

EDITH WHARTON: MORALITY AND SEXUALITY, EXPERIENCE AND IDEAS

"THE SHIFTING RELATION":
MORALITY AND SEXUALITY, EXPERIENCE AND IDEAS,
IN THE WORK OF EDITH WHARTON

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ABSTRACT

The revival of interest in the work of Edith Wharton has brought new critical concerns, particularly with regard to her treatment of women. However, the best way to evaluate her work is to combine aspects of this new focus with the interest of her own contemporaries in her analysis of moral issues. A study of her explorations of morality and sexuality makes it possible to examine two very important aspects of her work, and thus to trace her weaknesses and her developing strengths.

Her first major novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), reveals her initial, somewhat uncertain, commitment to an aestheticized morality. Her concurrent interest in Darwin caused her serious difficulties, however, making it impossible to harmonize her own commitment to moral responsibility with Darwinian determinism. This novel is also weakened by her inability to recognize the centrality of sexuality to her subject, despite the stress that Darwin, himself, had placed upon it. However, in *The Reef* (1912), Wharton repudiated both aesthetic and Darwinian approaches to morality, and, having finally experienced the power of sexuality to affect her own life, was able to bring it into the centre of her vision and relate it directly to morality,

although her treatment remained analytical. Though *Summer* (1917) brings sexuality into a curious relationship with morality, the latter being aligned on the side of an essentially incestuous marriage, it was with the writing of this novella that she was at last able to embody the exhilaration and power of sex in the qualities of her language.

These works reveal how Wharton was able, to an impressive degree, to transmute her experience--the social and personal effects of her upbringing, her encounter with an influential socio-biological theory, and a personal crisis--through insight and judgment, into art of universal, because shared, significance.

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INTRODUCTION

Every work of art adheres to some system of morality. But if it be really a work of art, it must contain the essential criticism on the morality to which it adheres.... The degree to which the system of morality, or the metaphysic, of any work of art is submitted to criticism within the work of art makes the lasting value and satisfaction of the work.... It is the novelists and dramatists who have the hardest task in reconciling their metaphysic, their theory of being and knowing with their living sense of being. Because the novel is a microcosm, and because man in viewing the universe must view it in the light of a theory, therefore every novel must have the background or the structural skeleton of some theory of being, some metaphysic.... And the danger is that man shall make himself a metaphysic to cover his own faults or failure.
D.H. Lawrence, *A Study of Thomas Hardy*, 185-88.

This is a good time to reassess the fiction of Edith Wharton (1862-1936). The revival of interest in her work occasioned by the release of her private papers in 1968 and the consequent publication of Lewis's biography in 1975 and Wolff's in 1977, has coincided with a shift away from the concerns of earlier reviewers and critics. Their interests lay primarily with the clarity of her "style", her connections with Henry James, her treatment of social class, and her view of the relationship of morality to convention.

During the last decade, two concerns (sometimes linked, sometimes not) have predominated: an interest in

Wharton's psychological state as revealed by her novels and personal relationships, and a determination to enroll her as a feminist, both groups of critics focussing on her treatment of women's place in society and in marriage¹.

Unfortunately, critics with the first of these interests tend to sacrifice the literature to the life, while those with the second claim as their own an author who wrote: "intelligent women will never talk together when they can talk to men, or even listen to them" (*French Ways and their Meaning*, published in 1918, 26). Furthermore, the judgments arising from this recent criticism seem to develop from an unfortunate combination of related desires: to ensure that Wharton becomes accepted, this time permanently, in the literary canon; to assert that she deserves to do so because she illustrates the theory or shares the view of the critic; and, as a consequence of both, to minimize any discussion of flaws in her work. I believe that an appreciation of her writing can only be adversely affected by such proprietary and protective interests, and that a more balanced judgment must be made.

The present concern with Wharton's treatment of the relationship between men and women is indeed of central importance, but so is her interest in morality, which is currently undervalued. I wish to bring these two aspects of her work to bear upon each other by focussing on Wharton's explorations of the nature and problems of sexuality and the

the extent to which these do, or do not, function in harmony with her concern for moral issues.

Wharton's "style" has been a perennial concern with critics, although, fashionably enough, this has altered in nature from praise for its clarity and classicism to explorations of its obscurity, carried out in jargon itself obscure. Both approaches tend, unfortunately, to treat style as separable from the import of the work. Furthermore, Wharton's rather pedestrian discussion of technique, *The Writing of Fiction*, though not published till 1925, is often taken as an adequate account of the making of all her work, including *The House of Mirth*, published twenty years earlier (1905). Much is made, in this context, of her post-Jamesian assertion that

it is best to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at the most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, (87)

which she combined with criticism of

the slovenly habit of some novelists of tumbling in and out of their characters' minds and then suddenly drawing back to scrutinize them from the outside as the avowed showman holding his puppet's strings. (89)

Yet of the three novels discussed here, only *The Reef* (1912) lives up to these requirements. Our response to *The House of Mirth*, for example, is bedevilled by the need constantly to assess whether Wharton is standing aside, has linked arms

with, or has slithered into, her characters--although admittedly she cannot be faulted for anything as ungainly as "tumbling" or as vulgar as showmanship.

Part of the problem in assessing the quality of Wharton's work is that she published a great deal (a total of 32 novels, novellas and collections of short stories, as well as reviews, literary theory, autobiography and other non-fiction), and her work is of extremely uneven quality. One service that recent criticism has rendered is to argue for a reassessment of works hitherto regarded as minor, such as *Summer* (1917), or major, such as *Ethan Frome* (1911).

The tendency to dismiss her work as limited by its concentration on a small, uninteresting and shallow minority, a criticism which accompanied the decline in interest in her work after her death, is also being challenged. Though Wharton's works are firmly grounded in time and place, she is more than a "historian of manners" (as the new Scribner paperback editions of her works unfortunately describe her), for the issues she explores are of permanent concern, and her ultimate interest lies in the universal which the particular reveals. From the vantage point of almost twenty years after the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton reflected, in *The Writing of Fiction*, that a good subject

must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere

irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context.... The wide creative vision.... seeks by instinct those subjects which, in themselves are a kind of summary or fore-shortening of life's dispersed and inconclusive occurrences. (28-29)

But as D.H. Lawrence, Wharton's younger contemporary, warned, the writer's "theory of being and knowing" which is his "system of morality", though it inevitably informs each work, must yet be subjected to criticism within the work itself. Wharton is at her best when she refuses to take the easy assumptions of her society for granted, and subjects her own presuppositions to examination. However, she is also no exception to the tendency that Lawrence observed to "make a metaphysic to cover [her] own faults or failure."

This thesis examines her impressive efforts, in three of her works: *The House of Mirth*, *The Reef*, and *Summer*, to subject her own metaphysic to criticism; working from a background of the Old New York bourgeoisie which was both limiting and stimulating, coming under the influence of current social and scientific theories, shaken by the intensity of a late and painful love affair, and all the while, inescapably, as any novelist must, exploring the deep-seated needs of her own nature. Her strength lies in the fact that, in her growing understanding of the problems of morality and the importance of sexuality, she challenges the reader to reconcile his own theory of being and knowing with his own living sense of being, an experience which this thesis records.

I

"The Library at Bellomont was Never Used for Reading":

Morality and Sexuality in *The House of Mirth*

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was Lily Bart.

Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (206-207).

An author's hindsight cannot always be trusted to describe the motive force behind the writing of a novel, but, in the case of *The House of Mirth* (1905), the impression left by reading the work and the account of the writer coincide on essentials. Wharton's purpose was, as she recalls in *A Backward Glance* (1934), to "extract" from a personally familiar subject, "fashionable New York.... in all its flatness and futility", a study which would have "typical human significance" (206-07).

When discussing her work, Wharton often gives the impression that she thinks the problems involved are mainly matters of technique--primarily aesthetic issues (perhaps as

an attempt to live up to James's requirements of the novelist). But inevitably the inseparability of subject and method asserts itself; so that while "extract", "flat", "dramatic" and "answer" may suggest a concern chiefly with something thought of as a technical problem, the weight of the passage is carried by such words as "futility", "irresponsible", "frivolous", "tragic", "debasing" and "ideals", words which make clear that her purpose is essentially moral. The centrality of moral issues to her work is a point critics have generally considered incontrovertible, and a recent attempt to claim Wharton for the ranks of the proto-structuralists on the grounds that she "chooses to omit a moral centre" in *The House of Mirth*¹, is a conclusion which the novel itself does not support, as I will show.

Morality, however, cannot be considered in a vacuum, nor can the novel deal with society in the abstract. Wharton chooses to cast this particular study in the form of the increasingly desperate search by a woman for a husband-- "The answer, in short, was Lily Bart". Given this subject, attitudes to sexuality, including Wharton's own, must inevitably become a part of the investigation. Surprisingly, however, although one would expect such matters to be central, in this novel they are handled as if they are peripheral--as if they lie in an unavoidable, but not quite focussed, part of Wharton's field of vision. This

makes *The House of Mirth* an interesting place to begin an examination of Wharton's treatment of morality and sexuality, for, although the former is always a conscious concern in her novels, she can here be caught a little off-guard, a little less self-aware, where sexuality is concerned, in a way which is not true of the other novels considered in this thesis.

But *The House of Mirth* is of compelling interest for another reason. When topics are of enduring importance to a novelist, their specific treatment in a particular work is subject to, and shows the influence of, the novelist's current concerns. To borrow from the same source of metaphor that permeates the novel, when strange patterns are seen on the surface of the water, there may be strong cross currents beneath. The cross current that collided with the main stream of Wharton's developing treatment of morality and sexuality in the early years of the century was Darwinism, and the force of the collision swept Wharton farther from the solidity of the shore than she seems to have realized. A deflection of the direction of flow can be seen again in *Summer* (1917), although there the explanation lies not in the force of a theory, but in her need to work through, if not solve, a continuing personal need. For the critic, the choppy water can be disorienting, and perhaps the easiest way to achieve a clearer understanding of what is happening is to examine the two currents in turn,

beginning with the one that flows in the main channel of Wharton's work.

One advantage in separating the two streams of thought is that it becomes easier to assess the impact of Darwin's theories on her work, the purpose of the second chapter of this thesis. But it is equally useful in that, as her first major novel, *The House of Mirth* allows us to establish a reference point from which to trace her developing perceptions of morality and sexuality through the course of her other fiction. And of the two, it is her conscious concern with the questions raised by moral issues that offers the more secure point from which to begin an examination of her work.

Wharton is clear-sighted and incisive on the "tragic implication" of the "frivolous society", with its "power of debasing people..." which she declared it her purpose to examine, although my reservations concerning her treatment of "its power of debasing... ideals" will subsequently become clear. As she delineates the destructive power of such a society, she demonstrates the ways in which the morality, culture and human relationships of the House of Mirth have become tainted and vulgarized by a surrender to materialism. Bellomont, a survival from a more virtuous, and a more cultured, age--the link between virtue and culture will prove important--offers various reminders of

its past. These are typified by the empty ritual of church-going (as empty as the Sunday carriage is of genuine worshippers) and the library, which is "almost the only surviving portion of the old manor-house of Bellomont... revealing the traditions of the mother country", a room which by Lily's time, significantly, "was never used for reading though it had a certain popularity as a smoking-room or a quiet retreat for flirtation" (59).

Wharton's analysis of the corrupted nature of this declining culture is realized with characteristic skill. However, the novel reveals another of her most characteristic and admirable qualities, that she is rarely content merely to describe or trace a problem, but must examine and tackle the fundamental moral issues which it raises. She is almost invariably concerned to investigate particular questions for their more general implications. In this novel she attempts to work out, first, whether it is possible for any of the inhabitants of the House of Mirth to be capable of judging the condition of their society for themselves; second, to discover whether any basis for moral discernment remains to enable them to reconstruct its weakened fabric; and finally to assess the implications for any society of the answers to these questions. Clearly the issues are relevant to all members of New York society, although in most cases the answers are obvious--and generally pessimistic. It is therefore through Lily and

Selden that the complexities, and possibilities, of these problems are explored most fully.

Given that this is a society in which traditions and older pieties have been corrupted by wealth--and by the power which that wealth brings--it is almost inevitable that the testing ground of moral judgments will centre upon problems raised by materialism, and on its destructive effects on inherited standards of behaviour. Furthermore, in a culture in which almost the sole function of money is to provide the means of what Wharton's contemporary, Veblen², called "conspicuous consumption", distinctions in its use lie in a narrow range from the vulgar to the refined. As a consequence, Wharton must explore the moral possibilities open to a society whose members are trained, to varying degrees and with varying degrees of success, in the use of wealth, and whose inferiority or superiority is therefore perceived to be a matter of what can be called, using the term in this broad sense, their aesthetic discernment.

The aspects of life which become points of discrimination range from trivial to more serious: choices of restaurant and guests, occasions of hospitality and wedding gifts, styles of domestic architecture and furniture, clothing and jewellery, to the upper levels of art and books. The vulgar, like the Brys, reveal themselves through ostentation; the dull, like Percy Gryce through

their lack of discernment over flavours of tea or the contents of books; and the cultivated, like Selden, through the sophisticated simplicity of their taste in all these matters, and their appearance of disdain for the wealth which underpins their society. It is to Selden's end of the scale that the word "aesthetic" would most often be applied, but by using it to designate the entire range of possible areas of discrimination, and the possible responses from vulgar to refined, my purpose is to stress that these matters are inescapably related.

At the higher end of this scale, Lily's weaknesses are soon revealed, and it is clear that she falls short of Wharton's standards in her perception of at least two cultural distinctions which also carry with them moral implications: an appreciation of the importance of the past, and a sensitive response to literature. Lily, at her worst, shows no appreciation of the moral value of tradition, making the past, instead, the grounds for a mocking appeal for the justification of her most disastrous actions: "I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from a wicked pleasure-loving ancestress" (226)--only very late in the novel does she recognize the values of "inherited obligations" and "traditional functions" (276). Her reading tastes, mostly popular fiction (with accidental excursions into *Omar Khayyám* and Euripides), or rather her inability to perceive the true and valuable in what she reads--with the

rather unconvincing exception of the Furies--are used as indicators that tell against her. I imagine that most readers would not have difficulty in agreeing with the aesthetic-moral link that Wharton takes for granted with respect to such matters.

In other areas, Lily is more skilled in discrimination than most of her fellows, and Wharton emphasizes that she possesses the power to discern between "mere display" and "the subtler manifestations of wealth" (40). The author's tone is one of approval, although it is not immediately obvious to what extent she considers Lily's abilities to be a matter of moral importance. But as the novel continues, and Lily slips downwards through the ranks of the would-be invaders, we become uncomfortably aware that the author herself is applying a scale of measurement which links the moral and the aesthetic at every level, and that though Lily may not be capable of the highest discrimination, her recognition of the difference between the ignorant ostentation of the Brys and the more sophisticated refinement of the Trenors carries with it favourable moral implications. This is confirmed by Wharton's distaste for the Gormers, whose generosity and open-mindedness are far superior to anything Judy Trenor offers Lily (Mattie's defection to Bertha Dorset notwithstanding), and yet who are clearly intended to be seen as morally inferior--on social grounds. The same is

true of the good-natured Norma Hatch, whose treatment on a broadly satiric level enables Wharton to avoid considering the moral implications of the episodes which involve her, on any but the crudest basis.

The Hatch passages, for this reason, most clearly reveal Wharton's assumptions about the links between the aesthetic and the traditional measures of worth. The ornamental excrescences which over-illuminate the overheated, over-upholstered world of Mrs. Hatch's Emporium suite are at one with the futile activities and the lack of definite hours and obligations. They are, for Wharton (even if we make allowances for her exuberant pleasure in an opportunity to ridicule tastelessness which she enjoyed indulging to powerful satirical effect) not only all moral indices, but all apparently of equal value in this regard. The unfavourable comparison with the world of the Trenors and Dorsets is clearly stated, and while the thoughts are Lily's, the judgment is less tentative than the word "seemed" might suggest (it is the consequence of the comparison, not of doubt), and it is unmistakably Wharton's:

Compared to the vast gilded void of Mrs. Hatch's existence, the life of Lily's former friends seemed packed with ordered activities. Even the most irresponsible pretty woman of her acquaintance had her inherited obligations, her conventional benevolences, her share in the working of the great civic machine; and all hung together in the solidarity of these traditional functions. (276)

Yet if we are to accept the value of such order and solidarity, we must imagine occupations of which we have

been shown no sign, forget that "the library at Bellomont was never used for reading", and ignore the evidence that Wharton herself has supplied of the ability of such a society to debase people and ideals. To be a pawn in a plot to entrap Freddie Van Osburgh, as Norma Hatch is, may be to fall victim, through moral ignorance, to the machinations of the members of the House of Mirth, but the source of the corruption is that very society to which superiority is here being attributed. Wharton's position is untenable, and at this point in the novel the links she makes between moral and aesthetic taste work, if they do succeed at all with the reader, by a cheap invitation to participate in the ridicule from a shared position of aesthetic superiority, and by a loose association of tastelessness with moral stupidity. Wharton certainly might be able to demonstrate the validity of such links--but the point is that she simply assumes there is no need to do so because, to her, they are self-evident.

Lily's fear of the ugly and the "dingy" shows similar (perhaps less conspicuous but more pervasive) evidence of a blurring of judgment on the part of the author. Dinginess is initially equated with the distasteful social and material compromises required of Lily and her mother (35), and Wharton recognizes that the dislike of dinginess may cause Lily moral difficulties. It may tempt her to use Bertha Dorset's letters for blackmail or not to discharge

her debt (295-96), and in this regard Wharton sees that Lily's "personal fastidiousness" has "a moral equivalent" in her regrettable unwillingness to recognize the ugliness in her own mind (82).

However, "dinginess" takes on a suggestion of Wharton's own distaste with the application of the word to Mrs. Penistone's expensive routine (35), and, significantly, her surroundings of ugly furniture and tasteless "art" work. Furthermore, there are times when Wharton reveals that she shares Lily's dislike of the ugly and the dingy, and attributes to such distaste moral values of which she approves. Disgust is Lily's strongest reaction to Mrs. Haffens's offer of the letters, and it is accounted for by "resistances, of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples" (104), a combination in which "taste" precedes "scruples", the two subsequently being united in her "sense... of personal contamination" (104). During another serious moral crisis, Lily assesses her complicity in Bertha Dorset's betrayal of her husband in the language of aesthetics: "the part was not a handsome one at best, and she saw it now in all the ugliness of failure" (227). This account, it is true, is given through Lily's language, and there are certainly authorial reservations here as to her ability to see as clearly as this in moments of triumph, but there seems little doubt that Wharton herself finds in the words a correct, and a morally appropriate, assessment of

Lily's behaviour.

Aesthetic judgment and aesthetic language are thus linked to Lily's moral discrimination. Wharton is often capable of impersonally, even ironically, assessing such associations in Lily's case, and it would be wrong to present her as unaware of the problem even though it is one in which, to some degree, she herself is caught up. But when we come to her presentation of Selden, Wharton appears more implicated in this aestheticized morality, and less aware of her involvement, than she is in her treatment of Lily.

Critics' reactions to Selden and his "republic of the spirit" have frequently displayed either the confusion or the disagreement that authorial ambivalence often provokes. The fundamental question which provokes critical divergence, here, is whether Selden's ideals should be taken as Wharton's own, or whether she presents them in the full and ironic knowledge that they are hopelessly flawed by his aesthetic view (and that last word is particularly appropriate for one who is so much a spectator) of life.

Marilyn Jones Lyde, in a detailed study of the moral basis of Wharton's thought, describes Selden as "Mrs. Wharton's representative of culture, integrity and personal charm" (134). Two points are worth noting here: the combination of the moral and the aesthetic in Lyde's own account, which, perhaps unconsciously, aligns critic and

author, and the critic's conscious association of the author with the character. Lyde believes "Selden may be thought of as representing the principle of balance and proportion which Lily finally achieves" (33), and describes Selden's republic of the spirit as representative of the "spiritual values" (133) and "moral idealism" towards which Lily's "finer instincts" strive (130). Furthermore, she fears no ironies in Selden's meditations after Lily's death (138).

Gary Lindberg, often an acutely perceptive analyst of Wharton's problems, is similarly uncritical of Selden's moral role:

His discussion with her of "the republic of the spirit" is, in fact, merely an explication of what has already been happening between them. Every time she sees through his eyes, she detaches herself momentarily from the values and habits of her society, thus becoming a candidate for citizenship in his republic. (65)

But, by contrast, Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues a powerfully persuasive case against Selden, one in which charges of aestheticism, the metaphor of seeing, and the link between aestheticism and morality play an important accusatory part:

Ironically, given Selden's self-consciously moral definition of his own role, he is changed very little by his contact with Lily's tragedy. He is always the connoisseur, always willing to evade complicity; and at the very end of the novel as at the beginning, we return to view Lily through his judging and imperceptive eyes. He still regards her as a moral-aesthetic object.

(125)³

I don't think there is any way to reconcile these

opposed points of view. There is, however, a way of understanding how they come about--as the result of Wharton's inability to detach herself wholly from Selden's point of view. Such a possibility is put forward in an article by Q.D. Leavis, in which she maintains that Wharton "never arrives at a judgment and never examines impartially the confused and conflicting ideas that pass through Selden's mind" (209) as he catches sight of Lily at the railway station and assesses her as if she were a piece of china. The article, published posthumously, is a brief one, and Mrs. Leavis's views are stated rather than demonstrated, but they seem to me acutely perceptive, although I would dissent from the categorical "never"s.

It is, in fact, from Selden that we hear the first use of "dingy" as he catches sight of Lily at the station among the working women: "The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was" (5). This aesthetic judgement (with Darwinian overtones to which I will return later) leads, however, to moral deliberations. Is Lily made of "vulgar clay"? If so, how could she take such a "fine finish"? Or is she, perhaps, fine material "fashioned into a futile shape"? Wharton herself picks up the analogy later (the comments can be attributed to no-one else): "Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax" (53). Thus, the terms in which Selden debates with

himself are accepted as real terms by the author and used to describe a serious question. Apparently this is not a language or an approach from which Wharton wishes to distance herself, or perhaps it is one she is less than clearly aware of sharing with Selden.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, and unavoidably touched on since, Wharton's narrative technique frequently makes it difficult to assign passages, even parts of passages, to the author or character. The account of Selden's upbringing, provoked by his seeing Lily's *tableau* and his ensuing desire to rescue her, offers just such a problem. In the paragraph beginning, "While Gerty was lost in the happy bustle..." (151), the first sentence is probably attributable to the author, but the passage certainly continues with Selden's own reflections on his earlier wish to avoid "permanent ties". However, with "Now it had been Selden's fate..." (152) the tone changes. The traditional "Now" seems to signal the storyteller's intervention and the "portrait, all smiles and cashmere" implies an amusement more impersonal than the remainder of the passage shows that Selden, on this topic at least, could be. Certainly, "Both were so conscious of restraint and discrimination in buying that they never quite knew how the bills mounted up", is telling criticism, but the indulgence of the tone is worlds away from the savage (though differing) treatments of Lily's mother or Mrs. Bry. There is, in the phrase "abstinence

combined with elegance", the same blend of authorial detachment in the humour, and shared values in the description, as attends her accounts of Lily's less subtle, but similarly aesthetic, moral discriminations. By the time we return to thoughts that are unquestionably those of Selden, with "pretty woman", we have been persuaded either to grant to *both* Selden and the author the neatly turned phrase, "the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them" (152) or to conclude there is no need to distinguish between them. The result is that we recognize in the aphorism a moral as well as an aesthetic condition of which Wharton, albeit with rueful amusement, can't help but approve.

Selden's reaction to the *tableaux* at the Brys' probably offers the most difficult challenge, next to the closing episode, in terms of assessing Wharton's attitude to his aestheticism. It is hard not to hear, in these phrases:

To unfurnished minds they remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of waxworks; but to the responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination. Selden's mind was of this order.
(133)

the Wharton who was to write, in her autobiography, of her adult reading of Darwin, that it opened "'magic casements'" for her into a "wonderworld" of "cosmic vastnesses" (94). Part of the problem in assessing Wharton's closeness or distance from Selden here lies in the equivocal language of

such passages as (*italics mine*), "he *seemed* to see before him the real Lily Bart.... as *though* her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment" (135). Such equivocations are accompanied by warnings embodied in references to "the spell of a fairy tale" (133) and Lily's less than morally exalted enjoyment over the quantity rather than the source or quality of the admiration she receives (136). These touches add to the impression that Wharton may consider Selden's susceptibility to art a dangerous characteristic. The uncertainty adds to the difficulty of deciding to what extent she endorses the aesthetic-moral language of "cheapened" and "vulgarized" which, here as elsewhere, permeates Selden's pattern of thought and judgment.

That she indulges in some irony at Selden's expense is also clear, but it should be noted that she allows him to share it with her. Imagining himself as Perseus, the rescuer, "he smiled at the whirl of metaphor with which he was trying to build up a defence against the influences of the last hour" (159). The bestowal on him of such self-knowledge works, to some degree, to counteract the negative judgements we might otherwise make of him.

Overall, two points provide a means of assessing Wharton's attitude to Selden here. One is the consequence of his aesthetic appreciation of Lily's *tableau*--his

decision to propose, which is surely to be seen as positive, despite the botching of the final outcome. The second is the return of the theme of the two Lily Barts in the closing interview in Selden's apartment (309), which picks up and confirms his perception, here, of the "real Lily". This late scene is surely intended to be read without irony, however overwritten parts of it may be⁴. Consequently, I do not think that Selden's failure to carry through with his fantasy of the rescue of Andromeda (158) is intended to be considered a judgment against him for his literary view of life or the ease of his surrender to the spell of art. It is not, in fact, a criticism of his aesthetic morality, but rather of his failure to live up to the moments of insight induced by such aesthetic stimuli. Lily's fear of the Furies is treated in the same serious way--and though this may fail to ring true for Lily it is as seriously intended in the novel as when Wharton herself used the mythic figures in her own letters (177, 222, 273, 586)--while at other times Lily's inability to comprehend or judge the quality of her reading is shown to be foolish.

We should not, therefore, dismiss the moral value Wharton attributes to literature as if she were using Selden's concern with it as a way of criticizing him. When Lily guesses that Selden may be in the library at Bellomont because he is "the only member of the party in the least likely to put it to its original use" she makes, in

Wharton's eyes, a favourable judgment on Selden.

Nor should we allow Wharton's own inability to avoid the dangers of popular romantic clichés to cause us to dismiss the closing pages as a parodic treatment of Selden. It is, after all, Wharton, not Selden, who sets up the mystification associated with "the word"², which Lily reaches for as she dies, and believes she must tell Selden to "make life clear between them" (323). Thus, we can hardly blame Selden if he finds "the word" the next day, or fails to reveal exactly what it is. It is, therefore, indefensible to argue, as Wolff does, that Selden's last scene is handled ironically by Wharton and that, when "there passed between them [the dead Lily and the grieving Selden] the word that made all clear" (329), he is indulging in "bathetic sentimentality", in an acting out of "the death of a beautiful woman as seen through the eyes of her lover... a set piece in American literature" (Wolff 132). The best we can say for Wharton is that she herself is caught up unawares in the moral clichés of the "set piece", a lapse as serious in a novelist as Lily's inability to feel the "filial instinct" for her dying father without "a few of those affecting words which an extensive perusal of fiction had led her to connect with such occasions" (33). What Wharton understands here about her character, she fails to perceive about herself.

Even though Wolff's criticism of Selden is

justified--he does indeed see Lily as a work of art and his allegiance to the "republic of the spirit" is only made possible because he participates in the life of the House of Mirth--the evidence shows that the views of Lyde and Lindberg are closer to Wharton's intentions, although one might wish it were not so. I think the answer lies, unfortunately but understandably, in Wharton's own aesthetic morality, which, though it makes her acutely aware of the vulgarities of Lily's crowd, and sometimes of the inadequacy of Lily's own aestheticized standards, also makes her incapable of a consistent recognition of the same problem at the higher level at which Selden exhibits it.

I do not believe that anyone could make much of an argument for Wharton's commitment to any alternative basis for morality. Gerty, goodhearted as she is, is condemned by such crude and patronising touches on Wharton's part as her wish that Veronese's goddesses would wear corsets (132), and her *naïveté* at the Van Osburgh wedding. Her girls' club good-works, like her advice to the Miss Silvertons of the world, clearly impress Wharton less than her services to Lily, alive and dead, and as a character, she only achieves convincing vitality for the few brief moments she is allowed by the author to hate her friend (162-63). At other times Wharton cannot persuade herself, and therefore us, that Gerty is not indeed "dingy". She is surely intended to offer an example of moral worth, but Wharton herself cannot

value her qualities sufficiently to make her philosophy an alternative to Selden's as a moral touchstone. Q.D. Leavis's view that Gerty, as Lily's opposite, is, for Wharton, therefore "necessarily dull, bornée and sentimental" seems, unfortunately, true. And while it is an exaggeration to describe Wharton's partiality for Lily as "uncritical partisanship", I think she does display "revelatory, if unconscious hostility" towards Gerty, as Mrs. Leavis argues (210).

Nettie poses a similar, if differently situated, problem, representing faith and courage at the edge of "the abyss" (320). Yet the discomfort Wharton feels with the idea of Nettie as a moral positive (and it cannot simply be a problem caused by writing about the unknown poor, as the successful, and earlier, "Bunner Sisters" shows⁴) is typified by a further recourse to the aesthetic as morally uplifting. Nettie's sense of justice in the world has been strengthened (even though based on false perceptions of Lily's position) by believing Lily is "having a good time", and by watching for accounts of her clothes and activities in the newspapers (313). There is certainly condescension in the account of the naming of Nettie's child, but the value of escapist art (at the appropriate social level) to uplift the spectator is, as in Selden's case, seriously, though here patronisingly, asserted. The irony of Nettie's misperceptions is not intended to be at Nettie's expense,

nor is there an intention to deride the power of beauty, however limited the perceptiveness of the beholder, to offer consolation, even hope. Nor can I imagine anyone wishing to argue, on the grounds that the thoughts are Lily's, that Wharton dissociates herself from the romanticized view of the "frail and audacious permanence" of Nettie's "bird's nest on the edge of the cliff" (320). The forced quality of the writing here seems more likely the consequence of an attempt to make Nettie's moral function more convincing than Wharton herself believes it can be.

What I find distressing about Wharton's attitude here is not the belief that art can provide a means of understanding and coming to grips with the moral issues of life, for it seems to me that this is indeed its most important role. But in her uneven treatment of Selden, she sometimes reveals that she is attracted to its power to offer a way out of life, an attitude which makes the "republic of the spirit" desirable *because* it represents an avoidance of the complexity and confusion of life. I am also made uncomfortable by evidence that Wharton is most fully engaged, most convinced and most convincing, when exploring and ultimately endorsing a morality not merely intimately allied to aesthetic judgment, but virtually indistinguishable from it, at points on a social scale between vulgarity and refinement which should be irrelevant to it. This is true even though Wharton is clearly aware of

the possibility of the vulgarization of aesthetic judgment by the rich, its fragility even in the older families, and its potential dangers for Lily, and even to some degree for Selden. Unfortunately, dinginess, for Wharton, as for her characters, has moral dimensions.

In making these criticisms, however, I am aware that no simple condemnation is possible here, for two important reasons. The first is that, given a society as corrupt as that of the House of Mirth, it is a very real issue as to whether disengagement, in some form, is not the sanest and most morally justifiable course to take. With Selden's attempts, albeit failures, to rescue Lily for life, Wharton seems to be denying this, although with her own rescue of Lily, by death, she seems to confirm, in the most extreme way, that withdrawal has strong attractions for her, too. Her weakness at this point perhaps derives from an understandable uncertainty, and from a consequent unwillingness, or inability, to address the problem head-on.

The second reason for tempering criticism with an acknowledgement of the difficulty she faces, is that Wharton herself (though in the novel she does not clearly distinguish between the moral benefits and moral dangers of eliding literature and life) demonstrates the ability of art to engage with life rather than to provide an escape from it. She does so by the act of exploration she undertakes in the novel, even though she, like Lily and Selden, is both a

product, and continues a member, of the society she deplures.

To turn to her treatment of sexuality is to see her struggling with similar limitations of perspective. However, it is also to realize that she does so with somewhat less awareness of the problems with which she struggles.

Given its subject matter, *The House of Mirth* might be expected to provide an understanding of the effects on sexuality of a social system which is materially and morally insecure, and in which marriage is to a great extent a matter of calculated combinations of money and status. Wharton does, indeed, take many, and varied, opportunities to explore the relationship of wealth and social status to marriage. Lily's father becomes "extinct" when he ceases to "fulfil his purpose" of providing the funds for his wife's social ambitions (33); impoverished Jack Stepney, male counterpart of his cousin Lily, must marry a dull and well-born heiress; rich Rosedale needs a wife with the right touch of cultivation and appropriate friends, and Freddie Van Osburgh must be detached from the much-divorced and geographically-unsuitable Norma Hatch, despite her pliability and wealth. Wharton also demonstrates that staying married has much to do with money: Bertha Dorset must manage the Silverton affair adroitly or risk losing her

husband's wealth; the Trenors' marriage is held together, despite Gus's affairs; because Judy's complacency is disturbed only when such relationships develop financial implications. Divorce, too, as she shows, has its commercial value--Carry Fisher, for example, well knows that both the separation and the "friendships" which follow have their own particular, and complicated, balance-sheets. Sex, however, plays little part in the more respectable of these relationships, and possibly not much in even those which are considered scandalous. Whether the absence is by accident or design on her part, however, makes a great deal of difference to our assessment of Wharton's work in this regard.

Caught up in the web of all these calculations, trapped in the marketplace of pre-matrimonial bargaining, Lily offers a social cultivation and physical beauty which make her a valuable ornament for a rich man desirous of showing off his wealth to best advantage, while the commodities she displays for sale need only a husband's money to ensure their untarnished maintenance and permanent acceptability. Wharton's moral condemnation of the necessity for such calculations is clear, if sometimes tempered by her sympathy for Lily and muddled by her own dislike of dinginess. It is more difficult, but important, to assess to what extent she is aware, that a fundamental link between marriage and sexuality has been severed.

Of course, the inhabitants of the House of Mirth are not unaffected by the power of physical attraction. There is clearly a sexual element (though perhaps unconsummated) in the relationships of Selden and Bertha Dorset, and Bertha and Ned Silverton, and we know sexual attraction to be a part of the relationship of Rosedale and Lily, Lily and Gus Trenor, and Gus and women such as Carry Fisher--and, of course, of Lily and Selden.

And yet we might wish to examine this last assumption more closely, initially because, leaving Lily and Selden aside for the moment, and with the exception of the physically, socially and culturally unappealing Rosedale, these attractions are all extra- rather than pre-marital. Furthermore, there are no examples, in Lily's *milieu*, of mutual sexual attraction within matrimony. Even Selden's parents' marriage, perhaps the most favourably portrayed, has apparently been largely a matter of aesthetics--his father's nurturing of his mother's charm and their joint concern with old lace and pictures.

There is, then, an overall pattern to these relationships which implies an association of sex with immorality, and with the breakdown of culture and traditions as symbolized by the use of the Bellomont library for flirtation, rather than with anything which Wharton favours⁷. Marital "success", on the other hand, is not linked with sex, but with a kind of aesthetic appreciation,

a preference for which is akin to Wharton's treatment of morality.

D.H. Lawrence²⁰ wrote, in his essay "Pornography and Obscenity", that those who have "a hate and contempt of sex.... insist that the real sex-feeling shall only be shown by the villain or villainess" (*Phoenix* 176). Leaving the question of Selden and Lily aside, for a moment, the two most notably sexual beings in the House of Mirth, are Rosedale and Trenor. Perhaps Bertha Dorset ought to be included, but, though her love life is conducted on "the volcanic nether-side" of surface appearances (104), she may be addicted to the intrigue rather than the practice of sex, although either way she fits nicely into the category of villainess. Trenor certainly qualifies as Lawrence's villain. In him, stupidity and sexual greed are unequivocally linked, both part of the "primitive man" whose "bewildered mind... passion had jolted from its ruts" (147). Rosedale, on the other hand, offers a more difficult problem in assessing Wharton's own sense of the relationship between sex and villainy.

Wharton deliberately stresses that Rosedale's interest in Lily is in part sexual. Lily, herself, judges that "the heat of personal inclination" underlies his "utilitarian motives" (241), and he confirms this for us when he recognizes that her beauty "lies in ambush" for him even when he is intent on being most practical (290). The

distaste provoked by Wharton's casual revelations of her own attitudes to his Jewish origins, and her stereotypical misuse of "the instincts of his race" (121), make it hard for the reader to make a fair assessment of her changing, and in some ways more sympathetic, treatment of him as the work continues. The modification was perhaps a consequence of the novel's publication in serial form while it was still being written (making it impossible for her to revise the early sections)⁷, although I don't want to argue that we have here the complexity of a Shakespearian Shylock, or evidence of a growing revulsion from her anti-semitism--the exploitation of prejudice is unfortunately constant throughout. However, if we can, for the moment, set aside this problem, it becomes clear, to Wharton's credit in dealing with sexuality, that Rosedale's finding Lily physically attractive is *not* offered as a justification for the reader's finding him abhorrent. It is linked rather to moments when he is revealed in a better light--as a kindly man when seen unawares with Carry Fisher's child, and as a compassionate man when he finds Lily destitute. Lily may be inclined to consider him, at best, as "kind... in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate" (249) but Wharton is not guilty, in the last episodes of the book, of associating his sexuality with the subhuman, although his good qualities certainly remain limited in the ways Lily suggests.

Wharton's varying treatments of Trenor and Rosedale suggest that she sees physical passion as a motivating force which, alone, is dangerous, and must either be restrained, as in Trenor's case, by "old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order" (147), or linked to other characteristics in concert with which it may not be wholly negative. This isn't to grant to sexuality the kind of importance we might hope for, but it does suggest that we should look at its function for Lily and Selden before considering whether Wharton does display, in Lawrence's words, "a hate and contempt of sex".

If Lily and Selden are to make us feel they experience a mature sexual attraction towards each other, they will have to be shown making a new pattern which breaks completely with the existing ways of the House of Mirth. The stress placed on the link between sexuality and immorality, and a disturbing (however light the touch) warmth in the treatment of the relationship of the Selden parents, suggests, however, that a mature sexual relationship may not be easy for Wharton to envisage.

Given the nature of the society and the consequent debasement of sexuality in the House of Mirth, there are two ways in which Wharton might nevertheless affirm its importance and human value. One would be to show, with unambivalent authorial approval, that Lily and Selden are sexually attracted to each other, whatever the various

difficulties they face. The other would be, while revealing them to be incapable of such a relationship with each other, to explain their failure as one of the debilitating effects of their civilization and delineate the problem with regret.

There is evidence in the novel that Wharton does, albeit sporadically, attempt the first of these possible courses of action. Lily's physical attraction to Selden is hinted at early, if cautiously, as she is tempted to embark on her Sunday truancy at Bellomont: "the blood in her veins invited her to happiness" (58). Less equivocally, after the *tableaux*, she is aware of "the quicker beat of life that his nearness produced" (137). Both references suggest that Wharton views Lily's impulses favourably, but this is not always the case. Lily's response to Selden, at the Van Osburgh wedding, is a blush: "The rise of her blood as their eyes met was succeeded by a contrary motion, a wave of resistance and withdrawal" (88), and the use of the phrase "rise of her blood" to describe the blush suggests it has sexual rather than merely social causes. However, the sentence is shaped around the metaphor of the rising and falling tide, in a novel in which water is usually associated with the fear of losing control of a situation. Since this is a verbal characteristic which is not confined to accounts centred on Lily's consciousness, this suggests that Wharton herself may connect sexual attraction to loss of power over oneself and others.

The same pattern, the weakening of attempts to portray sexual attraction favourably, also occurs later in the novel, when Wharton makes an attempt to give substance to the physical nature of the "pleasure" which "always made itself felt" when Lily meets Selden. Despite her resistance to Selden's rescue mission to the Emporium Hotel, she realizes his voice, the light on his hair, the way he moves and wears his clothes are "inwoven with her deepest life". Yet there is nothing in this passage that takes us beyond these perfunctory clichés. Furthermore, the emphasis falls on these features less as specifically sexual, and more as simply the physical characteristics of one who is important for other reasons, primarily for his capability to calm "the turmoil of her spirit" (278). The problem seems not so much to be that Wharton is trying to avoid treating Lily's sexuality directly, or that she feels that she must be discreet; it is rather that Lily just isn't there as a sexual being. In a few brief lines, describing a party during which Maggie Tulliver and Stephen Guest try, in vain, not to look at each other, George Eliot can show Maggie in the grip of a greater intensity of sexual feeling than Wharton, even though more explicit, ever seems able to generate in Lily. The difference between the two writers is instructive, in view of Wharton's admiration for Eliot's "sensuous" prose ¹⁰.

It thus comes as a shock when Lily, reflecting on the

"vision of the solidarity of life" which she has had, for the first time, through Nettie Struthers' account of her marriage, is presented as having had "a premonition of it in the blind motions of her mating instinct" (319). Nothing so crude--the word seems appropriate if we give weight to the phrase "blind motions" and to the Darwinian zoocentrism of "mating instincts"--has emerged in Lily's relationship to Selden. The lightly flirtatious aspects of their encounters, as when she leans forward for him to light her cigarette (10) can hardly be so described, even if we judge Selden's "purely impersonal enjoyment" of the act to be somewhat less impersonal than he thinks. And surely the nature of the kiss in the fairyland atmosphere of the conservatory: "her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched" (138), seems more the outcome of the aesthetic influence of the setting (perhaps on Wharton as well as the participants) than erotic impulses. It is hard to know whether Wharton is insisting, without providing the evidence, that Lily has felt such "motions" towards Selden at some time, or whether Lily's earlier, and less savoury, adventures, are here referred to, as they apparently are in the phrase "the blind groping of the blood" which specifically describes her experiences before she met Selden (65).

If Wharton fails to give substance to Lily's physical attraction to Selden, and even seems to denigrate sexuality

as "blind groping", it must also be noted that she suggests that there *is* something to be regretted in the limiting of the "blind motions of the mating instinct", when she concludes "they had been checked by the disintegrating influences of the life about her" (319). Added to Wharton's treatment of Rosedale, which suggests it may just be possible to link sexual attraction to such qualities as kindness and compassion without destroying their value, this offers some evidence for at least a theoretical recognition by her that sexuality may be a potentially positive force. This may perhaps be seen as a victory of sorts for Wharton, subject as she is to the same "disintegrating forces of the life about her" as her characters.

Overall, however, Wharton seems much more interested in portraying Lily's attraction to Selden as going beyond or deeper than sex, not in such a way as to make sex a significant part of a mature relationship but rather to emphasize its relative unimportance, and to stress Lily's development in non-sexual (and to Wharton more important) ways. As Lily makes her Sunday escape with Selden at Bellomont, early in the novel, she meditates on her feelings in doing so. In the course of considering what they are, she opposes "love" both to "some fortuitous combination of happy thoughts and circumstances" *and* to "the blind groping in the blood" (64). But this is not a preliminary to Wharton showing that Lily's understanding of the importance of

sexuality grows deeper, for she values sexuality no more highly near the end of her life, reflecting that Selden's love has "struck deeper" than "a simple instinct of the blood" into "inherited habits of thought and feeling" (320). I do not think there can be much doubt that here is another moment when, though Wharton may dissociate herself from Lily's willingness to wholly excuse Selden and blame herself, she does not deny the validity of that part of the judgment revealed by "deeper" and "simple". Nor is it possible to ignore the links Lily's reflections suggest to the aestheticized morality Selden represents.

Lily's last sleep is described in terms which make it a negation of sexuality: "the cessation of the inner throb", "the soft approach of passiveness", "each passionate pulse...stilled", "nothing to be excited about". Even, the "gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure" she feels is immediately given maternal rather than sexual connotations as she dreams of cradling Nettie's child (322), a matter to be discussed further in the next chapter. That this is a drugged sleep, leading to death, might suggest that Wharton is using the sequence to criticize the negation of sex, but if so there is no evidence of this being her conscious intention. Indeed the overall effect suggests that Wharton sees the sleep as a release from an impossible situation. Lily has felt the desire to die, in order to escape fresh failures: "If only life could end now--end on

this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities" (321) and this is exactly what the merciful author grants her, with the added bonus of an aesthetically satisfying closure. The language of negation of sex concealed within the account of Lily's dying may indeed suggest Wharton's subconscious recognition of its inevitable consequence--the denial of life, but there is little to support a case for any greater awareness, though there is more to remind us of the author who writes about her work as if it were a technical problem: "the answer in short was"--the death of--"Lily Bart".

If links between sex and villainy are the norm in the novel, and yet the treatment of Rosedale and Lily suggests tentative if sporadic explorations of more positive possibilities, it is through Selden, given his tendency to play the role of author's representative in the moral sphere, that we might expect Wharton's most definitive revelation of her attitude to sexuality.

Lily's, and the author's, retrospective review of her upbringing, carried out at Bellomont on the evening of her unsettling visit to Selden's apartment, is paralleled by Selden's, and the author's, review of his family background after he is shaken by seeing "the real Lily" among the Brys' *tableaux* (151-153). The two accounts, however, are very different in tone, Lily's at times approaching a savagery of condemnation which contrasts strikingly with the suave urbanity and lightness of approach of Selden's, a tone which

helps to mitigate the seriousness of the assessment that "in a different way he was, as much as Lily, a victim of his environment".

But, as with Lily, Wharton's primary concern is not with Selden's growth towards full adulthood, including sexuality, but with his emotional disabilities, his self-admitted desire to keep free from "permanent ties", his preference for "the luxury of charm" over the "utilitarian qualities" of "nice"-ness, his self-exculpatory choice of emotional freedom over any "makeshift alternative" to a love that was less than "the central fact of life". Wharton's implied, if indulgent, criticism is for his earlier trust in "reasoned resistances" as well as for the "impassioned self-absorption" of the newly-in-love, but her concern with his sexual nature is no more than an indirect outcome of matters which, to her, are evidently more important. Thus, Selden's determination not to respond to "pity... sympathy... helplessness" any more than to "a trick of the eyes" or "a curve of the cheek" reveals his distrust of the effects of physical attraction, but leaves us uncertain as to whether Wharton implicitly criticizes his attitude, fails to notice its significance, or agrees with it.

However, if his meditations after the evening at the Brys' suggest the peripheral nature of sex to his consideration of love, the scene of the *tableaux* (130-35) itself seems to promise a more direct access to the problem.

It is, after all, at this entertainment that Lily not only agrees to display herself as an art object, but also becomes the subject of discussion as an object of sexual interest.

Here, as so often elsewhere, the problem for the critic is to decide how aware Wharton is of what she is doing, how far she shares the attitude of the consciousness through whose eyes the action is revealed, and how critical she intends to be of that consciousness and the events it perceives. In this case, the questions are centred on Selden's reaction to Lily's *tableau*, requiring us to decide whether we endorse his response, and whether Wharton wants us to do so.

Initially, Carry Fisher's inducement of "a dozen fashionable women to exhibit themselves" suggests that Wharton is insisting that sexual display is of the essence of the performance, rather than an interpretation imposed upon it by the dissolute among the observers, such as Ned Van Alstyne. But, on reflection, the closeness of the phrase to the preceding metaphor of attracting prey suggests the women have the demeaning, but not necessarily sexual, function of bait, and also permits a transition to the treatment of their role as works of art, again, not specifically sexual, and here not necessarily demeaning either. Similarly, Wharton's criticism of Selden's function as spectator of the Brys' display of wealth is introduced as a moral-aesthetic issue, with mild implied criticism of his

initial cynical enjoyment of the vulgarly spectacular, softened, as elsewhere, by Wharton's willingness to laugh with him in his sophistication. (A somewhat different and less condescending treatment is extended to Gerty, whose enthusiasm is excused, at the other end of the scale, by Wharton's amusement at the expense of her *naïveté*.) It is really only with Van Alstyne's comment, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up, but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it", that we, as well as Selden, are deliberately jolted into a consideration of the sexual implications of Lily's *tableau*. Given the explicit placement of this "experienced connoisseur" as a voyeur "whose scented white moustache had brushed Selden's shoulder whenever the parting of the curtains presented any exceptional opportunity for the study of the female outline", it isn't easy to take Van Alstyne's reaction as a judgment shared by Wharton. Thus, even if we recognize Selden's response to the comment as an over-reaction--for Lily is no more an innocent Miranda than she is pure dryad--to see her as does Trenor or Van Alstyne is to be condemned, with them, not only by Selden but also by Wharton, for wrongly cheapening and vulgarizing her. This doesn't seem to leave us much choice but to accept that Lily, in the *tableau*, transforms herself into a work of art.

However, the problem is not so simply solved. I don't know how many readers of the novel are familiar with

Reynold's portrait of Mrs. Lloyd, or how they react to it if they see it after reading *The House of Mirth*. My own response to the picture, perhaps because my expectations had been shaped by Selden's reactions, and perhaps made all the stronger from my association of Reynolds with his best-known society portraits, was a surprised recognition of the appropriateness of Van Alstyne's remark. Nothing had prepared me for the discovery that in "selecting a type so like her own", Lily displayed not only her "artistic intelligence" but a great deal more voluptuous curve than Wharton had led me to expect¹¹. The careful arrangement of the clinging draperies, the shapely thighs and calves so conspicuously displayed, the deliberately erotic pose, make it very hard to imagine that Wharton could see, with Selden, only a "noble buoyancy" and "soaring grace". It is hard, too, to imagine that the cultured Mrs. Wharton did not know that Reynolds took the pose from Raphael's drawing of "Adam Tempted", and hard to believe, therefore, that she did not indulge in elaborate irony when she chose the portrait.

Even when addressing moral issues, Wharton wasn't always above irony at the expense of her own work, mocking her nonsensically "moral" novella *Sanctuary* (1903) by dubbing it "Sank" even while it was being written (Lewis 123). It is, however, impossible to believe that, whatever she was doing with Lily's *tableau*, she was less than serious in her aim. I think what emerges from the tension between

the overtly sexual invitation of the woman in the picture which Lily makes her own, and the revulsion we seem to be intended to feel from Van Alstyne's reaction, is a hope on Wharton's part that sexuality can be transmuted by art into something safe, even uplifting¹². She appears to believe, not so much that the human body can be beautiful, but that a seductive display before a large audience is acceptable provided the woman steps "not out of but into [the] canvas." When Leavis, while discussing the aestheticism of the nineties, the same period in which the events of the novel occur, defined it as "a retreat out of a profane world into an exquisitely cloistral art"¹³, he described just such a withdrawal as Selden makes at the Brys'. Unfortunately, Wharton, in her treatment of Lily's tableau seems disposed to join him.

The lip-service paid to the importance of sexuality, in the novel as a whole, is far outweighed by the power of art to purify life, and the value Wharton places on the "deeper" matters of sharing in a cleansed cultural inheritance. But, after all, when Lily finds Selden in the library, he is not reading, but instead engaged in conversation with a former lover from whom the library is no refuge, his state a suitable symbol for the relationship of life and art.

The confusion caused by Wharton's attempt to deal with sexuality by aesthetic means resembles, and is related

to, the effects of the tangling of aesthetic and moral judgments. It brings us back, as well, to the author who describes her writing as if it is primarily a technical problem, when her difficulties really stem from her moral preoccupations. Wharton struggles hard and creditably with the problems of morality and sexuality in the House of Mirth, but she is hampered by being one of its inhabitants. Furthermore, like Lily, she also fails to appreciate the full significance of the ancestral portraits on the wall in the library, reminders of the men and women from whom the Trenors are descended through the sexual act of procreation. Considering her interest in Darwin, this is a surprising and unfortunate failure, and one with which the next chapter is concerned.

II

The Descent of Woman:

Lily Bart, Edith Wharton--and Charles Darwin--in
The House of Mirth

Certainly, no one can deny the poetic value of the evolutionary conception.

Edith Wharton, "George Eliot", 1902 (247)¹

She had learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines; to become a worker among workers, and let the world of luxury and pleasure sweep by her unregarded. She could not hold herself much to blame for this ineffectiveness, and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the hummingbird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples?

The House of Mirth, 1905 (301)

It will probably be agreed that the use any writer makes of his or her knowledge is the sole test of its specific value.

Edith Wharton, "George Eliot" (248)

We have Edith Wharton's own testimony, in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), published towards the end of her life, to the importance she attributed to

Darwin as an influence on her thought. In fact, the relevance of Darwinism to *The House of Mirth* has become a critical commonplace, the quotation above being most often cited as an example. Yet the extent to which the novel is saturated with Darwinian references has not sufficiently been stressed, possibly because evolutionary language so permeates our own that much of it goes unnoticed among the clichés of common speech. I can testify to the uncomfortable consequences for my assumptions when I seriously engaged with Wharton's use of *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*². The result was to be shaken out of my merely complacent acceptance of Darwinian influence³, into an awareness of its fundamental implications for the novel.

Careful examination shows that there is scarcely a page of the novel on which the characteristic words, phrases and concepts of Darwinism do not occur. *The House of Mirth* is a world of natural, artificial and sexual selection, of "evolution" and "change", of "competition" and the "struggle for self-preservation", of "fitness" to survive, of "superfluous fragments of life," the danger of "extinction" or "atrophy", and of "grim necessity" combined with the appearance of "bounteous nature". It is also a world of both changing and overlapping environments, of "shelter" and its absence, of "adaptation" and the need to be "plastic", of "parasites", of "species" and "specialized races"--some

of them invaders, of "kinship", "kind" and "affinities", of "inheritance" and "inherited instincts". In Lily's case it is also, appropriately, the world of the "flower", particularly of the "rose", the "tropical flower" of the artificial "hothouse", the "orchid", and of course of the contrasted conditions of "roots" and "rootlessness", although while she is at her strongest it is also a world in which she hunts her "prey" and lurks in "ambush". Her fellow beings in the House of Mirth are "carnivorous", "predatory creature[s]", some having the power of the "anaconda" over the "rabbit". Alternatively they are "flies" in a jar, a "beetle", or a "bluebottle" under the observation of "the drawing room naturalist". Even the Emporium Hotel is "peopled" by an "elephantine sofa" and its "monstrous mates", although, in contrast, in the House of Mourning, shelter has "the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest on the edge of the cliff...."

The plot, too, is pure Darwin--by *The Origin of Species* out of *The Descent of Man*. Characteristics from the former include a number of environments, overlapping but increasingly different in the conditions of life they offer. We are shown several species, nurtured by the differing habitats, and fitted to their environments. Though many remain where they began, a few members of some species move, sometimes torn from their locations by forces beyond their power to resist, sometimes impelled by attractions of other

environments or problems in their own. Those capable of adapting to the new habitats succeed, sometimes intermingling with, sometimes mating with, and sometimes displacing those already established there. The resident species must adapt to the changed conditions brought about by the successful invaders, be displaced, or become extinct. A highly specialized organism, suited to a very limited range within a particular environment, but with only very shallow roots in it, once dislodged, is the most likely to be at risk, and, once displaced, cannot survive for long.

From *The Descent of Man*, and with the assistance of the Social Darwinists, comes the subplot of the development of morality from the social instincts as part of the mechanism of survival, and the sometimes cumbersome process of the adaptation of that morality to new situations and changed habitats.

The Van Osburghs, Trenors, Dorsets, Stepneys, Brys, Gormers, Rosedale and Norma Hatch, all fit neatly, even schematically, into this Darwinian vision, either as inhabitants or invaders of varying degrees of adaptability. Even the "parasite on the moral order," Gerty Farish, and the social parasite Carry Fisher have their places. Nettie Struthers, Mrs. Haffner and the hat-shop women inhabit a contiguous, if different, habitat with perils of its own, while the "amphibious" Selden attempts to move between more than one environment. Lily, significantly, is less and less

portrayed as an animal stalking her prey (a situation in which mate and prey are, as in the case of Percy Gryce, often one and the same) and more and more as an uprooted plant, although the "sea-anemone" in the passage used as an epigraph to this chapter catches something of both states.

But if the extent to which Darwinian language and plot permeate *The House of Mirth* has not been sufficiently stressed, neither has the relationship between the biologist and the novelist been perceived as particularly problematic. Generally Darwin's works have been treated as if they posed no difficulties of their own for the reader; thus Wharton's response to Darwin, even in the more detailed accounts of it, has been treated as if she had read, not the works themselves, but a simplified and paraphrased account of them, a convenient, and (impossibly) neutralized, abstraction⁴. Yet, as Gillian Beer has pointed out in her provocative study *Darwin's Plots* (1985)⁵, Darwin's own difficulties with language (which were as much the cause of his five revisions to *The Origin of Species* as new "facts" he wished to add) were magnified and multiplied by those who read and responded to his works.

He was telling a new story, against the grain of the language available to tell it in.... Evolutionary ideas shifted in very diverse ways the patterns through which we apprehend experience and hence the patterns through which we condense experience in the telling of it. Evolutionism has been so imaginatively powerful precisely because all its indications do not point one way. It is rich in contradictory elements which can serve as a metaphorical basis for more than one reading of

experience.... The unused, or uncontrolled, elements in metaphors such as 'the struggle for existence' take on a life of their own. They surpass their status in the text and generate further ideas and ideologies. (5, 8-9)

What is needed, then, is not simply an exercise in the identification and cataloguing of influence, for to stop at this point is to stop before much of significance has been said. It is more important to make an effort to discover, within the framework of Wharton's treatment of morality and sexuality, the relationship between her "reading of experience" and her reading of Darwin, the ways in which she sought for answers, in the rich possibilities of Darwinian language, to the most fundamental human problems which troubled her, and to judge the consequences for her in doing so. In her own words, the "poetic value" of "the evolutionary conception" may be judged, as she said of George Eliot, in the use she makes of her "knowledge".

But if the extent and complexity of Darwinian influence on this particular novel have not been fully appreciated, neither has Wharton's immersion in the implications of evolutionary theory over an extended period been adequately charted. If we turn to Wharton's account of her initial enthusiasm for Darwinism, recorded about forty years later in *A Backward Glance*, in the hope of discovering what the experience meant to her, we shall be disappointed, for the passage suffers from her regrettable compulsion to write in the stultifying clichés of an elderly *grande dame*

of letters. This makes it difficult to perceive the genuine excitement that must, as *The House of Mirth* testifies, have seized her when, soon after she made (or had made for her) a socially successful, but mentally unstimulating, marriage, her friend Egerton Winthrop, in an attempt to direct and systematize her reading,

introduce[d] me to the wonder-world of nineteenth century science. He it was who gave me Wallace's "Darwin and Darwinism", and "The Origin of Species", and made known to me Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Romanes, Haeckel, Westermarck, and the various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement. But it is idle to prolong the list, and hopeless to convey to a younger generation the first overwhelming sense of cosmic vastnesses which such "magic casements" let into our little geocentric universe. (94)

This passage, in fact, suggests only the vaguest sense of what the experience must have meant to the young woman hungry for intellectual nourishment. "Wonder-world" and "'magic casements'"--the latter no less a cliché for being a quotation from Keats, and already used by her in another context where she had discussed her approach to the writing of fiction⁷--are too tired to do more than reveal the intervening loss of enthusiasm. "Cosmic vastness" may legitimately refer to the the "cosmic" applications of evolutionary analogies made by Spencer and the other Darwinists to every possible aspect of life from business and economics to social theory, anthropology, and, of course, morality, but the suggestion that this redirected interest away from "our little geocentric universe" seems to

be a careless and accidental association called up by the word "cosmic"--Darwinism and its various offshoots were intensely "geocentric". It is clear that Wharton's mind was not on her writing, much less on her earlier excitement, here, and we must look to her work at the turn of the century for evidence of the intensity and nature of her involvement⁹.

Her initial interest was probably increased by the publication, in 1899, of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Classes*, which posited an evolutionary structure for human history, entailing the survival of earlier human instincts. These, in contemporary society, took the wasteful form of conspicuous consumption, a function demanded of wives and servants, who demonstrated, by their idleness and their expensive and impractical apparel, the wealth of those latter day barbarians, their husbands and masters¹⁰. One of Wharton's mentors, William Dean Howells, wrote an enthusiastic and early review of Veblen's book, recommending it to "the novelist of imaginative force" as,

material of that great American novel¹¹ which, after so much travail has not yet seen the light.... the most profoundly interesting spectacle which life has ever offered to the art of fiction, with elements of equal tragedy and comedy, and a pathos through all which must be expressed, if the full significance of the spectacle were to be felt.... This is the most dramatic moment, the most psychological moment which has ever offered itself to fiction. This is the supreme opportunity of the American novelist.... This life can hardly be studied by one who is a part of it, not merely because that sort of life is not fruitful in talent, but because the procession cannot very well

look on at itself. The observer must have some favorable position on the outside, and must regard it neither with 'a foolish face of praise', nor with satiric scorn. (288, 290)

It is possible to see in Selden, with his highly developed interest in spectacle, and his attempts to maintain an "amphibious" life, the fulfilment of these suggestions as the *alter ego* of the personally-implicated and more satirically-scornful Wharton. The exploration of the moral implications of this social Darwinist theory for the individual, female and male, and for the segment of society to which the author herself (with her own aspirations) belonged, would undoubtedly have appealed to her. At any rate, 1900 found Wharton toying, in her *donnée* book, with ideas which were to find expression in *The House of Mirth*, under the provisional, Veblenesque, title "A Moment's Ornament" (Lewis 150, Wolff 109). Given the absence of references by Wharton to Veblen, it is possible that the links between his analysis of society and Lily's experiences are the result of Veblen's work being a topic of popular discussion, but the connections cannot be wholly fortuitous¹¹, and given Wharton's voracious appetite for reading, are probably consequent upon her direct reading of the work.

By 1904, when the novel was well underway, it was titled "The Year of the Rose", remaining as such while in typescript (Wolff 109). Social Darwinism had taken many forms, but one of these (antithetical to that of Veblen, who

deplored and satirized the conduct of the profiteers of business) was directly descended from Spencer's concept of "survival of the fittest", a celebration of the strength of the victor, even if victory was won at the cost of the weak. Most congenial to "the captains of industry", this view was enshrined in the analogy put forward by John D. Rockefeller to a Sunday School class, and published in 1902¹²:

The growth of large business is merely a survival of the fittest.... The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business, It is merely the working-out of a law of nature and a law of God. (Hofstadter 45)

It is, of course, a vase of American beauty roses that irritates the youthful Lily by its reappearance on the luncheon table after Mrs. Bart's last dinner and immediately before her husband's financial and mortal collapse (30). More telling still, is Lily's reaction to her old finery near the close of her own life, which provokes the reflection that,

after all, it was the life she had been made for: every dawning tendency in her had been carefully directed toward it, all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty. (317)¹³

Unquestionably the final title, calling up the biblical houses of "Mirth" and of "Mourning" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-6), in concert with the associations of Lily's name with the

flowers that "toil not, neither do they spin" (Matthew 6:28-29)¹⁴, bestowed a dignity upon the novel, and upon the issues with which it dealt, that the previous titles could not do, yet these details are of considerable interest because they record the genesis of the work and the concerns it continued to treat. It cannot have escaped Wharton's notice, however, that Darwinism lent itself, in two men who could both be labelled "Social Darwinists", to very different understandings of society, neither of which could be seen as morally neutral. The contrast should have been instructive. The effects of this potential for diverging readings will be considered later in this chapter.

In 1902, Wharton wrote her review of Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot*. The essay is best known for its exploration of the compensatory effects of Eliot's unconventional private life on her attitude to duty and convention in her fiction, an interest sometimes linked to Wharton's own personal difficulties with her marriage (Lewis 109, Wolff 107) and the reflection of these problems in her work. Yet it is also notable for her defence of Eliot's interest in Darwin as being a source of creative impulse, of the "use of metaphors and analogies drawn from science" as enlarging "the range of poetic imagery", and of "almost all of the famous scientific hypotheses" as having "an imaginative boldness" justifying the metaphor "*le poème du savant*" (427). Though Wharton saw the imaginative promise in

Darwin's language, however, she may not have been sufficiently aware of the effect, on those who were "nourished" by it (427), of (in Beer's words) the "unused, or uncontrolled" and sometimes "contradictory elements" in Darwin's own metaphors.

One more piece of evidence for the intensity of Wharton's engagement with Darwinism at the time she was writing *The House of Mirth*, comparatively trivial in itself, but indicative of problems to come, may be found in the collection of short stories she published in 1904. Playing wittily with the dual implications of Darwin's choice of title for his study of mankind's place in evolutionary theory, Wharton chose, as her title story, "The Descent of Man". The tale tells, with a lightness of tone far removed from that of her next novel, of a scientist's betrayal, in a series of small but significant steps, of his leanings towards the "cold determinism" of science, for the rewards of publishing a work full of "things that popular preachers would quote in their sermons" (17, 16). Ironically, in betraying his belief in determinism, the professor is betrayed by it, or at least by the excuse it offers. "The determining cause of his consent was the fact that the book was already in the press" (18). It isn't wholly clear, from the tone of the story, which handles popularized science a good deal more roughly than the professor's Darwinian studies, whether Wharton is fully aware of the problem she

raises over the issue of determinism; nor if, in playfully extending her metaphoric treatment of "an idea" as a sexually seductive alternative to dull domestication, she isn't caught up in a personal predilection more serious than she might admit, one that might suggest problems in her treatment of sexuality. And there may be a further, and deeper, irony. In pursuing her exploration of the descent of woman in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton, too, may have been, like the professor, betrayed into a similarly paradoxical situation.

Though *A Backward Glance* can do no more than dimly record Wharton's earlier interest in Darwinism, *The House of Mirth* reveals the intensity, the moral focus, and some of the problems inherent in that interest. To turn to the quotation which is used as an epigraph to this chapter, is to see these elements revealed in a key segment of the novel. To read the work with the conclusions of the previous chapter in mind, is also to realize something of the intensity of the impact resulting from the collision of two ways of thinking.

The passage from *The House of Mirth* (301) which provides an epigraph for this chapter is one of the most quoted passages in the work, specifically in connection with its Darwinian explanation of Lily's inability to take control of her life. Critics including Nevius (57), Lyde

(135) and Lindberg (127) accept, without any reservations, that the passage expresses Wharton's views, although Friman (175), in an attempt to rescue the novelist's consistency of vision, maintains that the consciousness is Lily's throughout, an argument I will return to later. The structure of the passage supports the majority view, suggesting a shift from Lily's self-examination to an authorial intervention with "and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed", a point at which Wharton, in language inappropriate to Lily herself, takes over to place Lily's problems in a specifically Darwinian perspective:

Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product that she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock.

Whatever the grounds for her moral judgment, Wharton's concern with morality, as the discussion in the previous chapter has made clear, is central to her examination of Lily's and Selden's relationship to each other and to their society. The introduction of stark determinism reduces Wharton's careful exploration of moral issues based on individual responsibility to a shambles. Blake Nevius (1953) sees the problem clearly:

It is impossible, perhaps, to calculate [the evolutionists'] influence, but it has never been considered.... [Lily] is as completely and typically a by-product of her heredity, environment and the historical moment... as any protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel.... [However Wharton's] view was conditioned by a faith in moral values that collided head-on with the implications

of determinism. (56-58)

but having raised the problem, he casually drops it again with a denial of the importance, or even the reality, of the collision, and shifts the problem into the personal sphere:

But the day is past when we necessarily see a contradiction if two views are embraced simultaneously. Naturalism allies itself conveniently--and, if need be, temporarily--with a personal mood of despair, and I think it likely that this is what happened in Mrs. Wharton's case. (58)

To push aside the problem in this way, however, is to fail to engage with one of the most fundamental problems of the novel, although perhaps the explanation of this lies in his own language. That he could write, without apparently being aware of his own assumptions, that Wharton's "view was *conditioned* by a faith in moral values" reveals just that unexamined element of Darwinism in Nevius's own thinking which makes it more difficult for all of us to appreciate the extent to which we live within the boundaries set around thought by Darwin's language.

Lyde also recognizes the passage as "the clearest sort of determinism" (136), but she becomes concerned, at this point in her argument, with the issue of whether the novel ought to be called a tragedy, and sets the problem of contradiction aside in order to consider whether Lily might properly be seen as a tragic figure and to explore an appropriate definition of tragedy. Like Nevius, and for essentially similar reasons, she does not concentrate on the

problem raised by Darwinism, because, living within the assumptions which our language has absorbed makes it difficult to realize that there is anything in need of examination, while the problem of defining "tragedy" never fails to arouse critical interest.

Lindberg is, rightly, a good deal more concerned about the problem than this, however. He offers as his solution a change in the philosophical tenor of the work between the first and second parts:

Lily changes, in other words, from a complex individual making choices and facing their consequences, into an agent of the plot, a figure doomed and pursued by the implacable furies.... It is disturbing to see Lily destroyed, but it is far more disturbing to see Wharton change Lily's qualities and make her destruction so largely arbitrary; it defeats the expectations created by book 1.... the individual, morally responsible character has been sacrificed to her creator's concern with social determinism.... That the spectacle of Lily's destruction haunts one's memory is primarily due to Wharton's earlier seriousness about her as a psychologically and morally substantial being. There is something repugnant about comparing Lily Bart to a sea-anemone. (126-128)

This solution to the problem, which nevertheless remains a criticism of Wharton, fails in two ways. Lindberg does not adequately demonstrate or account for the shift from moral responsibility to social determinism at a particular point in the novel (in this case from the first to the second book); and, more seriously, and underlying the first failure, he does not recognize that the determinism he deplores is to be found throughout the work¹⁵.

Darwinism, after all, permeates not merely the second half, but the whole, of the novel and brings with it philosophical implications which, logically, leave no room for anything but an illusion of free will. Every organism including man, if seen as the product of the interplay of environment, heredity and chance, is the sum of these influences and acts accordingly. Even as he formulated his theory, as early as 1838, Darwin recognized the implications of his ideas and admitted privately to himself in his notebook, in a sentence he marked with a bracket of emphasis, "I verily believe free will and chance are synonymous.--Shake ten thousand grains of sand together and one will be uppermost,--so in thoughts, one will rise according to the law" ("M" 31). But, since our illusions are products of this process, Darwin recognized a further difficulty, expressing the problem with an awkwardness of phrasing which suggests his discomfort: "There is great probability against free action.--On my view of free will, no one could discover he had not it" ("N" 49)¹⁴.

But for Wharton, Carry Fisher's speculation over whether Lily fails through flightiness or because she despises what she works for (189) clearly addresses a real issue intended to provoke the reader's serious consideration, although this would be of little concern if she had no freedom of choice. Furthermore, Wharton obviously endorses (emphasizing her support with Biblical

overtones) Lily's resistance to the power of "all her past weaknesses" to draw her "toward the path their feet had already smoothed" as she rejects George Dorset's offer (245), and approves such moments of self-recognition as Lily achieves over the Trenor and Dorset affairs (166, 169, 227). The result, in the work of an author for whom there clearly *is* a requirement for moral responsibility, of the collision with Darwinist determinism, is the disarray caused by a frequent and disconcerting shifting of standpoint.

Of course, some of the fatalistic philosophy in the work emanates from its characters, and, although not all of this is specifically Darwinian, it contributes to the impression of a society with a vague and uncritically determinist cast. "Fate" and "destiny", used as they had been for many centuries, are commonplaces in the mouths of characters as diverse as Carry Fisher, Lily's mother and aunt, and the Brys. Fate also figures in the views of the active and intrepid Gerty, although her language, perhaps as befits one who is more alert to social issues, is more specifically Darwinian than that of some of the other characters. To her, Lily's beauty is "a natural force", and Selden's infatuation thus a "fatal necessity" (116). She excuses Lily on account of her upbringing (270) and her environment, which Gerty sees as something enfeebling from which Lily must be "detached" (268), a view no less Darwinian for its opposition, more apparent than real, to

the "sea-anemone" analogy.

Fate, often in a Darwinian context, is a word which dominates Lily's vocabulary, though her attitude changes from "fits of angry rebellion" (39) against it at the beginning: "It was a hateful fate--but how to escape from it? What choice had she?" (25), to resignation near the end: "she must learn to fall in with the conditions of her life" (316). In fact, Lily accepts popularized Darwinian views so implicitly that her moral reflections are expressed in Darwinian terms. She is much less concerned with the issue of her personal responsibility, and much more likely to speculate on whether environment ("the way I was brought up") or heredity ("my blood") should be blamed for her problems (226).

But Lily, as the previous chapter has shown, is frequently held at a distance from the author, whereas Selden's thoughts are often harder to distinguish from Wharton's own. The retrospective passage on his being "as much as Lily a victim of his environment" is inconclusive as evidence of Wharton's views, given that it may possibly express his own defensiveness rather than the author's judgment. However, in the closing pages of the book, which I have argued cannot reasonably be seen as critically presented, but are offered with authorial approval, his meditations also slip into Darwinian terminology: "If the moment had been fated to pass from them... it had been saved

whole out of the ruin of their lives. It was this moment of love.... which had kept them from atrophy and extinction... in every struggle against the influence of her surroundings" (329)¹⁷. The emphasis on the waging of the "struggle" as, in itself, representing a spiritual victory of sorts, still leaves Selden trapped within the terms of Darwinist determinism.

It is, however, in the authorial intervention in the "sea-anemone" passage that Wharton reveals most clearly her willingness to commit herself to the same Darwinian determinist argument accepted by her characters. Friman's argument that the passage is restricted to Lily's viewpoint is contrary to the language of the section beginning "Inherited tendencies... ". Elsewhere in the work, Lily's Darwinism is fittingly embodied in a simplified and popularized language, while that of this part of the passage is clearly that of the author ("highly specialized product", "organism", "narrow range") at a technical level not natural to Lily's vocabulary. This is Wharton speaking in Darwinian terms, and in so doing committing herself to the Darwinist philosophy.

And, Wharton, in thus accepting the Darwinian trinity of environment, heredity and chance, finds herself caught up in a deterministic universe. This has "advantages" in that it allows her to excuse the waverings and inadequacies of Lily and Selden. But to her much greater disadvantage, it

puts her into conflict with her deepest sense of personal moral responsibility, a consequence revealed in the instability of her position and the resultant uncertainty of her readers¹⁸.

However, in response to her dilemma, Wharton finds, like many before her, a partially satisfying, if not strictly logical, solution in the exaltation of the individual's duty to participate in the struggle for personal and moral survival, even if doomed to failure. Nettie, "one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap", carries the heaviest weight of this argument. "Whatever fate the future reserved for her she would not be cast into the refuse heap without a struggle" (313). The effect of deliberately couching in Darwinist terms Lily's, and the author's, admiration for this refusal to give in, is to highlight the insistence that a Darwinian viewpoint should not be seen as a justification for surrender. The metaphor used for Nettie points up Wharton's belief that this is the answer to Lily's plea, "What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap" (308).

Thus, like George Eliot in her explorations of determinism¹⁹, Wharton does not address the logical problem that, in Darwinian terms, it is natural for the healthy organism to struggle to survive, and therefore that efforts

to do so are not the outcome of a morally responsible choice, for if she did she would have to recognize the impossibility of reconciling moral responsibility with the theory of natural selection. Instead, the struggle, in itself, is assigned moral value, and in this context we can see the importance Wharton ascribes to Lily's efforts, however sporadic and limited, to exert her will-power and refuse to surrender to the forces of environment and heredity. We can see, too, that Selden, in his closing reflections on their "fleeting victory over themselves" (consisting, as that victory has, of the struggle rather than the outcome) speaks for Wharton and not simply for himself.

Wharton cannot be blamed for failing to solve the issues of human freedom and responsibility which have so long perplexed humanity, and presumably will continue to do so. Darwinian theories had not introduced new difficulties, but rather had raised the perennial problems in a new guise, and novelists such as Eliot and Wharton tackled them with a good deal of courage.

But if the "solution" was to insist on living as if one had choices to make, as it was for Wharton, then this permitted, and indeed required, that one address other moral issues, even though logic--and Darwin²⁰--might insist that such decisions were illusory. It is therefore necessary to examine Darwin's own exploration of the problems of morality

in an evolutionary world, a topic which he courageously tackled head-on in *The Descent of Man* (1871), in order to discover what effect his theories had on her thinking in this respect.

Though Wharton's solution to the problem of determinism and morality was to favour an attempt to live as if the individual had the choice to struggle against the effects of environment and heredity, Darwin chose a different procedure, but one which inevitably had its repercussions on Wharton's attempts to treat her society in Darwinian terms. Like many others in a difficult situation, Darwin turned to definition, using it as a means of constructing a linguistic defence against the charge that his theory denied man his moral nature and denied "differences between man and the lower animals" (*Defence of Man* 471). The solution was in some ways simple--he defined "morality" to suit his needs. But the theory accounting for man's moral development, itself, demanded elaboration, and when he finally extended his public argument to man's position in the evolutionary process, in *The Descent or Origin of Man and Sexual Selection*, which were published together in 1871, he devoted two chapters, and several other sections of chapters, not to mention various summaries of previous discussions, directly to the subject²¹.

Prefacing his argument with an uplifting quotation

which revealed his anxiety about the nature of his argument and his desire to propitiate those who had already called his views immoral, he quoted a paean, and a question, from Immanuel Kant to

"Duty! Wondrous thought, that workest neither by fond insinuation, flattery, nor by any threat, but merely by holding up thy naked law in the soul, and so extorting for thyself always reverence, if not always obedience; before whom all appetites are dumb, however secretly they rebel; whence thy original?" (471)

Having thus attempted to achieve an appropriate tone, he went on to explore the beginnings of man's moral nature, "Duty's original", tracing its "highly probable" development from the animal social instincts acted upon by man's intellectual powers. However, in quoting, with apparent approbation (but perhaps also some self-protective caution), "Sir B. Brodie" who, "after observing that man is a social animal... asks the pregnant question 'ought this not to settle the disputed question as to the existence of a moral sense?'" (472), he hinted at a willingness to omit even intellect from his definition of morality. To such a definition, clearly, determinism would pose no problems, for it permitted the designation of the most mechanical behaviour, providing it was socially directed, as moral. For Wharton, with her insistence on responsibility and struggle, such a definition could not help but be too broad.

In these chapters (IV and V, 471-511), Darwin argued that man's "social instinct" developed into "social

sympathy" which was gradually extended from family to tribe to humanity. He then outlined the effect of the intellect on the instincts, maintaining that man's intellectual powers led him to favour behaviour beneficial to the community over short term satisfaction because, though both were the result of instinct or impulse, personal gratification was, in the long run, weaker than the satisfaction of the social instincts. Habit, and community approval expressed through language, were also given a part in shaping this development (473). It may be noted, for later consideration, that one would expect the automatic nature of this "moral" sense to give Wharton trouble, although the role of the intellect and the stress on the relationship of individual and community, given her reputation for a formidable mind and acute social analysis, could be expected to offer an attractive means of organizing her understanding of society.

Darwin's discussion of "morality" reveals a number of problems from which he could not extricate himself. Two are of particular interest with reference to Wharton. The "mental faculties" were seen as working with the social instincts, and yet "the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason" (491). Linked to instinct was impulse, to which he accorded an uncertain position in man's "morality". Impulsive actions, which spring from the instincts, "will more commonly lead him to gratify his own desires at the expense of other men" (484),

but impulses resembling those of animals may lead to unselfish actions (because, after all, social animals have social instincts) and, in such circumstances, "it seems scarcely possible to draw a clear line of distinction" between amoral impulses and moral deliberations (482). Given his definition of morality, such a distinction was, in fact, not necessary.

Ironically, the process of "moral" evolution he described leads to the undermining of the law of natural selection (for which phrase, by the sixth edition he had adopted as an alternative Spencer's term "the survival of the fittest") by extending man's sympathies and protection to the "imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society" (493). In Wharton's terms these were the Lilies and Netties of the world, though they were not recipients of much sympathy or protection from their society, except from the almost equally powerless Gerties. In contrast to Darwin's ambivalence over the ultimate survival of the "fittest" or the "maimed", Wharton was clear. To be fit was to have money, and therefore power, and, in material terms at least, the fittest would win.

Lastly, Darwin faced the problem of "descent" and "ascent". "Descent", chosen for its genealogical associations, clearly cannot be a neutral word, carrying with it, in addition to the negative suggestions of downward movement in general and the Fall in particular, Darwin's own

wish to decentre man, to zoomorphize him, and thus to endow the word with positive, if unusual, associations:

that man is descended from some lowly organised form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many.... For my own part I would as soon be descended from... that old baboon, who descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs--as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practises infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.

Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale.... We must however acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities... sympathy... benevolence... god-like intellect...--with all these exalted powers--Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (919-920)

Darwin had long been engaged, not always successfully, with the problem of value-laden words, even in strictly biological contexts²². The problem was even more difficult when the subject of study was man; and it was not to be satisfactorily resolved, the passage above coming from Darwin's attempt to sum up his argument at the very end of *Sexual Selection*. Words like "risen" and "summit" as automatically carry positive associations as the more explicit "sympathy" and "benevolence", and the result of this was to represent man's development as progress, an effect which Darwin wished, unavailingly, to neutralize. This forced him deliberately to oppose the effects of such words with arguments supported by examples of "moral" animal behaviour.

But the difficulty lay not only in persuading his readers; it was also Darwin's own. The comparison of baboon and savage was intended to suggest a descent in more than the genealogical sense, but it was one with which Darwin was not completely comfortable. Thus the whole of the fifth chapter of *Descent* enacted an inconclusive debate within his own mind, focussed on the issue of the ascent and decline of human societies. How, given the action of natural selection, can the civilization it produces prove inimical to the process which produced it? And how can the historically-documented decline of various societies be explained? In the long run, Darwin had difficulty in believing it could, and the last word in the internal debate endowed the idea of "descent" with the positive connotations of "ascent":

To believe that man was aboriginally civilised and then suffered utter degradation in so many regions, is to take a pitiably low view of human nature. It is apparently a truer and more cheerful view that progress has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion. (511)

Darwin's uncertainty thus offered alternative ways of viewing evolutionary change, neither, whatever he might wish, being neutral. And for many of those who saw society in "Darwinian" terms, among them Herbert Spencer and his disciples, the optimistic notion of progress was the one which they abstracted from his debate.

But if we consider *The House of Mirth* it becomes clear that Wharton, unlike Spencer, is drawn to the more pessimistic potential of Darwinian theory. But while Darwin conceded temporary lapses (even, possibly, moral degradation between the ape and the savage) he nevertheless asserted the supremacy of his own society, whereas Wharton sees hers as having fallen away from earlier standards. Something of the value she places on tradition as a force for moral good in a society which had "descended" from the New Yorkers' ancestors towards the new savagery of Gus Trenor and his like, can be seen when the "primitive man" is finally, though barely, subdued by "old habits, old restraints, the hand of inherited order" (146), by "traditions" he is less "likely to overstep" because they are "so purely instinctive" (115). For related reasons, Selden appeals to Lily because his height and features, "in a land of amorphous types gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race, of carrying the impress of a concentrated past" (65). Wharton's incorporation of Darwinian terms into these passages makes it clear that she is neither relying merely on conventional ideas of tradition, nor swallowing Darwin whole, but attempting to scrutinize what she sees through Darwinian eyes, finding in the process that she is forced to place a much heavier emphasis on the reversion to savagery than Darwin, in his ambivalence, had been disposed to accept.

While Darwin's uncertainty over "descent" was revealed in his text and enabled his followers to take opposing views on the issue of progress, Wharton's pessimistic view brought its own problems, leading to the lack of any real alternative to the House of Mirth except as represented by Nettie--and, as I have already argued, Wharton could not make, of her, a convincing improvement, however she might wish to do so.

But if Wharton tends towards acceptance of the more pessimistic aspects of Darwin's two conceptions of "progress", on the issue of "impulse" she chooses the more positive of his wavering views. Surprisingly for one who values order, tradition and intellect so highly, she is strongly drawn towards impulse (linked to feeling and opposed to calculation) as a possible way around those difficulties which are caused by the civilized virtues and which appear to be otherwise impassable obstacles to total honesty. The solution is akin to Darwin's when he searches back beyond the savage to the heroic baboon for a source of virtue for civilized mankind.

The high points of the relationship of Lily and Selden can be charted from those moments when they reach back beyond habit and training. When Lily recognizes the danger of yielding to a "passing impulse" by "doing the natural thing" in visiting Selden's apartment, we are aware that, despite the disregard of convention, the act she

subsequently regrets has the author's approval. On the other hand, Lily's desires to convert the results of impulse into calculated profit in dealing with Trenor or Gryce (the latter condemned for being "most inaccessible to impulses and emotions," 49) are clearly part of her worst self (85, 21). Part of Selden's weakness, in Wharton's eyes, is that he often responds so suspiciously to Lily's moments of spontaneity, and part of his strength that he also finds those impulses attractive. As they talk in his apartment, he wavers from certainty that her "imprudences" are part of a "carefully elaborated plan" (5) to a pleased recognition that her spontaneity is real (6) and later at Bellomont comes to a solution which allows him to incorporate his conflicting reactions into one: that her "genius lies in converting impulses into intentions" (67), a conclusion with which Lily, at her most self-confident, would concur, but of which Wharton clearly does not approve. And that Selden, despite his fears, realizes not only that Lily's liking for him is spontaneous, but that he finds the "unforeseen element" this introduces into his life to be "stimulating" (69), is obviously intended to be seen as being in his favour.

In the closing scenes there can be no doubt of Wharton's championing of impulse and feeling over convention and restraint. The impasse at the Emporium Hotel "could have been cleared up only by a sudden explosion of feeling"

but "their whole training and habit of mind were against the chances of such an explosion" (278) and the moment is lost. Selden, always the laggard, is responsible for the failure of Lily's last attempt to reach him: "Such a situation can be saved only by an immediate outrush of feeling; and on Selden's side the determining impulse was still lacking", even though Lily herself had passed far beyond the paralysing effects of "well-bred reciprocity" (307).

Darwin's ambivalence freed Wharton to select the emphasis she found most congenial. But, apparently, she was now in the paradoxical position of upholding tradition and convention as well as their circumvention by impulse and spontaneity. When she sought a solution to this difficulty, it was in Darwinist terms that she did so. The attempt comes in a passage which Wharton told a correspondent was the encapsulation of her thesis²³--a passage recording Lily's "first glimpse of the continuity of life" which Nettie Struthers inadvertently gives her:

It was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment....it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now, the drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion, without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than any other; there was

no centre of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself and tenderness for others. In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood--whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties--it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving. (318-319).

Though this is Lily's recognition, and the tone sometimes admits some of Lily's self-pity ("poor little tentacles of self"), Wharton is in control here, as could be deduced from the language ("links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving", "grave endearing traditions"), as well as from the dominant metaphors (the house, the flood, a organism something like a sea-anemone) even had she not affirmed the thematic nature of the passage.

Her central, Darwinian, conception of the rootless, and therefore doomed, plant, suggests that she believes impulse and feeling can be brought into harmony with tradition by investing the latter with the qualities of a firm surface to which the plant can cling, enabling the roots to strike even deeper into the nourishing sources of human feeling beneath the surface, and (again an extension of a Darwinian concept, this time from *The Descent of Man*) into a shared source of human strength. Clearly the emphasis of the passage, which then slips into the imagery of house as repository of tradition (in a way strongly

reminiscent of George Eliot²⁴), does not represent a finished piece of philosophy--it seems to be working on a much less formal, and much less clearly formulated, level than that would require. But it does suggest a means by which Wharton may have sensed that some reconciliation between convention and impulse was possible, and possible on a moral level.

Thus, the experience of reading Darwin afforded Wharton opportunities to explore moral issues in ways which took her beyond the source from which she derived her inspiration. In one area in which she was particularly vulnerable, the aestheticized morality which is the subject of the previous chapter, Darwin's ideas may even have enabled her to recognize her own predilection more clearly.

Lily's most Darwinian skill, her adaptability, which obviously fascinates Wharton, provides such a link. The adaptation of organisms to the environment and to the other organisms within it is a feature of natural selection which aroused in Darwin himself a great deal of enthusiasm, as his choice of adverbs shows: "beautifully adapted," "exquisitely adapted," "admirably adapted," "perfectly adapted." He is often clumsy and uncertain when discussing aesthetic matters, struggling awkwardly and repeatedly with the issue of whether man and beast share the same standards of beauty, but it is clear that he has no problems when unselfconsciously voicing his delight in the intricate

inter-relationships which, ever changing, nevertheless constantly re-adjust to remain in an ordered harmony: "I can see no limit to the amount of change, the beauty and complexity of the coadaptations between all organic beings" (*Origin* 82). It is very likely that such a view had a strong appeal for Wharton--she who chose for the epigraph on the title page of *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) a quotation from Thomas Traherne, "Order the beauty even of Beauty is."

Like those animals and plants which Darwin identifies as being the result of man's "artificial selection," often designed to be primarily ornamental, Lily's "organisation" is also "something quite plastic" which men can "model almost as they please" (*Origin* 30). From the artist, Morpeth, who sees her as a work of art, not only to copy, but to shape by virtue of her "vivid plastic sense" (131) and "plastic possibilities" (237), to Selden himself, who admires her artistry in utilizing "fine shades of manner by which she harmonized herself with her surroundings" in order to protect herself from danger, Lily is the object of the kind of aesthetic appreciation that Darwin expresses.

It is at first surprising when, after her discussion of the Republic of the Spirit with Selden, Lily says, with what seems to be a very odd turn of phrase to describe an aesthete, that she has had a "sudden glimpse into the laboratory where his faiths were formed" (73). But, indeed, there are, in Selden, many of the qualities shared by

aesthete and scientist alike, particularly the stress on detached observation. Lily, rightly, fears that this interest is directed at her; and though we can see that Selden does not intend the crude manipulation that she suggests: "you're so sure of me that you can amuse yourself with experiments", she is certainly the object of his observation, and there is undoubtedly some truth in the second part of his response: "I am not making experiments.... Or if I am it is not on you but on myself" (73). Later in Monte Carlo, he is still treating himself in the same way, proud of the "personal detachment" which allows him to scrutinize his feelings "even in moments of emotional high-pressure" (187). Only in the closing scene does he fully realize that his "detachment from the external influences which swayed her" has, by increasing his "spiritual fastidiousness," kept them apart (329), and, as we have already seen, his inaccessibility to impulse has prevented the overcoming of his habitual detachment.

But Lily is the perfect subject for study by both aesthete and scientist--her adaptability is the single characteristic that makes her the perfect complement, or victim, of each. But as her nervous fear of Selden's intentions shows, though she puts her faith in a combination of adaptability and pliability, she is also aware of the danger of thus losing all identity in a kind of invisibility. She has therefore long maintained the "habit

of adapting herself to others without suffering her outline to be blurred"--this being one of the examples of the "skilled manipulation of all of the polished implements of her craft" (237).

But as this language reveals, Lily's outline is kept sharp only because she treats herself as work of art, and can therefore, for longer than would otherwise be possible, resist the chisel (or scalpel) of others. The artist, Morpeth, recognizes something of this when he becomes aware that something in her resists his art: "not the face: too self-controlled for expression; but the rest of her--gad, what a model she'd make" (237). But the paradoxical nature of this form of resistance is most clearly revealed at the *tableaux*.

Though the "personality" of the other actors has been skilfully "subdued"--suggesting a merely temporary state, Lily presents a picture which is "simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart" (134). Although this might seem to be the very opposite of adapting to her surroundings in the Darwinian manner, her "artistic intelligence" enables her, in effect, to become a work of art "without ceasing to resemble herself" because, indeed, she *is* a work of art and she has stepped "not out of but into" the canvas. The outlines she has fought so hard to maintain are the outlines of an artifact, and just as the background of the picture is a well-groomed and undistracting woodland scene, a merely

artificial nature, so Lily is artificially "herself"-- perfectly adapted to the artifice she inhabits in terms which are at once aesthetic and Darwinian.

The moral dangers of this adaptability Wharton both sees, and makes ominously plain. Lily's "faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings, hampered her in the decisive moments of life. She was like a water plant in the flux of tides," at the mercy of "the current of her mood" (53)--a state as dangerous to her moral judgment as to her worldly calculations. For, unfortunately, Lily's "faculty for renewing herself in new scenes" means "moral complications existed for her only in the environment that had produced them" (196).

This recognition comes in a sustained passage in which it is clear that Lily's adaptability is, in Wharton's view, a serious moral liability, and in which, as so often in the novel, Wharton demonstrates a link between Lily's aesthetic appreciation, her adaptability and her moral weakness. It occurs as Lily, enjoying the spectacular scenery of Monte Carlo, is uneasily, but only transitorily, aware of her butterfly ability to shed her old responsibilities in new surroundings: "How beautiful it was--and how she loved beauty! She had always felt that her sensibility in this direction made up for certain obtusenesses of feeling of which she was less proud" (196). Lily's problems and temptations as victim and art object are

the mirror image of Selden's, and respond to, and reinforce, his tendencies to be the scientific and aesthetic observer. As an art object or the subject of an experiment, Lily has no moral responsibilities; as observer, Selden may justify remaining uninvolved.

Thus, among the complex effects of Darwinian thought on Wharton's novel, it is probable that Darwin's insights into adaptation, which clearly appealed to her own sense of order and the beauty of order, assisted her to see the dangers of her aesthetic morality (and her urge to study and analyse society) somewhat more clearly. As I have noted in the previous chapter, Wharton is intermittently aware of her own temptations in this regard, and is admirable in her ability to discern something of her own problems. An understanding of this aspect of the survival of the fittest may have enabled her to become more sharply aware of the links between Lily as a product of artificial selection and as an object of art, one who is partly the creation of others and partly of herself, who substitutes an appreciation of beauty for an awareness of moral standards, and thus, dangerously, attempts to substitute social for moral survival.

It seems, therefore, that, in terms of Wharton's exploration of moral issues, Darwin's influence was at times profound and sometimes disorienting, particularly in

relation to her concern with individual moral responsibility. However, in other areas, above all where his ambivalence made it possible to select a congenial viewpoint, Darwin offered ways of seeing the problems of society in a useful light. But in the other major area with which this study is concerned, Wharton's understanding of sexuality, Darwin's influence, where perhaps it might have been most beneficial, seems to have made relatively little impression upon her.

It should not have been possible for someone well-versed in Darwinism to write, in the crucial sea-anemone passage,

She had been fashioned to adorn and delight. To what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That is is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples? (301)

for Darwin had repeatedly asserted, in passages which remained essentially unchanged from the first to the sixth edition:

I should premise that I use this term [Struggle for Existence] in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny.... Each organic being is striving to increase in a geometrical ratio.... (*Origin* First Ed. 52, 79; Sixth Ed. 52, 62.)

and reinforced his message, in *Sexual Selection*, published in 1871, by firmly applying the same conclusions to man,

using a quotation from Schopenhauer to emphasize and give authority to his point:

The final aim of all love intrigues, be they comic or tragic, is really of more importance than all other ends in human life. What it all turns upon is nothing less than the composition of the next generation.... It is not the weal or woe of any one individual, but that of the human race to come which is here at stake. (*Sexual Selection* 891).

There is, then, no "purely decorative mission" in Darwinian nature, for nature "round[s] the rose-leaf and paint[s] the hummingbird's breast" for the purposes of "leaving progeny"--a matter "more important" than "the life of the individual", the survival of the species. I do not wish to suggest that the Darwinian view of sexuality--that its sole purpose is procreation--offers a full understanding of mature human sexuality, but rather that it draws attention to an essential part of that sexuality to which Wharton in this passage (like much modern writing), seems blind.

Part of the problem in assessing Wharton's involvement here is that the question "Was it her fault...?" may signal a shift towards Lily's consciousness after the authorial passage that precedes it. Yet the prior, "rose-leaf", sentence surely is Wharton's, and there is little in the novel to suggest that she sees the matter much more clearly elsewhere--at most we might see this as Lily's argument, but if we do I think we have to grant it authorial endorsement. It is, furthermore, an argument that could only be made from within a society so cut off from the real

nature of sexuality as to merit the description "sterile".

I do not intend to argue that Wharton is unaware that her society is a barren one; indeed Darwin may have helped alert her to the nature of the problem. When writing of "the origin and causes of sterility" he suggested:

We see that when organic beings are placed under new and unnatural conditions... the reproductive system, independently of the general state of health, is affected in a very similar manner [to that of hybrids which are sterile]. (*Origin* 222)

Conditions in the House of Mirth are certainly artificial enough to suggest the relevance of this observation to human society in general, and Lily's world in particular, which, though not quite without children, is almost so.

Furthermore, the process of bearing them arouses in such women as Judy Trenor merely a passing disgust at the inconvenience they cause, Wharton, at her most crudely satirical, supplying for her the line: "as if [having a baby] were anything to having a houseparty" (41). In the same vein the phrase current in Lily's set, "the mating season," has little to do with sex and everything to do with the hardheaded scheming practised at such houseparties as Judy's, the inevitable prelude to a Veblenesque marriage (46).

Admittedly, the occasional inhabitant is seen in a parental role. Carry Fisher is revealed, briefly, as a caring if mostly absent mother, perhaps as part of the moral rehabilitation which Wharton sketches in for her in the

second part of the novel; and Rosedale, if not quite living up to the "paternal role", is certainly avuncular in the presence of the same shadowy little girl (249). In both cases, even a limited amount of concern for a child has positive moral connotations for Wharton. One exception to this is Percy Gryce (who, stimulated by Lily's interest in his Americana, had felt the "confused titillation with which the lower organisms welcome the gratification of their needs", 21) who manages to produce an heir without gaining approval from Wharton. Her distaste for his vaguely Darwinian eugenics is manifest early in the novel when Lily's feigned headache gives him "far-reaching fears about the future of his progeny" (66), and it is clear Wharton is both repelled by the eugenics and the use made of them. The House of Mirth is, indeed, metaphorically, and almost as literally, sterile, and Wharton intentionally depicts it in this way, but this is as Darwinian as she can bring herself to be with respect to this particular aspect of his thought.

Indeed, despite the recognition of sterility induced by the artificial nature of the society, there is little to suggest that her Darwinian awareness enabled her to move beyond the state of nervous uncertainty about sexuality which, as I have argued in the first chapter of this thesis, was a fundamental problem for her. Obviously she makes her most determined effort in connection with Nettie's marriage and baby, which evokes the phrase "mating instinct" and

associates it with "kinship", "solidarity" and "continuity of life" (319). That Wharton sees this much must surely be held (given the language) to Darwin's credit, but as I have already argued, the perceptions seem transitory and unconvincing²⁵.

Lily's reflections on Nettie's baby, rather than consolidating her Darwinian perception of the importance of sex and procreation, accentuate a disturbing note which has sounded more quietly, though persistently, during most of the book, the primacy of the need for shelter and protection. Wharton's near-obsession with metaphors connected with water is linked almost invariably with this need and with the related fear of loss of power and control. The book is inundated by "floods," "tides," and "dark seas" of "indebtedness," "humiliation" and "dinginess." "Currents," "undercurrents" and "underflows" of "amusement," "perpetual need" and "chance" carry the helpless along. Invaders manage to "land on the shore" of society or are "submerged" when they fail, although sometimes they "drift" or "float" to their doom. In what passes for clever conversation in the smart set, the "ship" of marriage is disparaged (78) while Lily's flying ship of dreams, with its motto of "Beyond" (154) finally takes her to her death. Perseus fails to rescue Andromeda from the rock surrounded by waves (159), although, when the metaphor is shifted, it is disaster for Lily, the sea-anemone, to be torn from her

rock. That rock finds its most characteristic alternate representation in a second group of images centred on the house. This may be the treacherous House of Mirth that provides only the illusion of shelter, the absent "old house stored with visual memories", the lost "house not built with hands but made up of inherited passions and loyalties", or Nettie's "nest built on the edge of the cliff"--a "shelter" constructed from "the fragments of her life" for the protection of her family (319-320).

These metaphors insist that the overwhelming need in *The House of Mirth*, so pervasive as to be the dominant passion, strong enough to suggest Wharton's uncontrolled personal involvement (a problem to which I will return in the discussion of *Summer*), is for protection, safety, shelter. And even when, as she sometimes does, she represents Lily's need for these as a misdirected wish to return to the womb of luxury to be "lapped and folded in ease in some dense mild medium impenetrable to discomfort" (273) she usually does so with compassion, often uncritically, and frequently in Darwinian terms which seem intended to justify it: a "longing for shelter against the buffeting of chances" (97). Thus, Darwin's insistence on the importance of sex and its primary function of procreation to ensure the all-important survival of the species, which is at the core of his thought, is almost eliminated. Into the vacancy is shifted another Darwinian

concept, the importance of the appropriate and nurturing habitat.

Furthermore, to supply the gap caused by the missing children, the adults in the House of Mirth themselves become children, begging others for the maternal protection they still crave, and often eliciting the desired response. Thus, "something faintly maternal" can be evoked from Lily by "the hurt cry of a child", even though that "child" is George Dorset--she even feels an instinctive urge to offer "shelter" to his wife (205). But Lily herself often reverts to the role of child, as she does with Gerty after the visit to the Trenor mansion, so powerfully asserting her need that Gerty, despite her revulsion, pillows Lily's head "as a mother makes a nest for a tossing child" (167). The same is true of her relationship to Selden, his most explicit declaration being preceded, even provoked, both by her physical mannerisms: "the beseeching earnestness of a child" and her childish speech pattern: "You never speak to me--you think hard things of me" (137). It isn't surprising that Selden, in the closing interview, speaks to her "as if she were a troubled child" (306), but it should be noted that these adult reactions usually carry the implicit approval of the author, and the needs of the adult-children, though recognized as such, are usually accorded her sympathy.

But we need to be able to assess more precisely

Wharton's attitude to the adults' substitution, in the place of sexuality and the concomitant responsibilities of child-bearing and child-raising, of their own childlike cravings for protection. Clearly the episodes of Nettie's child and Lily's subsequent dream ought to offer some guage of this, but I think it impossible to find more than Wharton's ambivalence in them.

What Wharton wants to tell us is happening in these scenes, I believe, is that holding the baby and recognizing its trustful dependence (316) brings Lily to a new understanding of maturity, and with the understanding of the importance of marriage and the bearing of children comes a Darwinian recognition: "her first glimpse of the continuity of life" (319). In this context, it is possible to understand her sensations: "the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into and became a part of herself" (316) as both an affirmation of the unity of humanity and a kind of symbolic pregnancy. If the closing scenes are read this way, her dream of protecting the sleeping child in the hollow of her arm (323), reminiscent of Gerty's treatment of herself, and the sense of warmth the real and dream situations give her, suggest that Wharton intended the two episodes to reveal Lily's final understanding of the full meaning of maturity.

But some readers, of whom Wolff is representative,

believe that Wharton intended the ending to have a different significance:

Lily's powerful identification with the baby gives silent testimony to the infantilizing force of the mutilating image of women that society fosters.... Lily is returning to the Valley of Childish Things. (130n., 131)

Provided I could add "her" before "society", and extend the "infantilizing force" to men as well as to women, I would concur with this argument. I would also register disquiet at the language of penetration in both real and dream scenes:

The [baby's] weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself. (310)
 Nettie Struther's child was lying on her arm.... She felt not great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. (323)

The effect suggests a displacement of sexual language into a less threatening context, in keeping with the negation of sexuality (discussed in the last chapter) which the account of Lily's last sleep conveys.

I would not, however, agree that it is Wharton's intention to represent Lily critically in these scenes; the arguments I have made in the first chapter for their being read without irony seem to me to be too strong. Rather, Wharton reveals her own inadequately understood predilections for relationships centred on shelter and protection over mature sexuality, a problem which she found

very hard to overcome, and to which I will return in the study of *Summer*. Thus, while she sees and regrets her society's sterility, she cannot herself escape from its effects.

The House of Mirth shows that Darwin's effect on Wharton's aestheticized views of morality was greater than on her attitude to sexuality, although in both cases the results were complex and diverse. His determinism undercut her fundamental belief in individual responsibility, and his emphasis on the dependence of the organism on the environment enabled her to avoid facing her problems in dealing with sexuality, and to stress, instead, the need for shelter and protection. Where, however, his ambivalence left her room, she was able to explore more fully her attitude to tradition in relation to impulse, a matter, like the others examined here, of perennial interest to her.

Two years after the publication of *The House of Mirth*, however, a meeting was to occur that would profoundly change her way of thinking, producing new insights which would be embodied in *The Reef*.

III

"Beings of a Different Language":

Pragmatist Meets Idealist in *The Reef*

"The not understanding is the one unendurable and needless thing."

Edith Wharton to Morton Fullerton, April 29 1910¹.

She would have liked to stop her ears, to close her eyes, to shut out every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be; and at the same time she was tormented by the desire to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexperienced in matters which made so much of the stuff of human experience.
The Reef (1912) (291).

"But is there, in such a case, any recommendation worth half as much as your own direct experience?"
The Reef (160).

"You told me I would write better for the experience of loving you."
Edith Wharton to Morton Fullerton, August 26 1908.

What Darwinian theory could not do for Edith Wharton, her own experience could. It took the form of the alternating exaltations and humiliations of a love affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton, whom Anna Leath would have described as a "Don Juan", an affair which began and ended in the four years preceding the writing of *The Reef* (1912). Now aware of the centrality of sexuality to her

own life--after an almost sexless marriage of over twenty years--and newly sensitive to the intensity and complexity of sexual passion, she must have felt impelled to examine its nature, and its moral implications². Thus, while in *The House of Mirth* morality and sexuality had been related to each other only obliquely, primarily through Wharton's tendency to aestheticize both, in *The Reef*, the relationship is made explicit and examined with deliberation.

The Reef is both an atypical, and a pivotal, work for Wharton. It is atypical because of the form she chooses for the novel, the sequential accounts of two alternating consciousnesses. It is pivotal because she is able both to move the issue of sexuality from the periphery to the centre of concern and to repudiate those attitudes from which, embodied in Selden in *The House of Mirth*, she had formerly found it hard to separate herself.

It is by means of Darrow, whose ideas are shaped by an aestheticism similar to, if less self-conscious than, Selden's, that Wharton demonstrates her complete emancipation from her earlier limitations. Initially, Darrow seems to be aware of the dangers of such an approach to life, but his own critical judgments of the dilettante Leath are less those of a man who sees the pitfalls of aestheticism, than of one who is only capable of criticizing his own weakness when he sees it more blatantly displayed in

others. Leath may have lived as if life were a "carefully classified museum" (93) but Darrow also displays pronouncedly Leathian characteristics. For him, Anna is a "fine portrait kept down to a few tones, or a Greek vase on which the play of light is the only pattern" (129), while Sophy is a "terracotta statuette... a young image of grace barely more than sketched in clay" (72). But that such modes of understanding bring their dangers, Wharton is now willing to demonstrate, and without any of the ambivalence that previously characterized her. Sophy, the unfinished statuette, may be treated with the carelessness not possible if she were perceived as a mature woman--may even tempt the amateur sculptor to try his hand at finishing the work. Her interest in becoming an actress, which Darrow casually considers he might further, gives him one means of attempting this, while their sexual liaison is in part a further outcome of the same ambition. Unfortunately, his unformulated desire to create a woman out the "boyish" girl, although (in Darrow's own pragmatic metaphor) it seems a "cheap" exercise of his powers at the time, requires a huge payment in the end. Nor are Darrow's urges to play Pygmalion restricted to Sophy, who is to some degree a temporary substitute for Anna. It is of the latter that he dreams (while he travels with Sophy in the train) that he would have "put warmth in her veins and light in her eyes: would have made her a woman through and through" (30).

But, though he draws on all the arts, Darrow's dominant metaphors are musical. The dangers of this mode of perception are revealed when people are thought of as instruments, with all the power which that permits the musician. Though Darrow sees both Anna and Sophy in this way (4, 63), Sophy, less reflective and therefore less resistant than Anna, is particularly vulnerable to damage from Darrow's cast of mind, for her "responsive temperament" causes him to experience "a fleeting desire to make its chords vibrate for his own amusement" (52). He can also avoid the need to listen to her "light chatter," which has, unfortunately, begun to reveal her "exhausted resources and his dwindling interest" (261), by no longer making any effort to follow her words, but letting "her voice run on as a musical undercurrent to his thoughts" (262), a dehumanizing process which enables him to resort to wordless communication, "the natural substitute for speech": the kiss (261)³.

Sophy's acting ambitions, like Lily's resemblance to a work of art, also make her vulnerable to another of Darrow's Selden-like concerns, for he fears she may be her own creation, and the "naturalness" that so attracted him on the journey (15, 17, 29) thus becomes problematic. Like Selden, he lurches from the conviction that what she does is "not an artless device" (44) to the fear that it is (56), and that he has therefore been taken in by her. Wharton

emphasizes the links to Lily's lover by showing his resolution of the difficulty in Selden's own terms: Sophy becomes a dryad--an "elemental creature whose emotion is all in her pulses" (262) and who therefore need not be treated within the protective pale of the normal conventions because the (revealingly-characterized) "episode" with her is as much outside them as "a sunrise stroll with a dryad in the dew-drenched forest." His perception of her as "plunged into some sparkling element which had curled up all her drooping tendrils and wrapped her in a shimmer of fresh leaves" (36) is therefore not so much charming as ominous. It enables him to justify his careless slide into a sexual relationship: "His caress had restored her to her natural place in the scheme of things, and Darrow felt as if he had clasped a tree and a nymph had bloomed from it" (261). It is Darrow's entirely appropriate punishment that, before he knows who Owen's *fiancée* is, he should envisage the young man as "a faun in flannels" and "hope he's found a dryad" (119).

But Darrow resembles Selden in more than his aesthetic approach to life; he also represents Wharton's repudiation of Selden as Darwinian scientist. Darrow has the classifying habit of mind, thinking, for example, of Leath as a "characteristic specimen" (6). Even when under stress, he is nevertheless aware (without serious self-criticism) that "in a more detached frame of mind" he would have been

extremely interested in "studying and classifying Miss Painter" (211). More dangerous is his desire to classify Sophy, who, he considers, might fit into one of three "feminine types": "ladies", others who are "not", and Bohemians: the first two "evolved if not designed" for the purpose of "ministering to the more complex masculine nature" the third being the object of his contempt for using "the privileges of one class to shelter the customs of the other" (26-27). Though Darrow quickly and shamefacedly comes to recognize the complexity of what he has hitherto so patronisingly oversimplified, the habit is strong and he continues to attempt the classification of Sophy, who "might be any one of a dozen definable types, or... a shifting and uncrystallized mixture of them all." But, as Wharton shows, the disastrous consequences of such an attitude are the licensing of experimentation on himself, on others, and on "life" (33, 128) and the obscuring from himself of his moral responsibility. Furthermore, the habit of classification helps to make it possible for Darrow, who considers "his life, on the whole had been a creditable affair... up to current standards..." (129), nevertheless to engage in a casual liaison with a young woman both socially and emotionally vulnerable, and, five months later, the girl virtually forgotten, to feel "somehow worthy" of Anna and success.

It must be remembered that this mode of thought is

endorsed by society's own custom of classification, one which is not specifically Darwinian in nature. The fact that some sexual encounters are accepted as "brief, parenthetical, incidental" (129), makes it possible for Darrow to run into danger without prior warning. "It seemed such a light thing--all on the surface--and I've gone aground on it because it was on the surface" (314). Taking the risk of sailing near the rocks of Sophy's vulnerability is excused by the socially "recognized" double standard: "In the recognized essentials he had always remained strictly within the limit of his scruples" (129). The Kitty Maynes, Lady Ulricas and Sophy Viners are, in different ways, outside those limits, outside the social reef. Thus Sophy, being "outside the pale of the usual" (76), is "the very creature to whom it" (with a double meaning which Darrow instantly, and uncomfortably, recognizes) "was bound to happen" (73).

In rejecting the appeal of aestheticism as a means of making moral judgments and understanding sexuality, and in recognizing the limitations that the aesthetic view shared with the scientific approach to life, Wharton did more than "place" her prior attitudes, she freed herself for the exploration of another area of human difficulty, which although it undoubtedly had its roots in her recent experience, had far wider implications than the purely

personal. This was the problem raised by the two contrasted approaches to life, with their special implications for both morality and sexuality, which, to make a less-than-rigorous use of two philosophical terms, may be loosely designated the "pragmatic" and the "idealist"⁴. However, to suggest that, in *Darrow and Anna*, Wharton simply wished to embody the characteristics of each, would be to give too abstract an idea of what was intended to be, in *The Reef*, an exploration of a painful human dilemma. In saying this, however, I must admit it is a novel to which my own responses seem largely intellectual and analytical, as this chapter will reveal, although I find it hard to decide how much I should attribute the problem to myself and how much to Wharton.

In the most fundamental terms, however, the root of the problem between Anna and Darrow is a philosophical one, and it is Anna's idealism and Darrow's pragmatism which make them seem, at times, to be "beings of a different language" (292). The differences in outlook between the two are, therefore, worth identifying. Although William James was not, and never claimed to be, the first "pragmatist," his lectures on the subject, given in the winter of 1906 to 1907--coincidentally just before Edith Wharton met Fullerton--provide what became the best-known verbal illustration (the nature of pragmatism precluding definition) of the pragmatic approach to life, and they,

therefore, provide a useful way of approaching the subject.

Though, or perhaps in part because, he was the brother of Henry James, Wharton, as her letters reveal, was disdainful of William James on both personal and philosophical grounds. She regarded him as "the source and chief distributor" of "psychological-pietistical juggling" (*Letters* February 21 1906, 101), thought that his family were all "victims of the neurotic and unreliable.... William o' the wisp James" (*Letters* March 24 1910, 205), and congratulated an essayist on "How you've managed to balance the big heart and the considerably less ponderable brain of your subject, when all the world has been so persistently confusing the two organs for the last fifteen years!" (*Letters* October 8 1912, 280).

In her circle, and with her interests, Wharton must certainly have been aware of his work as it came out, although she may not have read the published version of his lectures. Whatever knowledge she had, whether obtained directly or indirectly, may have given a more specific shape and greater detail to her portrait of a pragmatist, but, had William James never lived nor lectured, Wharton's novel need not have been affected, for she could have drawn on examples from a world crowded with pragmatists². In referring to William James in the course of this chapter, therefore, I make use of his work as conveniently representative of a particular approach to life, rather than attempting to

demonstrate a particular historical connection.

In his lectures, James identified two radically different schools of thought (and therefore ways of living), which he characterised as "tough-" and "tender-minded"⁴. The former might, more familiarly, be described as "Empiricist" and the latter "Idealistic"--terms which he himself used in a list of the characteristics of each. He claimed that "Pragmatism" was the long-awaited mediator between these two approaches to life, harmonising and utilising the best of each (37), but as is apparent from the very first lecture, James's pragmatism was really empiricism with a new name, its mediating role consisting solely of a willingness to acknowledge the utilitarian values of such matters as religion ("it may secure 'moral holidays' to those who need them", 197) from the opposing (idealist) list.

Among the characteristics of the "tough-minded" he listed the terms: "Empiricist (going by facts), Sensationalistic, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious, Fatalistic, Pluralistic, Sceptical", later adding "scientific", "naturalistic", and "positivistic" to the collection. One of the dangers of any such list is that it becomes an incantation, barely attended to in its specifics. However, to accord it closer attention is to see how appropriately many of these designations might be applied to Darrow. For the second group, the "tender-minded," he

listed "Rationalistic (going by 'principles'), Intellectualistic, Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious, Free-willist, Monistic, Dogmatical," with later additions of "romantic" and "spontaneous" (22, 23-24). While not all of these characteristics fit Anna, it is clear that enough of them do to suggest that her approach to life might be described in general terms as being that of an idealist.

Characteristic of pragmatism, in addition to its preference for the features on the "tough-minded" side of the list, are its emphasis on utility, which James liked to call "cash value" (133)--"the concrete truth for us will always be the way of thinking in which our various experiences most profitably combine"--(241); its concern with the present and future rather than the past, and its rejection of abstract principles for their lack of utility:

just as pragmatism faces forward to the future, so does rationalism [idealism] here again face backward to a past eternity. True to her inveterate habit, rationalism reverts to 'principles,' and thinks that when an abstraction once is named, we own an oracular solution. (147-48)

Above all the pragmatic preference is shown to be for action, process, experience--all of which are inherent in the nature of pragmatic "truth":

The truth of an ideas is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process. (133)

and with this emphasis on action, James condemns the desire for

security against the bewildering accidents of so much finite experience. Nirvana means safety from this everlasting round of adventures of which the world of sense consists. The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life. (188)

If Darrow can often be heard putting the arguments of William James, reckoning in terms of cost and payment, denying the importance of the past and the supremacy of the present, rejecting "useless" sacrifice, this is not, I think, coincidental, for both speak the language of pragmatism, though Darrow does so without conscious awareness of his philosophical position.

Anna, on the other hand, and in marked contrast to Darrow, reveals many of the characteristic responses to life of the idealist, the longing for absolute principles and truths, the conviction of the importance of the past and its links to the present and future. But on no other grounds do their differences appear so sharply marked as in their opposing preferences, in Darrow's case for "action" rather than contemplation, in Anna's for "knowing," primarily through reflection. This is the central polarity in their relationship, from which all others spring. It should not, therefore, surprise us that Darrow charges Anna, as William James charges his opponents, with a fear of "experience" and "life", of being afraid of the "adventures of which the world of sense consists."

In bestowing on Darrow the general characteristics of a pragmatist, and on Anna those of an idealist, Wharton would seem to be setting up a fairly simple dichotomy, inviting the reader to favour one over the other, and at the same time to extend a degree of sympathy to the losing side. One major problem for me, and I would suspect from the criticism, for most readers, is to combat the temptation to understand the situation depicted in *The Reef* in just such simple polarities, and to resist the desire to chose between pragmatism and idealism, between Darrow and Anna. This is certainly the way I first read the novel, and also the way I judged that Wharton wanted me to read it. To explore this tendency to make a polarized response, is to see that Wharton seems to be addressing a more subtle, and more complex problem. To begin with, therefore, I think it is worth looking at the pressures the novel exerts to make the reader see the problem in simple terms of either-or choice, and the way in which it offers its own criticism of the response it seems to invite. As I do so, I am uneasily aware of my own persisting wish for a quick and easy choice between the two extremes.

If we begin by considering the novel's own contribution towards evoking a polarized response, we can see it is in part the result of the actual structure of the novel, which is unlike any other by Wharton. Although her usual method of narration (whatever her theoretical avowals)

is to move freely in and out of her characters' minds, and to include in this movement authorial interpolations requiring the alert reader's utmost vigilance, she adheres here to a very strict limitation to two alternating consciousnesses. This alternating of consciousnesses both embodies, and engenders in the reader, a temptation to one or other of diametrically-opposed reactions; there is a pressure to make either-or judgments, to see the world "this way" or "that." At the same time, because each mind is allowed to dominate our perceptions for fairly long stretches, there is also pressure on us to feel sympathy for both Darrow and Anna. Most readers, while wanting to choose to support one or the other, probably feel uncomfortable about making definite choices between extremes--like William James we want a mediating solution. Compassion for both Darrow and Anna offers us a way out of the problem by allowing us to make a clear cut choice without a sense of guilt.

The one deliberate exception to Wharton's self-imposed restriction to two points of view and the exclusion of the authorial voice, is in the introduction of Anna, at the beginning of Chapter IX, where three paragraphs are devoted to the presentation, from the outside, of a charming and virtually static tableau of lady, parasol and chateau. The same paragraphs are also used to prepare the reader to consider the "intimate inward reason" for the

precise nature of the lady's gaze (83). This initial appearance of Anna is in striking contrast to the introduction of Darrow, into whose consciousness we are plunged at once, and who is caught up in movement from the very beginning, in the noisy rush of the train towards Dover (3). Thus, when first involved with Darrow, we find ourselves caught up in movement, while, in the encounter with Anna, we, like the lady, are in contemplation. The difference, both between what Wharton has us, as readers, do, and between the characters themselves, establishes the primary difference between pragmatic action and idealist thought as ways of experiencing the world. This process is initially kindest to Anna, associated as she is with the calm beauty of the chateau, in painful contrast to Darrow's sulky fulminations, and these impressions tend to linger, influencing our later perceptions.

But Wharton, even within the limits of the scene in which Anna is introduced, is far from presenting a clear cut case. For if we react, as predictably we will, to the "romantic, poetic, pictorial and emotional associations" (84) evoked by the "escutcheoned piers," the "grassy court," and the "shadow and sound of the limes" around the old *chateau*, we are quickly warned that these are dangerously romanticized ways to perceive Givré and Anna's life there, ways to which Anna herself has earlier fallen victim, for

her characteristic way of viewing the world has been through the medium of the fairytale. The analysis of what has gone wrong, filtered through the medium of Anna's own still partially-defective vision, represents her difficult but honest attempt to understand the consequences of her faulty perceptions.

As a young girl, she had misperceived the "substance of life as a mere canvas for the embroideries of the poet and painter" (88). She had used the discussion of books and pictures to avoid Darrow's sexual advances, and failed to find the magic formula, the "irresistible word" that would cure the dangerous split between her aesthetic and her sexual desires. Her problem had been twofold, the separation of art and life, and a preference for the former. Leath had seemed to offer a way of forging life and art together (91), but she had recognized, too late, that life was, for him, a "museum" (95) and his sexuality no more alive and warm than his kiss, "like a cold smooth pebble" from a "blond mask" (93).

The disappointment of her marriage has, in her own later judgment, simply reinforced her tendency to think of imaginative excursions as the "real" and the "alive" in contradistinction to "real life." As a consequence, "the old vicious distinction between romance and reality" had been "re-established for her" (95). The "irreducible crude fact" of Effie's birth had, if only temporarily, swept away

one part of this "delusion," the delusion that "real life" isn't "real," but Anna recognizes that the prevailing unreality of the household quickly imparted to even this living experience a "ghostly tinge" (96).

What Wharton shows us, with compassion, is, however, the enormous difficulty of overcoming such a handicap of vision. Anna's heroic efforts to do so are hampered by the very difficulty which she labours to overcome. The momentary experience of contact with "the real" has failed to teach Anna to judge, even with the advent of Darrow, the ways in which literature might really have something to say about life, as well as the ways in which some literary concepts might also prove to be dangerous modes of perception. The "vicious distinction" remains unexorcized and this leaves her almost blind to the dangers of romanticizing her relationship to Darrow. Her separation of life from art makes it impossible for her to subject the relationship between the two to a critical examination.

In Anna, the dangers of knowing in romantic terms, by understanding life through the pattern of the fairytale, are as clearly set out as destructive consequences of the aesthetic and Darwinian patterns which attract Darrow⁷. Elizabeth Ammons points out that prior to the last revisions of *The Reef*, the "little old deserted house fantastically carved and chimneyed which lay in a moat under the shade of ancient trees" (127) visited by Anna and Darrow, had been

called "the Sleeping Beauty's Lodge" in manuscript, but suggests that Wharton removed the name in the final version because it was too-obviously symbolic². She argues convincingly that Wharton wishes to demonstrate that both Anna and the Cinderella-like Sophy must learn that women do not live in a fairytale, although I would contest the feminist exaggeration that the book's meaning "in large measure" derives from these allusions, or that the novel's "main aim" is to "expose the fraudulent romantic visions fostered by the limitations imposed on women" (Ammons 79-80, *italics mine*). *The Reef* is much more than the feminist tract that Ammons suggests it is, being concerned with exploring much more than just one defective means of "knowing," as Darrow's case makes clear. It is also more than a criticism of the one form of "knowing" that romantic perceptions represent, and more than an attempt to show how difficult such preconceptions are to shake off, for it suggests that the value of "experience" should not be underestimated as a means to understanding.

But the course of Anna's enlightenment through experience is as beset by misconceptions as her upbringing. She had always believed, despite disappointments, that "Love... would one day release her from this spell of unreality", and provide the "magic bridge" to "life" from West Fifty-Fifth Street (88, 89). Darrow's impending arrival at Givré intensifies this state of mind, making her

married life appear, by comparison, to be "some grey shadowy tale that she might have read in an old book, one night as she was falling asleep" (96). The accumulating revelations concerning Darrow's and Sophy's affair cruelly demonstrate to her the inadequacy of the fairytale as a way of understanding experience, but Anna's disillusionment produces violent oscillations. Waking to the "understanding" that she must give Darrow up, she reacts bitterly against her previous romantic visions:

The knowledge came to her in the watches of a sleepless night, when, through the tears of disenchanted passion, she stared back upon her past. There it lay before her, her sole romance, in all its paltry poverty, the cheapest of cheap adventures, the most pitiful of sentimental blunders. She looked about the room, the room where, for so many years, if her heart had been quiescent her thoughts had been alive.... In that moment of self-searching she saw that Sophy Viner had chosen the better part, and that certain renunciations might enrich where possession would have left a desert. (333)

But this is no advance--it is merely the language of negation. It remains within the ethos of the romantic. Passion can only be disenchanted when enchantment is possible, and if Anna now finds the syrup of the fairytale bitter, she is still attracted to its more tragic possibilities: "certain renunciations might enrich where passion had left a desert;" she can still dream of the "tragic luxury," the "melancholy ecstasy" (335), of the last meeting. Of wider importance, and more difficult for either Anna or the reader to perceive, is the danger of her

insistence, here, on the primacy of "knowledge"--the kind of knowledge that comes, not from experience, but from the "watches of a sleepless night," that makes the life in which "thoughts had been alive" more desirable than that in which the "heart" lives and struggles with the confusions and complexities of existence. Dealing in such dichotomies, it is not surprising that Anna interprets her temptation to give in to Darrow as a matter of a surrender to pragmatism, to its insistence on the primacy of the present, to its utilitarian principles--taking refuge in polarity, rather than questioning her preference for romance, so that she is "sent shuddering back to the opposite pole" (334) and no other possibility seems open to her.

One of the dangers of the fairytale as a mode of perceiving life, is that, as does "fate" in *The House of Mirth*, it absolves from responsibility those who believe they live within it, and relieves them of the need to recognize complexity. This may, in part, account for Wharton's decision to introduce into the novel the ugliness of the last chapter, a conclusion which has struck most critics as brutal⁹. The last few pages seem to be an attempt on Wharton's part to educate Anna out of her particular form of "not understanding". The final hope for help from "some external chance", the quest for Sophy ("It was Sophy Viner only who could save her--Sophy Viner only who could give her back her lost serenity.... that step

once taken there would be no retracing it, and she would perforce have to go forward alone," 360), demonstrates this final inability to break from her romantic conceptions, and the moral failure that results from them. The sordid hotel, the sluttish disorder of the suite, the tawdriness of Laura, the sexual promiscuity which the situation reveals, and the prominent association of Sophy with her sister, through their looks and mannerisms ("the dingy distances of family history," 365) mock Anna's lingering hopes of a fairytale solution, as perhaps they mock the reader's too. But the crudity of the satire, and the harshness of its tone, arouse some doubt as to Wharton's own involvement here--as if she felt the need to crush her own lingering hopes along with Anna's.

There does seem something perverse in Wharton's desire to remind Anna and the reader that Sophy may share some of her sister's most repellant characteristics, and she certainly goes out of her way to emphasize this by the deliberate, almost melodramatic, re-introduction of Jimmy Brance, Sophy's friend at Mrs. Murrett's, with a considerable flourish, on the last page. It is true that, in the uncertainty of the ending and the difficulty of judging Sophy, lies the final, minatory, unlikeness to the fairytale, but the clumsiness with which this is achieved suggests that some of Anna's last reaction of "confused pain" (366) lingers for Wharton, too. It suggests that she

has shared, to some degree, Anna's predilection for this view of the world, and still feels its appeal. The ugliness of the conclusion, therefore, suggests a final loss of control. Meanwhile, the inconclusiveness of Anna's responses, which, convincingly in the circumstances, are self-protectively focussed on the physical and social requirements for escaping from the suite, make it impossible to forecast what Anna's subsequent reaction will be, although there is nothing to suggest it will not be a repetition of past oscillations.

Although Anna's most deep-seated, if periodically resisted, desire is to understand the world in romantic terms, she repeatedly reveals, as I have already suggested, a more general characteristic of the idealist: the paramount desire to "know."

For Anna, as for Wharton, "not-understanding is the one unendurable and needless thing" and thus, as her romantic perceptions prove increasingly inadequate, she is driven by her "illuminating impulse" (247), her "exploring ray of curiosity" (95), to ask questions and shed light on her situation at any cost. There is courage in this, for, although, early on, she expresses the hope to Darrow that "you and I needn't arrange the lights before we show ourselves" (113), she is also aware that there may be dangers in becoming Psyche, holding up the lamp to view her lover

(112). Either she may not like what she sees, or her lover may not wish to be seen in the light--both possibilities which do, in the end, come true.

Much of Anna's development seems designed to support the conventional view of the desirability of the search for knowledge and increasing self-awareness. Seen from this perspective, Anna's laudable quest is shown to be the (conventional) outcome of faults as well as strengths, to have been nourished by her *naïve* initial belief that she is aware of her weaknesses and is capable of subjecting them to her own and Darrow's scrutiny: "I want you to see me just as I am, with all my irrational doubts and scruples, the old ones and the new ones too" (113). Again traditionally, she later recognizes that complacency about her own superiority has also been a contributing factor: "an instinctive disdain for whatever was less clear and open than her own conscience had kept her from learning anything of the intricacies and contradictions of other hearts" (278). Her smugness, however, is finally subjected to her own "melancholy derision," with the realization that such dark places in others that "one need never know about" are also to be found "in her own bosom, and henceforth she would always have to traverse them to reach the beings she loved" (353).

My initial reaction to this is to applaud Anna in her search for the truth, and to conclude that Wharton is arguing for the moral necessity (however impossible its full

achievement) to come to know oneself, and as far as possible, others. The pattern of increasing self-knowledge is discernible, predictable and admirable, and, I think, genuinely there to be admired--but the issue is not quite as straightforward as this summary suggests.

For one thing, Anna's desire for knowledge is predominantly structured in terms of polarities: "To feel was surely better than to judge" (325); "Did such self-possession imply indifference or insincerity?" (326). Furthermore, her need is for absolute, and unachievable, certainty: she must "know", for example, not just what Darrow thinks, now, about his future loyalty to her, but "what would impel or restrain him at the crucial hour" (330), and in pursuit of such impossible certitude she becomes obsessed with the need for "knowledge" of the details of the affair.

Furthermore, Anna finds, as Psyche did, that knowledge can be dangerous, even destructive. Her reactions to this realization first shift briefly in the direction of pragmatism ("If only she had held her tongue nothing need ever have been known," 320). The movement is accompanied by self-blame, for she feels that if she had not "probed, insisted, cross-examined" (321), had not had "the wrong kind of audacities" (320), matters might have worked themselves out. She subsequently swings back to the idealist conviction that the "truth had come to light by the force of

its irresistible pressure" (353), a movement comparable to her oscillations in her "rejection" of the fairytale view of life.

But the situation is an even more complex one, for from a fearful refusal to think of Sophy at all (288), she comes to the state where she craves to know everything about the affair: to "know better" as she inappropriately puts it: "There was nothing she did not want to know, no fold or cranny of his secret that her awakened imagination did not strain to penetrate" (331). The language is both sexual and possessive, and reveals an increasingly voyeuristic obsession which Darrow quite rightly (though his underlying motives are characteristically pragmatic--it will put "something irremediable between us") rejects as emotionally repellent as well as immoral: "I've done something I loathe, and to atone for it you ask me to do another" (358). Her quest for knowledge has become a frenzy which both obsesses and, sometimes, disgusts her.

But for Anna, knowledge still remains the issue. She may alternate between wanting "to stop her ears, to close her eyes, to shut out every sight and sound and suggestion of a world in which such things could be," and "being tormented by the desire to know more, to understand better, to feel herself less ignorant and inexperienced in matters which made so much of the stuff of human life" (291), but, at bottom, she remains convinced that such understanding can be

achieved without experience. Forming her generalizations at second-hand, she is thus caught in the oscillations of "Life was like that... But no! Life was not like that" (302).

As Darrow struggles to give his pragmatist's account of the affair, he accuses Anna of the inability to "understand" and to her question: "You mean I don't feel things--I'm too hard?" he responds, "No: you're too high... too fine... such things are too far from you" (291). "High" and "fine" may sound like praise, but "too far" has the beginnings of criticism in it, criticism made more specific soon after: "You say you'll never understand: but why shouldn't you? Is it anything to be proud of, to know so little of the strings that pull us" (314). The metaphor of puppetry reveals an abdication of responsibility, but his criticism of Anna's preference for the abstract and the clean--"Her imagination recoiled from the vision of a sudden debasing familiarity; it seemed to her that her thoughts would never again be pure," (291)--is nonetheless valid. Tragically, however, Darrow's recognition brings her no understanding. They confront each other, as she perceives it, "no longer as enemies," but trapped in a state of non-comprehension, "as beings of a different language" (291).

No clearer indication of their difference in outlook could be found than in Darrow's pragmatic insistence that they are not separated by a "fundamental disaccord" (313) as

Anna believes, and in his conviction that "the facts" will argue his case for him (288). The pragmatic solution is to deny the gulf is unbridgeable, and to set about spanning it. While Anna talks of understanding, seeing, and knowing, his arguments rely on metaphors of work, building, and mending:

When you've lived a little longer you'll see what complex blunderers we all are: how we're struck blind sometimes, and mad sometimes--and then, when our sight and our senses come back, how we have to set to work, and build up, little by little, bit by bit, the precious things we'd smashed to atoms without knowing it. Life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits. (313)

The abdication of responsibility is there in the passives of "struck blind... and mad," but the pragmatist's insistence on action is given dignity and value. Characteristically, when Anna's response is to suggest the act of "principle," marriage to Sophy, his response is a refusal, for, as he repeatedly maintains, "sacrifice would benefit no one" (360): "Men don't give their lives away like that. If you won't have mine, it's at least my own, to do the best I can with" (313). And, as always, there is the acceptance of *not* knowing, and the insistence on the limitation of the power of the past, and on the necessity for proportion in the recognition of grey tones:

I don't know! It seemed such a slight thing--all on the surface--and I've gone aground on it just because it was on the surface. I see the horror of it just as you do. But I see, a little more clearly, the extent and limits of my wrong. It's not as black as you imagine. (314)

An admitted pragmatist will probably have no difficulty in

responding favourably to these assertions, but from the nature of the general critical response to the novel (admittedly weighted to some degree by the feminist reaction) it would seem that most readers (even the closet pragmatists among them) are likely to be more favourably disposed towards the idealist position, seeing these statements as merely self-excusing.

This was certainly my initial reaction, and it does not do justice to the rightness of Darrow's insistence on picking up and going on. Perhaps the tendency to disregard his argument is favoured by the pattern Darrow falls into, in which his repeated recognitions of his inadequacies are usually followed by further disastrous blunders made on pragmatic grounds. And while I recognize the dangers of falling into Anna's either-or approach, I still find it hard to balance the recognition of the pain experienced by two people who love each other with my tendency to read the novel analytically--which tends to be hard on Darrow, who, as a pragmatist, does not fare well under analytical examination. I suspect the schematic structure (almost equal numbers of books for each of the two lovers, and the prolonged discussions, arguments and periods of reflection) has something to do with it, as have the pronounced contrasts between the two approaches to life.

Certainly Wharton seems to have gone out of her way to emphasize the more doubtful aspects of Darrow's

pragmatism, even to the extent of making him, appropriately for a pragmatist, a diplomat by profession. Indeed, Anna, who fears his "tact" may be "a kind of professional expertness" (321)¹⁰, is right to do so for he is willing to deceive to please, as he does over both Sophy's unposted letter and Anna's unread one (69, 112). He lives by the pragmatic principle "that most wrongdoing works, on the whole, less mischief than its useless confession", and his choice of the word "useless" reveals his exclusive concern with the practical, or, more precisely, what appears to be practical at the moment of decision.

Indeed, his use of language often offers clues to his problems. When Darrow admits himself to be as unable to "test the moral atmosphere" as "a man in fever testing another's temperature by the touch" (208) he uses the word "moral," inappropriately, to describe the adjustments of behaviour being planned beneath his companions' social disguises--an inaccurate use of language which prolongs the sloppy thinking which allowed him to slip into the affair with Sophy in the first place.

Wharton makes it clear that such careless phrasing is a dangerous habit with Darrow. Warning Sophy against marrying a man she does not love, he can deceive himself: "He might yet--at what cost he would not stop to think--make his past pay for his future" (206). The words have the courageous ring of a last-ditch stand, but they incorporate such

pragmatic language as "pay" and "cost," and the utilitarian disregard for the past. Furthermore, within the refusal to think, Darrow conceals from himself that it must be Sophy who pays. Anna senses, and fears, something of this slackness. For her lover to come to her with an "open face and clear conscience" is horrible if his security is based on falsehood; but "if it meant that he had forgotten"--as indeed he admits to himself he had, revealing how easily pragmatism and diplomacy may serve self-indulgence--"it was worse" (290). Like Anna, we can't help but feel doubtful about arguments from such a source, having seen, even in his own terms, the disastrous working out of Darrow's pragmatism. Thus, it is easy to fail to give adequate consideration to the criticisms of Anna's idealism which Darrow effectively makes explicit.

The strongest features of his position may be seen in his appeal for Anna's understanding of his affair with Sophy, a passage (286-292) which is as representative as any in juxtaposing some of the strengths of Darrow's pragmatism with Anna's idealism. The exchange doesn't start well for him, in that we are instantly reminded, in his fencing to find out how much Anna knows, of his belief that confession is better avoided, if possible (286), and we suspect that he is using Anna's concern for Owen to persuade her to let him stay (287). But the scene is equally revealing of the dangers of Anna's position. There is accuracy in his

description of Anna's dilemma:

You've always said you wanted, above all, to look at life, at the human problem, as it is, without fear and without hypocrisy; and it's not always a pleasant thing to look at. (288)

for "look" is precisely the right verb for what she has wanted to do.

When Anna charges Sophy with being an adventuress, he defends her from the slur:

"She's not an adventuress."

"You mean she professes to act on the new theories? The stuff that awful women rave about on platforms?"

"Oh, I don't think she pretended to have a theory--"

"She hadn't even that excuse?"

"She had the excuse of her loneliness, her unhappiness--of miseries and humiliations that a woman like you can't even guess". (290)

Though Anna has the excuse of her misery, it is nevertheless typical of her to attempt to categorize Sophy into one compartment or another (and it isn't coincidental that the alternatives are pragmatic or theoretic), for it is in the world of absolute judgments that she feels most comfortable. By contrast Darrow's pragmatism makes him capable of an understanding and compassion which makes his reference to Anna's lack of experience a just one.

On the other hand, Darrow's pragmatic distaste for reflecting on the past, contrasted with the insistence of both Sophy and Anna on the inseparability of the present, past and future suggests a serious inadequacy of his narrow focus on the present time. His self-conscious and fatuous

offer of consolation to Sophy: "Time modifies... rubs out... things change... people change," encapsulates the pragmatic approach to time, and leads naturally, in combination with the stress on utility, to the evasion of the recognition of responsibility: "But what was the use of thinking of that now?" (263).

His is a position best put into perspective by Anna's insistence on understanding and incorporating the past into the present, a rejection of Darrow's argument that, because they are together, "'everything,' for me, is here and now: on this bench, between you and me" (111). It becomes clear that Darrow's belief that the time that matters is only present time, is dangerously linked to the belief that responsibility to others is also limited. To accept either of these limitations would be a betrayal of Anna's deepest psychological and moral perceptions. The past is so important that she may not "betray" it to others, so she may not talk of Leath to Darrow (119) but it is also too significant not to be re-examined. Something that she failed to understand then may come between them again (111), a fear that proves justified. However tempted she may be by the pragmatic view--"Why should past or future coerce her when the present was so securely hers?" (333)--Anna cannot, for long, think in Darrow's terms.

Darrow's pragmatic position, then, stands criticized explicitly and implicitly, by Anna's idealism, but though

his problems are easier to recognize and categorize than hers, Anna's insistence on knowledge rather than experience, though apparently a safer course, almost guarantees that, in Darrow's image, life will roll away like the night landscape from a train "just outside her glazed and curtained consciousness" (30).

When Darrow asks whether any knowledge he can give Anna is "worth half as much as your own direct experience," her acknowledgement that he is right is purely formal, and followed, at once, by another request for second-hand knowledge (160). Like her insistence that what she wants for Owen and Effie is "that they shall always feel free to make their own mistakes," her actions belie her assertions of her faith in experience (120). The scene in which Anna asks Darrow if he can recommend Sophy as a governess, even though she has already employed her for five months in that position, like many other episodes, reveals her incapacity or unwillingness to learn to understand Darrow's "language," even when she mouths its words. But, in the same scene, while Anna thus reveals her inadequacies, we are aware that Darrow is guilty of his own. His recommendation that she trust to her own experience is really a pragmatic evasion of a subject he finds painful, and when it doesn't work, he attempts to distract himself, and Anna, in a different way: "He held Anna closer, saying to himself, as he smoothed back the hair from her forehead, "What does anything matter but

just *this*?" (160).

Whether the result of conscious tactic or irresistible urge, the question is one to which both participants, and the reader, must direct their attention: "Does anything matter but just *this*?" Is the central issue at stake between them the nature of sexuality? When Darrow receives Anna's telegram requesting that he put off his visit, his reaction sets the parameters within which we struggle to assess Anna's attitude to sex. Her excuse, he reflects, like the last ("the visit of her husband's uncle's widow"), will probably be "good," but she seems "beset by family duties, and as he thought, a little too readily resigned to them." He is convinced that "her 'reason', whatever it was, could, in this case, be nothing but pretext" (3, 8, 9). His reflections are interrupted by his accidental encounter with Sophy; but later, in the train to Paris, he reflects on the "reason" he believes the "pretext" to conceal:

The reflection set him wondering whether the "sheltered" girl's bringing-up might not unfit her for all subsequent contact with life. How much nearer to it had Mrs. Leath been brought by marriage and motherhood, and the passage of fourteen years? What were all her reticences and evasions but the result of the deadening process of forming a "lady"? The freshness he had marvelled at was like the unnatural whiteness of flowers forced in the dark.

As he looked back at their few days together he saw that their intercourse had been marked, on her part, by the same hesitations and reserves which had chilled their earlier intimacy. Once more they

had their hour together and she had wasted it. As in her girlhood, her eyes had made promises which her lips were afraid to keep. She was still afraid of life, of its ruthlessness, its danger and mystery....

And now he saw her fated to wane into old age repeating the same gestures, echoing the words she had always heard, and perhaps never guessing that, just outside her glazed and curtained consciousness, life rolled away, a vast blackness starred with lights, like the night landscape beyond the windows of the train. (29-30)

Thus the examination of the primary antithesis of the novel, that between action and evasion of experience, which is, in part, precipitated by a sexual liaison, is also directed to the question of the sexual experience itself. Is Anna, the idealist, afraid of sex, as Darrow suspects, and is this part of the distaste for the complexity and impurity of experience to which her idealism is linked? Any attempt to solve the problem demands a willingness greater than Darrow's to distinguish partial truths from misconceptions, but it also requires that we do not, too easily, dismiss Darrow's judgment simply because it is made in the throes of disappointed resentment, or because of his complacent conviction that, "a love like his might have given her the divine gift of self-renewal" (30).

Anna, herself, confirms Darrow's perception of the consequences of her training as a "lady". Sexuality and the emotions were not matters admitted into Anna's West Fifty-Fifth Street (or Wharton's West Twenty-Third Street)¹¹ upbringing. In a phrase more characteristic of Wharton than Anna, "people with emotions were not visited" (86). Thus,

unlike some of her contemporaries, who, as girls she had envied for "their superior acquaintance with the facts of life" (88), Anna had been "a model of ladylike repression"¹² (87).

Tentatively associated with "the embroideries of the poet and painter" (87)--with consequences we have already noted--"Love", the "sublime passion" and "key to the enigma" of "the spell of unreality" (88), appeared to Anna to bear no relationship to the sexual sophistication and adventures of girls like Kitty Mayne. Their alert awareness of their own wants, their elopements and post-marital flirtations resembled neither her romantic ideals, nor, when she met him, what she dreamt might be possible with Darrow. But, presumably disappointed in her frigid behaviour, or taking it as a sign she had little interest in him except as a friend, he had disappeared¹³, and Anna found herself considering whether her own lack of sexual response had been to blame.

Subsequently, Anna had chosen a husband suited to a woman with a fear of sex, a man whose rare kisses "dropped on her like a cold smooth pebble" from a "symmetrical blond mask," although at such times she began to question "the completeness of the joys he offered" (93). Cause and consequence are hard for both the reader and Anna to disentangle, although she later recognizes that "she had been cold to him" (320) in the course of their marriage at

the frigidly-named Givré. Darrow's reconstruction of her upbringing and marriage are thus independently confirmed by Anna herself--the issue becomes whether this may be taken as proof of a fundamental shrinking from sexual experience which she can never overcome, or whether she may no longer be a victim of her own sexual coldness.

Anna herself is convinced she is no longer frigid, but sexually alive and aware, and certainly her reactions to Darrow are quite different to those of her girlhood. Darrow's flirtation with Kitty Mayne had thrown her into a fever of jealousy, but, face to face with Darrow, she had been reduced to silence and rigidity, unable to express herself in words or actions (90). Now, as the affair with Sophy comes to light, she is aware that her sexual responses are increasingly strong--she both desires, and eventually experiences, intensely satisfying intercourse with him (or so we are led to infer from her reactions the following day, 344). She not only wishes to respond to Darrow; she does, and powerfully but--and here lies the problem--it is, to an increasing extent, in spite of herself.

For Anna comes to fear sexual attraction as "enslaving," leading to a loss of self-control, more particularly a loss of moral control. Such fears are a consequence of her growing knowledge of Darrow's affair, for, at first, the sense of "belonging," even of "slavery," is an exhilarating aspect of being in love. Darrow's arrival

at Givré produces strong reactions--she feels "like a slave, and a goddess, and a girl in her teens." She recognizes in herself a craving to demonstrate her power over him, to test him (fairytale style) by "the most fantastic exactions" and yet to "humble herself before him, to make herself the shadow and echo of his mood" (125). But as the relationship with Darrow becomes more problematic on a moral level, its sexual intensity mounts. The joyous sense of being possessor and possessed takes on a threatening aspect, and she is aware of a feeling "confused and turbid, as if secret shames and rancours stirred in it, yet richer, deeper, more enslaving.... She knew now that she could never give him up" (317). Sexual consummation brings "a new instinct of subserviency, against which her pride revolted" (346) and her language stresses her sense of being inescapably his possession--recognizing she is "now his for life" (344). Her old desire to wield power persists, though it takes new forms: she is "shamed... to detect a new element... a sort of suspicious tyrannical tenderness that seemed to deprive [her love] of all serenity" (345-46), but, significantly, temporary relief comes when she feels herself "his in every fibre" (346)¹⁴.

Is Anna's increasing obsession with "enslavement" another manifestation of her fear of involvement in any form of experience that endangers her sense of control, that threatens her desire for the certainty of absolutes, the

safety of abstract knowledge, the untainted world of thought? Or is Wharton herself arguing, through Anna, not only that sexual passion can endanger self-control, a truism too obvious to contest, but that, because of this, it is too dangerous to risk with someone of Darrow's susceptibilities?

This is the argument to which Anna, herself, constantly reverts. She fears that she will succumb to the temptation to make a hitherto undreamed-of pact with "dishonours" simply because of the "mere way in which he moved and looked" (299)¹⁰. There are times when Wharton seems to share in her mistrust. In the course of a discussion over their responsibility to Owen, and while Anna, characteristically, anguishes over her desire to show "strength of character" which she fears will instead be interpreted by Darrow as "habitual indecision" (121), she realizes Darrow is not listening. He is "steeped in the sense of her nearness" so that "even her deficiencies were so many channels through which her influence streamed to him". The moment is one of security and joy for Anna, but the reader may remember that just such a change of focus occurred when Darrow, having kissed Sophy, realized that the fact that he need not listen to her any longer "added immensely to her charm. [Sophy] continued, of course, to talk to him, but it didn't matter, because he no longer made any effort to follow her words" (262). Is Wharton's demonstration, that the temporary infatuation and the

committed love have a similar effect on one's sense of responsibility, simply intended to be a criticism of Darrow, without being an indictment of the power of sexuality to undermine the moral restraints which language, by contrast, supports? This seems another in a series of questions about Wharton's own position to which an attempt at an answer is best postponed.

But this raises a related problem. Does Wharton agree with Anna that, even when sexual love is shown to be the source of security, strength, and self-confidence, these effects are outweighed by the likelihood that it will lead to a selfish lack of concern for others. Wharton's essay on George Eliot, although it dates from a decade earlier, and thus cannot be taken as evidence for her attitude when she wrote *The Reef*, reveals her mind working on just this problem. Furthermore, those passages of Eliot which she quoted in the essay find echoes in Anna's dilemma. Eliot had set up, in *The Mill on the Floss*, the same dichotomy between sexual love and family duty that Anna sees in her own life, caught between the needs of Owen and Effie and her desire to marry Darrow. In her essay, Wharton had quoted Maggie's "I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery... it would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me" ("George Eliot" 250). Anna, striving to persuade Darrow that their marriage must not be made at Owen's expense, argues, "I

couldn't bear it if the least fraction of my happiness seemed to be stolen from his" (121).

These are Anna's words, and it is possible that Wharton wants us to believe, as Darrow does, that Anna is, without realizing it, seeking, in her duty to her family, a means to evade the final sexual commitment to him. In 1902, Wharton had described, in tones of approval, Eliot's belief in the primacy of "faithfulness to inherited or accepted duty" as the "keynote" of her teaching--"All George Eliot's noblest characters shrink with a peculiar dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism." But she had also quoted Eliot's words (written "in a moment of profound insight") that "the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it" ("George Eliot" 250). To write of a "shifting relation" is not to deal in dichotomies, or place one thing in opposition to another. Nevertheless, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot had aligned herself on the side of duty. With regard to *The Reef*, the difficulty is to decide whether Wharton rejects the polarization of passion and duty in favour of the "shifting relation," even though Anna, with her characteristic either-or approach, saw the two as being in opposition.

This, then, leaves us with a number of questions. Does Wharton share Anna's fears that sexual passion is so likely to lead to enslavement and loss of self-control, to

moral evasions and compromise, to a selfish abandonment of one's duty to others, that in a situation of risk, such as marriage to Darrow, it should be repudiated? Or does she suggest that Anna, damaged as she has been by her upbringing, reverts to these excuses, contrary though they are to her conscious hopes for her future, out of a deeply-rooted fear of sexuality? Does she believe that the opposition of morality and sexuality, discerned by Anna, is a false one?

I think the way towards answering these questions lies in seeing Anna's dilemma within the larger preoccupations of the novel. For Anna's idealism, with all its admirable qualities, and its readily-identifiable moral superiority to Darrow's pragmatism, is, nevertheless, a means by which she cuts herself off from life, refuses to take risks, and attempts to substitute the aseptic safety of knowledge for experience. Its ultimate consequence is "not understanding." And for all the frightening consequences to which sexual passion can lead, the same is true of the refusal to take the risks that sexual involvement, of the kind that Darrow offers, demands.

At the same time, the very depth of disturbance which Anna feels, and which is conveyed so powerfully to the reader, suggests Wharton's own deep involvement, and gives one cause to wonder whether, perhaps, her own lingering uncertainties remain to colour the work. If so, this may

account for the intensity with which the novel invests the fear of sexual attraction, and for the impression that sexual passion is charged with less of the novel's energy than the passion for knowledge.

For, although sexuality and its consequences are central to *The Reef*, and indeed the power of sexual passion to overwhelm the individual's integrity in ways which were personally and morally dangerous was one of the central questions at issue, Wharton seems unable, or unwilling, to convey any sense of the physical intensity of sex. The language is as frosty as the name of the house in which most of the action takes place, and might be the work of the earlier Wharton whose frigid life had never been warmed and shaken by an intense sexual passion. The best way to illustrate this to oneself is to read those passages in the early part of *Summer* which describe Charity's physical harmony with the burgeoning growth of early summer (for example: 53-4) immediately after reading *The Reef*. The resultant impression is that the latter work is physically numb. The best Wharton can do, to convey sexual passion, is to depend a good deal on abstraction: "they gave each other a long kiss of promise and communion" (128) combined with attempts to add concreteness by enumeration:

Deeper still than all these satisfactions was the mere elemental sense of well-being in her presence. That, after all, was what proved her to be the

woman for him: the pleasure he took in the set of her head, the way her hair grew on the forehead...

followed by similar details of her nape, gaze, gait, gestures, face, temples, upper lids, to the final cliché (complete with ellipses): "and the way the reflections of two stars seemed to form and break up in her eyes when he held her close to him..."--and yet worse: "If he had any doubt as to the nature of her feeling for him, those dissolving stars would have allayed it" (129-130). No argument based on the fact that we are in Darrow's consciousness can save this writing from disaster. And no such consciousness would have led Darrow into the problems he had more than once experienced.

Furthermore, so charily is Anna's sexual surrender (the word seems appropriate to her ambivalent state) to Darrow handled--signalled chiefly through the discreet ending of chapter 36 with the embrace in Darrow's bedroom (343) and her subsequent sense of being "now his for life" on the following page (344)--that a critic as perceptive as Wolff is able to conclude that (unlike Wharton to whom Anna is being compared) Anna "does not have an affair" (219). Although I am sure Wolff is wrong, Wharton certainly makes it possible to miss the point.

Perhaps Wharton's own experience was still too close, and still felt to have been too dangerous, for her to dare to do more than deal with sexual passion on an intellectual level. What makes *Summer* such an astonishing advance on

The Reef (for *The Custom of the Country* focusses, perhaps also with self-protective intent, on a woman who is essentially asexual) is that the language is permeated, in a way that might have been expected in *The Reef*, with a sexuality which is intense, vital, and exhilarating.

A more perplexing link to *Summer* than Wharton's attempt to deal with the physical power of sexuality, is her flirtation, in *The Reef*, with hints of what was to become a central concern in the novella, the subject of incest. Darrow's affair with Sophy, who will later become Owen's fiancée, is the most obvious of these. More important than the technical complexities of such a relationship (potential wife's stepson's potential wife) are the psychological features, particularly the stress laid on Darrow's perception of Sophy as a child, and her consequent appeal to his protective urges. Wharton seems to be in control here, as she examines how thinking of Sophy in this way makes it possible for Darrow to slip into the affair by justifying his stay in Paris with her as unconnected with the sexual attraction he feels. He can persuade himself that her behaviour "showed she was a child after all; and all he could do--all he had ever meant to do--was to give her a child's holiday to look back on" (72). He can even reassure himself that her appeal has been momentary, and that his feelings have "cooled to the fraternal, the almost fatherly" (53), a Darrovian attempt at precise thinking.

In the reverse case of Owen and Anna, it is less clear that Wharton is fully aware of the unnatural qualities of the relationship she depicts. Despite Owen's near-absence as a felt presence in the book for the reader, it is clear from Anna's account that she feels more strongly for Owen than for anyone else, including Effie, and at times, it seems, almost more than for Darrow himself. The relationship is slippery and protean: sometimes there is an "odd, elder-brotherly note" (103) in Owen's treatment of his stepmother; while at other times they are so close as to seem almost one person (98). Sometimes his resemblance to his father (98) suggests there is an element in their relationship of his representing the husband that Fraser Leath should have been, but at other times, although he rarely calls her mother, he seems to her to be like "her own son" (251). As lovers might, they walk together in physical harmony: "keeping step came to them as naturally as breathing" (101) and communicate wordlessly: "Was I speaking? I thought it was your eyes.... They're such awfully conversational eyes" (106).

Clearly Anna recognizes no jarring or disproportionate note in her plea to Darrow: "I'm almost Owen's mother.... any estrangement between you and him would kill me;" nor, equally clearly, are her increasingly desperate attempts to ensure Owen's happiness a "pretext" (at least in the sense of something deliberately trumped-up), to avoid making her

final commitment to her lover. In the end, the younger and the older man seem almost one, caught up in the same blocked relationship with her, no longer even "beings of a different language", but worse, completely cut off: "she saw between [herself and Darrow] the same insurmountable wall of silence as between herself and Owen, a wall of glass through which they could watch each other's faintest motions but which no sound could even traverse..." (354).

Clearly Wharton disapproves of Darrow's misdirection of his protective instincts, although, at the same time, it would seem from the warmth with which she evokes the initial scenes, she herself finds the blend of protectiveness and sex an attractive one. The combination is one which she was to explore more fully in *Summer*. I am not at all sure that she is as aware of the discomfiting elements in the relationship between Owen and his stepmother. Certainly the intention is present to suggest that Anna may be using Owen, not as a deliberately constructed "pretext" for evasion, but rather at a deeper level, out of fear of committing herself to Darrow. It is not so easy to assert that Wharton sees the more disturbing sexual elements of the relationship, and an overt exploration of the problem comparable to that which occurs with Darrow and Sophy does not take place.

One other point about the relationship of *The Reef* to *Summer* should be made before moving on to a discussion of that novella. As I have already noted. *The Reef* is an

atypical work for Wharton in that, though, with *Anna*, she insists on the inseparability of past, present and future, and on the inseparability of the lives of all those involved in "the coil," she does not, in *The Reef*, show her characteristic concern for the inter-relationship of individual and the larger society, an omission which is clearly by design. This is all the more surprising in that Wharton, herself, records that she once asked Henry James, concerning *The Golden Bowl*:

What was your idea of suspending the four principle characters... in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the human fringes we necessarily trail after us through life? (A Backward Glance 191).

Yet eight years after the publication of James's work she completed a novel of which this could be a description and criticism.

Presumably Wharton felt that this meeting of idealist and pragmatist demanded such an intense concentration on the changing interior states of her two characters that simultaneously to set them in society, and to deal with their relationships with it, would be impossible. Yet there is something rarified about the atmosphere of the work that suggests she was not at her best when omitting what usually interested her most, the interaction of the individual with the larger group. It is as if, in deliberately setting such limits, Wharton denied the importance of something she felt

ought to have been taken into account. Her next novel, *The Custom of the Country* (1913) was to swing back, perhaps too far, to the larger scene. It was with *Summer* (1917), the subject of the next chapter of this thesis, that she achieved a balance between the interior life and the demands of the society within which it was lived.

IV

"Coming Home for Good"?

Morality and Incest in *Summer*

"Most of you who have returned here today... will go back presently to busy cities and lives filled with larger duties. But that is not the only way of coming back to North Dormer. Some of us, who went out like you... have come back in another way--come back for good.... For good. There's the point I want to make... for good and not for bad... or just for indifference.... And even if you come back against your will--and thinking it's all a bitter mistake of Fate or Providence--you must try to make the best of it, and to make the best of your own town; and after a while--well, ladies and gentlemen, I give you my recipe for what it's worth; after a while, I believe you'll be able to say, as I can say today: 'I'm glad I'm here....'"

"That was a man talking."

Summer (193-5).

In the sequence of Wharton's best works, an impressive process of self-criticism can be traced. Although she had been unable to dissociate herself wholly from Selden in *The House of Mirth* in his preference for an attenuated and aestheticized sexuality, she was subsequently willing to examine the implications of this attitude in *The Reef*. In *Summer* she accepts the cumulative lessons of both these works, recognizing that sexuality can neither be aestheticized nor moralized out of its central place in human

life, and chooses to write explicitly, "in a high pitch of creative joy" (*A Backward Glance* 356), of the exhilaration of sexual passion, embodying its excitement in the language in a way which she seemed unable to do in *The Reef*.

In the course of the re-evaluation of Wharton's works that has taken place in the last two decades, *Summer* has been one of the works which has risen most sharply in critical estimation. Indeed it is a remarkable book, not merely because of the candid treatment of sex unexpected from such a writer at such a time, but for its considerable strengths: the powerful evocation of a young woman's dawning sexual awareness, the portrayal of unachieved adolescent longing for certainty in knowledge, and a sympathetic vision of a weak but finally compassionate man.

However, the current recognition of its many qualities makes it possible, indeed essential, to examine its serious and central failure; for, in the final scenes, in the ambiguity of Charity's "coming home for good" as the wife of a man who is, in every way but by blood, her father, there seems to be a pressure, difficult to define at first, to judge the marriage on the wrong basis. The reader may either feel an uncomfortable uncertainty as to how to respond, or, as do many of the modern critics of the work, may react strongly for or against the relationship, only to find that others have arrived at diametrically opposed conclusions, both as to the desirability of the marriage and

about Wharton's attitude to it. Some applaud the work as her "bluntest criticism of the patriarchal sexual economy... the 'rape-incest model' of sexuality and marriage in America" and others praise it as "a hymn to generativity and marriage")¹. A high degree of conflict in the response of the reader, or between readers, suggests one of two possibilities. The first is that, although the novel maintains a consistency of vision, its complexity makes it too subtle to be easily grasped, a strength in the novel thus demanding a complex response. If this is the case, then the problem lies wholly with the reader. The second is that the careless or partisan reader has been attracted to one aspect of an unresolved difficulty besetting the author. If so, the problem in the novel is not one of complexity, but of a confusion that has been further magnified by the response, and author and readers share the blame. If the latter is the case, and I will argue that it is, the confused nature of the response offers a key to recognizing Wharton's own problems with the novel.

Though they disagree on its significance, the critics agree that incest is central to the book². Such agreement is not surprising. That Charity and Royall are not linked by a blood relationship does not significantly affect the situation, except by making marriage legally possible between them. In every way except the genetic, they are father and daughter, and Wharton has no intention of

allowing this to be forgotten³. Furthermore, in the many cultures where sexual relations between father and daughter are condemned, anthropologists report that adoption is considered to be as strong a cause for prohibition of marriage as the existence of blood ties (Fox 34).

In order to decide where the problem in responding to *Summer* originates, it is necessary to consider precisely why its central relationship arouses such strong reactions in us. Whatever the primeval origins of the ban on parent-child incest, the strong revulsion we feel towards it is clearly more fundamental than can be explained by empty custom, or even (bearing in mind the inclusion of adopted children) fears of genetic dangers. Given that marital and sexual relationships are not necessarily identical, it is possible that if a such a marriage could somehow be dissociated from sex and the generation of children, much of the special horror of incest would be removed, although the relationship would not then be a marriage in any normal sense of the word. The sexual aspect of incest is undoubtedly the key to the intensity of our reaction to it. The source of the horror lies in the disproportionate linking of maturity with immaturity in a relationship that ought to be founded on the maturity of both, and the related abuse of power deriving from the authority of the father.

While these elements explain why we regard incest with disgust, they do not account for the subject's

simultaneous fascination. This seems to originate in the potent combination of sex with rebellion, the latter being directed against one of the most fundamental taboos of our culture. It is probably for this reason that the Romantic interest in brother-sister incest was able to draw on the thrill of the broken prohibition without the ugly disproportion of maturity and power inherent in the relationship between father and daughter.

Wharton was to write of quasi-incestuous situations several times (a topic to which I will return at the conclusion of this chapter) and one of her biographers, Wolff, has argued that her interest in this relationship originated in her childhood relationship to her parents (18), a possibility discussed in Appendix Two of this thesis. Given the fact that she returned repeatedly to the subject, it seems likely that it had a strong personal fascination for her, and that biographical factors may, indeed, have predisposed her to explore the subject repeatedly. Possibly the subject, despite the inevitable difficulties in shaping it to her purpose, also attracted her because it offered both a particularly acute confrontation of sexuality with morality and, paradoxically, a "solution" to the conflict, although one that bears marks of Wharton's earlier difficulties in the works examined here.

If we examine the relationship between Charity and Royall in terms of Wharton's treatment of the key elements

of the incestuous situation: sexuality, maturity, and rebellion, we should be able to come closer to discerning her intentions in her treatment of the subject, and thus the source of the reader's troubled response to the conclusion of the novel. I shall argue that, in doing so, we can follow Wharton's skilful, if unconscious manipulation of the liabilities inherent in aligning an incestuous marriage with morality and against sexuality. The novel thus offers new insight into Wharton's continuing attempts to explore the relationship between the two. It also offers an illustration of an author employing strategies that serve an end of which she herself is not clearly aware, as a consequence of a conflict she is unable to resolve.

As noted earlier, the revulsion against marriage between parent and child might be somewhat mitigated if that marriage were to be depicted as sexless. This however would be at considerable cost, since normally such a marriage could not be considered desirable. In the context of such a novel as *Summer*, affectionately called "Hot Ethan" by its author (*Letters* December 21 1916, 384), with its heady evocation of a girl's gradual awakening to sexual fulfilment, it would seem to be particularly difficult to present a sexless marriage as justifiable.

Wharton conveys Charity's growing awareness of her sexuality with admirable skill and sensitivity, from the

girl's initial unfocussed sense of her own participation in the burgeoning of early summer:

This was all she saw; but she felt, above her and about her, the strong growth of the beeches clothing the ridge, the rounding of pale green cones on countless spruce-branches, the push of myriads of sweet-fern fronds in the cracks of the stony slope below the wood, and the crowding shoots of meadowsweet and yellow flags in the pasture beyond. All this bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyxes was carried to her on mingled currents of fragrance. (53-4)

to her recognition and acceptance not only of her own sexual desires but also the emotional complexities entailed in their satisfaction:

Since the day before she had known exactly what she would feel if Harney should take her in his arms: the melting of palm into palm and mouth on mouth and the long flame burning her from head to foot. But mixed with this feeling was another: the wondering pride in his liking for her, the startled softness that his sympathy had put into her heart.... If he wanted her he must seek her: he must not be surprised into taking her as girls like Julia Hawes were taken.... (106)

It would seem, from these and many other passages, that whatever there had been of Selden and the young Anna Leath in Wharton has at last been understood and expunged. And yet the novel is not, as it might superficially seem, an unalloyed celebration of sexuality, not, as Marilyn French argues, "a clamorous and ecstatic affirmation of the joy of sexual love no matter what it costs" (xlvi). It is something far more complicated. For the movement towards sexual fulfilment is accompanied by a subtle but steady development of a negative movement that associates sexuality

with the animal and the subhuman, and with rebellion, irresponsibility and the denial of reality. In *The House of Mirth*, the conflict between sexuality and morality had been limited by the attenuated and aestheticized nature of both. In *The Reef*, the problem had been examined but the sexual intensity had been overwhelmed by analysis--the passion to know. In *Summer*, sexuality is revealed in all its power, and the old conflict is therefore intensified. However, so powerful are the early scenes depicting Charity's physical harmony with the generativity of the early summer, that only careful attention to language in the context of the structure of the book reveals the countermovement that paradoxically prepares for a marriage night, and possibly a marriage, centred on abstinence from sexual intercourse.

One of the unremarked features of the initial scenes which so powerfully and attractively depict Charity's sensuous nature and link it to the burgeoning summer is that they are almost wholly conveyed in terms of growing vegetation. By contrast, animal imagery generally has negative associations in this novel. Phrases such as the "bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyxes" (54) are undeniably and explicitly sexual, but the first direct animal reference, to "the earth smell that was like the breath of some huge sun-warmed animal" immediately precedes the arrival of Liff Hyatt, his clumsy boot destroying the delicate bramble flowers. Furthermore, as

one of the Mountain people, he is explicitly placed: his "pale yellow eyes" those of a "harmless animal" (56). Whenever Wharton wishes to stress the emotional aspect of the consummation of Charity's love for Harney, which she consistently celebrates despite its hopelessness, she continues to associate her with vegetative symbols. Thus love produces the "wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils" (180). But in telling contrast, the orgasmic Nettleton fireworks move from "sky orchards... blossom... petals... golden fruit" to "great birds ... building their nests in those invisible treetops" (147), as Charity will soon move from sexual anticipation to consummation, from the vegetative to the animal and, in so doing, end with a "broken wing" (280).

Meanwhile the animal is insistently connected with the subhuman in general and with the Mountain people in particular. At the house in the swamp the woman is an "unkempt creature", the man "sodden and bestial", the family "like vermin in their lair" (83). Later, at the funeral of Charity's mother the nature of the Mountain people ("nocturnal animals", "like a dead dog in a ditch") is linked with words that Charity's consciousness selects with horror from the burial service, "In my flesh shall I see God", words that offer consolation not by celebrating the physical body, but by asserting the supremacy of the

"incorruptible" over the "corruptible", the "glorious body" over the "vile body" (248, 250, 254, 255).

An "ecstatic affirmation of the joy of sexual love" that is conveyed most powerfully in terms of growing plants, and simultaneously uses animal associations to convey disgust, suggests an unwillingness to accept the full implications of human sexuality. This suspicion is confirmed by Wharton's treatment of its consummation, for if the overall movement of the book celebrates sexuality most joyously in terms not of the animal but the vegetative, it also celebrates it most intensely before love is consummated, in the period when Charity is a creature of romantic daydreams (40), theoretical "knowledge" (105) and fantasies about Harney's fraternal and comradely affection and pity (95, 103, 125). But this state is fractured on the night of Harney's first kiss and the subsequent encounter with Royall (160), and it is noticeable that both the intensity and extended nature of the early sensuous descriptions are considerably diminished after the trip to Nettleton.

The Fourth-of-July kiss is also sullied by the atmosphere of Nettleton itself, with its obtrusive seediness, its swarming crowds, its reeking food smells and its cheap gimcracks. But there is more than a sense of physical revulsion in Wharton's depiction of the scene: there is yet another indictment of sexuality. The day

celebrating the assumption of national responsibility is marked by a general casting off of responsibility among the participants, a mood in which Charity and Harney are caught up. The theme is further developed when consummation takes place in a location that marks the same absence of communal responsibility, an empty house, fixed up only temporarily to seem like a home; a fit place for an affair that cannot last, severed as it is from the real world and the realities that Charity strives to forget. The linking of sex with evasion of responsibility, already suggested in Royall's actions, is made explicit in Harney's repeated distraction not simply from his commitment to Annabel Balch but also from Charity's needs, leaving him "so penetrated with the joy of her presence that he was utterly careless of what she was thinking or feeling" (164), with the consequence that for his own convenience he persuades her to return to the guardian he now knows has been a sexual threat to her in the past. For Charity too, the same links are emphasized, so that when Charity confronts Royall, "all her old resentments and rebellions flamed up, confusedly mingled with the yearning aroused by Harney's nearness" (103).

This treatment of sex (its most intense celebration tempered by the exclusion of the animal, the height of its joy reached before consummation, its fulfilment linked to the bestial natures of the Mountain people and to the irresponsibility of Harney and to the rebellion of Charity)

suggests that Wharton has not yet been able to reconcile it with morality, but is still principally concerned with the opposition caused by the power of sexuality to weaken self-control and to distract from recognition of duty.

And yet because *Summer* has recognized and embodied the centrality of sexuality to human life, it cannot defuse it or weaken its power. In the closing scenes of *Summer*, Wharton's "solution" is therefore not to exclude sexuality but rather to endorse a sexuality that is all the more powerful for being held in check. This is a perfect resolution of her problem in the sense that it offers the ultimate in both responsibility and intensity, the latter actually increased by leaving the eventual sexual outcome of the marriage in doubt by placing us at the mercy of Charity's point of view. She concludes, when she wakes to find her husband sleeping in a chair, that he had "sat there in the darkness to show her she was safe with him"; he had married her because "he knew..."(284), (the ellipses presumably representing the fact that she is pregnant, which she has never admitted to him). His manner towards her offers us no greater certainty about the sexual outcome of the marriage than does her judgment. It fluctuates from treating her as he would if they were an old married couple, to addressing her as if she were a pretty daughter he wished to indulge. All that is clear is that, for now, he is anxious to avoid suggesting any hint of an immediate sexual

relationship.

We are left with two impressions that *ought* to be contradictory: that of the harsh father who has at last learned how to show his paternal affection and achieved a reconciliation with his hitherto-rebellious daughter, and the dissipated man who has learned self-control ("as if all the dark spirits had gone out of him", 284) for the sake of the woman he loves. We are asked, however, not only to believe that both are simultaneously possible but also that both are desirable. It is this "resolution" of the problem of sexuality that, in part, contributes to the confused reaction provoked by the closing of the novel.

Having chosen to place the marriage in opposition to sexual irresponsibility, Wharton faces two major problems caused by the nature of the relationship: the disproportionate linking of immaturity to maturity and the inappropriate use of paternal power that are characteristic of father-daughter incest. Charity must be successfully shown to be a mature woman by the time of her wedding, at no disadvantage with respect to Royall, if this marriage is to be rightly considered, in Wershoven's words, to be a "union of equals who have grown through confrontation and acceptance of themselves and each other" (9). Otherwise Wharton must find some other way of nullifying the moral objections to the marriage.

One way of demonstrating Charity's maturity would be to show her an adult in her understanding of others, particularly Royall. However, the dominance of Charity's point of view throughout almost all of the book produces an unsettling consequence. We are largely at the mercy of the mind of a girl who is neither wholly child nor wholly woman. We are, therefore, subject to an adolescent's fluctuations between sophistication and naïveté, and if we accept her own avowals of the former, we do so at our peril. Added to this is Wharton's partial use of omniscient narration to supplement Charity's view, a function carried out by an elusive narrative voice that slides in and out of Charity's consciousness and makes it very difficult for us to keep our bearings (a technique discussed at greater length in connection with *The House of Mirth*). "Lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in Lawyer Royall's house. She had never put it to herself in those terms; but she knew her power..." (23). The consequence is that we may very easily be fooled into believing in Charity's "knowledge" as unquestioningly as she does. Since understanding of others is an important component of maturity, the reader is constantly driven to assess and reassess what is learned from Charity and what this shows about her. Possibly those critics who see the marriage as one of "equals" fall victim to Charity's own delusions ⁴.

However, there is considerable evidence that no

equality of maturity is achieved. Because Charity herself values "knowledge" of others very highly as a means to power, or at least of self-protection, the problem of the quality of her knowledge is repeatedly raised, most acutely in connection with Royall. Over the school episode, for example, Wharton at first allows us to believe that Charity "understood" his reasons, had "made out" his lonesomeness and "was conscious" of his superiority to his neighbours (25). Yet later we find she had "only a dim understanding of her guardian's needs" (70) and later still, after her night vigil, "suddenly she understood that, until then she had never really noticed him or thought about him. Except on the occasion of his one offense he had been to her merely the person who is always there, the unquestioned central fact of life, as inevitable but as uninteresting as North Dormer itself". It becomes essential to our attempt to "place" her knowledge that we decide whether we are to see this as a belated recognition of her own self-centredness (even on that one occasion "she had regarded him only in relation to herself, and had never speculated as to his own feelings... But now she began to wonder what he was really like"), or as yet-another self-delusion growing from her "effort of indifference" (110-111). The uncertainty produced by the need to distinguish the equivocal narrative voice from Charity's thoughts makes judgment difficult. One thing is clear: since one cannot hate a person and find him

"uninteresting", this moment cannot represent a point at which Charity achieves a final understanding of their relationship. We ought therefore to recognize that Charity's "knowledge" never convincingly demonstrates achieved maturity, even though a superficial reading may suggest that it does. A "useful" (though possibly accidental) long-term consequence of this series of revisions, from the point of view of aligning the marriage on the side of morality, is that negative judgments of Charity's guardian can subsequently be modified without provoking the reader, now accustomed to revision, to undue resistance. This helps to make Royall's recovery of moral stature in the closing pages seem less unlikely.

The pattern of revision is continued to the end of the book. Thus, though the beginning of the wedding service has "the dread sound of finality", it is later, with the placing of the ring on her finger that "she understood that she was married" (278). But once again the knowledge proves incomplete for the sight of the lake "roused her for the first time to a realization of what she had done. Even the feeling of the ring on her hand had not brought her this sharp sense of the irretrievable" (280). If it could be isolated from the serious flaws in the book, this presentation of Charity's struggle to "know", its association in her mind with her "need" for power, and the process of constant revision she and the reader

simultaneously undergo, could be described as brilliantly achieved. Unfortunately it is flawed by the purpose to which it is put.

Full understanding of others can never be completely achieved, and it might be argued that, despite Charity's continuing need to revise her judgments, overall progress to maturity is achieved. But it is also possible to see the pattern of revision as being without any direction except of repeated discovery of error. Read this way, the emphasis in Charity's acknowledgement, "I guess you're good too" (291) ought to fall on the second word. Sufficient ambiguity remains to require the reader to look at another source of evidence, her emotions, for a clearer understanding of the direction of movement. Unfortunately, this supports the second way of reading the pattern, suggesting that Charity fails to achieve maturity. For her overall emotional movement is not in the direction of maturity but of retreat towards childhood. This is the chief characteristic of the closing pages, as the feminist critics have correctly pointed out, although from the point at which Royall rescues her to their return home, the language of these scenes invites us to share in Charity's relief rather than to find her regression repellent as these critics insist. Furthermore, Wharton makes it clear that Charity's relief is not merely because she is surrendering to Royall, but because she is surrendering to Royall her father. His

fatherly role is signalled by the reference to the *Crimson Rambler*, which "brings a softness to her heart" (266), and his reminders of his earlier rescue of her when she was a little child. His repeated assertions that he knows what she wants, that she wants "to be taken home and took care of", his tone "strong" and "resolute" and his manner "grave" and "kindly", his provision of the desperately needed food and warmth, all prepare us to accept Charity's feeling of a "sense of security" (273). Wharton makes no attempt to mute the language of childlike submission, describing Charity as acting "passively", "obediently" and "timidly" (274, 276). In *The House of Mirth*, as I have already argued, Wharton reveals how strongly she is attracted to these "protective" aspects of love, even between adults, and is therefore not able wholly to repudiate the childish nature of her society. The stress on the need for nurture rather than maturity is here seen, disturbingly, to have been carried through to *Summer*.

How, then, can some of the critics hail Charity's marriage as desirable, given her emotional state? They are not all protected from error by the armour of feminism, but that hardly seems sufficient reason. In part the uncertainty about her greater understanding of others and her undoubted, if limited, moral gains make this possible. In part the regression can be excused by those who wish to do so on the grounds that these are "special circumstances",

and that though Charity is for the moment exhausted, in French's words, "Spring will return"(xiviii). But probably even more effective, and more misleading, is the contrast between her quiet acceptance of the conditions of the homecoming and her previous adolescent rebellion, which makes her final state seem more desirable than her first to some readers. This, ironically, may explain why some critics are able to see the end as a "union of equals" and an adult acceptance of the demands of civilization, for they are responding to the comparison between this state and her earlier rebellion, and thus see this as an adult acceptance of, and accomodation to, reality rather than a childlike submission. However, these contrasts should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the compassionate warmth that mitigates the bleakness of the ending is achieved through the evocation of a love more appropriate to a father than a husband.

If one of the features that we normally find repulsive about incest is the imbalance of maturity, we must wonder why Wharton uses the language of childish submission to persuade us to respond with approbation to the marriage and to the return home "for good". However, if we recognize that Wharton has, in *Summer*, acknowledged the centrality and power of sexuality without discovering how to reconcile it with morality, we can see how desirable it would be for her to detach sexuality from its proper object, cleanse and even

intensify it by denial, and reattach what is left of it to the nurturing relationship of father and daughter. This would help pave the way for the portrayal of the marriage as a positive moral act and enable Wharton to "solve" the problem that *Summer* raises for her.

Before examining Wharton's treatment of the other obstacle to a favourable representation of the marriage, the possible imbalance of power between "father" and "daughter", it is important to stress that to portray a relationship of marital authority and obedience of the traditional type is neither to depict incest nor to suggest it symbolically. If we do not keep this in mind there is a danger that we will criticize the marriage for the wrong reasons, as the feminist critics do, by obscuring the fact that it is the deliberate abuse of *parental* authority that constitutes an essential part of the horror of incest⁴. Furthermore, critics such as Ammons and Crowley who impose a feminist metaphor on *Summer* reduce the marriage from its human dimensions to a flat symbolic scheme, thus blurring the personal ugliness of incest in the cause of impersonal theory. The real issue is whether Wharton shows us a relationship in which Royall misuses his power as parent against a disproportionately powerless Charity in order to bring about their marriage, for, if so, then the situation has one of the nastiest elements of incest and it will be

difficult for Wharton to align it on the side of morality. On the other hand, if she does not, we may ask if she deals with the subject fairly, or whether she is guilty of a sleight of hand that enables her to make the marriage acceptable.

Charity believes that her power originated in Royall's moment of weakness when she was seventeen: "She knew her power, knew what it was made of and hated it" (23). Certainly the name given her in childhood suggests an intent (as she suspects) to ensure her recognition of her dependency, and Royall's sexual advances put him at a moral disadvantage. However, the evidence, even filtered through her point of view, is that these "knows" are, like the others, inadequate, and that her initial power developed long before his attempted entry into her bedroom, growing rather from his loneliness and affection for her, as the episodes of the school and the rose suggest. Wharton achieves two ends by suggesting that Charity's power originates not only in Royall's error but also in the loneliness that results in his inability to exercise his control over his ward, for she causes us to feel not only a desire to excuse his lack of authority but also a wish that he would exert it. Both responses make it easier for her to restore him to a position of moral authority at the conclusion of the novel.

This double effect is strengthened by the established

pattern of conflicts between the two, in which Royall attempts to assert power, or Charity anticipates him by going on the attack, the struggle usually culminating in his defeat and in her sense of disgust at her ascendancy (111, 118). Scenes that contrast his public and private roles confirm that though "Lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer... Charity ruled in Lawyer Royall's house". Thus, immediately after he has been humiliated in his plea, "I want you to marry me... I'll do whatever you say" (33) he is presented, in somewhat mocking tones, in all his "professional dignity and masculine independence" (36) holding court at Fry's store. Times at which Royall clearly ought to assert his authority as guardian, as over her early closing of the library, present him as unable to do so (41). The overall effect is to build up considerable pressure on the reader to favour the assertion not merely of his authority, but of his parental authority.

Charity's ambivalent attitude to her power, already noted with regard to Royall, is further pointed up by her relationship to Harney. Their love makes her feel, for the first time, "the sweetness of dependence" (23) and she is attracted to his "air of power", which she believes city living has bestowed both on him and on Royall (51). Nevertheless Harney, well-mannered, but also constitutionally weak, often plays the subordinate role, asking where she will take him each day (66), and treating

her deferentially (76). Sex provides a momentary illusion of balance: she thinks of Harney as one "who dominated her, yet over whom she herself was possessed of a new mysterious power" (149). However, this is clearly a precarious equilibrium, maintained at the expense of self-delusion: "all her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will. It was not that she felt in him any ascendancy of character--there were moments when she knew she was the stronger" (175).

Wharton, therefore, prepares us for Charity's final acceptance of Royall's authority by encouraging in us a hazy sense, partially shared by Charity, that her position of power over both Harney and Royall is unnatural and undesirable. Unless we look closely at where this is leading, to the blurring of the distinction between parental authority and the traditional authority of the husband, and insist that this is no justification for *filial* submission in marriage, we may be persuaded to endorse Charity's regression to childlikeness that is a feature of the closing scenes of the novel.

Bristling with resentment over such lines as "You're a good girl, Charity" (291), feminist critics are generally proof against Wharton's tactic, but for the wrong reasons. They do not see that she is not attempting to portray Royall as a symbol of the "dominant male's indulgence of a female's weakness", but indeed, as the tone of the closing pages

insists, as an example of "true compassion" (Crowley 95). What the reader *should* find worrying is that she uses this shift in power, which she carefully engineers to seem desirable and natural, to support Charity's regression to childhood. At the same time Wharton avoids the issue of abuse of parental power by portraying a situation in which that power has not been exercised since Charity's girlhood.

The approbation with which Charity's regression is presented, linked with other aspects of her treatment of maturity, strongly suggests that Wharton endorses Charity's final dependence on Royall. It suggests that Wharton is, indeed, attempting a sleight of hand. Her aim is to exonerate Royall from charges of misuse of parental power by portraying Charity not only as the flouter of authority, but also as the real holder of power in the household. By representing this situation as one that Charity deeply, if dimly and intermittently, regrets, and by inviting the reader to share that feeling, Wharton supports the claim that Charity's capitulation enables the couple to "come home for good". Thus, she obscures as effectively as the feminists, but for her own quite distinct purposes, the difference between parental power and the traditional authority of the husband, and in doing so attempts to persuade her readers to respond favourably to a situation they ought to censure.

Having done as much as possible to nullify the problems caused by inequalities of maturity and power, and to link sex to irresponsibility, Wharton must free the incestuous marriage from its association with rebellion against the most fundamental of taboos, and transform it into a positive assertion of the moral values of the community. That Wharton attempts this, is corroborated by some of the critical reaction to the book. Wolff, for example, admires the novel on the grounds that it shows that "even passion must submit to social injunctions", that "passion without order will be inarticulate and weak" and that "it is undeniable that we relinquish something significant--glorious--when we submit to the repressive process of civilization... yet in the end we gain more than we lose" (292-3). The means by which Wharton attempts this justification, and the extent of her success, can only be determined by an examination of the roles that Royall and Charity play in relation to their society, its needs and demands.

The issue of rebellion is linked to maturity and power, for Charity is initially portrayed as filled with an adolescent's hatred of "everything" (9, 12, 112) including her guardian and the responsibilities, pieties and rules of her community, in fact a hatred of those people and things she fears have, or might gain, power over her. Her fear condemns her to ambivalence, for while she clearly loathes

the "deeper sense of isolation" that Miss Harney's genteel cowardice imposes on her (31), at the same time it is through isolation that she seeks to protect herself from her world. To be "outside the jurisdiction of the valleys", as the Mountain people are, and not to "give a damn for anybody" seems thrilling (65) and it is the Mountain that she initially identifies as "home" (163). But Wharton's repeated association of animals with both the Mountain people and with Charity's desire to protect her privacy ("Whenever she was unhappy she felt herself at bay against a pitiless world, and a kind of animal secretiveness possessed her", 101) makes it clear that these acts of rebellion, and the "childish savagery" (220) to which she feels driven, are a denial of responsibility to the human community.

The moral progress Charity makes in surrendering Harney to Annabel Balch, and in deciding to keep her baby, emanates from her own strength, yet these are decisions made less for the community as a whole than for the sake of another individual, and Wharton allows Charity little else in the way of decisive moral action. When she awakens on the Mountain she knows she faces "a new day in which she would have to live, to choose, to act, to make herself a place among these people -- or to go back to the life she had left" (261), but it is only the naively romanticized dream of a clean and rosy baby supported by prostitution that finally causes her to leave (261). It is true that she

herself overcomes her animal "instinct of concealment" when she sees Royall's buggy, but her movement towards rather than away from him is an impulse born of exhaustion and weakness rather than conscious and positive choice (265) and her subsequent acts are given shape largely by Royall's decisive actions, not by hers. If, then, Charity is to "come home for good" in these circumstances, Wharton must show that to surrender to Royall is in itself a moral act because it is to submit to a moral superior.

Given Royall's considerable weakness at the beginning of the novel, to establish him as a moral superior is not an easy matter. Wharton's use of "Old Home Week" is the key to her attempt to make him a dominant moral force within the novel and therefore, to make him the symbol of the community to which Charity must be reconciled. Wharton is careful, however, not to demand too much of our credulity, establishing that, despite his serious limitations, his weakness for drinking and the occasional society of prostitutes and bar-room loafers, he is a man recognized not merely by North Dormer, but by the young architect from the big city, as "above the people among whom he lived" (70). Even Charity sometimes sees him as "a magnificent monument of a man" whom she admires (27). But the emphasis is placed on the "ruined and unforgotten past" (68) with which the "monument of a man" is associated. The "only man" with courage enough to go up the mountain and rescue Charity (72)

has become a "lonesome man" capable of making sexual advances to his seventeen-year-old ward. To again become worthy of the full moral significance of the word "man", which he has debased, Royall must be shown to earn it again as an individual and within the community.

At the same time, the word "home" must be given more than casual meaning and must be associated with the community as a whole through a similar means of rehabilitation to that of Royall. The red house is at first seen (as usual through Charity's eyes) as "cheerless and untended" outside (23), and a place of "cold neatness" inside (24), apparently lacking the "freshness, purity and fragrance" of Miss Hatchard's house (85). But compared to the house in the swamp, the red house not only takes on the nurturing characteristics of a home, with the smells of scrubbed floors and food, but becomes "a very symbol of household order" (85)². The house also takes some part in representing the tradition of the larger community because it contains the books that Royall values. These include the speeches of Webster, whose own assertion leads forward to Royall's speech at Old Home Week: "True eloquence indeed does not exist in speech... it must exist in the man, in the subject, in the occasion". There are also the works of Bancroft the historian, whose patriotic encomiums ring more flamboyantly: "With one impulse the colonies sprang to arms. With one spirit they pledged themselves to be ready for the

extreme event. With one heart the continent cried, Liberty or Death" (Spiller 549, 527-8). Together, though these works may argue against his sophistication, they also suggest Royall's genuine if theoretical commitment to the larger community, a dedication that will take a more active form during Old Home Week. Hanging in the house and also continuing the theme, is the picture of "The Surrender of Burgoyne", depicting a scene from the War of Independence (32, 37, 85), a picture proudly associated by Wharton with the history of her own family (*A Backward Glance* 9). However, Wharton intends us to see that, if these links to the past remain only that and no more, they can only be of limited moral worth.

Royall and his house are shown to have moral significance in the community, but they are also shown to be inadequate, links to a better past rather than a sufficient source of strength in the present or a promise of new life in the future. Royall has succumbed to the weaknesses of his decaying town; he "in common with most of his fellow citizens had a way of accepting events passively, as if he had long since come to the conclusion that no one who lived in North Dormer could hope to modify them"(90). If he is to stand out in more than reputation and manner from his fellows and take an active lead in shaping events, it must be in a way that brings the "man", the house and the community together, thus providing a positive moral centre,

a "home" to which Charity can return, rebellion behind her. Royall's weaknesses are convincingly delineated; the issue is whether Wharton can successfully portray him as able to revitalize the community and his own moral life by the means she selects: the Old Home Week festivities. As a preliminary step, she prepares carefully for Royall's rehabilitation, first through the Nettleton scene, then by her own intervention, and finally by contrast with Miss Hatchard.

The seedy nature of the Fourth of July holiday has already been noted, with its emphasis on the tawdry level to which both the national celebrations and Royall's self-respect have sunk. Accompanied by Julia, whose white feather suggests surrender rather than independence, his age is accentuated to near-senility by the youth of his disreputable companions, his drunkenness and his shock at meeting Charity. Washington has been reduced to a firework display, Royall, the ruler of North Dormer, to a display of the "tremulous majesty of drunkenness" (151). The shock and pain of the meeting are brilliantly delineated and the scene is one of the most powerful and moving in the novel. Julia's earlier jibe to Charity, "Say! If this ain't Old Home Week" (145) ensures that the reader will link this with the later occasion, and suggests that it may be the opportunity for Royall to make good what he has sullied.

Unequivocal intervention by the author is as rare in

the novel as it is in Wharton's fiction as a whole. When it occurs, it seems to mark a recognition of a need to make a point that she fears may otherwise be missed (the authorial intrusion in *The House of Mirth*: "she had been fashioned to adorn and delight" serving this function). Such an intrusion not only precedes but also patronizes Old Home Week: "that form of sentimental decentralization was still in its early stages... the incentive to the celebration had come rather from those who had left North Dormer than from those who had been obliged to stay there, and there was some difficulty in rousing the village to the proper state of enthusiasm" (170). This suggests that Wharton does not herself wish to be caught sentimentalizing but, even more, that Royall may be able to make the event worth something more than mere sentimentality, even against such odds.

Miss Hatchard's role is to provide the living embodiment of the sentimental. As Charity weaves garlands of hemlock, with its associations of sedation, poison and death, the spinster prattles on "for the hundredth time" of her "Associations" (172). Her "peroration" on "old ideals, the family and the homestead and so on" (173) establishes the empty falsity that Royall must make into solid truth if he is to achieve the necessary moral stature to win Charity from rebellion and redeem her.

Wharton deliberately and successfully gathers together all these threads as the scene begins. Not only is

Nettleton explicitly mentioned, but Royall's reading and Miss Hatchard's sentimental "Associations" are also woven into the opening of the speech with its "sonorous quotations" and "allusions to illustrious men, including the obligatory tribute to Honorius Hatchard" (192). But Royall is rejuvenated -- not merely in appearance, but also, and more disturbingly, by Charity's memories of an earlier period of her life as she notices "the look of majesty that used to awe and fascinate her childhood" (191). The effect of this is curiously unsettling, and may reflect Wharton's own uncertainty. She has prepared us to see the links to the past as of little worth unless they influence the present and future, and yet she is most fully engaged when she represents Royall and, as we have already noted, his relationship to Charity, in situations in which the past is recaptured rather than built upon.

In connection with this, Wharton insists on reminding us of their past relationship, by stressing that the speaker is Charity's "guardian" (192), although "his inflections were richer and graver than she had ever known them" (193). Wharton is clearly determined to make Royall's moral stature justify the nature of the relationship and help negate its disturbing aspects rather than to deny or evade the issue of incest. The scene is, therefore, crucial. It must carry complete moral conviction if the couple's return as man and wife is to be perceived as a homecoming "for good".

Royall is given an unusual amount of control over our reactions by being given three pages of direct speech, which suggests how much importance Wharton ascribes to the scene as a means of restoring Royall to his appropriate moral stature⁴. We are repeatedly given assurances of his powerful effect on the audience, are told of the "light of response on their faces", the "sense of suspense in the listening hall" (193), and that a "murmur of emotion and surprise ran through the audience. It was not the least what they expected would have moved them" (195). We are, therefore, directed not only to respond with the audience, but also to see Royall's perception of his own and his community's plight as fresh and genuine rather than a collection of Hatchard clichés. Most important of all, we are told by Mr. Miles to recognize Royall's regained stature: "That was a *man* talking" (195). The clergyman takes a further part in supporting this judgment, for he is shortly to be seen as more naïve than Royall ("...the piety and purity of this group of innocent girls", 198), thus drawing our attention to the lawyer's realistic honesty by contrast with Miles' idealistic clichés; yet he is also shown to be a "man" himself by virtue of going courageously to perform the Mountain burial, and, therefore, capable of recognizing manliness in another.

Yet the speech itself is a disappointment. If it is to work, its success must depend not on external support

from the author through the reactions of the hearers, but on the absolute conviction it should give us of Royall's sincerity. The references to his own failures, expressed both directly and indirectly, go some way to achieving this effect: North Dormer might have been a "bigger place" if those who came back wanted to come back "for good... and not for bad... or just for indifference" (194), although once again it is in invoking the past that Wharton is successful. But the whole collapses in the patent falsity of "I give you my recipe for what it's worth; after a while I believe you'll be able to say, as I can say today: 'I'm glad I'm here!'" (195). Only our distraction from Royall's speech by a concern for Charity's anxious search for Harney and the painful revelation of Annabel Balch's presence can prevent us from recognizing Wharton's inability to make this assertion ring true. Yet our acceptance of the rightness of the ending depends on the theme of "coming home for good", which this speech is intended to establish. The fundamental problem is that Royall's moral weaknesses, including the lack of self-control that has led to his sexual advances to Charity, are too serious to be erased by an unconvincing declaration of reconciliation to his lot in North Dormer. That Royall's proposal of marriage is explicitly linked back to his speech ("His voice had the grave persuasive accent that had moved his hearers at the Old Home Week Festival", 270), demonstrates how heavily Wharton is relying on the

moral superiority she hopes she has established for him on that occasion. Her failure is all the more disastrous for the novel.

She makes a final attempt to assert the moral worth of the marriage by stressing bonds to a yet wider community, by explicitly linking the marriage to the burial service (278) through the "ordered ritual" of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This not only confers on the marriage responsibilities to a society greater than the concerns of the two individuals, but also reminds us that whatever Charity's anguish, it is part of the common lot: "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery" (254). The marriage is, thus, invested with as much moral authority as Wharton can muster from community and religion, but it is not sufficient to compensate for her failure to show that Royall has achieved the moral stature required to justify Charity's submission to him.

There is an element of ambiguity in Charity's attempt to understand her own reaction to Royall's proposal of marriage and her own assessment of her moral stature in relation to his, for it is accompanied by an unusual recognition on her part of an inability to "know," and it is left incomplete:

"Oh I can't--" she burst out desperately.

"Can't what?"

She herself did not know: she was not sure if she was rejecting what he offered, or already struggling against the temptation of taking what

she no longer had a right to (270).

Royall gives Charity no real chance to make up her mind as to which is true; instead he gently urges her down the Mountain and into marriage. But Wharton has done her best to make certain that the reader is not left in any doubt, for she has exerted a great deal of pressure to ensure that Royall is seen as offering Charity the opportunity to "come home for good".

Paradoxically, then, Wharton chooses a relationship normally considered immoral, an incestuous marriage, and invests it with moral significance, opposing it to normal sexuality. The measure of her success may be seen in the divided responses of readers to the work. However, we should not need the "protection" of a feminist outlook to resist her persuasion to respond by seeing Charity's childlike submission to Royall's authority as either emotionally fitting or as a desirable righting of an imbalance of power. Above all, we should not be persuaded, as we are instructed during the Old Home Week festivities, to see Royall as the symbol of moral dedication to the community. Unfortunately, given that Wharton's thoughtful commitments to order and the "process of civilization" (Wolff 293) is one of the most rewarding aspects of her work, it is particularly hard to resist this appeal, and particularly distressing to see it linked to such a purpose.

As Wharton confirmed to a friend, Lawyer Royall "is

the book" (*Letters* September 4 1917, 398), and the failure of her attempt to make Royall's moral rehabilitation convincing is, therefore, central to the failure of the novel. For, despite the positive reactions of some readers, it is a failure, and this is ensured from the beginning by Wharton's goal: the justification of an incestuous marriage for the very reasons for which it ought to be condemned: a return to immaturity, a surrender to paternal authority, and a denial of normal sexuality, all in the name of morality and commitment to the community.

Given that an incestuous marriage is particularly difficult to align with morality against sexuality, Wharton's choice and treatment of it seem perversely designed to cause her almost insuperable problems in achieving a resolution. That several more works were to explore incestuous situations certainly suggests a deeply-felt personal preoccupation with the subject, potentially destructive of the ability to see clearly and impersonally². If we move beyond *Summer*, however, we can see that, as Wharton continued to develop variations of the theme, she gained increasing, though not total, mastery of this preoccupation.

About two years after the publication of *Summer*--according to Wolff (407), though Lewis thinks it was later (*Letters* 589 n2)--she wrote a fragment, which she herself

labelled "unpublishable", that described, in explicit detail, pleasurable sexual intercourse between father and daughter. The "unpublishable" nature of the work obviously allowed her more freedom to indulge her fantasy to its fullest than did *Summer*, but the punishment for self-indulgence was correspondingly harsh, for in the outline for a short story entitled "Beatrice Palmato," to which the fragment is linked, the daughter subsequently kills herself (Lewis 544-8). In 1935, Wharton wrote to a friend, with considerable relish, of Moravia

as to whom I remain unconverted and incorrigible--because Faulkner and Céline did it *first* and did it nastier. (I've got an incest donnée up my sleeve that wd make them all look like nursery rhymes--but business is too bad to sell such Berquinades nowadays.) (*Letters* August 14 1935, 589)

but to read the fragment and outline is to realize they could neither have been written primarily in the spirit of competition, nor for profit.

The preoccupation remained unexorcised ten years after the publication of *Summer* but its treatment changed. In *Twilight Sleep*, 1927, a middle-aged man who allows himself to be seduced by his stepson's wife is not excused on the grounds of his own unhappy marriage, middle-age regrets, muddled motives or even the girl's flagrant promiscuity. Perhaps significantly this "father figure" is a lawyer whose tastes in reading (in the later novel clearly intended to be seen as naïve) are the same as Royall's.

In 1928 Wharton accorded considerably more sympathy

to the appealing hero of *The Children*, and she provided generous mitigating circumstances for his growing awareness of the sexual nature of his love for his unofficial ward. The conclusion, however, with his humiliating realization that the girl has mistaken his proposal of marriage for an offer of adoption, suggests a more ruefully honest recognition of the impossibility of justifying such a relationship, even though Wharton apparently still found it attractive--and indeed, in the original outline, had planned that the marriage would take place (Wolff 381).

In 1929, in *Hudson River Bracketed* a further change took place, leading to the depiction of the hero's grandfather, an old lecher with a taste for drink and young girls, as "the best Fourth of July orator anywhere in Drake County", who, "when Old Home Weeks began to be inaugurated throughout the land" was in great demand in "tableaux representing The Old Folks at Home... (with his new set removed to bring out his likeness to George Washington)" (7). Lawyer Royall had finally been brought down to the level of farce, and with his reincarnation as Grandpa Scrimser the compulsive need to fantasize about incest was reduced to rather nasty nonsense, although its very nastiness suggests a residual strength of feeling not in keeping with total control.

Evidence from other works therefore suggests very strongly that Wharton was repeatedly drawn to the depiction

of some aspect of father-daughter incest, and in *Summer* the justification of such a marriage contributes to the confusion in readers' responses to the work. However, at a more fundamental level, we may trace both progress and continuing difficulty in Wharton's treatment of sexuality and morality in this novel. On one hand, the moral weight of the work is given to a relationship founded on Wharton's ambivalence towards the power of sexuality, and her use of morality as a counterweight to it. On the other, sexuality, comparatively unimportant and attenuated in *The House of Mirth*, is now given full recognition as both a powerful and central force, not only through examination and analysis, as it is in *The Reef*, but through its embodiment in the language of the novel. As Lawrence saw, in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, "the danger is that man shall make himself a metaphysic to cover his own faults or failure." If we recognize that Wharton, to some degree, succumbed to that danger, we must nevertheless also recognize the extent to which she had succeeded in submitting her "metaphysic" to criticism from within, as Lawrence insisted the artist must.

CONCLUSION

No limited selection of the works of such a prolific writer can provide a complete overview of her development. When Wharton finished *Summer* in 1917, she was, in terms of her published works, only halfway through her writing career. Nine more novels, four novellas, four major works of non-fiction, four volumes of short stories, various miscellaneous pieces and a volume of poetry were to follow. Wharton's best-known novel, *The Age of Innocence*, would be published three years after *Summer*, and awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. Increasing critical interest is now focussed on her last, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*, published in its incomplete form in 1938, and her short stories are currently being given the close scrutiny they merit.

However, the three novels examined here recommend themselves for several reasons. Each is quite different from the other two, to the extent that a reader unfamiliar with Wharton, and unaware of the author, might well think them the works of different writers. And while *The House of Mirth* and, to a lesser extent, *Summer*, have obvious affinities with other works by Wharton, *The Reef* is unique in its concentration on inner states of consciousness. As her first major novel, *The House of Mirth* provides an essential understanding of Wharton's point of departure, and

a mark from which to measure how far she was to travel. It also enables us to trace the considerable and complex effects upon her of the social-philosophical thought which evolved from Darwin's scientific theories.

If *The House of Mirth* reveals the extent to which the assumptions resulting from her upbringing could be shaken by a theory, *The Reef* shows, in an equally dramatic way, how a personal crisis could bring about a much more self-aware assessment of the inter-relationship of morality and sexuality, and an increasing recognition of the power of the latter to shape human lives. A novel that has perplexed critics by its atypical nature, it seems to me to have been pivotal in that, without it, Wharton could not have advanced further, and *Summer*, much of its language permeated by a powerfully evocative sexuality, could not have been written. Thus, the three novels not only provide significant points at which her exploration of morality and sexuality can be examined, they also offer an interesting study of the way in which an author's work can be shaped and even deflected by a variety of influences, some immediate, and some of long-standing. Through these works we can trace Wharton's increasing ability to understand and reconcile, in D.H. Lawrence's words, her "theory of being and knowing" with her "living sense of being." The intensity of that "living sense of being" accounts for both the problems with which she struggled and the successes she achieved.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹A series of annotated bibliographies exist which cover, between them, the period 1897-1987. I have listed them, for the reader's convenience, at the end of the bibliography.

CHAPTER ONE "The Library at Bellomont was Never Used for Reading": Morality and Sexuality in *The House of Mirth*

¹"Wharton's ideological perspective suggests she is less connected with the 'Great Tradition' in literature than she is connected with the modern French tradition leading to structuralism." Roslyn Dixon writes of "the source of ambiguity in *The House of Mirth*" as "the use of multiple points of view", and while I might quarrel with the word "source" which is, I believe, ultimately, Wharton's own uncertainty about a number of difficult moral problems, the technique certainly is the embodiment of that ambiguity. I would quarrel more vigorously with the loose equation of "No one provides the moral touchstone necessary to make Lily's suffering meaningful" with "Wharton, in fact, chooses to omit a moral centre" (220), for the one does not logically follow from the other. Furthermore, Wharton makes a great many choices, but, as I will argue, none as deliberate, clear cut, and far-reaching as this. Dixon is right to sense a central problem with morality, but wrong in her diagnosis, and her article is one of a great many which solve all difficulties in the work of the novelist by claiming, "I understand Wharton, though no-one else does, because she's one of us" (feminists, structuralists etc.).

Authors are not always right about their works, but Wharton certainly intended there should be a moral centre to the novel. She wrote, apropos of *The House of Mirth*:

I could not do anything if I did not think seriously of my trade; and the more I have considered it, the more has it seemed to me valuable and interesting only in so far as it is a "criticism of life."... if anyone who cared for

the moral issue did not see in my work that I care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself-- or at least my inadequate means of rendering my effects. (*Letters* December 5 1905, 99)

I shall argue, in Chapter Two, that some of the blame does fall on Wharton.

²Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was published in 1899. I defer a discussion of its possible impact on Wharton to Chapter Two, since Veblen was, in some sort, a Social Darwinist.

³Feminists, not surprisingly, agree with her.

"Lawrence Selden may think that Lily has been fashioned into a futile shape (which is slightly comical, coming from him, a dilettante of sorts)". Elizabeth Ammons (30).

⁴"It was the love his love had kindled, the passion of her soul for him" etc. (309).

⁵James Gargano believes "faith" is "the word" (141). It's hard not to get drawn into solving the puzzle, silly as it seems, and I can't resist offering my own suggestion that Lily and Selden each have a "word". On Selden's side it may well be "faith", as Gargano suggests, while for Lily it may be "courage". When Lily meditates on Nettie and her husband she concludes, "Yes--but it had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith and the woman's courage" (320).

⁶*The Bunner Sisters* was written in 1892, though not published till 1916 (Lewis 66). Once again, Mrs. Leavis seems to have seen Wharton's problem with Nettie: "pitifully inadequate and unconvincing" (214).

⁷In the *House of Mourning*, of course, there is Nettie Struthers, but I am always teased by the thought that sexual attraction got Nettie into trouble in the first place, and I am incapable of following through with the calculations required to ascertain whether Nettie's husband is the father of the baby--and then wonder whether I am supposed to wonder.

⁸D.H. Lawrence read *The House of Mirth* and apparently liked it. Responding to the arrival of a parcel he wrote to Arthur McLeod, "The books are come today--what a treasure! You don't know how grateful I am. And Frieda thanks you particularly. She's swallowed *The House of Mirth* already" (28 Nov. 1912). Asking for more books to be sent out to Italy, he wrote again, "Mrs. Wharton--*The House of Mirth* woman--is rather good" (5 March 1913), (Boulton 481, 523).

⁹There are times when Rosedale, like Carry Fisher,

seems to have grown out of Wharton's initial conception, into something more sympathetically handled. This isn't unlikely, given the conditions under which the novel was composed, the first part appearing in print while the rest was still being written "When the first chapters appeared I had written barely fifty thousand words" (*A Backward Glance*, 208).

¹⁰Percy Lubbock quotes Charles Du Bos who was describing an event that took place in 1912, "I remember her reading to me, in *The Mill on the Floss*, the two passages on the beauty of Maggie's arm, adding 'To think there are fools who pretend that there is no physical life, no sensuousness in George Eliot'" (102). Although the details are not close, Wharton may have had the famous conservatory scene from *The Mill* in mind when she gave her two lovers a scene in the Brys' conservatory.

¹¹A colour plate of the portrait is available in Penny's *Reynolds*, plate 103. The same volume contains notes on the picture (275-76).

Diana Trilling believes Wharton's "description of Lily's beauty of body revealed through the classical draperies carries a remarkable erotic charge", but she is clearly familiar with the picture itself, and I think she must be responding to what she knows of the portrait rather than to Wharton's words.

¹²I am not sure if this is Diana Trilling's point when she says (with approval) of the passage on Lily's *tableau*,

Mrs. Wharton is in no way blinding herself to sexual reality. On the contrary she suggests a radical connection between sensuality and elegance, sexuality and sensibility. If the well-ordered, the harmonious, the classical announces itself in grace and high-mindedness, Mrs. Wharton concludes that it is also the style that best serves our biological needs. Lily and Selden are designed for each other not merely in spirit but in body.

I am willing to grant there may be a radical connection between sensuality and elegance, and readily acknowledge a connection between sexuality and sensibility, but the longer I look at the rest of the passage (beginning with the rhetorical "if"), the more I have trouble with "high-mindedness" being a "style" that "serves our biological needs". Overall, this sounds like the kind of criticism Selden, himself, might write, although "biological needs" is, perhaps, a little crude.

¹³F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972) 20-21.

CHAPTER TWO The Descent of Woman: Lily Bart, Edith Wharton--and Charles Darwin--in *The House of Mirth*

¹Wharton's essay was published in 1902. Often critics comment on how she saw, in George Eliot, some relationship to her own *personal* situation. Her *scientific* interest is related in a similar way.

In the case of George Eliot, the influences determining the change [in her popularity] are somewhat difficult to trace. The principal charge against her seems to be that she was too "scientific", that she sterilised her imagination and deformed her style by the study of biology and metaphysics. The belief that scientific studies have this effect on the literary faculty has received what is regarded as striking confirmation in Darwin's well-known statement that, as he grew more engrossed in his physiological investigations, he lost his taste for poetry so that at last he became incapable of finding any pleasure in the great writers who had once delighted him. This statement seems convincing till examined more closely; then it will be remembered that there is more than one way of studying the phenomena of life, and that the fixity of purpose and limited range of investigation to which the scientific specialist is committed differ totally from the cultivated reader's bird's eye view. (247)

Edith Wharton was, of course, a cultivated reader; she was also much more cultivated than women in her social set generally were: "Dr. Johnson is known to have pronounced portrait-painting 'indelicate in a female'; and indications are not wanting that a woman who ventures on scientific studies still does so at the risk of such an epithet" (248). Wharton went on, appropriately enough, to describe Eliot's work in terms of her "literary evolution" (250).

²Although *Origin of Species* was first published in 1859, the edition most widely available in Wharton's lifetime would have been the much-revised and expanded sixth edition, *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection* (1872) to which, for this reason and unless otherwise stated, my references are made. The sixth edition incorporated phrases that were not originally Darwin's, such as Herbert Spencer's "survival of the fittest". *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* was published in 1871, and applied Darwin's theories directly to man. This was something Darwin had hitherto avoided in print, although many "Social Darwinists" had not been so cautious. A useful account of the different versions of *Origin* is given by Morse Peckham's

introduction to the Variorum Edition (Norton 98). Beer, at various points in her book, draws attention to the implications of the changes Darwin made.

³I am grateful to Brian Crick, who suggested to me that the problem of Wharton's relationship to Darwin was worth looking at more carefully, and to whom I also owe the realization of the extent to which critics, as well as author, find it difficult to recognize Darwinian influence, because we are subject to it ourselves.

⁴Amongst others, Nevius (1953), Lyde (1959), Friman (1966) Lindburg (1968) and Dixon (1987) all write on Wharton's Darwinism. Interest in the topic began early. In a two articles (1906) written in response to the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Charles Waldstein discussed, under the title "Social Ideals", the changing nature of tragedy in fiction. In contemporary fiction, he wrote,

The environment, social as well as material, thus dominates, nay even creates, the individual. Whether it be a mere coincidence or a casual connection or--what seems to me more likely--the result of the spirit of the age, it is in the age of Charles Darwin that the influence of the environment, in essentially modifying, if not in producing, a definite character is made a distinct literary element.... Yet, though the study of evolution and heredity may thus have led to exaggeration and abuse, the modern reading public has not only become prepared to understand most of such influences upon the formation of character, but the knowledge of them has become so familiar and has given such a general tone to the consciousness of the thoughtful public, that the scientific attitude of mind has indirectly affected the artistic treatment of life" (847-8).

⁵Beer is particularly good on Darwin himself, though less interesting on his effects on George Eliot and Hardy. There is some additional material on Darwin in her essay "Darwin's Reading and the Fictions of Development" in *The Darwinian Heritage*, ed. David Kohn, Princeton: Princeton U.P. (1985) 543-588.

⁶Bell makes a convincing case when she argues that it is probably Edith Wharton whom Paul Bourget described, in 1893, as "the intellectual tomboy" and, even less flatteringly "a thinking machine":

She, has read everything, understood everything, not superficially, but really, with an energy of enthusiasm that could put to shame the

whole Parisian fraternity of letters... Though like the others she gets her gowns from the best houses of Rue de la Paix, there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied, not a painter or sculptor of whose works she could not compile a catalogue, not a school of poetry or romance of which she does not know the principles... (Quoting from Bourget's *Outre-Mer*, Bell 68)

Wharton's interest in biology continued, and there are a number of references to readings on evolution in her letters. For example, in 1908, she wrote to Fullerton that she had read Locke's "Heredity and Variation", a "simple" exposition of Mendelism, and begun Déperet's "Transformations du Monde Animal" (Letters June 8 1908, 151).

Incidentally, it was the reading of Locke's *Heredity and Variation* which provoked her often-quoted diary entry, summing up her feelings on her marriage:

struck by a rather amusing passage, [I] held it out [to Teddy] and said: "Read that!" The answer was: "Does that kind of thing really amuse you?"--I heard the key turn in the prison lock. That is the answer to everything worthwhile! Oh, Gods of derision! And you've given me twenty years of it! *Je n'en peux plus.* (Bell 152)

That the entry was made at the height of her affair with Morton Fullerton, should be taken into account.

7 "Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity" (*The Writing of Fiction* 109).

8 Wharton named her "Awakeners" as follows: "Darwin and Pascal, Hamilton and Coppée ranked foremost among my Awakeners" (*A Backward Glance* 72). Elsewhere in her autobiography she adds the historian of architecture, James Fergusson (91) and the poet, Browning (66) to the list.

9 The relationship of the novel and Veblen's work can be clearly seen in such passages as this:

As has been seen in the discussion of woman's status under the heads of Vicarious Leisure and Vicarious Consumption, it has in the course of economic development become the office of the woman to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this end in view.... It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman's earning a livelihood by useful work. It is not "woman's sphere". Her sphere is within the household, which she should "beautify", and of

which she should be the "chief ornament"....
 According to the modern civilized scheme of life,
 the good name of the household to which she belongs
 should be the special care of the woman; and the
 system of honorific expenditure and conspicuous
 leisure by which this good name is chiefly
 sustained is therefore the woman's sphere. (126)

Darwinist language pervades Veblen's work, as, for example,
 the discussion of the differentiation between men's and
 women's functions: "A cumulative process of selective
 adaptation to the new distribution of employments will set
 in, especially if the habitat or the fauna...." (13); or,
 "In the sequence of cultural evolution the emergence of a
 leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership"
 (22).

¹⁰Wharton herself was later to write (1927), more
 acidly, of the popular requirements for "The Great American
 Novel" in an essay with that title. She deplored that it
 was required to center on 'Main Street' and all the
 narrowness that this stood for.

¹¹Ammons usefully places Veblen in the context of
 "The Woman Movement" of the late nineteenth century (26-29).

¹²William J. Ghent, *Our Benevolent Feudalism* (29),
 quoted in Hofstadter (45).

¹³Wolff (109) thinks the "rose" in the title suggests
 the "Art Nouveau" preoccupation of Lily's society, and there
 may, indeed, be some echoes of this in the title. If the
 original title "A Moment's Ornament" was, as Raymond Benoit
 suggests ("Wharton's *House of Mirth*", *Explicator* xxxix
 (March 1971) Item 59), a quotation from Wordsworth's poem
 "She was a phantom of delight," on his wife, Wharton must
 either have changed Lily's character, or meant the title
 ironically:

The reason firm, the temperate will,
 Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
 A perfect woman, nobly planned
 To warn, to comfort, and command.

¹⁴The associations with the lilies of the sermon on
 the mount are, of course disturbing and ironic, for though
 Lily neither toils nor spins, except rather incompetently at
 the end, she does not abstain because of any virtuous motive
 of trust in God. The passage in Proverbs 31:10-31,
 beginning "Who can find a virtuous woman..." would also have
 provided an ironic contrast to the Veblenesque female of
 Lily's day.

¹⁵Lindberg worries a good deal about the

contradiction between Wharton's determinism and her belief in moral freedom, but his argument that there is a change in philosophical direction in *The House of Mirth* is more consistent than other attempts he makes to deal with the problem. He wants to believe in the Wharton who upholds individual responsibility:

Rather than subscribe to rigid formulas of environmental or psychological determinism, she sees human life as conducted on reasonably coherent and selective lines. She treats her major characters as if they were responsible beings, and she see her own craft as the careful elucidation of this responsibility. (109)

This is a general statement which *The House of Mirth* contradicts (although Lindberg would restrict the contradiction to the second part). Elsewhere, however, he appears to be putting the opposite case: "Wharton does not impose a deterministic framework after imagining her characters as free and self-defined; she conceives them as the results or representatives of a social system" (111), which I take to mean the approach is deterministic from the start, although the beginning of the sentence suggests he is about to argue the opposite. He seems to be in the same state of conflict as the author he discusses.

¹⁴The entry in the "M" Notebook was made between July 15 and July 21, 1838, and in the "N" Notebook towards the end of the year. Many entries strikingly pre-figure the arguments in *The Descent of Man*, for example: "Grant reason to any animal with social and sexual instincts and yet with passion and he must have conscience" ("N" 2-3).

¹⁷There are some odd moments when Wharton seems, through the perceptions of Selden and Lily (who believe that Darwinian laws determine they shall not achieve their "fate" to be together) to be placing in opposition what I will loosely call a "romantic" notion of fate against an evolutionary one. Lily believes that when she rejected Selden in the conservatory, she "disowned her fate" (317), while Selden admits he had "always feared his fate"--the attainment of love between himself and Lily (328). But Wharton brings, or (perhaps more accurately) forces, together both the romantic and the Darwinian "fate" when in his closing reflections Selden comes to believe they work as one--the moment of love having, after all, been "saved whole out of the ruin of their lives" (329). They have fulfilled their romantic fate, and had their moment of love, even if their Darwinian fate has made union in life impossible.

¹⁸Although, as I have argued, I think Dixon's argument that the novel has intentionally "no moral centre" is both over-simplified and untenable in the way that she

makes it, nevertheless it is possible to see how the intrusion of Darwinian determinism might, superficially, give it that appearance.

¹⁹George Levine, in an essay on George Eliot's views of "Determinism and Responsibility", states that though Eliot was a "consistent determinist," she nevertheless insisted on the responsibility to act in such a way as to avert evil. In his 1906-1907 lectures on pragmatism, William James, of whose "brain" Wharton had a low opinion (see Chapter Three), ironically characterized the problem thus: "Everything is necessarily determined, and yet of course our wills are free: a sort of free-will determinism is the true philosophy" (23). The pragmatic solution was to treat free will as "a doctrine of *relief*," one of those words, like God and Design, which "when we bear them into life's thicket with us the darkness *there* grows light about us" (85). In a letter written in 1906, Wharton quoted William James's remark that "humanity will never be satisfied with scientific knowledge to explain its inward relation to reality" and commented "What other kind of knowledge is it capable of receiving? Oh, dear--oh, how slowly the wheels turn, and how often the chariot slips back!--" (*Letters* February 21 1906, 102)

²⁰Darwin wrote, "To arrive, however, at a just conclusion... it is indispensable that reason should conquer the imagination" (*Origin* 135).

²¹Chapter IV: Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals, continued: The Moral Sense... (471-495). Chapter V: On the Development of the Intellectual and Moral Faculties During Primeval and Civilised Times (496-511).

²²In *The Origin* he had attempted to neutralize the effects of the word "advance" as applied to the nature of organisms: "Naturalists have not defined to each other's satisfaction what is meant by an advance in organisation" (93), but the ensuing argument showed he had been unable to shake off, even in his own mind, the connotations of improvement which he deplored.

²³To Erskine Steele, in a letter (Steele, 262).

²⁴The importance given to a "centre of early pieties" is reminiscent of George Eliot's lament that Gwendolen Harleth's life was not "well rooted in some spot of a native land" and may have been prompted by Wharton's reflections on the work of an author she much admired, and who, herself (as Beer points out, 219), was attempting to come to terms with the implications of Darwinism:

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life should be well rooted in some spot of native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge. *Daniel Deronda* 1: 3 (50).

A comparison of the two passages demonstrates Eliot's superior tendency to root her abstractions more deeply in the actual. Eliot clearly knows specifically (and personally) why, in ways that Wharton cannot surmise, rootedness is so important.

Houses had great significance for the author whose first full-length published work was *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). In *A Motor Flight Through France* published in 1908, Wharton was to speculate on the effect on George Sand (for whose love-affairs she perhaps, by then, felt fellow-feeling) of the "sober" house at Nohant, "conscious in every line of its place in the social scale, of its obligations... its rights....":

one may, not too fancifully, recognize in it the image of those grave ideals to which George Sand gradually conformed the passionate experiment of her life; may even indulge one's self by imagining that an old house must have exerted, over a mind as sensitive as hers, an unperceived but persistent influence, giving her that centralising weight of association and habit which is too often lacking in modern character, and standing ever before her as the shrine of those household pieties to which, inconsistently enough, but nonetheless genuinely, the devotion of her last years was paid. (47)

Tellingly, Wharton wrote to a friend, concerning the purchase of her home in Hyères in 1919: "I am thrilled to the spine... and I feel as if I am going to get married--to the right man at last" (*Letters*, n.d. 417)

²⁰I think more than Wharton's childlessness is revealed in the awkward way she handles the scene with Nettie's baby. The uncomfortably humorous approach: "ensuing degustation," "passionately celebrated her reunion with her offspring," "excused herself in cryptic language for the lateness of her return," and just plain awful writing: "as light as a pink cloud" (314) suggest a more fundamental unease than the absence of experience can explain. The problem is, I think, that she shares her society's fundamental discomfort in the face of parenthood.

CHAPTER THREE "Beings of a Different Language": Pragmatist Meets Idealist in *The Reef*

¹The quotations from the two letters used as epigraphs may be found on pages 214 and 162 of Wharton's *Letters*, edited by R.W.B. Lewis. The long-awaited collection is disappointing in that, although the amount of white space on the pages is considerable, less than one in ten of the extant letters is included, and in that letters containing material important enough to be used in Lewis's biography of Wharton are not included in this collection.

²Lewis, Wharton's biographer, says "there is no question that the sexual side of [her] marriage was a disaster.... [It] was not consummated for three weeks.... It had the effect of sealing off Edith's vibrant but untutored erotic nature for an indefinite period" (53). He does not give the source for his information, but it may be her unpublished first attempt at autobiography, "Life and I."

Appendix Two may be consulted for an general overview of Wharton's life, and its effect on her writing. In the case of the specific events which relate to the writing of *The Reef*, however, these notes seemed a more appropriate place for the relevant material. The novel may be read without reference to this information, but it supplies an interesting commentary on the relationship of Wharton's life to her work, and her ability to transmute one to the other.

When Wharton met Fullerton he was an American journalist, working for the English paper, *The Times*, in its Paris bureau. The most detailed account of this charming bisexual and his multiple concurrent affairs, including that with Wharton, may be found in Lewis (183-264) and in Lewis's introduction to Wharton's letters (10-17). For Wharton, the most distressing aspect of the affair was Fullerton's rapid alternation between passionate devotion and absolute indifference, marked by inexplicable silences. Like most of the women who loved him, she continued to do so even when she learned the truth about him, and, also like the others, retained an affection for him after the affair was over.

Many links make it clear that Wharton worked with her own experience here. However, although some aspects of Anna's dilemma in *The Reef* clearly originated in Wharton's own life, Anna's problems in coming to grips with the implications of the limited infidelity of George Darrow, are very different to Wharton's dizzying involvement with the gyrations of the compulsive Casanova, Morton Fullerton. Nor can the novel be read as a *roman-à-clef* in which characters can be transposed, whole, from life to the novel. Anna herself certainly bears the marks of the Wharton who (temporarily caught up in a fairytale) believed that

Fullerton had "woken" her from "a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement" (*Letters*, Aug. 26, 161). However, while this may sufficiently describe Anna's situation, it is clearly not an adequate account of Wharton herself, even prior to 1907, and even though there were times when she believed it was. To further complicate the relationship between fiction and life, aspects of Sophy are also drawn from her creator, as the letters show. On the other hand, the whimsically-rebellious dilettante, Leath, cannot be equated with Teddy Wharton, while Darrow seems in many ways, including in his attraction to a younger woman, to have as much of Walter Berry, Wharton's close friend and advisor, as of Morton Fullerton, in him.

To add to this complexity, the years leading up to the writing of *The Reef* were those in which Wharton's friendship with Henry James became for her "the pride and honour of my life" (*Letters*, Dec. 17 1915, 365), a friendship which was interwoven with her affair with Fullerton, who was himself James's friend. However, it is James's characters, rather than their author, who appear in *The Reef*: among them the naïve Daisy Miller (Sophy), the diplomat Peter Sherringham and his actress protégée Miriam Rooth from *The Tragic Muse* (Darrow and Sophy), a diluted version of Gilbert Osmond from *The Portrait of a Lady* (Leath), and the "four characters" suspended "in the void" of *The Golden Bowl* (Wharton's description of James's novel, recorded in *A Backward Glance* 191). James's comments to Wharton on *The Reef* may be found in his letter to her of December 4, 1912, available in Lubbock edition of the letters, Vol. 2, 281, or in Howe (ed.) 147. No excerpts can really do his mingling of approval and criticism justice.

Unexpected reminders of real and fictional characters and situations thus emerge from and recede into the work as one reads, suggesting both the difficulty and determination with which Wharton was struggling to subordinate her personal experiences, while drawing on what she had learned from them, and to her desire for impersonality. It is as if, by diluting the real with the fictional (although the fictional had close ties to the personal), Wharton hoped that she could come closer to fictionalizing the whole.

The Reef has a much-noted and much-debated formality of structure (the first to comment on it being James himself), the use of a tightly-patterned form normally alien to her. It consists of five books--the central three placed at Givré and framed by two set predominantly in Paris. This is combined with the alternation of narrative between two minds--with almost exactly equal time given to each, and a strictly limited cast of characters. Such a departure from her usual approach suggests an almost

obsessive preoccupation with the need for control. Her letters reveal that she was particularly concerned about the book's structure and composition: "I don't think I've ever been so worried and uncertain about the "facture" of a book--I've no doubts about the stuff;" while of the final six chapters (Anna's rapid alterations of mind after Darrow's return to Givré) she wrote: "It's essential that these chapters should be especially ripe and homogeneous (what a combination of adjectives)" (*Letters* June 25 and August 12, 1912; 271, 275).

The same impression, of the personal subdued--as far as her understanding and her strength allowed--to the impersonal, is conveyed by Wharton's own references to the autobiographical element in *The Reef*. Although her relationship with Fullerton had, by 1912, been transmuted into friendship, it is hard to imagine there was much in the way of literary advice that he could give her--Berry was available for this purpose, as usual, and there is no evidence, at least in those letters provided by Lewis, that she consulted Fullerton on *Ethan Frome* (1911) or *The Custom of the Country* (1913), both published close to this time. And yet, she was sufficiently anxious to have him read the manuscript of the novel to "transport myself to some point not too remote" in Europe, to meet him (*Letters* June 25 1912, 271). "I shan't send the chapters [to the publisher] till I've read them to you" (*Letters* August 12 1912, 275). There may have been an touch of the thumbscrew in this wish to review the work in the company of her former lover, but there may also have been a desire to assert to herself, by this action, that it was now *only* a literary work, and could be treated as such even in the most personal of circumstances.

However, her uncertainty about the personal element continued. Shortly after the novel's publication she wrote to Berenson: "I'm sending you my book, though I don't want to, because I'm sick about it--poor miserable lifeless lump that it is!... Anyhow, remember it's not *me*, though I thought it was when I was writing it". It isn't clear whether "not *me*" is intended to refer to the autobiographical element or the uncharacteristic form. I suspect she consciously meant the latter, although the ambiguity suggests her uncertainty about the former. Several years later she was to recall, with a touch of the same ambiguity, "I put most of myself into that opus" (*Letters*, Nov. 23 1912, 284; Lewis 326).

The letters to Fullerton make painful reading, but in one way their publication does Wharton a service by revealing the considerable extent of her success in teasing out, from the chaos of her life between the meeting with Fullerton in 1907 and the publication of *The Reef* in 1912, threads of universal concern raised by, but not restricted to, problems of sexual unfaithfulness.

³Darrow's aesthetic priorities, by his own recognition, make his view of the world very different to Sophy's. In Paris, "Darrow noticed that she did not feel the beauty and mystery of the spectacle as much as its pressure of human significance, all its implications of emotion and adventure" (35). Regrettably from the point of view of Darrow's character and Sophy's future, it is these dissimilarities, his weakness and her *perceived* weakness, which enable him to dismiss Sophy as second rate, someone without "any echoes in her soul" (62).

⁴I am grateful to Brian Crick, who suggested that, in my initial consideration of pragmatism, I underestimated its significance to the work.

⁵Marius Bewley argued for pragmatism as a widely diffused, but specifically American, philosophy:

Pragmatism really existed in America long before William James formulated it in an intellectual position. The whole historical situation conspired to make America into a nation of pragmatists, and all William James had to do was to take the temperature of the air around him and give it a name and definition. From the eighteenth century or earlier Americans had remodelled ancient European reality to meet their own needs, and their sense of having done so successfully left them with a great feeling of optimism about their ability to continue remodelling in the future. The norm by which they had lived was one of comfortable and sometimes luxurious expediency, and expediency had come, in their eyes, to be good and true. (Marius Bewley, "The Relation between William and Henry James," *Scrutiny*, XVII, 332)

But, as an approach to life, pragmatism (like idealism) is unrestricted to time or place, and, despite Anna's residence in a French setting, and Darrow's position as an American diplomat, I don't think Wharton has the European-American dichotomy in mind.

⁶The danger of using a specific representative of pragmatism is that the focus of the chapter may shift to his particular pronouncements. Since I do not want this to turn into a sustained discussion of William James, I will avoid, as far as possible, examining his language, and the validity of the ideas it embodies, except insofar as they are directly relevant to *The Reef*. I will not, for example, discuss his choice of terms, nor the validity of his lists.

⁷It is also clear that Wharton had also overcome her own wish to romanticize in these terms. During the early

part of her affair with Fullerton, she had attempted to express her sense of their relationship in terms of the fairy tale:

The way you've spent your emotional life, while I've-- *bien malgré moi*--hoarded mine, is what puts the great gulf between us, and sets us not only on opposite shores, but at hopelessly distant parts of our respective shores.... And I'm so afraid that the treasures I long to unpack for you, that have come to me in magic ships from enchanted islands, are only, to you, the old familiar red calico and beads.... Often and often I stuff my shiny treasures back into their box, lest I should see you smiling at them. (*Letters*, early March, 1908, 134-35)

While love letters are not usually written for publication, this is not tossed off casually; the metaphor is carefully and systematically expanded, and the risk of using it defused as far as possible by the reference to her fear of seeming foolish. Yet, the scenario she offers is ideally suited, though she may not consciously recognize it, to the subsequent occurrence of a shipwreck, requiring only the insertion of a reef, which perhaps Wharton already sensed would take the form of Fullerton's own weakness of character. The fairy tale was doomed to be revealed as unreality.

Soon, indeed, she was to recognize that enchantment alone could not be enough for her, and she was writing (perhaps more confidently than she felt): "You and I... are almost the only people I know who feel the 'natural magic,' *au-delà*, dream-side of things, and yet need the *netteté*, the line--in thinking, in conduct--yes! in feeling too!" (*Letters* June 8 1908, 152). If we detect Lily, whose motto was "Beyond," beneath a flying ship, in the "*au-delà* dream-side of things", yet the desire for clarity and lines, in thought, conduct *and* in feeling, recognizes Wharton's discomfort with her surrender to the day dream of the fairytale-come-true. By the following year (she was already involved in a plot to free Fullerton from the blackmail demands of another mistress by the spring of 1909, *Letters* 181-84) the devastating experience of loving a Casanova could only have turned the metaphor to irony, but by 1912 the experience was impersonalized through the account of Anna's education.

⁶Wharton had written to Fullerton, "You woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions, a needless self-effacement. If I was awkward and inarticulate, it was because, literally, all one side of me was asleep" (*Letters*, August 26 1908, 261).

⁷Some see it as an unfair attack on Sophy. Ammons, for example, calls it "upsetting, even cruel" (87) and

Auchincloss asks, "Poor Sophy! Does she deserve it?.... it is no good" (xi). Nevius summarizes its effect as, "Blood will tell. Water will seek its own level.... With its depressingly narrow set of values, it is one of the most regrettable passages in Edith Wharton's fiction" (140). Others (and one wonders whether any novel can be considered characteristic of Wharton that does not produce a polarization of views among the critics over the significance of the ending) see the closing scenes as a criticism of Anna. Wershoven (107) agrees with Walton that this is so. The visit to the hotel is "a scathing comment on Anna.... One is finally made to realize... the distinction of Sophy's character which has survived its environment with a simple integrity that Anna, with all her refinement, cannot achieve" (Walton 70).

Wharton would probably reply that there is no such thing as *simple* integrity, although to admit the complexity of such a moral condition is not to abandon an attempt to achieve it. I would argue, also, that neither Anna nor Sophy is the villain here, though both are endangered by their inability to free themselves from misperceptions.

¹⁰Wharton's reiterated pleas to Fullerton to tell her the truth punctuate her letters from 1908 to 1910: "I love you so deeply that you owe me just one thing--the truth." "I recognize... perfect freedom in loving and unloving; but only on condition it is associated with equal sincerity." "The one thing I can't bear is the thought that I represent to you *the woman who has to be lied to.*" (*Letters*, July 1 1908, 158; May 1909, 179; Winter 1910, 197.) However, by 1912, she had apparently finally settled into an illusion-free friendship with him that enabled her to consider the problem with clarity but apparently without bitterness.

¹¹Her state of emotional and sexual ignorance is clearly based on Wharton's own adolescence, as the latter's autobiographical accounts show (see Appendix Two) and thus, in elucidating Anna's problems, Wharton was forced to try to understand her own.

¹²Freud's paper on "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Repression" was published, coincidentally, in 1908, the year that Edith Wharton began her affair with Fullerton. I do not know to what extent Wharton was aware of Freud's work at this time. About ten years after the publication of *The Reef*, writing to Berenson about a mutual friend, she was scathing: "Above all, please ask Mary not to befuddle her with Freudianism and all its jargon. She'd take to it like a duck to--sewerage. And what she wants is to develop the *conscious*, and not grub after the subconscious. She wants to be taught first to see, to attend, to reflect." (*Letters* Feb 21 1922, 451)

¹³Very like the young Walter Berry (who was always susceptible to attractive young women and had evaporated leaving Edith Jones vulnerable to the attentions of Teddy Wharton). Incidentally, while Anna's fears that Fraser Leath might have been a "Don Juan" appear ridiculous, Teddy Wharton, in the closing years of their marriage, and in his increasingly serious mental disturbance, *had*, surprisingly, qualified for the title.

¹⁴Wharton's letters to Fullerton almost too insistently repeat that she claims no rights, takes nothing for granted. At the same time they rarely have the kind of confidence exhibited by Darrow's "joyous ease of manner... that proclaimed a right". Rather they take on the tone of one who must beg, and though what she implores from Fullerton is not love but honesty, nevertheless the tone of supplication is humiliating, and she clearly feels that it is so. It may be that this experience taught Wharton to fear sexual passion even while she rejoiced in it.

¹⁵The fear of sexual attraction to over-ride the will grew out of Wharton's own experience. She wrote to Fullerton of her troubled sense that their affair should end: "I can't say this to you, because when I do you take me in you arms; *et alors je n'ai plus de volonté* (Letters, late summer 1909, 190).

CHAPTER FOUR "Coming Home for Good": Morality and Incest in *Summer*

¹A sampling of contradictory quotations from the critics shows this clearly:

Some of the book's reviewers shared Sara Norton's puritanical recoil.... But it was widely observed that, despite the sordidness of the tale, simple goodness did win out in the end (so the denouement was misread). Lewis, 1975 (398).

[Charity] allows herself to be made an honest woman of by the rather admirable old failure of a lawyer who had brought her down from the mountain in her childhood. It is the first sign on Mrs. Wharton's part of a relenting in the cruelty of her endings.... Her blinding bitterness is already subsiding. Edmund Wilson, 1941 (25)

[Charity] eventually resigns herself to a life of emotional barrenness as the bride of her elderly

guardian.... her decision to keep her baby forces her into marriage with a man she has despised, though he is her moral superior in compassion. The age of her guardian, his drinking, and the overtones of incest ominously darken the ending. Margaret McDowell, 1976 (71)

Summer is over. But she has her intense immersion in natural beauty, her proud stubborn spirit, her dawning awareness that there is good in Royall. Spring will return. Marilyn French, 1981 (xlviii)

[Royall's] patience, however well intentioned, falls short of being true compassion because it arises from a dominant male's indulgence of a female's weakness. As Royall's wife, Charity has even less freedom than as his ward. All she does have is the material compensation that North Dormer men pay to women for their subjection.... The final page ... marks her final entrapment in the dependent childish identity from which North Dormer permits her no escape. John Crowley, 1982 (95)

It is undeniable that we relinquish something significant--glorious--when we submit to the repressive process of civilization... yet in the end we gain more than we lose... Ultimately, this novel of Summer is a hymn to generativity and marriage. Cynthia Wolff, 1977 (*A Feast of Words* 293)

Thematically, the book is Wharton's bluntest criticism of the patriarchal sexual economy. The final union between Charity and Royall is not merely depressing; it is sick.... Wharton's combination of threatened rape and figurative incest anticipates what a later critic... has called the "rape-incest model" of sexuality and marriage in America. Elizabeth Ammons, 1980 (133)

What Wharton describes is not the incestuous marriage of father and child... but a union of equals who have grown through confrontation and acceptance of themselves and each other. Carol Wershoven, 1985 (9)

In 1959, even before the current revival of critical interest in Edith Wharton's writing, Marilyn Jones Lyde noted a "confusion among the critics" that repeatedly resulted in "diametrically opposite conclusions among the various critical interpretations of her works" (1). As these quotations demonstrate, this is nowhere more true than in the critical response to *Summer*, a novel that attracts participants in two critical trends, which might be broadly termed the feminist and the Eriksonian (Wolff 14), both groups being determined to annex Wharton as one of "theirs". It is also clear that the disagreement largely centres on

the significance of the novel's conclusion, in which Charity returns to her guardian's home as his wife. There is striking similarity between critics sharing a particular stance or type of approach but, even so, it should be noted that some of the feminist critics are in disagreement, as the quotations from Marilyn French (feminist author of *The Women's Room*), and John Crowley or Elizabeth Ammons demonstrate.

²The quotations above confirm this. Additional evidence may be found in the annotations in Alfred Bendixen's *Edith Wharton Newsletter*, "A Guide to Wharton Criticism, 1974-1983", Fall 1985, pp.1-8; "Recent Wharton Studies: A Bibliographic Essay", Fall 1986, pp.5-9.

³Examples may be found throughout the book, the most striking being: "They... looked at each other... with the terrible equality of courage that sometimes made her feel as if she had his blood in her veins" (118). Gimbel, in fact, argues that Royall is actually Charity's natural father, and that the story of the convict is simply a convenient fiction but, apart from the extra *frisson* this adds, the theory seems unnecessary to any interpretation of the novel, and unduly speculative.

⁴As already noted, part of the feminist argument concerning *Summer* is that Charity's marriage is less a specific example of an individual relationship between two people than a condemnatory metaphor for traditional marriage in general (in Ammons' words, the "rape-incest model" of sexuality and marriage in America). This argument is usually associated with references to the patriarchal society, a convenient pseudo-scientific designation that allows its users to claim that a society so "classified" grants only one kind of authority to the male in relation to females, that of father. But this is to argue by *legerdemain* on the basis of an inexact and misleading anthropological term. No normal view of marriage in our society has ever failed to differentiate between the kind of authority granted by the adult wife to her husband (even in the traditional marriage service, where the reiterated "I will" is as important as the promise to obey) and the authority of the father over the daughter. In the second case the girl has grown from helpless infancy through childhood under his care and is trapped physically, psychologically and morally: not merely by her need for physical support and by the habit of deference, but also by her initial moral dependence.

⁵Wharton placed a high moral value on order, choosing to begin her book, *The Writing of Fiction* (published 1924) with a quotation from Traherne, "Order the beauty even of

Beauty is".

⁶Wharton dedicated a considerable section of *The Writing of Fiction* to discussing the merits of narrative versus speech and was willing to lay down a "fairly definite rule" that speech should be restricted to "climaxes", that dialogue "should be reserved for the culminating moments, and regarded as the spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks in curving toward the watcher on the shore" (73).

⁷Among the "moral treasures" of her childhood, Wharton counted "my early saturation with the noble cadences of the *Book of Common Prayer* and my reverence for an ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs" (*A Backward Glance*, p.10).

⁸Leavis discusses "impersonality" many times. A *locus classicus* is in *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (156).

The need to return repeatedly to a subject until the problem is worked through can be seen in the works of many writers, Lawrence providing one of the best known examples. Closer still to Wharton is Dickens. Strangely enough, although Wharton is said to have disliked his work intensely (Lubbock 186) her own work often suggests parallels with his. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the interest both writers repeatedly show in "incestuous" relationships. Brian Crick has discussed Dickens' treatment of the relationships between older men and younger women in his essay on *David Copperfield*. He identifies a "compulsive fantasizing element" that led Dickens repeatedly to reveal "an unconscious predilection for the attachment between elderly men and youthful women" and he condemns this as a "disastrous failure of knowledge" on the writer's part (40-41). On the evidence not only of *Summer* but also other works by Wharton, it seems equally true that she suffered from a "compulsive need to fantasize" about father-daughter incest, though her careful attempt to create a situation in which it would be justifiable suggests that her awareness was greater than Dickens' from the first. *Bleak House* offers even closer similarities to *Summer* than does *David Copperfield*. Wharton's novel might be seen as a rewriting of *Bleak House*, in which Allan Woodcourt slips away and Esther marries Jarndyce. The resemblances seem even closer if both the Jarndyce-Esther relationship and the Dedlock marriage are considered and features selected from both. Most readers are disgusted by the former, a combination of impotence and ignorance that, though it does not culminate in marriage, suggests abuse of parental authority and disproportion of maturity, however coated in saccharine. Furthermore, the denial of any sexual basis for the

relationship perversely adds to its grotesque nature. On the other hand, though the Dedlocks are a couple separated by a generation in age, and the wife, like Charity, is a "fallen woman" of a lower class than her husband, the marriage is not repellant (although in fairy-tale terms not "happy") because there is no disproportion in maturity or misuse of power, and indeed the relationship between Sir Leicester and his wife is extremely moving. The reader who compares *Bleak House* to Royall's red house will find the comparisons provocative.

"In his raw youth... he had got together a little library of his own in which... Sparks and Bancroft [represented] almost the whole of history. He had gradually discovered the inadequacy of these guides, but without ever having done much to replace them" (*Twilight Sleep* 58).

APPENDIX ONE

Chronology.

Note: Publication dates are given only for those works which are relevant to this thesis.

1862 Born to George Frederick Jones and Lucretia (Rhineland) Jones (Old New York bourgeois-aristocracy). Two older brothers, aged 12 and 14.

1866 Family began six-year period travelling around Europe, chiefly for reasons of economy after dislocation of Civil War. Edith learned German, French and Italian.

1872 Family resumed life in United States. Winter season in New York, summer in Newport (before the invasion of the *nouveaux riches*).

1878 Mother printed her daughter's verses privately (to Edith's subsequent humiliation).

1882 Father died after family had returned to Europe for the sake of his health. Edith was jilted because of interference (probably for financial reasons) by her *fiancé's* domineering mother.

1883 Met Walter Berry, who left Newport when engagement seemed likely. Subsequently met Teddy Wharton (then aged 33), from a Boston family of similar social background to her own. Teddy was warm, easy-going, generally popular, enjoyed hunting and light conversation, and shared Edith's pleasure in dogs and travel.

1885 Married Teddy (thirteen years her senior) and began life as social hostess, busy with supervision of house decoration and travel. Soon began wide program of reading including Darwinian material.

1889 First publication of poems written as adult.

1890 Began to suffer a variety of disabling illnesses, particularly nausea and asthma. Apparently found writing almost impossible, to publisher's repeated disappointment.

1891 First publication of short story, "Mrs. Manstey's View".

1897 Walter Berry reappeared and became, from then on, close friend and literary counsellor. With the help of Berry's advice on literary style, she wrote (with Ogden Codman) her first book--on house decoration.

1898 Further breakdown. Treated by a colleague of S. Weir Mitchell the neurologist. While she was in Europe or not with Teddy, she was generally better, but she usually worsened on return to U.S. or when with Teddy. Short stories and two novellas written.

1901 Mother, of whom she had seen less and less since her marriage, died in Paris.

1902 Built The Mount, Lenox, Mass. First novel, *Valley of Decision*, set in Italy of the 18th century, published. Very productive period for short stories. Published essay on George Eliot. Increasing contact with American and European intellectuals. Altogether she was to publish 32 novels, novellas and collections of short stories, as well as 9 books of non-fiction, 3 books of poetry and numerous articles. The level of her work is uneven, but most of it sold very well throughout her career. [From now on I record only the publication of the best known works and those discussed in this thesis.]

1903 Teddy, himself increasingly a victim of various painful ailments, suffered six-month depression.

1904 Close friendship with Henry James begins. Publication of third volume of short stories, which included "The Descent of Man."

1905 *House of Mirth* published, an instant success.

1906 Introduced into upper-class Parisian literary and intellectual circles.

1907 Paris became her second home. Met Morton Fullerton, journalist, former student of Charles Eliot Norton, and friend of Henry James.

1908 Affair with Fullerton began, and though it probably ended some time in 1910, their friendship continued. Teddy himself was unfaithful, and irresponsible with Edith's money. Doctor's called his problem "neurasthenia"; today he would probably be described as "manic-depressive". Walter Berry moved to Paris in pursuit of his career in international law. *A Motor Flight Through France* published, with its references to George Sand.

1911 *Ethan Frome* published. The Mount sold.

- 1912 *The Reef* published, after Fullerton had read the MS.
- 1913 Divorce granted on grounds of Teddy's unfaithfulness; Paris became Edith's permanent home, although she travelled energetically through most of Europe and later N. Africa. *Custom of the Country* published.
- 1914 On outbreak of war she committed herself to Paris. For its duration she organized refugee and other aid on a practical level, and worked to obtain American financial and military aid. Awarded medals by France and Belgium.
- 1916 Death of Henry James.
- 1917 *Summer* published.
- 1919 "Beatrice Palmato" written, according to Wolff.
- 1920 *Age of Innocence* published and won Pulitzer Prize in the following year. At about this time began "Life and I", an unpublished autobiography.
- 1923 Awarded Doctor of Letters by Yale; last visit to U.S (11 days), and the only visit in the last 24 years of her life.
- 1925 Published *The Writing of Fiction*, essays on the principles guiding her writing techniques.
- 1927 Walter Berry died, a devastating loss. *Twilight Sleep* published.
- 1928 Teddy died. *The Children* published.
- 1929 Serious illness; she recovered but was weakened. *Hudson River Bracketed* published.
- 1931 In touch with Fullerton again after a break of several years.
- 1934 Published *A Backward Glance*, her autobiography.
- 1935 Suffered a stroke
- 1936 Died in August, age 75. Though a declared agnostic (born Episcopalian), she had shown increasing interest in Catholicism for some time before her death. However, she gave no definite sign of conversion.

1937 "A Little Girl's New York" published posthumously.

1938 Last (incomplete) novel, *The Buccaneers*, published posthumously. Quickly ceased to be of interest to public or most critics (although there were notable exceptions such as Edmund Wilson).

1952 Fullerton died.

1968 End of ban on the publication of her private papers. This led to renewed critical interest in her work, to new editions in print (including publication by feminist publishers), to two biographies (by Lewis and Wolff) and, in 1988, to the publication of a collection of her letters.

APPENDIX TWO

The Biographical Background

Some writers, and some works, invite the reader to turn to biographical information to elucidate problems that otherwise seem inexplicable. Of the novels which are the subject of this thesis, only *Summer* (1917), in which Wharton exhibits an apparently perverse determination to place an incestuous marriage on the side of morality, seems to demand biographical investigation. As noted in Chapter Three, after *Summer*, a series of works exploring variations on the theme of father-daughter incest continued with the "unpublishable" fragment "Beatrice Palmato" (1919?), followed by *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and *The Children* (1928), closing with *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). This continuing interest suggests that, indeed, some personal need distorts the exploration of the relationship of sexuality to morality in *Summer*. In the case of *The Reef*, knowledge of Wharton's upbringing, which in so many ways resembled Anna's, and comparison with her letters, offers impressive evidence of Wharton's ability to distance herself from her experience and transform it into fiction. However, unlike *Summer*, *The Reef* does not cause the reader to sense a need for such

supplementary material. Relevant details concerning the Fullerton affair may, however, be found in the notes to Chapter III.

An account of that part of Edith Wharton's life which was lived in the public eye would give the impression of almost unalloyed success. It would also give us no hint of the sources of strength and weakness which went into the making of her fiction. During her lifetime, she was second only to Henry James in prestige as an American novelist and short story writer. Her productivity was prodigious, as were her sales and profits, and although her first full-length novel was not published until she had reached the age of forty, she eventually wrote a total of thirty-two novels, novellas and short story collections, as well as nine books of non-fiction, three books of poetry and numerous articles of various kinds. Her second novel, *House of Mirth*, was an instant best-seller, and fifteen years later she won the Pulitzer prize for literature for *Age of Innocence*. In 1923 she was made Doctor of Literature by Yale University. She was one of Henry James' closest friends (and some say his literary disciple), and friend of some of the foremost intellectuals in America and Europe, conversing fluently in French and German. She was also, in turn, American debutante and society matron, expert on modern house decoration and on the history of eighteenth century Italy, travel writer, and hostess of a Parisian *salon*. She became an indefatigable

worker for refugees in Paris during the First World War, for which she received several medals of honour, and even turned war reporter, visiting the front and writing articles intended to persuade America to enter the war.

Acquaintances usually found her a rather haughty *grande dame*, terrifyingly well-dressed, and even more intimidatingly intellectual in her conversation. Only her divorce, in 1913, gave public evidence of strains beneath the immaculate surface of productive success.

The public figure does not offer anything that would explain Wharton's problems with *Summer*, or supply much background to *The Reef*. It is therefore reasonable to seek, in the evidence surviving from Wharton's life, some clues that would be helpful in understanding her work, but particularly *Summer*, better. The opening of her papers to public scrutiny, forbidden until 1968, stimulated considerable interest, but little hitherto-unknown material has subsequently been published, except in the form of quotations in the biographies of Lewis and Wolff, and, 1988, the long-awaited volume of correspondence. Wharton, however, did leave two official accounts of her life which, reticent as they are, offer more revelations than she may have realized.

She considered her first attempt at autobiography, "Life and I", which was probably written in 1920 or 1922 (Wolff 417), too candid to publish, although she used parts

of it later in her official autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934) and the posthumously published article, "A Little Girl's New York". In the two published accounts of herself, the reader meets her in the stance of the successful author whose public and private lives have been equally smooth, insistent that "Everywhere on my path I have met with kindness and furtherance; and from the few dearest to me an exquisite understanding" (*A Backward Glance* xx), a statement which, as we will see, is disingenuous to say the least. She cannot hold such an unnatural position without curious contortions, however. Her husband disappears from the pages of her life with mysterious, and misleading, ease; while her relationship with her mother appears, even within the pages of a single work, *A Backward Glance*, to be inconsistently portrayed.

I have suggested that in her depiction of the marriage of Royall and Charity, Wharton gives evidence of trying to satisfy the need to create a situation in which a father-daughter marriage, entailing a return to immaturity, a surrender to paternal authority, and a denial of normal sexuality, would be acceptable, even desirable. I have also suggested that she gradually came to reject this as impossible, as she demonstrated in some of the fiction which followed *Summer*. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suggest that the writing of these works, in itself, brought her a clearer view of what she was trying to do, and why she could

not make such a relationship work to her satisfaction. We need, therefore, to examine her account of her life to see whether it enables us to understand this compulsive interest.

In the chapter entitled "Knee-High" of *A Backward Glance*, Wharton records (as many an upper-class child might) that her dog and nurse were in the foreground of her early life, but

Peopling the background of these earliest scenes there were the tall splendid father who was always so kind, and whose strong arms lifted one so high, and held one so safely; and my mother, who wore such beautiful flounced dresses, and had painted and carved fans in sandalwood boxes, and ermine scarves, and perfumed yellowish laces pinned up in blue paper, and kept in a marquetry chiffonier, and all the other dim impersonal attributes of a Mother, without, as yet, anything much more definite. (26)

These lines provide a suitable introduction to her parents: the "kind" father of the "strong arms" which "held one so safely" and the "Mother" who "as yet" chiefly consisted of such "dim impersonal attributes" as clothes, but who nevertheless dominates the passage, and takes two roles: "my mother" and "a Mother". In *Summer*, father and mother reappear as, respectively, the guardian who ultimately provides support and love, and the caring mother of Charity's daydreams, who, in the end, proves to be an alien, unknowable figure.

Edith Wharton's parents, Lucretia, born a Rhine-lander, and George Frederick Jones, belonged to the Old New

York bourgeois-aristocracy. According to their daughter they were, like most of their class, well-to-do, unimaginative, fiercely conventional, concerned with decency, financial probity and good manners, distrustful of writers and poets (like Anna's parents in *The Reef*), but naively unsuspecting of the deluge of *nouveaux riches* who were to annihilate their class and standards during their daughter's lifetime. They were sufficiently well-off to ensure that George Jones never needed to work, but after the civil war they nonetheless found it more convenient to spend six years of Edith's childhood travelling in Europe, where living was cheaper, but where they remained largely insulated from European life. Their return to America in 1872 meant winters in New York and summers in Newport, both claustrophobically limited in social contacts, culture, even house decoration. It was a society whose every requirement her mother rigidly upheld, and to which Edith strove desperately to conform, yet by which she felt both trapped and confused:

I was never free from the oppressive sense that I had two absolutely inscrutable beings to please-- God and my mother--who, while ostensibly upholding the same principles of behaviour, differed totally as to their application. And my mother was the most inscrutable of the two ("Life and I", Wolff 12).

As the "dim impersonal attributes" of "a Mother" crystallized into the absolute inscrutability of Lucretia, Edith attempted to create her own rigid and consistent

standard of absolute truthfulness amidst these contradictions, based on "a compunction entirely self-evolved" and a fear of "the dark Power I knew as God". As a consequence, she caused herself many painful conflicts with uncomprehending adults, particularly her mother ("Life and I", Wolff 22), which culminated in a nervous breakdown, which she described as a terror of "formless horrors", when she was nine. In maturity, a positive outcome of her childish confusion was to be a lifelong concern with the relationship of convention and morality, a preoccupation which provided the motive power for much of her best work. The child, however, felt the dilemma to be painfully insoluble.

Lucretia was thirty seven when her daughter was born, and already had two sons aged fourteen and twelve. A rumour that Edith was illegitimate and that her real father was her brothers' "extremely cultivated English tutor" surfaced later, and, though Edith certainly knew of the story when an adult, there is no evidence to be found that she was strongly influenced by it, except perhaps in such dim echoes as Charity's ignorance of her paternity, one or two short stories, and the figure of M. Rivière in *The Age of Innocence*. Nor is there concrete evidence to either prove or disprove the gossip (Lewis 535-539).

Perhaps this late-born daughter was unwanted. Certainly Lucretia's attitude to her was one of great

coldness and distance, alternating unpredictably with flashes of domineering, even suffocating, interest. As Wolff has noted (15), words suggesting chill, starvation and suffocation are used with great frequency in Edith's accounts of her mother and her mother's society. Her first childish "novel" met with an "icy comment" (BG 73); her request for information on sex encountered "icy disapproval" and Lucretia's "coldness of expression deepened to disgust" ("Life and I", Wolff 15). Her memories of New York were of "narrow houses... crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery" (BG 55), and at the end of her life she still remembered the deprivation of the imagination in terms of starvation:

I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades, and then have concluded that since, for reasons which escape us, the creative mind thrives best on a reduced diet, I probably had the fare best suited to me. But this is not to say that the average well-to-do New Yorker of my childhood was not starved for a sight of the high gods. Beauty, passions, and danger were automatically excluded from his life (for the men were almost as starved as the women); and the average human being deprived of air from the heights is likely to produce other lives equally starved.

The possibility that "the creative mind thrives best on a reduced diet" can hardly have been of consolation to the child, who was starved not only of culture, but of her mother's unconditional love, and the two deprivations seem to have become linked for Edith at the deepest level. The

metaphors of food and starvation were sufficiently powerful for her to use them in her praise of Walter Berry, her friend, literary advisor, and the man she gave evidence of caring most deeply for, in her life: he "found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and... fed them till our last hour together" (BG 119).

As a child Edith's "made up" and wrote copiously, with a desperate need which had an unhealthily obsessive quality to it:

There was something almost ritualistic in the performance. The call came regularly and imperiously; ...though when it caught me at inconvenient moments I would struggle against it conscientiously. (BB 35)

Yet, as a consequence of Lucretia's "reduced diet", both of love and culture, Edith was limited to writing on brown wrapping paper spread on the floor; for regular paper would be wasted on her efforts, which often aroused her mother's scorn. However, there were times when Lucretia paid attention to her daughter's literary efforts, with results that were sometimes less than welcome. When Edith was sixteen her mother "perpetrated the folly" of having her daughter's adolescent poems privately printed ("Life and I", Woolf 47), an act which caused Edith lifelong embarrassment. Perhaps as a partial consequence, her first adult publications were followed by a period of about seven years when requests from her publisher for more material actually inhibited her ability to write.

Edith was "brought out" as a debutante a year early, because "my parents were alarmed at my growing shyness, at my passion for study, and at my indifference to the companionship of young people of my own age" ("Life and I", Wolff 47). So deep was her desire to gain her mother's approbation that, even during this period, indeed until she married at twenty three, she submitted every book she read for her mother's prior approval, novels being routinely forbidden without examination--"to save [Lucretia] trouble" (BG 65). However, in dramatic contrast, after her marriage Edith made a series of moves out of her mother's sphere: geographically--by her choice of the location of her houses in New York and Newport, and by extensive travel abroad; and culturally--publicly rejecting her mother's taste in furnishings in her first book *The Decoration of Houses*, and writing the novels of which her mother had disapproved. At the time of her mother's death in Paris in 1901, contact between the two, which had declined steadily since Edith's marriage, had eventually almost ceased.

The emotional reverberations of Edith's relationship with her mother may be discerned in the relationship of Charity to her unknown mother, the latter being, like Lucretia, in essentials utterly "inscrutable". Charity's dreams of acceptance by her mother are never actually tested, as Edith's were, because death prevents her from finding out anything about her mother's attitude to her

relinquished daughter. Overwhelmingly, however, the realization conveyed by the Mountain funeral is that Charity's dream of acceptance is impossible. The alien nature of the mourners, the apparent futility of their lives in the face of death, the bitter cold (the frozen emotions being embodied in the climate of the isolated place) and the incomprehensibility of her mother's life and death to her daughter, make this realization inescapable. The language and the conclusion are thus similar for both Charity and Edith. Furthermore, like the New Yorkers of Edith's very dissimilar birthplace, the Mountain people are starved (and again their physical state is a metaphor for their whole existence) emotionally, morally, socially and culturally. In fact, were it not for the final sense of pity we feel, we might be tempted to see the death of Charity's mother as Edith's revenge on her own. Perhaps, more accurately, it is a dirge for a relationship with a mother who was, like Charity's, never really known. Neither the autobiography nor the novel, however, argues for sympathetic comprehension; for clearly there can be no adequate understanding of a person so alien, either for Charity or for Edith.

If we turn from Edith's relationship with her mother to that with her father, we may become aware, as Wolff perceptively points out (34), that though we often hear Lucretia's voice in *A Backward Glance*, we never hear the

words of her father. It is her mother who is intensely, if painfully, *there*. Her father exists in a blurred romantic haze, an impression given, for example, by the opening scene of Wharton's autobiography, recounting her first memory. It is of herself as a three-year-old girl, romanticized and distanced by the use of the pronoun "she", who walks through New York with her father, acutely conscious of her clothes, of her veil which hangs over her "red cheeks like the white paper filigree over a valentine" (1), aware of "herself as a subject for adornment--so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine me in the little girl's vague soul" (2). Her father plays the prince to this small member of the New York aristocracy, a "tall handsome father", with his "ruddy complexion and blue eyes" (2), and the excitement of the occasion is heightened by the little girl's first kiss from an equally little boy--"and the little girl found it very pleasant" (3). The tone of the passage is discomfitingly arch, as if Wharton herself is ill at ease with the fairy tale glow, and feels compelled to nudge us into noting it. Indeed, the passage closes explicitly in an ironic, if nevertheless self-indulgent, vein: "and it will be seen that I was wakened to conscious life by the two tremendous forces of love and vanity" (3). Unfortunately, however, the need to romanticize, though recognized, and to some degree admitted, has not been successfully controlled, suggesting just how strong that

need is.

It is noticeable, once one is aware of the icy epithets associated with Lucretia, how often Edith's father is associated with warmth: "One of [her hands] lay in the large safe hollow of her father's bare hand, her tall handsome father who was always so warm blooded that in the coldest weather he always went out without gloves" (2). It is even more striking to note the strong links between this scene and the explicitly sexual fragment on incest, "Beatrice Palmato" (published in Lewis 547-8). Possibly, Wharton was aware of the connections, and gained considerable amusement out of the relationship between the two works which was concealed within the very proper pages of her autobiography. It was the kind of private joke, treating her public self with private irreverence, that she is said to have greatly enjoyed.

But if her father was a romantic prince, he was also a weak man, dominated and dwarfed by his wife. He was, for example, a man who might have developed an interest in poetry, except that "my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy". Given his wife's personality, there is for the reader an odd irony in the fact that, his interest in poetry having been stunted, he developed a passion for reading about Arctic exploration (*A Backward Glance* 39). More serious, however, although Wharton does not acknowledge it, is the obvious conclusion

to be drawn from the biographical material, that he was a man who was quite incapable of protecting his daughter from his wife, or perhaps even incapable of recognizing the need to do so.

Edith herself never charges her father with being a weakling, nor does she accuse Walter Berry, whose support fell short of a commitment to marriage, of similarly failing her. However, both proved finally inadequate, though nevertheless much beloved. It is not surprising to find resemblances between her father and the men she loved--and indeed Berry's deathbed was explicitly linked by her, in *A Backward Glance* to that of her father (88)--but it is saddening to see the repeated pattern of her attraction to men who shared her father's weaknesses. Wolff points out, succinctly, that they were all "punctiliously polite and emotionally reticent; above all, they were in no way sexually assertive. They would not intrude upon the delicate balance of the girl's privacy; they would not demand emotional intimacy from her; and it is altogether reasonable to suppose she sought them for precisely these reasons" (49). Wolff's description is doubly interesting because it suggests Royall's sensitive and kindly treatment of Charity on their wedding night. And yet it seems certain that, beneath the protective shell, Edith desperately wanted those things she most feared, a condition which may equally well be implicit in Charity's final relationship to her

guardian-turned-husband.

In a sense, in her marriage to Teddy Wharton, thirteen years her senior, Edith married her father and became her own mother for, while he treated her as an indulgent father might--always, Auchincloss says, carrying a thousand-dollar bill "in case Fuss needed anything" (*Edith Wharton* 49)--she treated him as if she were his domineering mother. Even without their intellectual and sexual incompatibility, to which public and private records, respectively, bear witness, it would not have been surprising if the marriage had failed. It slowly degenerated from early companionship into mutual bouts of physical and mental illness, apparently brought on by close proximity to each other, into severe depression in her, and wild mood swings from melancholy to exhilaration in him. The agony culminated in a divorce in 1913, and in lasting guilt for Edith, who was painfully aware of having violated her moral principles by terminating the marriage.

We can see, in Lucius Harney (as in Selden and Darrow), some of the weakness of Edith's father and of the other men she chose. However, by splitting off some elements of masculine weakness and attaching them to Harney, she allows the younger man to carry away with him the mark of permanent irresponsibility, enabling the older, Royall, to remain and grow into a figure of self-abnegating dependability, retaining, as we have seen, the powerful

effects of sexuality, though not through its mature acceptance, but rather through its denial.

Named after the friends Edith made in her refugee work during the First World War, but also for his role as ugly prince, Royall (as Charity does to Edith) bears many resemblances, small and great, to Edith's father. Royall's worthy but limited intellectual interests, sign of a man who might have gone further with the right encouragement, are represented by his valuing of Webster and Bancroft, and remind us of the withering of George Jones' cultural development. Even more striking are the hints in *Summer* that, somehow, Royall's wife bears much of the blame for his weaknesses (although they are much more spectacular than those of the quiet and respectable Jones), and is responsible for his failure as a city lawyer, and for his drinking and whoring. This certainly suggests there is some element of wish-fulfilment for Wharton, in Charity's replacing the unsatisfactory wife.

One more piece of important biographical evidence, only briefly touched on so far, must be considered: Wharton's attitude to sexuality. Clearly this is a matter which is as relevant to *The Reef* as it is to *Summer*, and it has some bearing on almost all her work, including *The House of Mirth*. Predictably her attitude was moulded by her mother, with the cooperation of Edith's own scrupulous habits of truth and submission, with disastrous

consequences:

Once when I was seven or eight, an older cousin had told me that babies were not found in flowers but in people. This information had been given me unsought, but as I had been told by Mamma that it was "not nice" to enquire into such matters, I had a vague sense of contamination, and went immediately to confess my involuntary offense. I received a severe scolding, and was left with a penetrating sense of "not-niceness" which effectually kept me from pursuing my investigations farther; and this was literally all I knew of the processes of generation till I had been married several weeks. ("Life and I" Wolff 39).

Niceness and feeling were constantly at odds throughout her adolescence, as she recorded, again in "Life and I" (Wolff 36):

Life, real Life, was singing in my ears, humming in my blood, flushing my cheeks and waving in my hair--sending me messages and signals from every beautiful face and musical voice, and running over me in vague tremors when I rode my pony, or swam through the short bright ripples of the bay, or raced and danced and tumbled with "the boys." And I didn't know--and if by any chance, I came across the shadow of a reality, and asked my mother "What does it mean?" I was always told "You're too little to understand," or else "It's not nice to ask about such things."

Perhaps the consummation of her marriage was delayed because of Edith's ignorance and fear; but these obstacles, at least, she had tried to remove:

A few days before my marriage I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, and begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me "What being married was like". Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. "I never heard such a ridiculous question! she said impatiently; and I felt at once how vulgar she thought me. But in the extremity of my need I persisted. "I'm

afraid, Mamma, I want to know what will happen to me!" The coldness of her expression deepened to disgust. She was silent for a dreadful moment; then she said with an effort: "You've seen enough pictures and statues in your life. Haven't you noticed that men are--made differently from women?" "Yes," I faltered blankly. "Well then--?" I was silent, from sheer inability to follow, and she brought out sharply: "Then, for heaven's sake don't ask me any more silly questions. You can't be as stupid as you pretend!" The dreadful moment was over, and the only result was that I had been convicted of stupidity for not knowing what I had been expressly forbidden to ask about, or even think of! ("Life and I", Wolff 40)

We may feel some sympathy for Lucretia in her embarrassment, presumably a result of her own similar upbringing, but the familiar language of mystery, dread, suffocation and cold remind us that this episode was not unique, but characteristic of a twenty-three year relationship. These passages also make it clear that Edith's confused feelings about sex, surely in themselves not unusual, became damagingly linked to her existing self-doubt and to her desperate need, and fear, of love.

Lewis quotes Edith as saying that her mother's failure in this regard "did more than anything else to falsify and misdirect my whole life". It certainly seems that the marriage to Teddy began with sexual difficulties and soon became one of sexless companionship (Lewis 53), but Edith was to have one intense sexual relationship in her life, a passionate and highly "romantic" affair with the journalist Morton Fullerton, when she was in her mid-forties, from about 1908 to 1910. The situation has been

described in some detail in the third chapter of this thesis. Until the publication of Lewis's biography, this was assumed to have been with Walter Berry, so well did the couple hide their tracks (183-266). In Edith's case the need to conceal their love affair seems to have originated from a deeper level than social caution:

Something gave me the impression the other day that we are watched in this house... commented upon... How degraded I feel by other people's thoughts... Sometimes I think that if I could go off with you for twenty-four hours to a little inn in the country in the depths of a green wood, I should ask no more. (Lewis 220)

There is no evidence that she permanently regretted this late encounter with the exhilaration of consummated sexuality, but her discovery of Fullerton's numerous (bisexual) relationships, which included an engagement to a girl brought up as his sister (which occurred at the same time as his affair with the unknowing Edith), and the help she had to give him to extricate him from being blackmailed by another mistress (*Letters* May 1909, 182) must have contributed to her fear of the power of sexuality to undermine responsibility. Her husband's own extra-marital affairs, increasingly flaunted as he became more unstable, as well as Berry's numerous flirtations, may all have contributed to reinforcing that distrust of sexuality which her upbringing had inculcated. Her affair taught her the heady excitement of sex, but gave her all the more reason to fear its effects. One might even speculate that Edith was

attracted to Fullerton because she sensed in his nature a guarantee that the relationship would *not* be permanent. Certainly she quickly became aware of his unreliability, and he was gradually reduced to the same status in her life--intellectual companion--as her many other male friends.

At a time when, as a debutante, she was energetically involved in the "seasons" at Newport and in New York, and apparently a social success, Edith regretted the lack of any friend close enough with whom to discuss the subject of sex. In maturity she was famed for her many, and apparently close, friends, and yet she could write in her diary, at sixty-two: "The lonesome time alone is what remains to me; what I recall is of a lone life, and what I have gone through has made me alone" (Wolff 11). Nothing, apparently, not a lover, and not even the closest of friends (Berry was still alive at the time this entry was made) could eradicate the scars inflicted in childhood, the desperate craving for love and approval, and the cruelly protective shell which shut them out. There are echoes, in this, of the Charity who feels alone and yet is afraid to be drawn into contact with others, who experiences a sense of impregnable loneliness, a loneliness which is both a curse and a protection from hurt, and which, in Charity's case enables her to sense something of Royall's own misery. Charity's desperate need to keep her love secret, which seems to have deep, almost instinctive, roots, echoes the feeling that

drove Wharton to write to her lover Fullerton of her longing for a hidden love in "the depths of a green wood".

Other similarities between author and character can be detected. Both women feel the claustrophobic sense of being trapped in their surroundings, which, for Charity, finds its outlet in escape to the hills above the village and in dreams of the Mountain, and, for Edith in frenzied travel. Even tiny details, such as Charity's remarkable ability to wake each day with a fresh optimism, which was also Wharton's ("I am born happy every morning" *A Backward Glance* 372), offer resemblances. In other ways too, Charity resembles her creator. Wharton's brilliant depiction of the superficially "knowing" Charity who is not as sophisticated as she appears, or thinks herself to be, is reminiscent of her own younger self. Charity also resembles the adolescent Edith with "life singing in my ears, humming in my blood, flushing my cheeks and waving in my hair".

In judging Wharton's involvement in her novel, it is helpful to turn to F.R. Leavis, who argued, convincingly, and often, that the greatest works are "impersonal": the writer has transmuted personal experience and concerns, through an act of insight and understanding that includes judgment, into art which is of value to others because it addresses shared concerns. Wharton herself said something similar in *The Writing of Fiction*:

The business of the artist is to make weep and not to weep, to make laugh and not to laugh, and unless

tears and laughter, flesh and blood are transmuted by him into the substance that art works in, they are nothing to his purpose or ours. (121)

In Charity's nature, her unachieved longing for certainty and her relationship to her unknown mother, we see an author at work on her own experience in a way which is wholly praiseworthy, transmuting it into something separate from herself, something judged and understood, something of universal value, in Leavis's word, "impersonal". Here, biographical knowledge of Wharton, though an impressive demonstration of the author's strength, is not required to elucidate any mysteries or recognize success.

But in the treatment of sexuality, as we have seen in the examination of *Summer*, something disturbing occurs which suggests that a personal problem creates a distortion in the novel, something with which Wharton cannot deal, because she cannot distance herself from it through full comprehension. Sexuality becomes threatening as it approaches consummation, a change signalled by a change in the language with which Wharton describes it. The ghost of the girl who realized it was "not nice" to know that "babies are not found in flowers but in people" seems to rise and take control of the novel, embodying her fear in a language that shifts from the vegetative to the animal as the love affair progresses. Our knowledge of Edith Wharton's upbringing allows us to understand why this happens, and to recognize the origin of the difficulty with regret. This does not, however, allow

us to excuse the resulting flaws in the work.

Similarly, there is nothing to be deplored when a writer successfully turns personal difficulties into insight, as Wharton does in using elements of her father's character in her creation of the weak but compassionate Royall. The problem lies in the resolution that allows Charity to regress, accepting the nurturing of a "father-figure", with the appropriate associations of warmth and food that represented for Edith all that was missing in her relationship with her mother, and for which her father seemed offer at least a dim compensation. It lies in the fantasy of the daughter replacing the unsatisfactory wife without (at least for the present) the disturbing threat of consummated sex, but with powerful undercurrents of suppressed sexuality, and with a child that will complete the family. It lies in this situation being presented as morally justified, and, indeed, redemptive for both Royall and Charity.

Charity, of course, is *not* Edith Wharton, although the two have enough features in common to suggest that the character grew out of her creator's deepest need to understand herself. Possibly, in *Summer* and the studies of "incest" that followed it, Wharton succeeded in salving her emotional wounds by exploring her fantasy and finding it wanting. But the literary critic cannot justify a flawed work on the grounds of its therapeutic value to the writer,

and the distortion of what is good in *Summer* can only be profoundly regretted.

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