920s.

Wharton’s earlier suggests that these changes in American literary taste had begun to take shape before the war. In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine has thoroughly middlebrow tastes. Her favourite book is *When the Kissing Had to Stop* and her favourite plays are *Oolaloo* and *The Soda-*

Water Fountain. She simply likes the most recent things she has seen and read. She is utterly oblivious to what distinguishes high culture from low, pronouncing *Phaedre* as ‘fade’ (24-5). The post-war fiction characterizes popular literary taste in the 1920s and 1930s as a succession of the silly fads Undine adores. When Weston pitches his “big novel of modern New York” in *Hudson River Bracketed*, his publisher informs him, “The public was fed up with skyscrapers and niggers and bootleggers and actresses. Fed up equally with Harlem and with the opera, with Greenwich Village and the plutocrats... Why not follow up the success of *Instead* with another novel just like it? (HRB 398). Weston was lucky to strike on a successful formula with *Instead*, and his publishers want him to stick to it. His artistic visions are sidelined in favor of their financial concerns. Their first priority is to sell his novel to the middling masses like the newest washing powder. In the modern literary marketplace, people like what is popular, rather than liking what is good. In ‘Permanent Values in Fiction’ (1934), Wharton observes that modern readers “are told every morning, by wireless and book-jacket, by news-item and picture-paper; who is in the day’s spotlight, and must be admired (and if possible read) before the illumination shifts; and every passing fad and experiment in their favorite field of letters is pressed on them with bewildering rapidity” (CW 178). She fictionalizes this through Bunty Hayes’ assertion that “many of the literary people didn’t seem to realize yet that writing a good advertisement was just as much of an art as turning out *Paradise Lost* or *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” (HRB 510). Hayes cannot differentiate between advertisements, satire, and epic literature. The novel argues that all art had been reduced to the same middling level as a result of businessmen having become powerful agents of taste. At the same time, as discussed in Chapter One, Wharton’s relationship with the middlebrow was a complex one. Hayes’s comment is more than simply an indicator of stupidity or lack of taste. Wharton did not see John Milton and Anita Loos on the same level, yet she admired *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), seeing the ambitious, gold-digging Lorelei Lee as an echo of Undine. She referred to *Blondes* as “the greatest American novel,” and by doing so asserted that modern literature could be lighthearted and offer serious social criticism (Lewis

468; Haytock 9, 181). At the same time, her evocation of the ‘great American novel’ also slyly suggests how far her nation still had to go to catch up to European traditions.

A lack of appreciation for visual art was another aspect of American taste that irked the author. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she wrote that it was the responsibility of a wife and mother to surround her family with “classic prints,” and argued “the habit of regarding ‘art’ as a thing apart from life is fatal to the development of taste” (174-5). Pauline Manford defies her creator’s edict by relegating art to mere decoration. One of her prized possessions is a Sargent portrait of Jim. Arthur loves the image of his son, while Pauline values the expense of the painting. Arthur’s personal attachment to this painting resonates with the perspective of John Campton in *A Son at The Front*. He supports himself through society portraits, as Sargent did: “for two years he had let it be as difficult and as expensive as possible to be ‘done by Campton’” (*SF* 8). The work he considers his best is that depicting his son, George, pieces alive with memory and emotion. Meanwhile, Pauline’s reasons for appreciating the Sargent anticipate the Lynds’ contention that art in American homes had become “highly standardized and used almost entirely as furniture” (244). The artist and the subject mean nothing to Pauline; the painting becomes an anonymous fixture amongst a collection of furnishings intended to fortify her social position.

Though Wharton championed the relevance of art in modern life, her writing demonstrates remarkably little patience for contemporary art, echoing her dismissal of modernist literature. Lita’s cubist statue, which shocks Pauline, links post-war sculpture to sexual crudeness. Like the tawdry photos of Lita in *Looker-On*, we are meant to see it as an object of meaningless vulgarity. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, she connects modern art to the herd mentality of consumerism through the art exhibitions that take place at Storecraft, Bunty Hayes’s New York department store. Among them is “The Tomorrowist Show,” mainly attended by trendy poseurs “whose only interest in exhibitions is to visit them on their opening day” (404). Those few of her modern Americans that possess refined taste gravitate toward artists of previous

generations. Rose's house in *The Children* displays her collection of "Whistler etchings and Sargent watercolors," echoing Wyant's passion for Sargent (39). Her taste reinforces her allegiance to traditional ways of life and European culture. Yet it also hints toward the way that she – like Wyant – is locked in the past. The contrast Wharton drew between old and new art attests to her unwillingness to allow her own tastes to evolve, even while she freely made broad criticisms of the tastes of her countrymen.

The post-war fiction also attacks those who assume a veneer of being 'cultured' in a more general sense. These individuals put on a false front of refinement for social advancement. Concerns about this group are at the heart of 'The Vice of Reading,' in which she expresses dismay with the notion that "as grace gives faith, so zeal for self improvement is supposed to confer brains" (*CW* 100). To her dismay, [Wharton] saw that as the century progressed, 'culture' in America had more often "come to stand for the pretense rather than the reality" (*FW* 68). Her post-war characters inhabit a society obsessed with "short cuts to culture," such as a pocket volume of "Appropriate Allusions" that Mrs. Leveret clings to like a protective talisman in 'Xingu' (1916) and the "five foot shelf" of world's classics (*S* 6, *HRB* 116). That these "short cuts" were purely intended to aid social climbing is supported by Radway's contention that condensed collections of literature and leather-bound classics enabled Americans to materially display their command of culture during the 1920s (145, 164). Pauline's book collection is designed for precisely this function: "She had always meant to be cultivated – she still thought she was when she looked at her bookshelves" (*TS* 155). Though she is neither cultured nor cultivated, she uses her financial resources in a way that enables her to be seen as such. Wharton acknowledged "society women are not quite such simpletons as [one might] think" (*GA* 134). Still, even the most expensive trappings of taste cannot disguise her characters' fundamental lack of it.

Middling taste also mars social interactions and relationships in the post-war fiction. The nineteenth century hallmarks of class are no longer relevant, and social position is defined by

wealth and fame, not one's background or breeding. The authors of *Middletown* support her perspective, arguing that a shift toward "solidarity, conformity, and wide personal acquaintance" in American society had left "the individual somewhat more isolated from the close friends of earlier days" (278, 312). Friendships in Wharton's fictions of the 1920s and 1930s are largely strategic, with high-profile personalities becoming the targets of social climbers. Characters such as Dicky Thaxter's coterie in 'Literature' immerse themselves in "artificial little groups" who display little genuine interest in one another (*UW* 125). Similarly, the ladies' reading group of 'Xingu' consists of "ladies who pursue culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone" (*S* 1). In the story, Mrs. Ballinger claims, "We aspire to be in touch with whatever is highest" (*S* 10). Despite these lofty assertions, the women clearly seek the prestige novelist Osric Dane can provide to their circle, misguidedly attempting to impress her by discussing a river in Brazil as though it were a philosophical concept. The upwardly mobile also prey on artists in *Twilight Sleep*, in which one of Pauline's many projects is her 'League for Discovering Genius.' Elsewhere, in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Ellie Vanderlyn pursues the latest talents for her menagerie. She champions the painting talent of Nat Fulmer, then the music of his wife, Grace. She tells Suzy, "Grace is my discovery, and I'm determined to make her known, and to have everyone understand that *she* is the genius of the two" (162). Ellie's words hint toward her fundamental lack of interest in genuine friendship as well as artistic talent. All of these characters are purely interested in the social advantages their connections to others may yield. Those who show uninspired taste in clothing and décor tend to keep uninspiring company.

The new celebrity status of the writer particularly unnerved Wharton. Throughout *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, social climbers seek to curry Weston's favor. He relies on these connections to enhance his career, but he is uncomfortable in this milieu, "a meeting between best-sellers and best-dressers" (*GA* 290). One of these aspirants, Lady Guy Plunder, regards "movie-stars, millionaires, and musicians" as "interchangeable values in the social market" (*GA* 288). At her London parties, socialites and artists intermingle, with detrimental

consequences for the novelist and his craft. Weston's attempts to take advantage of society often results in society taking advantage of him; while he "had imagined that they were throwing open the door of their lives to him," he later realizes that these socialites were "simply adding a new name to their lists" (*GA* 278). His dalliance with the 'smart set' entices him to temporarily place profits and popularity ahead of worthwhile art. Though he rises to the pinnacle of literary fashion, he correctly predicts that his own fortunes will mirror those of Tristram Fynes, whose novel *The Corner Grocery* becomes "the proverbial epithet of the small town atmosphere" (*HRB* 276-7). Yet Fynes is quickly forgotten, and after the failure of *Colossus*, Weston's devotees soon drop him. This is affirmed when he overhears a member of Lady Guy's set talking about him dismissively: "That first book of his – what was it called? – really did have something in it" (*GA* 395). The fact that socialites, artists, film stars and pretenders to culture had become "interchangeable values" was the root of the problem. Though society had become more tolerant and democratic, she felt that better friendships – and better art – could only be produced within a society with a greater allowance for meritocracy.

It is through Weston that Wharton establishes a model of more refined engagement with modern society. As his experiences allow his literary taste and creativity to evolve, they also teach him to be more discerning in the company he keeps. Initially, he aspires to mingle with the millionaires and film stars that "naturally breathed this larger air," and he needs them for inspiration and to make a name for himself (*HRB* 118). Yet when he is at his most popular among the smart set, he writes turgid novels like *Colossus*, "a kind of hybrid monster made out of the crossing of his own imaginings with those imposed on him by the literary fashions and influences of the day" (*GA* 393). In contrast, when he takes a critical observer's stance on contemporary social life, he produces great fiction, such as *The Puritan in Spain* and *Instead*. His faded popularity – and the financial stability offered by Halo – liberates him to begin a more productive phase of his career, one in which he critically examines his experiences in American and international society. Wharton ends his saga in a manner that hints his best work lies ahead

of him, which in turn suggests the potential for an emerging intellectual elite within modern America. Neither rich nor poor, these artists and intellectuals possess a capacity to “recognize the uses of the frivolous” by both participating in and observing modern society without sacrificing their aesthetics, intelligence, or taste (BG 98). In becoming conversant with modern society without being consumed by it, he may potentially become a truly great American novelist.

Common Ground With Lewis

I concluded the previous chapter by briefly comparing the fictions of Wharton and Scott Fitzgerald, arguing that the two offered similar observations about women and their roles in modern America. I conclude this chapter by pointing out that her criticisms of the impact of middle class taste on the nation’s culture were similar to those of Sinclair Lewis. Even so, the ‘snob’ label has remained steadfastly attached to her, where it is rarely applied to him. This section briefly examines the similarities in the writers’ assessments of mainstream taste and asks why these assessments have been received so differently. It focuses on *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (1922), those of Lewis’s novels that made the strongest impression on Wharton.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Wharton praised *Main Street*, even though she thought it was popular for the wrong reasons. This inspired her argument about the perilous state of American literature in ‘The Great American Novel.’ She was also impressed with *Babbitt*. She was less enthusiastic about Lewis’s subsequent novels, *Arrowsmith* (1925) and *Elmer Gantry* (1926), and described the latter as a “pitiful production” (Lee 624). Wharton and Lewis wrote to one another after the Pulitzer Prize committee overturned its initial decision to give the 1921 award to *Main Street* in favor of *The Age of Innocence*. They maintained contact throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but were closest in the early years of their acquaintance. Lewis dedicated *Babbitt* to her, an honor that she described as having left her “a little dizzy” (Lewis 434). Lewis

also eventually won the Pulitzer, in 1926, though he controversially declined the honor. He went on to earn the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930, and was the first American to do so. In his acceptance speech, Lewis mentioned a number of American writers he revered, yet neglected to include Wharton. It was quite a shift from having dedicated a novel to her several years earlier. Ellen Phillips Dupree claims that Wharton took the omission as a slight: “Lewis’s speech had affirmed Wharton’s worst fears for her novels: that they would be dismissed as prudish by succeeding generations with no understanding of the times that had shaped them” (268). Whether or not his rebuff was intentional can never be known. It is never mentioned in the correspondence between the two, which continued – somewhat more tersely – after he received the award.

Despite the awkwardness that eventually developed between them, Lewis’s popularity suggested to Wharton that there was still hope for a cultural elite in America in the modern period. In ‘Permanent Values in Fiction,’ she classes him among the few creators “of live people among modern novelists” and suggests that his popularity derives from the public’s innate thirst for quality literature. She writes, “The general reading public, suggestible though it is, and anxious to follow the hints given by the selective minority, is yet irresistibly drawn to any book based on genuine observation of character, and embodied in consecutive and significant narrative” (*CW* 178). Her implication that Weston, or someone like him, could represent the nation’s new literary elite is supported by readings of her characters as a fictionalization of Lewis. Lee thinks that Wharton was inspired by Lewis’s “passionate youthful self-education and religious fervor, his struggle to make it in New York as a freelance journalist, his false starts and poverty, his tentative early novels and his destruction of his first draft of *Main Street* before its huge success” (620). Another character in *Hudson River Bracketed* – Tristram Fynes, the author of a portrait of American small-town life called *The Corner Grocery* – is also reminiscent of the author.

Her critiques of mainstream taste seem to have impacted on him as well. When Lewis won the Nobel Prize, he gave a speech criticizing idealism and the mythmaking impulse in American literature. The speech bears a striking resemblance to arguments Wharton had made in 'The Great American Novel.' In it, he observed that American readers and writers were

[S]till afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American, a glorification of our faults as well as our virtues. To be not only a best seller in America but to be really beloved, a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; that although American girls may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers; and that, geographically, America is composed solely of New York, which is inhabited entirely by millionaires; of the West, which keeps unchanged all the boisterous heroism of 1870; and of the South, where everyone lives on a plantation perpetually glossy with moonlight and scented with magnolias. ('Nobel' par. 10)

As she had been, Lewis is critical of the expectations surrounding American fiction, the great American novel, and those who emerge as the nation's foremost writers. In his view, these institutions perpetuate a distortedly rosy view of the nation and its values. In order to lay claim to any of these dubious honors, he asserts, a novel must invoke hoary regional stereotypes, a parochial image of strapping men and docile women, and a strange view of class in which one strives to be rich but resents those who already are. Both writers asserted that the idealistic image of the nation needed to be challenged and complicated, rather than naïvely revered.

In linking middle class values to homogenized taste, Wharton and Lewis worked along parallel lines. Lewis's aggressive critique of these values comes through in *Babbitt*, when the eponymous protagonist makes a speech praising his hometown:

The ideal of American manhood and culture isn't a lot of cranks sitting around chewing the rag about their Rights and their Wrongs, but a God-fearing, hustling, successful, two-fisted Regular Guy, who belongs to some church with pep and piety to it, who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians... who plays hard and works hard, and whose answer to his critics is a square-toed boot that'll teach the grouches and smart alecks to respect the He-man and get out and root for Uncle Samuel, U.S.A! (185)

Babbitt's speech characterizes the modern middle class as a disturbing amalgamation of patriotism, capitalism, Christianity, and conformity. Lewis undercuts his protagonist's zeal with

the clear implication that there are thousands of other cities like Zenith, populated by millions of “Regular Guys” just like Babbitt. His bombastic declarations regarding the need to be “hustling” and “successful” is comparable to Wharton and the Lynds’s arguments about the importance of “getting there” on the social ladder. *Main Street* reiterates this contention, with Carol Kennicott’s observation that the town of Gopher Prairie is “an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to become respectable... it is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God” (265).

Lewis’s sense that the desire for middle class respectability has stifled American individuality and intellect resonates with the perspective of H. L. Mencken, who famously referred to the middling masses as “the booboisie.” The phrase implies that this was a group of people that was acutely conscious of class matters and little else. He believed that “capitalism, democracy, and religion had proved fatal to creative genius” in the United States (Parrish 198). Wharton’s concerns regarding American tastes were in keeping with those of Lewis and Mencken, yet her tone in discussing them set her apart. Her approach is more serious, often pedantic. Meanwhile, despite Lewis’s criticisms of Babbitt, there is clearly a part of the author that comes to energetically love his protagonist. We feel differently about characters like Babbitt and Carol than we do about Pauline or Lady Guy Plunder. Mencken also expresses himself in a more jocular, kidding manner. These differences in tone made a massive difference in shaping how Wharton’s views were interpreted relative to theirs.

Even so, on closer inspection, the correspondence of Lewis and Wharton’s critique of post-war taste is striking. Though he lacked her keen eye for detail in this respect, he also used clothing and interior décor to critique the homogeneity of American life. His description of Babbitt’s “uniform as a Solid Citizen” is a case in point: “The grey suit was well cut, well made, and completely undistinguished. It was a standard suit. White piping on the V of the waistcoat added a flavor of law and learning. His boots were black laced boots, good boots, honest boots, standard boots, extraordinarily uninteresting boots” (*Babbitt* 18). As the clothing of Wharton’s

female characters calls attention to their decorative artificiality, Babbitt's humdrum attire reiterates his lack of taste. *Hudson River Bracketed's* description of Weston's childhood home is reminiscent of that of the Babbitt family, whose amenities have graced the pages of *Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes* (*Babbitt* 23), as Weston's features in a similar publication. Lewis's narrator bluntly comments that the house is "not a home," which Wharton clearly implies about the Weston abode (*Babbitt* 24). The décor of these homes reveals less about the lives and passions of the people who live there than it does about the pervasive desire to 'keep up with the Joneses.'

Both also use automobiles as a means of making arguments about the relationship between escapism and conspicuous consumption in modern life. Cars were an important aspect of class identity in the 1920s, and the authors of *Middletown* note that some working class families were so eager to have a car that they took out mortgages on their homes to purchase one (x). In *Main Street*, Lewis writes that for Dr. Kennicott, "motoring was a faith not to be questioned" (195). In *Babbitt*, he observes, "a family's motor indicated its social rank precisely" (79). These machines also reflect a desire "to flee out to a hard, sure, unemotional man-world" (*Babbitt* 348). In both novels, the car is a barometer of class status and a symbol of American masculinity. Kazin sees the automobile as a central motif in Lewis's fiction, likening the author's ability to capture the textures of 1920s life to his descriptions of "the exact sound of a Ford car being cranked on a summer morning" (176). Cars play a similar role in Wharton's fiction. In *Twilight Sleep*, Dexter Manford owns a Ford and a Buick. Lorin Weston of *Hudson River Bracketed* owns a Chevrolet, which he later upgrades to a Buick. Fords and Chevrolets were middle class cars: sporty, basic, and fun to drive. The Buick was a more upscale version of the Chevrolet, boasting costlier trim and upholstery as well as a more powerful engine. Though these men own similar cars, they reveal different information about their owners. Lorin's car serves a clear purpose in Euphoria, a city that lacks public transport; driving is more of a necessity for him. For a Manhattan attorney like Dexter, however, any car seems like an indulgence. Still, it is worth

noting that the cars he drives are below his means. Though his surname – Manford – marks him as an iconic man of the assembly line era, he does not share his wife’s extravagant taste. There is an element of the middling about Dexter, yet it also renders his tastes endearingly humble relative to those of Pauline. Like Babbitt, he is torn between his craving for material comforts and a life of deeper significance. These conflicting desires ultimately drive both men to extramarital affairs.

Wharton enjoyed luxurious cars and relished the freedom they provided her. She explored America and Europe in the company of friends – particularly Walter Berry, James, and Fullerton – from the driver’s seat. During the war, she drove a Mercedes to deliver supplies to hospitals near the front lines. James referred to the redoubtable machine simply as ‘Her.’ She refused to use the car for any social occasion, being cautious about running out of petrol: “I don’t want to use my remaining cans of essence for pleasure when they may be needed shortly to bring coal to our infants” (Lee 479). The cost of luxury cars did not trouble her, and she was not precious about using them thoroughly. Conversely, she took issue with some people’s motivations for buying them, reserving little patience for those who “thought that motors were made for speeding, not sightseeing” (J 610). Her dismay that such a compelling piece of technology had been transformed into just another status symbol is evidenced by her contemptuous portrait of Cliffe Wheeler, one of the “showiest of New York millionaires” who splashes out thousands on “powerful motor-cars” (TC 7). The women of Wharton’s post-war fiction also use cars to display their wealth in full public view. In *Twilight Sleep*, Lita drives a “smart Brewster” (39). Elsewhere, Barbara Wake from “The Day of the Funeral” (1933) drives a Packard, and Mrs. Glaisher, Halo’s Park Avenue nemesis in *The Gods Arrive*, drives a Rolls Royce befitting her status as “one of the chief ornaments” of an “expensive New York group” (GA 95). Lita’s luxurious, flirty Brewster cabriolet suits her starlet image, while the cost of Packards and Rollses made them accessible only to the extremely wealthy. Wharton’s wealthy Americans take the mentalities of Zenith and Gopher Prairie to the extreme, buying cars for their exclusivity

rather than their functionality. Though they can afford to be careless with his money, like the majority of Wharton's post-war Americans, they cannot buy taste.

Wharton's sense of the existence of a distinct 'American language' accorded with Lewis, as well as Mencken. Her assessment of the class implications of speech is a more serious-minded echo of *Main Street*, in which Kennicott tells his wife: "They think you're showing off when you say 'American' instead of 'Ammurican'" (95). Through characters like Babbitt, his fiction celebrates the American language, even while mocking it. Slang, colloquialisms, and contractions enliven his novels. Meanwhile, Mencken's *The American Language* (1919) classes the speech of his native land as a "catchall" of "more or less disreputable wits," yet is also delighted by the language's colorfulness and ability to adapt (708). Both men express a love-hate relationship toward the national manner speech, but Wharton is more condemnatory. Her defiant stance against the vernacular furthered longstanding notions of her snobbery. Kenner describes the 1920s and 1930s as ushering in "a fifty year reshaping of the American language" and claims that this language gave rise to the twentieth century "American Renaissance" in literature (xviii, 3). While Wharton and Lewis both criticized the nation's speech, her refusal to include it in her fiction set her apart from a trait that would be revered in American literature for decades to come. In betting against the tastes of *Main Street*, Wharton made an unfortunate wager.

Wharton and Lewis's fictional portraits of pretenders to culture are also similarly scathing. Pauline Manford is Wharton's wealthy, female version of Babbitt, owing to her mindless devotion to a vast – and contradictory – network of social organizations and causes. Both characters are renowned for their oratorical skill, and use it to their social advantage. As Pauline earns the praise of her dimwitted circle for accidentally giving a speech on contraception to a group of concerned mothers, Babbitt's speech boosts his status among the other businessmen in town. His friend Virgil tells him: "You're getting to be one of the classiest spellbinders in town. Seems 's if I couldn't pick up a paper without reading about your well-

known eloquence. All this guff ought to bring a lot of business into your office!” (*Babbitt* 186). Lewis’s protagonist comes to believe in the image of himself he constructs, just as Pauline Manford sees herself as a cultured woman. He is not alone among Lewis’s characters in his aspiration to be “classy.” In *Main Street*, Carole Kennicott and the other members of the ladies’ Thanatopsis club seek to bring culture to Gopher Prairie. Mrs. Dawson aggressively attempts to recruit the college educated Carol into the club: “We’re learning all of European literature this year. The club gets such a nice magazine, Culture Hints, and we follow its programs... it does make a body hustle to keep up with all these culture subjects, but it is improving” (124). The members of Thanatopsis recall the ladies of Wharton’s ‘Xingu,’ as well as similar clubs in *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *Twilight Sleep*. Both writers disapproved of the notion that culture could be acquired at a department store or via mail-order catalog, and lashed out against middlebrow literary culture, though their success often depended on middlebrow readers like their characters.

Like Wharton, Lewis linked the trivialization of American culture to waning literacy. Ted Babbitt complains to his father about “the Camembert they teach us at the High” and dismisses Milton, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth as “has beens” (*Babbitt* 86, 80). Babbitt responds by encouraging the boy to study business instead of these impractical topics. Wharton’s characters read the newspaper to keep up on the latest gossip, or to discover the state of their own intimate relationships. Meanwhile, Lewis’s characters read the newspaper to develop opinions and tastes: “on the subject of Shakespeare he wasn’t really an authority. Neither the *Advocate-Times*, the *Evening Advocate*, nor the *Bulletin of the Zenith Chamber of Commerce* had ever had an editorial on the matter, and until one of them had spoken he found it hard to form an original opinion” (*Babbitt* 80). Lewis’s protagonist needs to seek permission from the newspaper in order to form likes and dislikes. While his Nobel speech attests to his concerns about America’s cultural future, *Babbitt* also suggests that he was, to some extent, in on the joke. Though his shortcomings are clear, Babbitt is also refreshingly unpretentious. Lewis had a greater capacity for seeing the humor in shifting American tastes, above and beyond its vulgarity. For Wharton, these changes were no

laughing matter, and this comes across in the tone of her writing.

Even with these differences in tone, Wharton and Lewis were alike in their criticisms of middling modern taste. Why, then, has the ‘snob’ label proven so much more difficult for her to shake? Their relationships with the United States are perceived very differently. Her aristocratic, East Coast roots counted against her, as did the fact that her novels dealt with a wealthier group of Americans. With the exception of Weston, her characters divide their time between Manhattan, the Riviera, London, and Paris: they are the ‘smart set’ that critics like Parrington condemned. Lewis hailed from a middle class family in Minnesota, and these humble origins made him a more ‘appropriate’ commentator on middle class values. He made a better fit with the image of the nation and its literature that emerged ascendant during the 1920s – an image that both of them actively sought to dismantle. Blair claims that the initial popularity of *Main Street* was directly linked to Lewis’s background; readers and critics alike were drawn to the idea of a “Sauk Centre boy made good” (‘Main’ 154). His folksy appeal – if sometimes misconstrued and overstated – far outstripped that of the *grande dame* of Old New York.

Lewis also preserved credibility among highbrow critics by distancing himself from the middlebrow. He benefited from mainstream popularity; *Main Street* stayed atop the best-seller list for four years after its initial publication (Blair, ‘Main’ 139). However, declining the Pulitzer Prize was a defiant rejection of the business of American literature. In a letter to the committee explaining the decision, he rebuffed the claim that *Arrowsmith* represented “the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood,” a statement that Wharton also did not enjoy having applied to her fiction. “This phrase,” he wrote, “if it means anything whatsoever, would appear to mean that the appraisal of the novels shall be made not according to their actual literary merit but in obedience to whatever code of Good Form may chance to be popular at the moment” (qtd. in Lingeman 279). From his perspective, the Prize was a matter of literary fashion rather than merit. His sense that the committee had misunderstood *Arrowsmith* echoed Wharton’s reservations on winning the award five years

earlier. Where her reputation among critics dwindled after she accepted, his reputation within the literary establishment continued to rise after he declined it. That his actions enhanced his credibility among critics is also suggested by Wharton's missing out on the 1927 Nobel Prize, when Henri Bergson emerged victorious.

As Wharton and Fitzgerald have become indelibly linked with the Gilded Age and the Jazz Age respectively, misreading has powerfully shaped the divergent reputations of Wharton and Lewis, particularly in terms of their criticism of American class and taste. Views of Wharton as an aristocratic insider hurt her reputation after the Pulitzer, while his youth and humble origins helped to boost his fame. It allowed American audiences to assume "that Lewis's intent in *Main Street* was to indict small town America for the tragic destruction of a dreamer" (Blair, 'Main' 149). Such a reading fails to acknowledge that Lewis criticizes Carol and Babbitt, even as he inspires our sympathy with them. This approach to Lewis has become institutionalized. E. M. Forster has commented that his novels "lodge a continent in our imaginations" (127). Wagenaar also claims that Lewis imbues *Gopher Prairie* and *Zenith* "with an enchantment without which it would have been that much more difficult to endure" (233). Lewis certainly appreciated American ambition and enterprise. Yet, like Wharton, that appreciation existed alongside strong reservations about culture and society. Lewis was ambivalent about his Midwestern roots, just as Wharton was had mixed emotions about Old New York. Even so, he came to be seen as an icon – even as a defender – of small town life in the post-war period, as she was linked to the turn-of-the-century Manhattan elite. Both became a part – for better and worse – of an image of America they found flawed and limiting.

Chapter Five

A Sideways Glance at the Europeanized American

Though she had lived abroad for decades, Wharton still considered herself an American during the 1920s and 1930s, even if she took pride in being a Europeanized one. She questioned her affinities with her homeland, but also considered herself a “self-made man” all her life, a testament to the value she placed in American energy, ambition, and optimism (Lubbock 21, 23; Auchincloss, *Her Time* 9). In some ways, her distance from her native land intensified her connection with it. Years earlier, she fictionalized this experience for comic effect in *The Custom of the Country*, with the comment, “the proper attitude for the American married abroad was that of a militant patriotism; and [Madame de Trézac] flaunted Undine Marvell in the face of the Faubourg like a particularly showy specimen of her national banner” (309). The author brought a Spragg-like enterprise to Paris through her wartime charitable projects and her writing, yet she did not make a particularly “showy specimen of her national banner” in the years immediately after the hostilities ended. Throughout her life, she believed that Americans should look to European history and cultural tradition as a guideline. For much of the 1920s, she worried that ‘American ways’ had eroded the values and customs of Europe that she dearly valued. During this period, she took a more critical view of American insularity and exceptionalism with deeper suspicion than she had in the past. I argued in Chapter Two that the Great Depression did not persuade her that America had come to possess greater “intellectual honesty” or a richer “sense of the past.” The welter of modernity persisted, yet she also grew more tolerant and appreciative of American history, ideology, and identity during the 1930s. She creates a model of hybridized European-American identity, merging older traditions and modern attitudes, in *The Gods Arrive* and *The Buccaneers*. Though several significant flaws hamper her vision of an alternative American identity, it nevertheless represents a shift in her attitude toward the nation that her critics have not often recognized.

European Virtue and American Vice

America's overt rejection of European tradition after the war was a source of great concern for Wharton. In 1919, she wrote to Barrett Wendell, "How much longer are we going to think it necessary to be 'American' before (or in contradistinction to) being cultivated, being enlightened, being human, & having the same intellectual discipline as other civilized countries?" (L 424). From her perspective, defining oneself as an American meant taking pride in a set of dubious and misguided virtues. As long as being American meant embracing the turgid culture of small town life and refusing to take interest in the broader world, she could do without it. The passage suggests her frustration with contemporary ways of defining Americanness, as well as her sense that the nation was selling itself short by limiting its ambitions to 'keeping up with the Joneses.' Conversely, the historically and culturally rich civilizations of Europe drew her sympathies across the Atlantic. Prior to moving to France permanently, she made the crossing with such frequency that James once referred to her as "the pendulum-woman" (BG 177). The long-established customs of the Old World appealed most to her. "In England I like it *all*," she wrote in 1903, "institutions, traditions, mannerisms, conservatism, everything but the women's clothes, & the having to go to church every Sunday" (L 85). She imparts her awe for continental history to her young American soldier, Troy Belknap, in "The Marne" (1918). He observes of the French, "what a wonderful help it must be to have that long rich past in one's blood" (S 275). The author felt that past in her own blood, though in this respect she was among a minority of Americans. In the nineteenth century, many regarded Europe as pretentious and decadent, while in the twentieth, they saw it as outmoded and restrictive.

The war intensified her perception of European virtue, as well as American insularity and immaturity. Her nation's neutrality in the first three years of the conflict angered her deeply, and she used everything at her disposal – writing talent, business acumen, and diverse social connections – to cajole the United States to join the fight. She also prevailed upon individuals to assist through charity work. She was outraged when America failed to retaliate after the

Germans sank the Lusitania in May 1915, describing the incident in *A Son at the Front* as a “bitter taste of the national humiliation” (136). As the crisis on the continent deepened, she openly condemned the nation’s foreign policy through her reports from the front lines in *Scribner’s Magazine*. Her war writing also attacked her countrymen’s obliviousness to the chaos in Europe.⁶⁷ In “The Marne,” a senator from an unnamed state tells Troy Belknap, “This isn’t our war, young man” (*S* 275). Elsewhere, in *A Son at the Front*, the expatriate John Campton consoles himself that his son will not be called to fight for France, thinking to himself, “This is not our job anyhow” (*SF* 36). Of course, she believed very strongly that this was ‘America’s war,’ a battle to preserve all of Western civilization. Although “she minded very much when James took British citizenship in 1915,” she defended his controversial decision in a 1916 letter to Barrett Wendell (*L* 156). In it, she asserts, “his change of citizenship was the revolt of a sensitive conscience bred in the old ideals, & outraged by the divergence between act & utterance which has come to be a matter of course for the new American” (*L* 373). She found neutrality directly at odds with America’s professed ideals of freedom and democracy, and she understood the motives underlying James’s choice, even if she would not have done the same herself. Still, her many criticisms of the United States during this period and afterward made it easy to overlook the feelings behind her anger.

Wharton wanted America to conduct itself in accordance with its noble democratic ideals, a view she shared with former President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt wrote an introduction to *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a collection of writing and art that benefited her charities. In it, he condemns America’s response to the war and praises her patriotism:

The part that America has played in this great tragedy is not an exalted part; and there is all the more reason why Americans should hold up the hands of those of their number who, like Mrs. Wharton, are endeavouring to remedy the national

⁶⁷ As Hoeller points out, she also attributed indifference toward the war to her more sympathetic characters, such as Mrs. Glenn in ‘Her Son,’ who “seemed to have forgotten that there had ever been a war, and that a son of her own, with thousands of young Americans of his generation, had lost his life in it” (Hoeller 160, *S* 537). In her quest to find the living son that she had abandoned, Mrs. Glenn neglects the memory of her other son – her one true son – and the sacrifice he made defending European civilization.

shortcomings. We owe to Mrs Wharton all the assistance we can give. We owe this assistance to the good name of America. (x)

The author was – like Roosevelt – a conservative. Both hailed from wealthy families, and were passionate in their belief that America could be a force of good in the world during and after the war. Though her critics would accuse her of hating or abandoning America, the fact that one of its greatest leaders praised her as a model citizen, even a patriot, attests to the depth of her attachment to the nation.

Roosevelt's words demonstrate how *noblesse oblige* – discussed in the previous chapter – was pertinent to politics as well as culture. Wharton's sense of the aristocracy's role in affecting broader social change comes through in her fictional portrait of (then Senator) Roosevelt in *The Age of Innocence*, which Lee reads as an illustration of “how she thinks the ruling classes in America have changed since the 1870s” (576). Roosevelt's encouragement ignites Archer's sense of patriotic duty: “Hang the professional politician! You're the kind of man this country wants, Archer. If the stable's ever to be cleaned out, men like you have got to lend a hand in the cleaning” (*AI* 285). Lee contends that the novel is a commentary on “the dangers of American isolationism” which exposes “the damaging limitations of an inward-looking, defensive, and parochial American history (576-577). Though it is set in the 1870s, *The Age of Innocence* contains an argument about politics and national identity in the late 1910s and into the 1920s. Wharton felt it her responsibility as a writer to work against these inward-looking tendencies, as Roosevelt and Archer saw it as their duty in the political realm.

Her patriotism briefly surged after the United States finally entered the war in 1917. Her fictional and autobiographical accounts of the period are redolent with pride at the joined valor of the two nations to which she had given her heart. In “The Marne,” she writes, “America tore the gag of neutrality from her lips, and with all the strength of her liberated lungs claimed her right to a place in the struggle” (*S* 277). She wrote to Mary Cadwalader Jones about the victory celebrations in the Tuileries, describing the “American & French soldiers with their arms around

each other's necks" and praising "our wonderful troops" (L 407). Benstock characterizes this attitude as "a belated, sentimental, and embarrassing patriotism" (Joslin and Price 31). Yet her outpouring of emotion was rooted in a genuine desire to see the nation live up to her vision of its potential, more than an outmoded assessment of the nobility of battle. When the war ended, her patriotism quickly faded, as President Wilson again drew the nation into an isolationist posture. She angrily wrote, "All that I thought American in a true sense is gone, and I see nothing but vain-glory, crassness, and total ignorance – which of course is the core of the whole evil" (Lewis 424). This disappointment inspired her to write *French Ways and Their Meaning*, a text that, as has been observed, reveals more about "the America that never was" than it does about French civilization (Wright, *Travel* 102). The political strategy behind her post-war writing comes through in the text, which argues that through active participation within a larger global community, the United States could reconnect with the values she believed to be "American in a true sense."

For Wharton, a problematic aspect of American culture in the 1920s and 1930s was a reinvigorated sense of exceptionalism. This was not a concept unique to the period, but one that can be traced to the seventeenth century, when the first colonial settlers saw the continent as a 'New World' waiting to be harvested.⁶⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term in *Democracy In America* (1838), declaring that the United States was "qualitatively different from all other countries" (qtd. in Lipset 18). The nation has shaped history to affirm that singular status, a tendency evidenced by Emerson's assertion that "Our age is retrospective. It builds sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism" (qtd. in Levine, *Highbrow* x). Levine argues that the period leading up to the First World War was "particularly prolific" for the invention of 'traditional' national imagery, including the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, the Liberty Bell, Uncle Sam, and the Statue of Liberty (*Highbrow* 228-229). These

⁶⁸ Levine also defines exceptionalism as the belief that "the United States was the only country in the world that began with perfection and aspired to progress" (Bradbury and Palmer 38).

origin narratives were created during Wharton's lifetime, and persist even today as powerful symbols of American ways of life. Exceptionalism lies at the heart of concepts like the 'great American novel,' historical myth making, and the American Dream. It is very much implicated in the emerging vision of the nation she writes about in "The Great American Novel,' which troubled her throughout the later years of her life.

Over time, the nation's geographic isolation fortified notions of exceptionalism, and this mentality shaped the nation's foreign policy. After the War of 1812, the United States remained insulated from foreign attack until the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1945, an incursion that would not recur until the World Trade Center attacks of 2001. This distance also lessened the impact of economic shocks in Europe and Asia prior to 1930 (Lockhart 3). According to Seymour Martin Lipset, this isolation encouraged Americans to become "more disposed than other people to expect individuals to do their best for themselves, not for others" (238). Government policy exploited the nation's territorial advantages. The Monroe Doctrine, which forbade European colonization of South America under threat of war, disguised imperialism as the promotion of trade and democracy. As a friend and follower of Roosevelt, Wharton would have been aware of his 1904 Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which asserted the exclusive right of the United States to intervene in the Caribbean and Central America if nations were unable to pay their international debts. The measure barred European nations from taking similar actions and fortified the boundaries of America's developing transoceanic trade empire, coming into law shortly after the government secured the right to construct the Panama Canal. When he announced the policy, Roosevelt stated that the United States had a "duty" to the Western Hemisphere to police "our southern neighbors" (qtd. in Morris 324). Roosevelt and subsequent presidents cited the Corollary to justify interventions in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic through the 1930s.

Her awareness of these policies is also suggested by her close relationship with Morton Fullerton, who discusses both the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary in *Problems of*

Power (1913). She helped him to write the book, sharply criticizing his prose style in the process. He later gave her a copy in which he had inscribed, "To Edith Wharton, but for whom this book would never have been written" (Lee 338). Fullerton alleges that "in becoming members of a World-Power, the Americans have been so astonishingly transformed that even one who has been absent from their shores for a period of only twenty years must inevitably, upon his return, find his compatriots almost unrecognizable" (12). His descriptions of the way America had changed anticipate that of Wharton in the decades to come.

In some cases, Wharton supported the imperialist aim behind the nation's foreign policy, in other cases she did not. Wegener describes Wharton as a self-professed "rabid imperialist" and as "keenly receptive to American expansionism" (Wegener 784). He reads her travelogue of North Africa, *In Morocco*, as "an unabashedly partisan testament to the virtues of the French Protectorate" (Wegener 793). He likens far-flung engineer characters in *The Children*, *The Buccaneers*, *The Marne*, and 'The Long Run' to imperial conquerors (795-803). Beer also observes that the author did not question the wisdom behind France's intervention in North Africa, concluding, "the superiority of the Gallic way at home and abroad is taken, by Wharton, for granted" (*Writers* 15). While Wharton saw value in a 'civilizing' Western influence in North Africa and South America, Wegener goes too far with the claim that she grudgingly saluted the "all-conquering power" of America's *nouveau riche* abroad (Wegener 794). As she grew more concerned about America's impact on Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, she moved away from her earlier position of "rabid imperialism." Her fears about the nation's status as a "World-Power" are evidenced by her observation that "Ford motors and Gillette razors have bound together the uttermost parts of the earth," and her complaint that Americans had "internationalized the Earth, to the deep detriment of its picturesqueness, and of many far more important things" (*CW* 156). She also compared America's present role in the world to a "sort of missionary dweller selling his wares and inculcating his beliefs from China to Peru" (*CW* 156-

7). The influx of tourists into Europe after the war encouraged her to see global trade as spreading American habits, tastes, and customs throughout the world.

She did not fear the military conquest of Europe, but America's social and cultural transformation of the continent. Joseph Nye defines this process of gradual assimilation as "soft power" (31). Niall Ferguson also notes the pervasion of the idea "that foreigners will Americanize themselves without the need for formal rule" from the late nineteenth century onward (13). In Wharton's lifetime, the nation's soft power expanded in a number of ways: travel became cheaper and more efficient, new communications technology made information more readily accessible, and Americans had more money and time at their disposal. All of these things allowed entertainment, fads, and fashion to spread across the Atlantic more easily. In Wharton's view, the distinctions between nations, which imparted richness and diversity to global culture and society, were diminished by the emergence of a "safe denationalized modern world" (*SF* 40). Her satirical novels of the 1920s, such as *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children*, explore how America detached itself from European culture and tradition, even while forcefully asserting their presence on the continent. These texts suggest that European societies, like America of the past, placed a higher value on morality and tradition. The voice of America's fading ideological links to Europe echoes briefly in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, when a line from Robert Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' (1855) is sung twice: "What of soul was left, I wonder?" (*GM* 71). The remainder of the poem invokes the relationship Wharton saw between history, ideology, and national identity:

As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop.
Here on Earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop? (Browning 552)

Wharton's fictions link the "mirth and folly" of post-war life to an absence of national "soul," or a set of collectively held traditions and values which outlast and surpass those of individuals.

Over time, she believed, these institutions gave rise to a "more elaborate and fully crystallised"

society (FW 16). By abandoning past cultural ties to Europe, she predicted that America and her people were fated to “bloom and drop.”

Literary Backward and Sideways Glances

Before turning to Wharton’s texts themselves, it is important first to have a sense of how her depictions of Americans abroad look back to James’s international novel and cast sidelong aspersions on the hedonistic lifestyles of the writers of the Lost Generation.

As James had done at the turn of the century, Wharton was evaluating American identity in the face of social change during the post-war years. His return to America in 1904 and 1905 had inspired him to write *The American Scene*, while her return in 1923 to receive her honorary doctorate from Yale did little to dispel the cynical conclusions she had reached about the United States.⁶⁹ Many aspects of modern American life unsettled and annoyed her at this time. Her reworking of the international novel in *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children* attest to the conflicts and contradictions in her thinking about Americanness and the nation’s relationship with Europe in a globalizing world. James’s approach to the international novel had dramatized “the conflict between different sets of manners and mores” (Wegelin 305). In his novels, the protagonist inhabits a “laboratory for studying” the relationship between nationality and personal identity, and “must intelligently adapt himself to the new mores, or, in one way or another, be destroyed” (Cargill 419). Wharton’s novels reverse James’s roles of American innocent and European exploiter. Her Americans transform Europe into a site of material and social gain while remaining oblivious to its history, traditions, and culture. *The Custom of the Country* forecasts this altered transatlantic relationship. Like Christopher Newman in *The American* (1877), Undine

⁶⁹ R. W. B. Lewis observes, “Horton’s vanilla ice cream, which she consumed in quantities during the hot days and looked back upon wistfully from St. Brice, seems to have been one of the few items she regarded with respect” during the trip (453).

is naïve, straightforward, and materialistic. Both characters come to France knowing little of the nation's customs and routinely commit social misdemeanors. They struggle to integrate within French society, becoming victims of what both authors characterize as the tribal mentality of the French. Yet Wharton's American is a more insidious creature than James's. Bentley describes Undine as a "transatlantic Amazon who traffics in husbands and barter her own child" (209). There are elements of this Amazonian quality in Joyce Wheeler, Pauline Manford, and even Kate Clephane, though none manages to earn their creator's admiration like their prototype. Undine may be naïve and uncouth, but she is far from powerless, which she proves by marrying and divorcing her way to the pinnacle of cosmopolitan society.

As her model of the relationship between America and Europe diverged from that of James, so too did her sense of how national identity shaped individuals. He writes in *The American Scene* that national identity is the "supreme relation" between people (85). In novels such as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The American*, *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), his American characters must deracinate themselves to earn a place in Old World society. These attempts often yield mixed results, but James's renunciation of his American citizenship attests to his belief that a near-complete transformation was possible.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, in the preface to *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton argues that nationality remains forever "clenched in some crevice of prehistory" (vii). Though she felt "out of sympathy with everything" in America much of the time, she never considered herself to have become French in the way that James saw himself as having become English (*L* 84). The characters of her fiction can never fully erase their links to their country of birth, even if they more strongly identify with another nation's traditions and ways of life, as she often did. In *The Buccaneers*, Nan's mother-in-law admonishes her, "When you became my son's wife, you acquired his nationality. Nothing can change that now" (199). Nan's newfound love for England cannot alter the structures of her mind and

⁷⁰ Theodore Roosevelt believed it possible for James to erase his nationality, remarking of the novelist, "Thank Heavens... he is now an avowedly British novelist... a very despicable creature... a miserable little snob... it makes one blush to think he was once an American" (qtd. in Lee 156).

character that have been shaped by her American background. The comment inspires her rebirth as the headstrong American girl of the early sections of the novel, convincing her that she must leave her husband.

The tensions between Wharton's European inclinations and her American roots inspired her satirical reworking of the international novel during the 1920s. Loyalty to both nations divided her, and she described herself in 1903 as a "wretched exotic produced in a European glass-house" (L 84). Though she complained of the limitations imposed by an American upbringing, she was equally critical of the insularity of other nations. Earlier that same year, she complained to Margaret Terry Chanler about Europeans that were unable to appreciate their culture: "when I see the stupid Italians I have met here, completely insensitive to their surroundings, & ignorant of the treasures of art & history among which they have grown up, I begin to think it is better to be an American, & to bring it all to mind & eye unblunted by custom" (L 78). While *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children* satirize this perspective, Wharton's letters point out that her tendency to condemn provincial attitudes was not limited to America.

While Wharton saw the value in updating James's model of the international novel, her satirical depictions of Americans abroad condemn the glamorous image of expatriate life popularized by the writers of the Lost Generation. Writers such as Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and Hemingway preferred to "love America at a distance" and journeyed "3,000 miles in search of Europe," only to rediscover their homeland in the process (Hoffman 51, Cowley 83). Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) provides a well-known example of these writers' iconic image of the disenchanted American abroad, in the scene where Bill Gorton tells Jake Barnes, "You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time thinking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes" (120). Like the Lost Generation writers, Wharton wrote about her homeland from Europe. Yet

she maintained that they had not distanced themselves from the mentalities of home to the extent that they claimed.⁷¹ She observed, “The very novelists who still hug the Main Street superstition settle down in the Quartier Latin or the Riviera to write their tales of the little suburban house at number one million and ten Volstead Avenue” (*CW* 157). Through her reference to ‘Volstead Avenue,’ she invokes the 1919 Volstead Act, the congressional bill authorizing Prohibition. In so doing, she argues that these writers cloaked their love for the affordable entertainments of the Riviera behind their artistic pretension. They bring the middling tastes and values of Main Street with them to the cafés of Paris and the Riviera. While there is a hint of truth in it, her comment again suggests her unfortunate tendency to speak of her contemporaries in the most reductive of terms.

Wharton’s Hotel Set

Hotels provide an apt setting for Wharton’s portrayal of rootless, pleasure-seeking Americans in Europe. In the *American Scene*, James is “verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just be the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself” (102). Wharton echoes this sentiment in *The Custom of the Country* when she describes Americans as a people “who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels” (327). While James speaks of American hotels, and Wharton about European ones, she saw little distinction between the two. Her tourists experience the Old World through American-style hotels, heading to the Riviera when the weather is warm, to the Alps for skiing in winter, and to cities like London and Paris for shopping and socializing. Wright observes that Wharton’s early experiences abroad “left her convinced that the experience of foreign culture was one of few remaining means of intellectual

⁷¹ Tinter sees links between Wharton and Hemingway, via Vivienne de Watteville’s *Speak to the Earth: Wanderings and Reflections Among Elephants and Mountains* (1935): “The intermediary between *Speak to the Earth* and ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ may well have been the perceptive and brilliant preface by Edith Wharton which... should emerge from its undeserved obscurity” (138)

development accessible to modern Americans” (*Travel* 17). Few of her characters avail themselves of the opportunity; they care little for culture, primarily concerned with “food, finery, dancing” (*TC* 175). They are “ephemeral beings blown about upon the same winds of pleasure” from one hotel to another (*GM* 119).

Life abroad becomes another form of entertainment for her Americans, recalling James’ observation that “Europe was the great American sedative” (*Wings* 88). Nevius has criticized the “thinly glamorous backdrop” of *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children*, yet these novels deliberately call attention to that veneer in order to demonstrate how the swarm of Americans in Europe suffocated the continent’s rich artistic and cultural heritage beneath a noxious cloud of gin and jazz (199). In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton equates Nick’s Mediterranean yacht voyage with the Hickses to “drug-taking” and “a form of anesthetic” (147). The pleasure-cruise allows Nick to shore up the image of himself as a moralist and intellectual, while he hypocritically condemns Suzy for seeking fleeting diversions abroad. In *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton also observes, “When rich people’s nerves are out of gear the pleasant remedy of travel is the first prescribed,” and the old-fashioned Nona envies their ability to “escape by flight – by perpetual evasion” (306). Setting off for glamorous European hotels and resorts becomes the ultimate form of “buying off suffering with money.” Her characters seek to avoid the pain of modern American life by leaving its very source, heedless of the fact that they bring that world – and the problems they seek to escape – along with them.

The Ritz hotels in Paris and London embody the showy materialism Wharton resented among Americans at home and abroad. She often refers to the Ritz in her fiction as the ‘Nouveaux Luxe,’ a pseudonym invoking new money pretensions and lack of taste. She describes the Paris Nouveaux Luxe as a “Moloch of a hotel,” invoking a biblical demon known for demanding costly sacrifices, while the London chapter hosts “a come-and-go of rich aimless people, the busy people who, having nothing to do, perpetually pursue the inexorable task from one end of the earth to the other” (*TC* 230, *GM* 160). Carol Wershoven argues that the author’s

“Eurotrash” characters embrace the Nouveau Luxe, because “in these places, nothing is real. And Eurotrash cannot distinguish false from true” (Joslin and Price 115). Among them is Cliffe Wheeler, a man “mainly interested in Ritz Hotels” and the standardized glitter of post-war cosmopolitan life (*TC* 5). Wharton’s oft-voiced disdain for the Ritz led Henry Adams to suggest that people be divided in two groups, “Ritz vs. Anti-Ritz,” further noting that, “The Anti-Ritz class contains only Mrs. Wharton” (Lewis 335). Writing to James regarding a disagreement with Walter Berry in 1915, she commented, “It’s not a little rift but a little Ritz that’s between us just now – for I can’t stand that scene of khaki & champagne” (Powers 335). Berry became a fixture at the Paris Ritz during the war, though Wharton declined to accompany him, finding its lavish atmosphere distasteful. In her view, the wealthy and influential should have used their resources to aid the men on the battlefield. This attitude comes through in ‘The Marne,’ when Troy and his father dine in the Nouveau Luxe, surrounded by “fat neutrals” that have come to “feast undisturbed on lobster and champagne” (*S* 289). These Americans have little interest in France’s fight, since they have enough money to buy themselves ignorance of the terrible conflict affecting the rest of the world.

The “fat neutrals” and other denizens of the Nouveau Luxe transport the dull homogeneity of Main Street across the Atlantic, during and after the war. Europe increasingly seemed like an American colony to her during the 1920s, as suggested by *The Glimpses of the Moon*, in which she observes, “Suzy had always lived among people so denationalized that those one took for Russians generally turned out to be American, and those one was inclined to ascribe to New York proved to have originated in Rome” (40). Similarly, in *The Children*, Boyne shares the horror of his creator upon entering a hotel restaurant to find that “Every one of the women in the vast crowded restaurant seemed to be of the same age, to be dressed by the same dress-makers, loved by the same lovers, adorned by the same jewelers, and massaged and manipulated by the same Beauty doctors” (154). Little distinguishes these people from those attending Pauline Manford’s dinner parties back in New York; everyone looks the same, talks the same,

and has the same cosmopolitan pretensions. By having “inter-married, inter-loved and inter-divorced each other over the whole face of Europe,” Wharton’s Americans transform the continent into another picturesque backdrop for their petty personal dramas and social aspirations (*GM* 40).

Among her hotel set, nationality no longer serves to distinguish people from one another. Wharton further emphasizes the blurring of national distinctions in the post-war period by sprinkling Americanized Europeans throughout her fictions. Among them is Lord Altringham in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, whose new title causes him to transform into one of her enterprising new-money Americans, like Moffatt of *The Custom of the Country* or Van Degen of *The House of Mirth*. So too is Spartivento, the Italian duke turned Wall Street banker in *The Gods Arrive*. Finally, in ‘Charm Incorporated,’ the Kouradjine family comprises numerous aspiring artists, musicians, and actors: “little Boris was already affianced to the world’s leading movie-star!” (*S* 659). Though they are descended from Russian nobility, their dreams are clearly the product of American popular culture. Bell has similarly argued that Kate Clephane returns to a diluted, Americanized version of France at the end of *The Mother’s Recompense*, one she describes as “the *déracinée*’s Riviera” (Joslin and Price 42). Kate flees America at the end of the novel, but in doing so she does not embrace a French life. Instead, she retreats to a place among a colony of other misfit expatriates on the Riviera, people who have broken their “roots” to hide within the “transatlantic mists” (*MR* 19, 20). In breaking those roots, she removes herself from the soil of her nation and in her past. Yet the analogy also suggests that she has lost a part of herself in the process – the roots are violently severed, rather than gently transplanted. Rendered unable to draw nourishment and nurture from nation or her family, Kate Clephane too will eventually “bloom and drop” like the other cosmopolitans Wharton invokes through her reference to Browning’s poem in *The Glimpses of the Moon*.

While Wharton’s Americans abroad have little interest in European culture, they do manage to collect souvenirs. Though no scenes in *Twilight Sleep* take place abroad, the novel’s

characters display their exotic souvenirs of other countries in a way that reinforces the author's contention that Americans valued travel for social rather than cultural reasons. The women of the novel are mindful of the provenance of their jewelry; Pauline twice mentions the "Chinese" pedigree of her amethyst earrings, while the Marchesa envies Lita's "Indian emeralds" (168, 175, 72). Lita decorates her sitting room with "the early kakemono of a bearded sage, on walls of pale buff silk" and "three mourning irises isolated in a white Sung vase in the desert of an otherwise empty table" (31). The novel offers no indication that Lita has any interest in Japan, suggesting that her 'national' design theme follows a trend established by her aunt, Kitty Landish. Kitty abandons her plans for an Arabic-themed house after deciding to pursue a Viking design: "Alhambra *motifs* had hastily given way to others from the prows of Nordic ships" (131). Neither woman's décor belies a larger interest in global culture, but the aspiration merely to "do what the other young couples were doing" (31). Pauline even garnishes her dinner table with a sprinkling of American imperialism, offering "Japanese plums" to her guests and procuring "little foreign-looking cream-cheeses in silver paper" for the family's stay at Cedarledge (72, 222). John Halperin has argued that Wharton's "New New York" in *The Custom of the Country* had attempted to "construct an imitation of European culture" by "purchasing its antiques and artifacts" in a manner that echoes James's *The Golden Bowl* (194). The tastes of her 1920s New Yorkers are even more degraded than those of Undine and Moffatt. Anything merely "foreign looking" will do; whether it is new or old, from Europe or Asia is irrelevant. *Twilight Sleep* indicts the cultural impoverishment of a nation that regards Japanese fruit and Viking-themed houses as symbols of worldliness, culture, and modernity.

In James's novel, Newman journeys to Paris with a spirit of exchange and reciprocity; shortly after meeting the Nioches, he declares "I should like to learn French... if you learned my language why shouldn't I learn yours?" (11). In contrast, Wharton's post-war Americans are "parasites" – she uses the term three times in *The Glimpses of the Moon* (51, 92, 120) – virulent creatures that unthinkingly impose their ways on Europe. They display their antagonism to the

‘Old World’ by invoking stereotypes in discussing anything European. In *Twilight Sleep*, Pauline sees her charity work as “distinguishing her native country” from the “cynical indifference of Europe” (191). In ‘The Marne,’ young American men and women in the Foreign Legion aspire to “teach France efficiency” and how “to respect Women” (*S* 282, 283). In ‘The Young Gentlemen’ (1926), a maid defends her employer’s anger by claiming: “It’s his Spanish blood, I suppose... he’s frightfully proud” (*S* 334). *The Children* is rife with ethnic stereotypes: Scopy admonishes the twins for being “so foreign and unmanly... they’re Italian,” and Zinnie refers to them as “those two wops.” The children debate which of them is “a real true Merrican” after Scopy scolds their poor grammar, in order to justify which of them should be permitted to travel on Cliffe’s yacht (14, 281, 71). These characters regard ‘Europeanness’ as the problem, and ‘Americanness’ as its logical solution. The most egregious example comes in *Twilight Sleep*, when the Marchesa urges Pauline to write a letter to a Cardinal in order to persuade him to attend one of her dinner parties: “A *personal* note, dear; yes, in your own writing; they don’t yet understand your new American ways at the Vatican” (244). Any protocol or behavior that does not fall under the classification of “American ways” is dismissed as quaint, backwards, or a nuisance. It is something that Americans assume – wrongly, from Wharton’s perspective – that their nation could only improve upon. Her Americans enjoy an edited, sanitary, and safe experience of foreign culture; Mrs. Hicks summarizes her preference for palace hotels with the remark that one could “rely on the plumbing” (*GM* 188). The passage echoes Wharton’s use of bathrooms to comment on America’s aversion to reality. Mrs. Hicks is unwilling to experience Europe outside her yacht or a hotel. She believes that her physical presence in another land allows her to fully experience it. Wharton’s novels argue that American tourists must actively engage with another culture to benefit from its traditions, as James’s titular American had done.

This condescending mentality comes into play on the rare occasions that Wharton’s Americans seek to emulate European ways. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, the narrator comments that Nick and Suzy were often recognized as Americans “only because they spoke French so

well,” suggesting that the couple express themselves in a practiced, pretentious manner, and lack an understanding of the subtleties of the language that allow for more fluid expression of a native-born or fluent speaker (41). Wharton establishes a clear distinction between ‘speaking the language’ and true communication, and her Americans make little effort to understand anything beyond the superficial markers of foreignness, remaining aloof to the history and values behind them. The French language – or any foreign tongue – serves as little more than a badge of ‘culture’ amongst other Americans. This was another aspect of the transatlantic dynamic that she prognosticates in *The Custom of the Country*, in the scene where Raymond de Chelles attacks Undine for her obliviousness to French culture: “we’re fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honorable for us!” (347). Halperin called de Chelles “one of the novel’s few admirable characters” in contrast to the influx of *nouveau riche* “barbarians” like Undine and Moffatt (195). Undine has caught pace with French fashion and manners, yet she has no conception of the nation’s traditions, owing to her own nation’s relative lack of such codes and customs.

Wharton’s depictions of American children abroad allow her to make predictions regarding the future impact of the nation’s culture on Europe. Fass points out that social conservatives during the 1920s believed the modern family “failed to provide the young with fundamental moral training” (37). This is certainly the case in *The Children*, as evidenced by Wharton’s description of Terry Wheater: “he looked cosmopolitan: as if he had been sharpened and worn down by contact with too many different civilizations – or perhaps merely with too many different hotels” (7). The boy has not been enriched by life in Europe. In literal terms, he is weak and sickly. Speaking metaphorically, Terry has been deracinated and uprooted, occupying the periphery of his parents’ glamorous lives. Elsewhere in the story, while Judith initially tells Boyne she wants to see more of Europe than “sleeping cars and Palace Hotels,” she continues to drift in her mother’s wake, from one hotel to another (28). Terry’s health recovers,

leaving both children poised to assume the manners and values of their parents. Having grown up in European hotels, they are likely to have little inclination to explore the continent in greater depth. They are more likely to spend their time drifting between Ritz hotels and the Riviera. These habits and traits passed down from parent to child suggest the virulent spread of American ways abroad.

Becoming a Europeanized American

Wharton regarded her writing as a way of sifting through the myriad definitions of what it meant to be an American. She emerged from the 1920s – and cynical portraits of Americans abroad in novels like *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children* – with a better sense of a national identity that she could take pride in. She did so even though many of the aspects of American ideology and society that had bothered her during the 1920s – and, in many instances earlier than that – had persisted into the 1930s. She was still mindful of contemporary America’s problematic ways of thinking about history, gender, class, and taste. Yet the aspects of national identity rooted in more timeless qualities of vitality, dynamism, and ambition nevertheless asserted a compelling force in her life as well as her writing. She would continue to critique American society, but her affinity for it also emerges more clearly in her writing of this decade.

Living abroad enabled her to appreciate how culture and history connected nations to one another. In her 1936 tribute to Paul Bourget, Wharton suggested that the best way of understanding one’s own country was by living outside of it: “It is only in seeing other countries, in studying their customs, reading their books, associating with their inhabitants, that one can situate one’s own country in the history of civilization” (qtd. in Lee 732). The first of Wharton’s essays in *Fighting France* describes the mobilization of Paris as an inspiring moment of international solidarity, when a “mixed throng” of “Italian, Roumanian, South American, North

American” soldiers hailing from “every class, from the scum of the Exterior Boulevards to the cream of the fashionable restaurants” temporarily unite in “an instinctive community of emotion” (16-17). She was moved by the sight of these soldiers, bound together by a common goal despite the differences that divided them. Hinda Warlick, an American volunteer working behind the front lines in ‘The Marne,’ expresses a similar spirit of international community. She gives a rousing speech to the other volunteers: “Since I came to Europe, nearly a year ago, I’ve got to know the country they’re dying for – and I understand why they mean to go on and on dying – if they have to – till there isn’t one of them left. Boys – I know France now – and she’s worth it!” (S 297). She expresses regret for her earlier stance, which anticipates that of Wharton’s 1920s Americans: “there wasn’t hardly anything I wasn’t ready to teach them” (S 297). By presenting Hinda’s speech with a distinct American accent, Wharton suggests that this inclusive perspective was relevant to the inhabitants of Main Street as well as among the cosmopolitan smart set.

Novels like *The Glimpses of the Moon*, *Twilight Sleep*, and *The Children*, seen in conjunction with critical essays like ‘The Great American Novel,’ seem to indicate that Wharton had largely given up hope in the existence of open-minded Americans after the war. However, hints of Hinda’s reverence for Europe linger beneath the “shouting and tinsel” of modern life (TC 87). In *Twilight Sleep*, Nona reflects upon the war that had ended nearly ten years earlier. As she sits on the terrace at Cedarledge, her mind wanders from Jim and Lita’s relationship, to her own abortive romance with Stan, finally settling into imagining a soldier in the trenches:

She had often wondered what those men thought about during the endless hours of watching, the days and weeks when nothing happened, when no shadow of a skulking enemy crossed their span of no-man’s land. What kept them from falling asleep, or from losing themselves in waking dreams, and failing to give warning when the attack impended? She could imagine a man led out to be shot in the Flanders mud because, at such a moment, he had believed himself to be dozing on a daisy bank at home. (238)

In keeping with the concluding section of Chapter Two, this passage is one example of Wharton’s adoption of a narrative mode reminiscent of modernism, bringing readers into the

kaleidoscopic movement of Nona's thoughts. It also mocks the inability of 1920s Manhattanites to imagine a life that is not replete with distractions and entertainment. Virtually everyone in Nona's world seems to live in a "waking dream," having totally forgotten about the war. Nona stands apart from them by imagining the soldier as a person that shares her human limitations and weaknesses. It is unclear whether the soldier is American, French, or British, but the possibility of his European heritage does not prevent her from envisioning herself in his boots. Wharton does not mention the war anywhere else in the text, and, indeed, Nona's thoughts meander past it quickly. Still, the fact that this novel – perhaps her boldest attack on American consumerism and insularity – includes a glimmer of transatlantic identification and a 'sense of the past' suggests that the author had not entirely lost faith in the nation's ability to transcend notions of national and generational exceptionalism. This was rooted in the renewed patriotism she experienced in the 1930s, commenting to Elisina Tyler that it "seemed strange to hold one's head up again when one's country is spoken of" (qtd. in Bauer 185).

With her final two novels, *The Gods Arrive* and *The Buccaneers*, Wharton posits a more fully realized vision of a hybridized American identity, refined by experiences of other nations and cultures. Her ideal American holds fast to his or her national roots, while remaining open to experiencing and appreciating other cultures. Unlike her 1920s characters, Nan, Halo, and Vance evolve beyond our first encounters with them. In *The Buccaneers*, this reimagined American is "the world's highest achievement" (B 24). Nan and her cohorts stand apart from their English counterparts, a "blast of outer air" which "had freshened the stagnant atmosphere of Belgravian drawing-rooms" (B 166). These are not the "redundant women" that trouble Dexter in *Twilight Sleep* or the "parasites" of *The Glimpses of the Moon*, but something fresh and distinctive. In *The Gods Arrive*, Weston's experiences abroad encourage him to adopt traditional aesthetic and domestic values, which enable him to potentially write a truly great American novel. The conclusion of the novel presents an alternative to standardized life on Main Street, depicting a measured, Whartonian vision of the American Dream. In it, Halo and Vance are financially

secure but not opulent, their energies devoted to art and family. They enjoy a small circle of close friends and proximity to the cultural resources of New York without the distractions of the city. Benstock has argued that *The Buccaneers* attests to Wharton's "retreat" to an older vision of America (Joslin and Price 31). Yet I would argue that the novel is not merely a "retreat" to the past, but a vision of what America could have been. The novel depicts a transatlantic society that embraces both tradition and innovation. It does not characterize the past as wrongly and hazardously forgotten, as does *The Age of Innocence*. Nor does it envision one's links to the past as an impediment to happiness or forward progress, as do *Twilight Sleep* and 'After Holbein.' Instead, it sees history as a vibrant component of present reality. Though Klimasmith has argued that *The Age of Innocence* emphasizes how "hybrid temporalities structure modern culture," Wharton's final novel presents a more comprehensive and confident vision of historical as well as cultural hybridity (567). In it, English society is revitalized through the influence of three continents – North and South America, and Europe – rather than suffocated beneath one rigid code of manners and morality.

A mindfulness of a shared past with Europe sets her Europeanized Americans apart from the homogenous, rootless cosmopolitans of her 1920s satires. *The Buccaneers* positions England as America's social and cultural parent, fictionalizing her desire that the nation might eventually "come into her real inheritance of English culture" (FW 55). The surname of the central family, St. George, reinforces this lineage by evoking England's patron saint and national banner. Even as an American outsider, "a dweller in houses without histories," Nan comes to revere the English past (B 92). British history exposes her to a "beyondness" exceeding anything she had known in America. "Beyondness" has a similar meaning to "soul" in the Browning poem from *The Glimpses of the Moon*. It is an understanding of the relevance of history on a personal level and in the present tense. As she speaks to Guy about the family estate at Honourslove, she sees his "latent passion for every tree and stone of the beautiful old place" (B 92). His reverence for England is contagious to her, and she comes to realize that the land

cannot be thought of apart from the past it has witnessed. Her solitary walk near Tintagel, during which she is “absorbed in the struggle between wind and sea,” evokes this (B 120). She is “not thinking about Dukes,” though she does encounter one, but contemplating the centuries of events for which the dramatic landscape of Tintagel provided a fitting setting (B 120). In this moment, the interconnectedness Wharton envisions between history, national soil, and the individual come through clearly. Wershoven describes Nan as a character of “imaginative, intelligent renewal” and an “emblem of hope” at the end of Wharton’s career (Joslin and Price 125-126). She relishes the larger national narratives, as well as the smaller histories of individual families like the Thwartes. For her, the past is very much alive in the present, shaping her choices and character.

Like Nan in *The Buccaneers*, Weston’s deepening appreciation for history enables him to more fully understand his place in the world in *The Gods Arrive*. When he journeys to The Willows near the end of the novel, he reflects upon his first visit there: “Through its modest doorway he had entered into a legendary past... its bracketed balconies overhung the perilous foam on which his imagination had voyaged ever since. The old house had been his fairy godmother, and it was only now, as he looked at it again, that he understood” (425). With his new understanding of America’s connection to a larger historical tradition, and the impact of that tradition on his life and art, Weston becomes the writer with “an eye adjusted to focus the eternal at short range” that Wharton argued may be found in any generation in ‘Permanent Values in Fiction’ (CW 177). With his deep reverence for European literature and an innate understanding of American ways, Weston seems poised to begin a new literary renaissance that transcends national boundaries.

Wharton believed that Americans who spent time in Europe – outside the confines of American palace hotels – would develop a more refined taste in art. Europe was the seat of aesthetic greatness in her view, and had perfected the novel: “the great continental novelists are all the avowed debtors of their English predecessors; they took the English novel of manners in

its amplitude, its merriment and pathos, and in their hands ‘the thing became a trumpet’” (*WF* 49). Her reverence for European aesthetics extended to other art forms, architecture among them. She notes that the best achievements of the discipline were “chiefly to be found in Italy after the beginning of the sixteenth century” (*DH* 4). While her 1920s satires consistently reference American popular culture – tabloids, Hollywood, beauty regiments, and other trends – the Weston novels and *The Buccaneers* frequently allude to higher art forms. While Suzy Lansing does not recognize the Browning poem she hears played as a song in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Laura educates Nan about the poetry of her ancestor, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in *The Buccaneers*. Nan reflects on his poems throughout her time in England, and her discussion of the poet with Guy Thwarte – who surprises her with his view that “there are other poems even more wonderful than ‘The Blessed Damozel’” – evidences their like-mindedness (*B* 110). Conversely, Ushant’s comment that he has “very little time to read poetry” suggests his incompatibility with Nan (*B* 122). Wharton also parallels Weston’s artistic growth to his understanding of the concept of ‘The Mothers,’ a collective unconscious that provides the source of all life and creation in Goethe’s *Faust* (1832). He first reads *Faust* in *Hudson River Bracketed*, and it lingers in the back of his mind throughout its sequel, while he explores a Spanish church, in Fontainebleau in the early stages of writing *Colossus*, and while reading Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (*GA* 23, 121, 416-21). Each of these texts makes a compelling argument that classic European works of literature can shape and enrich American lives.

The post-war fiction – somewhat problematically – argues for the necessity of understanding a nation’s language in order to appreciate its art and customs. Wharton described language as the “chosen vessel in which the finer life of a nation must be preserved” (*FW* 49). Like other members of her social class, she spoke French, Italian, and German in addition to English. She insisted that American volunteers for her charities have a strong command of French (*Price* 109-110). Roger Asselineau argues that her “mastery of French was such that she could not only write to such a finicky stylist as Gide without fear of being criticized” and that she

“created a ‘*franglais*’ of her own,” inventing “words with a French root and an English ending” (Joslin and Price 357, 360). Her blending of languages comes through in a 1915 letter to James, recounting one of her journeys to the front.⁷² She wrote, “motors can’t circulate in the war zone après la tombée de la nuit” (L 352). An example of her *Franglais* can be seen in a letter to Howard Sturgis from 1916, where she dismisses the notion of “‘brusking’ the Jameses,” her play on the French for ‘rushing’ (L 380). She also mixed languages in her fiction. Though Halo and Vance rarely speak any language other than English, *The Gods Arrive* is interspersed with foreign words that impart to readers an auditory sense of the couple’s experience living on the continent. Shirley Foster claims that Wharton regarded “separation from everything opposed to the European ideal” as an “essential part of the process of the insertion into the foreign,” and their immersion in continental language attests to their receptiveness to cultures other than their own (Joslin and Price 136). They explore the “*tierras despobladas*” (‘unpopulated lands’) of the Spanish countryside, attend a dinner in Paris featuring “truffled *poularde* and *langouste à l’Américaine*” (GA 20, 130). Later, Frenside consoles Halo after her separation from Vance by referencing the concept of “*Dichterleibe*,” or, ‘poet’s love’ (GA 433). These mergers suggest Wharton’s view that one could best express oneself through a multiplicity of languages, and that a single mode of speech was often inadequate to the complexity of one’s thoughts and experience. Yet Wharton becomes something of a Carol Kennicott in her sense of the edifying potential of foreign language, and it is easy to see why her critics saw this position as beyond the aspirations of average Americans, for whom learning multiple languages was not practical or affordable.

European environments also prove indispensable to Weston’s artistic development. He constantly meets new people abroad, forming friendships that are intense, fleeting, and often rife with pretension. Yet he gains something from each of these relationships, as evidenced by Halo’s observation regarding his bond with Alders, “The clever young writers he had known in

⁷² Her linguistic mixing is most obvious in her correspondence with him, and Powers’ *Henry James and Edith Wharton, Letters 1900-1915* (1990) is the superlative resource.

New York had read only each other and ‘Ulysses’; here was a man full of the curious lore of the past, who could at any rate put the Coconut Tree clan in their true perspective” (47). Meeting people from all over the world drives his mind to constantly search for new characters and stories. The terrain and cityscapes of the continent also foster his creativity. In Spain, he and Halo “always managed to find a warm corner in the courts of the Alhambra, or sheltered by the ilexes of the Generalife, where Vance could ‘lizard’ in the sun, and turn over his dreams like bright-coloured shells and pebbles” (50). This enables him to write *The Puritan in Spain*, his second successful novel and a historical romance in the vein of Wharton’s *The Greater Inclination* (1899). Later, in Paris, the couple makes weekend trips to Chartres and Selnis, the “ancient streets” transporting Weston into the “state of receptiveness into which great impressions steal like angels” (79). Though his creative epiphany occurs after reading Augustine in the United States, Wharton suggests that he must first experience Europe for this revelation to occur. He needs the exhilarations of Paris, the quiet contemplation of Oubli-Sur-Mer and Granada, and finally the disappointments of London to decide upon the direction his art and relationships will take.

In contrast to the parasites of the hotel set, the Europeanized American relishes – rather than rejects – the traditions of other countries. Through the eyes of the American girls in *The Buccaneers*, the standard fixtures of the London social calendar gain new life. As the girls watch a precession of carriages on the way to the Queen’s Drawing-room gala, Mabel Elmsworth exclaims, “It beats any Barnum show I ever saw... Look at that antique yellow coach coming along now, with the two powdered giants hanging on at the back. Oh Liz! – And the old mummy inside!” (96). Their excitement echoes Wharton’s assessment of Americans in Rome as “unblunted by custom” three decades earlier, hinting toward the possibility that Americans could ameliorate the damage they had done in the world in the intervening years (L 78). The American girls initially fail to understand British traditions, often with humorous results. As a group, they commit to learning the rules of London society. Mrs. Elmsworth instructs them, “Everyone in

England takes tea at five. In the country-houses the women dress up for it, in things they call ‘tea-gowns’. I wish we’d known that when we were ordering our clothes in Paris. But Miss March will tell you all about it” (B 101). The St. George and Elmsworth girls must interpret established customs in a way that many native-born citizens do not. By making an effort to learn English ways and their meaning, they sometimes prove themselves more attuned to these traditions than the English themselves, as in the scene where Miss March, the Dowager Duchess, and Lady Brightlingsea discuss the origins of the Virginia reel. The Dowager contends that “The Wild Indians taught it to the Americans,” while Miss March points out that it is “just an old English or Scottish dance” (190). Miss March, the expatriate American, is correct. As an outsider, she has had to work harder to understand the culture she lives in. Like Hinda in ‘The Marne,’ the women of *The Buccaneers* retain their American sensibilities while willingly adapting to the customs of their host country.

The social world of *The Buccaneers* blends together people of disparate economic backgrounds and cultures in a ‘what could have been’ reworking of the society that culminated in middling modern America. It retains the old-fashioned morality and intelligence Wharton sometimes glimpsed among the nineteenth-century elite, yet also embraces youthful American energy. “Ignorant of tradition and unimpressed by distinctions of rank,” the St. George and Elmsworth girls establish a society fundamentally different from that of Pauline Manford of *Twilight Sleep*, who considers an eclectic dinner party guest list evidence of “her American independence” (B 106, TS 22). Cultures come together in a way that enriches all parties, rather than negating distinctions between people. The girls endear themselves to the British aristocracy not in spite of their Americanness, but because of it. They cannot win over everyone; in the projected conclusion to the novel, Sir Helmsley, who dismisses the “whole tobacco-chewing crew, the dressed up pushing women dragging their reluctant backwoodsmen after them” is horrified when his son elopes with Nan (B 77). Still, the openness and sincerity with which the girls conduct their “novel kind of invasion” of England enables them to attain a high social

status there that New York would never have allowed them (B 70). They revolutionize a staid aristocracy by being what Wharton characterizes as the best possible way to be American: gregarious, open-minded, earnest, and ambitious.

In the hybridized world of *The Buccaneers*, old-fashioned morality proves more conducive to the development of genuine friendship. As I argued in Chapter Three, the women of Wharton's contemporary post-war writing compete with one another constantly. One woman's success often comes at the price of another's humiliation or defeat. In contrast, the women of *The Buccaneers* place their friendships before their individual desires. Their expatriation forces them to cultivate powerful bonds within their small group, as evidenced by the scene in which Lizzy Elmsworth sacrifices her chances for marriage to Lord Seadown. She heroically puts a halt to Lady Churt's aggressive flirtation with him, announcing that he is to be married to Virginia St. George. This leads Mr. Robinson to think, "She's begun to realize that she's thrown away her last hope of Seadown; and very likely she repents her rashness. But the defence of the clan before everything" (138). Though Lizzy initially competes with Virginia for his affection, they unite against a common foe. Similarly, when Conchita asks Nan for a loan to help her escape her unhappy marriage, the pleas of her desperate friend cause Nan's "frozen heart" to "thaw in soft participation" (211). Miss Testvalley also helps Nan to elope with Guy, even though she "goes back alone to old age and poverty" as a result of her actions (243). Through these women's sacrifices, *The Buccaneers* characterizes women as gaining power in society through unity with one another.

The Gods Arrive envisions the edifying influence of Europe in terms of religion and domestic morality. Exposure to European traditions renews Halo and Weston's appreciation of marriage during their failed attempt to lead an open relationship. They attempt to live by the rules of modern America, convinced that they need not be married to be happy. As Halo reads a cautioning letter from her husband's attorney, she thinks to herself, "Did he really imagine that any threat of his could still affect her?" (5). Yet this arrangement leaves them both unhappy,

driving Weston to wonder, “How did two people who had once filled each other’s universe manage to hold together as the tide receded?” He concludes, “To the Catholic church marriage was a divine institution; but it seemed to him infinitely more impressive as an emanation of the will of man” (120). Halo reaches a similar conclusion, “We most of us need a frame-work, a support – the maddest lovers do. Marriage may be too tight a fit – may dislocate and deform. But it shapes life too; prevents growing lopsided or drifting” (*GA* 317). Her American bohemians abroad come to a decidedly Old World conclusion about the meaning of matrimony in their lives.⁷³ The faith-derived traditions of Europe influence the couple, even if this is not expressed through conventional religious practice. This oblique, yet significant encounter with Catholic morality recalls Hayley Delane’s relationship with Whitman in ‘The Spark.’ Delane comments of Whitman, “I don’t think he believed in our Lord. Yet he taught me Christian charity” (*ONY* 220). Delane is oblivious to Whitman’s celebrity; the writer’s intellect and philosophy as compelling in their own right, providing Delane with a moral compass. As Delane does not need to read Whitman in order to be moved by his words, Weston and Halo do not need to attend weekly Mass in order to allow the religious and domestic traditions of Europe to positively shape their lives.

Both *The Gods Arrive* and *The Buccaneers* reach back to older, European domestic traditions by embracing life outside the urban environment. Wharton characterized the modern metropolis – at home and abroad – as a breeding ground of social falsity, where the actions of others cannot be trusted. By the 1920s, Paris and New York had become representative of everything that the author found exasperating about modern life. Benstock claims that the city “threatened [Wharton’s] creativity, alienated her from the wellsprings of her desire and genius, and traumatized her sense of self” (Joslin and Price 31). In *The Gods Arrive*, when Halo is ‘cut’ by Mrs. Glaisher, she immediately recalls “all those towering sky-scrappers to whose shelter the

⁷³ Weston’s conclusion echoes Archer’s assessment of his marriage at the end of *The Age of Innocence*: “Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites” (286).

Statue of Liberty so falsely invites the proscribed and the persecuted” and is filled with “uncontrollable mirth” (95). New York is the first image that comes to her mind in the face of these overt social games. Wharton characterizes the modern city as full of potential distractions, the nerve center from which homogenous consumerism emanated. She imparts this perspective to Vance Weston, whose first impressions of New York are of a chaotic “tumult of life and wealth and energy.” His eye is immediately drawn to the “shopfuls of tempting and expensive things” (*HRB* 153). He initially believes the city will inspire him to write, but his time there quickly devolves into shopping, sightseeing, and socializing. In *The Gods Arrive*, the temptations of London also derail his ambitions for a new novel. Though he goes to these cities to pursue his art, his creativity flourishes in remote places like Paul’s Landing, Oubli-Sur-Mer, and The Willows. He must experience the world beyond his hometown and beyond the metropolis in order to realize his potential. Nan St. George also comes to a deeper understanding of herself in tranquil environments outside cities. She realizes her love for Guy at Honourslove, and for England at Tintagel: “It was not the atmosphere of London but of England which had gradually filled her veins and penetrated to her heart. At least life in England had a background, layers and layers of deep rich background, of history, poetry, old traditional observances, beautiful houses, beautiful landscapes” (*B* 207). In Tintagel, Nan allows herself an authentic experience of a slower life, while characters like Joyce Wheater would have been content to glimpse it passing down Piccadilly through the window of the Nouveau Luxe. It is there that Nan learns to appreciate the confluence between history, social tradition, morality, and art that allows her to expand beyond the limited perceptions of one nation, setting her apart from the frivolous Americans abroad that are “merely born to bloom and drop.”

Though Wharton’s final novels evidence a significant alteration in her thinking about American identity, her vision of Europeanized American identity is flawed in several significant respects. First and most obviously, *The Buccaneers* is a historical novel set in the 1870s, which does little to unsettle perceptions of the author’s conservatism relative to contemporary America.

Lee observes, “for those who dismissed her as a writer who kept doing the same kind of book, or who saw – and see – her as entirely identified with the society, wealth, and class she wrote about, *The Buccaneers* looked like a final confirmation” (722). With the notable exception of Bauer’s discussion of her writing’s engagement with Fascism, the novel has not widely been read in terms of the culture and society of the late 1930s (165-192). *The Buccaneers* scrutinizes the marriage plot through a resolutely modern lens, exploring the porous boundary the author had long seen between marriage and prostitution. Its Americans are more endearing and open-minded than those in her fiction of the previous decade. Even so, its defense of American ways would likely have carried more weight had they been framed in a more contemporary setting, particularly in light of the way critics were thinking about her at the time.

Secondly, the ambivalent tones Wharton strikes in both *The Buccaneers* and *The Gods Arrive* inhibit the full realization of her vision of the Europeanized American. Beneath the romance and hybridity of *The Buccaneers* lies an undercurrent of sexual violence and xenophobia. In the end, Laura Testvalley becomes another of Wharton’s thwarted, self-sacrificing older women, destroying her hopes for marriage to Sir Helmsley by encouraging Nan to elope with Guy. Nan – the young, rich woman – triumphs, while the older governess fails to improve her lot in life. Though the shifts in tone from light to dark makes for compelling reading, and is in keeping with that of many of her most revered fictions, it darkens aspects of the novel that clearly seek to revitalize and reclaim American traits. The author’s vacillation between satire and seriousness in *The Gods Arrive* is similarly problematic. As I discussed in Chapter Three, there is evidence to suggest that Wharton saw her conclusion to the novel as a positive and satisfying one. Yet Goodman and Thompson’s readings indicate that it falls short for some readers. This is likely owing to the fact that at various points in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, both Weston and Halo are difficult characters to sympathize with. He often behaves like an arrogant brat, which in turn makes it difficult to understand her devotion to him. Also, though Weston seems poised for his greatest literary triumph in the story’s final pages, when we leave him he has

yet to conceive of a great American novel – let alone write one – even if Wharton takes care to show us how all the seeds of for brilliance have been sown.

Thirdly, while *The Buccaneers* showcases cultural exchange amongst the peoples of three continents, the novel does not adequately acknowledge America's racial and ethnic diversity, whether judged by the standards of the 1870s or the 1930s. Wharton's references to African-American minstrelsy and Conchita's mixed-race heritage offer an insufficient rendition of a uniquely multicultural society. Bauer argues that the author "resisted seeing other races as having their own cultures," and her writing never fully anticipates or appreciates the tremendous influence of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa in American culture (61). This is a major, limiting oversight in her reconception of American national identity, and as the American academy became more inclusive throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, her narrow definition of hybridity seemed all the more retrograde.

Finally, Wharton's assumption that her countrymen would embrace a vision of America as part of a global community was also misguided. America was – and remains – insular and parochial in many respects. Yet the idea of the nation as a mere cast member of the global drama, rather than playing the starring role, was fated to never be a hugely popular one. Paul Giles claims that "to lose the sense of the United States as a privileged and protected space is to lose the sense of it harbouring exemplary or exceptionalist qualities of any kind" (Manning and Taylor 45). Conceiving of Americanness as something that needs to be tempered by other cultures helped to fortify notions that her relationship with her homeland was purely antagonistic and pedantic. While her treatment of exceptionalism in *The Buccaneers* and *The Gods Arrive* suggests that she saw her country as distinctive in a number of respects, the majority of her countrymen were more inclined to see exceptionalism as a synonym for superiority.

Wharton opens the final section of *A Backward Glance* with the observation, "The world is a welter and has always been one; but though all the cranks and the theorists cannot master the old floundering monster, or force it long into any of their neat plans of readjustment, here and

there a saint or a genius suddenly sends a little ray through the fog, and helps humanity to stumble on, and perhaps up” (379). Her post-war writing reflects these views, moving from resentment toward acceptance of the fact that her world had become a smaller place since the turn of the century, and in many ways, a more American place. Her assessment of the threat of globalization was ahead of its time. Though her vision of a shared future between Europe and America suffers from significant flaws, *The Buccaneers* and *The Gods Arrive* vividly describe what America could have been, and what she believed the nation could still potentially be in the years to come. Her writing offers a contradictory and complex treatment of post-war life, but hers is nonetheless a distinctly American vision.

Conclusion

A Writer for Our Time

In this coda, I would like to move away from Wharton's historical moment to suggest how her fiction pointed toward America's future in the twenty-first century. Even with its limitations, her assessment of the public nature of modern life, and of the nation's relationship to history, gender, taste, and globalization has relevance and meaning for us still.

She could not have predicted the recent rise of social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, nor the fad for 'reality television.' Yet both trends reflect a widespread desire for fame and publicity she had commented on nearly a century ago. Her writing anticipated the American love affair for celebrity through *Twilight Sleep's* Lita Wyant and *The Children's* Zinnia Wrench. These characters could be easily updated for the modern world. One might imagine a twenty-first century Lita finding fame in the manner of Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian, a 'celebutante' who becomes famous simply for being famous. There has been no shortage of women like Lita in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have skyrocketed to fame after removing their clothes. The love affairs of a latter-day Lady Wrench, meanwhile, would feature prominently in the tabloids, fitting the model of much-married Hollywood stars that have captured the public imagination for decades, such as Elizabeth Taylor. The rise of internet-based communications and celebrity culture are also germane to the story of *Hudson River Bracketed*. A latter-day Vance Weston would 'advance' his notoriety by establishing an online presence in order to further his career. Given his tendency to muse on the nature of genius, he would constantly update his blog or Twitter feed with his latest thoughts about literature, measuring his popularity and literary success by his number of online friends and followers. Rather than owning a department store, an updated incarnation of Bunty Hayes might be a social networking impresario like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, leaving Weston's artistic integrity to be compromised by writing code.

Wharton would find her critiques of the American need for constant escapism, stimulus, and entertainment borne out today by a ride on the New York subway or an hour's wait at a bustling airport. Here, thousands of people interact with devices, rather than people, waiting to board forms of transport all equipped with seatback televisions. The author realized early on that the technologies intended to keep us better connected with the world around us often intensified one's feelings of isolation. American lives can now be carried out in public to a far greater extent than had been possible in her lifetime. Increasingly, people are willing and eager to live their lives in front of a camera or online. However, the scientific community has recently expressed deep reservations about this cultural trend. A 2010 study conducted at the University of Arizona found social networking sites a poor substitute for "meaningful connections with other people" (Segrin and Passalacqua 320). Though individuals may have consistent interactions with a huge group of people online, the study concludes that this cannot replace the psychological succor of face-to-face contact. Superficial popularity, it seems, is no better protection against loneliness in 2011 than it was for Suzy Lansing in 1922. Wharton's contention that genuine connections are rare in a society of disposable relationships is very much pertinent to the world we live in.

A twenty-first century Wharton would also not be taken aback by her nation's current relationship to history. In the 1930s, she complained to Royall Tyler about the "sour grapes in the present American attitude" following the collapse of the stock market, going on to argue that "the time to denounce the bankers is when we were all feeding off their gold plate, not now!" (*L* 573). The American tendency to conveniently forget or remember the past persists into the present, a case in point being the global recession that began in 2008. Millions of Americans took out mortgages on homes they otherwise could not afford, enticed by repayment rates that were initially low, but ratcheted up dramatically after a few years. Banks, lenders, and investment firms then bundled these mortgages to sell as derivatives, with the result that companies and individuals lost money as people defaulted on their loan payments. Throughout the 1920s,

investors engaged in a similar kind of risky behavior, purchasing stocks on margin for up to ninety percent of the share price. This meant that if a share of stock cost one hundred dollars, they were paying as little as ten. If they earned a profit, it was theirs to keep. But if they lost everything, they were still liable for that additional ninety dollars per share. Many risked money they did not actually have, resulting the worst financial disaster in the nation's history. The triggers of the current recession differ from those of 1929, yet the placing of blame has followed a similar logic. The popular wisdom now, as then, has been to fault the financial industry writ large. Wharton does not absolve the bankers entirely, but suggested that individual investors ignored obvious risks in pursuit of instant wealth. Her stance would be equally applicable to the nation's current financial woes. America has always condemned Wall Street in economic downturns, only to forget old grudges at the first signs of a revitalized economy. Wharton had experienced a number of smaller market crashes in her lifetime, and her contention that the nation's love affair with capitalism did not die in 1929 has proved keenly accurate in a number of instances since she left us.

Her attitudes to gender relations were prophetic, too. In works such as *The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children*, she alleges that marriage and family remained the central avenues of women's advancement and security. In the early twenty-first century, women have far more opportunities in society, many no longer relying on marriage as a sole means of financial support. However, women also continue to struggle on many fronts, which likely would not have surprised her. The Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963 to bring the salaries of men and women into parity, yet a pay gap persists even today. Double standards continue to affect perceptions of women, who are expected to balance traditional feminine roles with the stereotypically masculine comportment of corporate life. As Wharton was in her time, influential women continue to be subject to *ad hominem* attacks to a far greater extent than their male counterparts. It has been pointed out that the media condemned Hillary Clinton for her work on health care reform during the 1990s, while more docile First Ladies like 'Lady Bird' Johnson were beloved

by the American people, as long as they kept to traditionally feminine pet-projects (Thompson 7). Subsequent First Ladies, like Laura Bush and Michelle Obama, have learned from Clinton's 'transgressions' and devoted their energies to traditionally feminine political interests, often involving children's education and nutrition. These causes are obviously important, but the fact remains that these women are largely defined by their position as the wife of a president, though many of them – Laura Bush and Michelle Obama among them – are hugely accomplished in their own right. The representation of women in American politics continues to lag dismally behind that of other nations. Clinton has become an exception, now Secretary of State after an unsuccessful presidential bid in 2008. Nevertheless, the demise of her campaign at the hands of the press and the Democratic Party attests that the double standard is very much alive and well. Though widely regarded as a skilled politician, Clinton has proven difficult for the American public to like, often branded as overly aggressive. As Thompson suggested in 2002, this polarizing figure might prove an enticing subject for Wharton were she alive today, especially given what Clinton has done and attempted to do in the last few years.

Wharton's post-war writing was also ahead of its time in its assessment of the corrosive power of the modern beauty industry. A 2011 incarnation of Pauline Manford would likely make time in her schedule for bi-annual Botox injections and chemical peels. She would surely have a trusted plastic surgeon at her disposal, sure to be one of Manhattan's most exclusive and costly physicians. With their constant scrutiny of their faces before the mirror, characters like Pauline and Kate Clephane anticipate how anxieties about beauty remain a feature of women's lives in twenty-first century. Plastic surgery was in its early stages when Wharton was alive, but it has become widely accepted around the world, among people of all ages and economic backgrounds. Women are the primary clients, with some risking death with unlicensed underground 'doctors' for fuller lips or breasts. It is an industry that has helped many people, yet deepened the insecurities of millions more. The author's interest in the relationship between aging and sexuality also anticipates the twenty-first century phenomenon of the 'cougar,' a

woman who prefers the younger men as sexual partners. A twenty-first century Kate Clephane would likely be more concerned that her dressmaker's frocks make her look like a cougar, than if they make her look "like a flapper" (MR 17). In television shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Cougar Town*, the term purports to be a badge of empowerment, but is often used to comically deride those who refuse to age gracefully by emphasizing discrepancies in age. Like Pauline, these women continue to strive for a svelte, ageless ideal that is in many respects an evolution of the flapper phenomenon from nearly a century ago.

Wharton's fears regarding the degradation of modern culture were by no means unique to her time; the author had seen mainstream tastes as under threat when she wrote *The Decoration of Houses* in the 1890s, and other observers both within and outside the United States have often claimed to see the end of culture (as they prefer it) looming on the horizon. However, her arguments regarding the middling of American culture are a remarkably astute prediction of twenty-first century debates on taste. Her 'conservative' defense of a tastemaking elite shares the concerns of many of today's social commentators, who argue that 'popular taste' is a contradiction in terms. This year, Neil Gabler argued that the Internet had destroyed highbrow criticism by enabling everyone to publish his or her ideas about art and culture, leaving nothing to distinguish the trained critic from the armchair aesthete. The pretenders to culture continue to menace its defenders. Gabler's article also notes that that Americans have tended to see themselves "as manly, honest, commonsensical and populist," and that the rise of online criticism is only the latest attempt to establish a "culture divorced from any European antecedents, a democratic culture." What Wharton and Gabler see as middling, these bloggers perceive to be democratic. Critiques of the cultural tyranny of the middle class continue to be made, as evidenced by Jason Mittell's 2010 observation, "In the US discussion about class is forbidden. Everybody is middle class. The rich are middle class people with more money and the unemployed are middle class people who caught a bad break" (qtd. in Harris). Both Gabler and Mittell's views could be set beside Wharton's observations in 'The Great American Novel.'

Though she would be heartened to know that the cultural elite still had its defenders, she would be greatly dismayed to see the extent to which her fears about the spread of American ways across the globe have been realized. Wegener has noted the “uncommon prescience of [Wharton’s] remarks on so many harbingers of the consumerist or commodity-oriented world” and wondered how the author might have responded to “the omnipresence of more recent exports – from Coca-Cola to Hollywood, McDonalds to Disney to Michael Jordan – through which a commercially hegemonic world power has ‘internationalized the earth’ on a scale she could not have imagined” (805). American popular culture dominates the world’s screens and airwaves, with innovations in technology and distribution allowing books, films, and music to appear on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously. Niall Ferguson claims that as of 2005, thirty-nine of the world’s eighty largest telecommunications companies were American (21). Increasingly, the voice of the world’s culture has taken on a distinctly American accent, and the tastes of the masses continue to reign over that of an intellectual minority. The United States has not come into its “rightful inheritance of English culture,” as she dared to hope in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (55). Though these things would have troubled her, her belief in the need for a ‘civilizing influence’ abroad suggests that she would likely be in support of the nation’s recent military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

Finally, she would be heartened to see the resurgence of philanthropy amongst America’s wealthy. Since its founding in 1994, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed nearly twenty-four billion dollars toward development and healthcare initiatives around the world. Over seventy-five percent of these funds have gone outside the United States, with domestic funds devoted to scholarships and libraries (‘Foundation Fact Sheet’). Warren Buffett, one of the most successful investors in the world – and for a time the world’s richest man – pledged to donate ninety-nine percent of his fortune to philanthropic interests like the Gates Foundation (Kroll, Miller, and Serafin). In 2006, Buffett commented, “I’ve worked in an economy that rewards someone who saves the lives of others on a battlefield with a medal,

rewards a great teacher with thank-you notes from parents, but rewards those who can detect the mispricing of securities with sums reaching into the billions. In short, fate's distribution of long straws is wildly capricious" (par. 10). Buffett reaped the bounty of the American Dream and is happy to share it with his nation and the world. His is not the "self-righteous philanthropy" of Pauline Manford, but an investment in the future of global culture and society on the level of earlier American philanthropists such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, and the Astor family (*TS* 162)

One hundred years after Wharton published *Ethan Frome*, American life continues to be something of a "welter." Even so, her nation's energy and ambition has enabled it to "stumble on," and, in some instances, up (*BG* 379). On the whole, her characterization of the nation remains relevant today, and many aspects of American culture and society would fail to surprise her. Her writing of the 1920s and 1930s synthesized the contradictory values at the heart of American identity and ideology, and her exhortations to her countrymen were rooted in common sense, even if they were often expressed in a robust manner. She defended the need to cultivate authentic knowledge and relationships, experience new cultures through travel, and structure one's behavior based on a belief in something larger than oneself – be it family, morality, or nation. She speaks for her own time, and for ours; she is a product of her historical moment, but does not remain locked inside it.

Notes on the Text

All citations appear in keeping with the 6th Edition of MLA style. The formatting of the text is in keeping with the University Faculty of English Language and Literature Notes of Guidance, while the bibliography adheres to MLA guidelines.

In-text references to the writings of Edith Wharton adhere to the following key:

AI: The Age of Innocence

B: The Buccaneers

BG: A Backward Glance

C: The Children

CC: The Custom of the Country

CW: The Uncollected Critical Writings

DH: The Decoration of Houses

FW: French Ways and Their Meaning

FF: Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort

GM: The Glimpses of The Moon

GA: The Gods Arrive

HRB: Hudson River Bracketed

HM: The House of Mirth

L: The Letters of Edith Wharton

‘Life’: ‘Life and I’ in *Novellas and Other Writings*, Library of America (1990)

MR: The Mother’s Recompense

ONY: Old New York

R: The Reef

RF: Roman Fever, and Other Stories

S: Collected Stories 1911-1937

TS: Twilight Sleep

UW: The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton, Volume Two: Novels and Life Writing

WF: The Writing of Fiction

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