

A STUDY OF SOME MALE CHARACTERS IN EDITH WHARTON'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Edith Wharton has been criticised for her portrayal of male characters. They are often dismissed as being mainly one type: the inadequate, aristocratic, dilettante gentleman. This thesis argues that whilst this figure re-occurs in her work a development can be seen from Lawrence Selden of The House of Mirth, to Ralph Marvell of The Custom of the Country culminating in Newland Archer, hero of The Age of Innocence. Furthermore these men are not carbon copies of each other, but independent characters in their own right. Finally, it will be shown that there is a considerable range of male characters to be found playing secondary roles in her work.

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INTRODUCTION

When Edith Wharton died in 1937, the critic Wilson Follett declared that the majority of her novels about fashionable New York society would date: only Ethan Frome would live on.¹ Forty-one years later, Gore Vidal declared that "Traditionally, Henry James has been placed slightly higher up the slope of Parnassus than Edith Wharton. But now that the prejudice against the female writer is on the wane, they look to be exactly what they are: giants, equals, the tutelary and benign gods of our American literature."² In 1953 Blake Nevius gave three reasons for the study of Edith Wharton's work.³ First, she was the only American novelist to deal successfully and at any length with the feudal remainder of the New York society that hardly lasted until the coming of the twentieth century. Secondly, next to Henry James, she was the most successful American novelist of manners, especially noteworthy for her

¹"What Edith Wharton Did--and Might Have Done", New York Times Book Review, (September 5, 1937), 2.

²"Of Writers and Class: in Praise of Edith Wharton", Atlantic Monthly, CCXLI no.2 (1978), 67.

³Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), pp.8-10.

recording of costume, décor and inflexions of speech. Finally, there are two great themes in her work: the large and generous nature trapped by circumstances of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature and her attempts to define the nature and limits of a person's responsibility. The subject of the individual in conflict with society may be detected in her work too. The treatment of these themes frees her from the charges of narrowness of subject matter often levelled at her.

Interest in Edith Wharton may also be aroused because in many ways she stands apart from the mainstream of American literature. As John Harvey⁴ noticed, she learned from the great French novelists of the nineteenth century: Flaubert, Balzac and Stendhal. Behind them lies the stimulus of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Turgenev. This helped to counterbalance Henry James's influence, although the complexity of the issue is increased because he had learned from them too. James compared Edith Wharton's work to George Eliot's⁵ and Richard Poirier likened her wit to Jane Austen's and proposed that "Her achievements as a satirist prepare the way for Sinclair Lewis, who dedicated

⁴"Contrasting Worlds: a Study in the Novels of Edith Wharton", Études Anglaises, VII (1954), 193-195.

⁵Letters, ed. Percy Lubbock, (New York: Scribner's, 1920), II, 284.

Babbitt to her."⁶ Both Alfred Kazin and Edmund Wilson have written of her affinity with American realism. In a piece dated October 4th, 1947, Wilson for example, boldly states, "I will point out that Mrs. Wharton was as much a contributor to the realism of the age that followed hers as she was an inheritor from James."⁷ Articles have also been written in a quest to find the philosophy of determinism in her work and so bring her into the school of naturalism.⁸

Edith Wharton's most important single literary debt and literary relationship, however, must be to, and with, Henry James. When her first volume of short stories, The Greater Inclination, was published in 1899, reviewers immediately compared them to his work. Naturally, critics differ in their estimate of the relationship. Carl Van Doren felt that she resembled James in subjects and attitudes⁹ whilst Robert Morss Lovett declared that "There is no doubt that Mrs. Wharton regarded Henry James as the

⁶"Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth", in The American Novel, ed. Wallace Stenger, (New York: Basic Books, 1965), p.118.

⁷"Edith Wharton: a Memoir by an English Friend", in his Classics and Commercials, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1950), p.415.

⁸J. A. Robinson, "Psychological Determinism in The Age of Innocence", Markham Review, V (Fall, 1975), 1-5. See also: Anne Friman, "Determinism and Point of View in The House of Mirth", Papers on Language and Literature, II (1966), 175-178.

⁹Contemporary American Novelists 1900-1920, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), pp.95-104.

chief master of English fiction and that he in turn considered her his most proficient follower."¹⁰ Q. D. Leavis's opinion was that "Her admiration of Henry James's work, later her great intimacy with him, provided her with a springboard from which to take off as an artist."¹¹ More recently Geoffery Walton said, "On the whole, Edith Wharton's literary relationship to James seems of an ordinary kind: a general debt to him as a source of inspiration and technique, one or two particular borrowings, and, beyond this, the development of a comparable, but lesser and also very different genius."¹² Writing in 1976, Margaret B. McDowell acknowledged that "Certainly she followed James in a concern with technique, in a conviction that the formal properties of writing are important, and in a conscious experimentation with the tenets she had established for herself as esthetician and writer."¹³ Blake Nevius pointed out that Henry James and Edith Wharton

¹⁰Edith Wharton, (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1925), p.6.

¹¹"Henry James's Heiress: the Importance of Edith Wharton", Scrutiny, VII (1938), 262.

¹²Edith Wharton: a Critical Interpretation, (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p.199.

¹³Edith Wharton, (Boston: Twayne Publishers a Division of G. K. Hall, 1976), p.33.

had similar origins, class outlook, background and literary ancestry.¹⁴ This complicates our view of their relationship, which has been explored in some depth by Millicent Bell.¹⁵ Like Nevius, she notes the disparity in their later work: "As James's work came to final maturity, he became less and less concerned with the definitions of types and customs; she, on the other hand, went on from book to book to trace the growth of new social configurations."¹⁶ The Reef and Madame de Treymes exhibit a debt to James. Both writers were concerned with the same social class and this answers for some similarity of characters. More specifically, Newland Archer has been compared to Lambert Strether, Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer. The quartet of characters in The Reef has been likened to that in The Golden Bowl. Perhaps the final word on this subject should be allowed to Percy Lubbock, who knew both

¹⁴Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, pp.30-36

¹⁵"Edith Wharton and Henry James: the Literary Relationship", Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, LXXIV (December 1959), 619-637. This was developed into a longer study: Edith Wharton and Henry James: the Story of their Friendship, (New York: George Braziller, 1965).

¹⁶Edith Wharton and Henry James: the Story of their Friendship, p.307.

Henry James and Edith Wharton; "She had made friends with him in her books, so to speak, when she began to write--enrolled, as was evident, under his banner, a disciple of his art; but of his authority, as she emerged from pupilage, she was by no means patient, nor a meek receiver of his doctrine--though his approval of her work, when she got it, was the only meed of praise that she greatly cared about or valued."¹⁷

Though not of James's stature, Edith Wharton is an interesting and important American writer. Edmund Wilson was one of the first critics to champion her work. Initially this was in The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature; ¹⁸ he praised her later in a review of Percy Lubbock's Portrait of Edith Wharton.¹⁹ But it is in reference to his comments about her male characters that this thesis is particularly concerned. He says that "Up through The Age of Innocence, and recurring at all points of her range from The House of Mirth to Ethan Frome, the typical masculine figure in Edith Wharton's fiction is a man set apart from his neighbors by education, intellect,

¹⁷Portrait of Edith Wharton, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p.137.

¹⁸"Justice to Edith Wharton", (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941), pp.195-211.

¹⁹"Edith Wharton: a Memoir by an English Friend", pp.412-418.

and feeling, but lacking the force or the courage either to impose himself or to get away."²⁰ This man is apparently a phenomenon of post-Civil War America and Wilson defined the type further in this way:

In Edith Wharton's novels these men are usually captured and dominated by women of conventional morals and middle-class ideals; when an exceptional woman comes along who is thirsting for something different and better, the man is unable to give it to her. This special situation Mrs. Wharton, with some conscious historical criticism but chiefly impelled by a feminine animus, has dramatized with much vividness and intelligence. There are no first-rate men in these novels.²¹

Six years later, in his review of Percy Lubbock's Portrait of Edith Wharton he said:

. . . the male type which most conspicuously recurs in her novels is the cultivated and intelligent man who cannot bear to offend social convention, the reformer who gets bribed without knowing it in marrying a rich wife, the family man who falls in love with someone more exciting than his wife but doesn't have the courage of his passion; and the treatment of these characters by the author, though outwardly sympathetic, is always well chilled with an irony that has an undercurrent of scorn.
 . . . Edith Wharton knew him well, and she never ceased to resent him because he had failed to stand up to the temptations and threats of

²⁰"Justice to Edith Wharton", p.206.

²¹Ibid., p.207.

that civilization and because he had not been strong to save from that moneyed world, in which it was even easier for a woman than for a man to be caught, a woman, courageous herself, whom he might have, whom he should have, loved.²²

Other critics have recognised the re-occurrence of this male figure in Edith Wharton's novels. I intend to demonstrate that there is a development in her use of this figure from Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth to Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country which culminates in Newland Archer who appears in The Age of Innocence. These novels have similar settings and are considered to be her greatest works. I shall also argue that there is more diversity than is usually acknowledged in the range of male characters featured in her fiction. Before devoting a chapter to each of the three major novels, I shall take a general look at the male characters in her works and the main critical ideas advanced about them.

²²"Edith Wharton: a Memoir by an English Friend", pp.416-417.

CHAPTER I
HEROES AND THEORIES

In Chapter III of her autobiography, A Backward Glance,¹ Edith Wharton gives an account of the writing she did as a child, furiously scribbling away on large sheets of brown wrapping paper spread out on the floor. By the time she "came out" in 1879, when she was seventeen, she had written a short novel Fast and Loose and some of her poetry had been published. V. H. Winner provided an introduction to the former when it was published in 1977 and she says there that the prevalent type of male associated with Edith Wharton's fiction could already be seen: the bland representative of civilisation and the life of the mind.²

After this early start Edith Wharton laid her writing aside as she became immersed in New York society. She married and travelled and did not start writing again until the end of the century. Her first novel, The Valley of Decision, was published in 1902 after some volumes of

¹(New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934).

²Fast and Loose: a Novelette by David Olivieri, ed. V. H. Winner, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), p.xxvi.

short stories. Robert Morss Lovett declared that "It is perhaps a measure of Edith Wharton's ambition that for her first work of long breath she should have undertaken a historical novel, choosing for her period the Italy of the eighteenth century."³ Some have compared it to George Eliot's Romola, generally because the well-researched historical background is too apparent, tending to deaden both novels. Cynthia Griffin Wolff detected the influence of Stendhal's The Charterhouse of Parma and says, "she addresses herself to the problems of his fictional world as he has posed them"⁴ but sees the characterisation of the hero as the main difference between the works. Edith Wharton's hero is a Duke, Odo Valsecca, a symbol of liberalism, fighting for a balance between his mistress's radicalism and his wife's conservatism. Odo is an intelligent and sensitive man whose idealism and subsequent disillusionment are plausible, yet as a character he fails to come to life.

Edith Wharton's second novel, The House of Mirth was a commercial success and provides us with Lawrence Selden, an early example of the passive, gentleman hero. My next chapter will be devoted to a discussion of him, Simon Rosedale and some lesser male figures. After the

³Edith Wharton, (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1925), p.16.

⁴A Feast of Words: the Triumph of Edith Wharton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.93.

novel's publication the author wrote to Charles Scribner, her publisher and promised that her next hero, unlike Lawrence Selden, would be a strong man. The result of her endeavours was John Amherst, who appears in The Fruit of the Tree. He lacks Selden's aristocratic background, loves his work as factory manager/owner and fights passionately for social justice for his workers, ignoring social conventions. Understanding public and industrial situations, he fails to know himself and is not in tune with the emotional needs of others. He will not stand behind Justine, his second wife and Louis Auchincloss is adamant that, "Even he takes his ultimate stand in the chilly line of Edith's heroes: men of good taste, good manners, and attenuated will power."⁵ Yet he is a far more active character than Selden and his failure is one of vision rather than action.

Madame de Treymes was published in 1907, as was The Fruit of the Tree, but it has a decidedly Jamesian flavour. Frederic Taber Cooper, writing in 1911, felt that it was almost flawless in its structure and content, and the high-water mark of Edith Wharton's attainment at that point in her career.⁶ The hero, John Durham, is actively trying to help the woman he loves and is far more sophisticated than

⁵Edith Wharton: a Woman in her Time, (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.66.

⁶Some American Story Tellers, (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, reprinted 1968 [1911]), pp.168-195.

James's Christopher Newman of The American, with whom he is often compared. Both are caught up in the machinations of the French aristocracy who destroy each man's personal happiness.

In Ethan Frome Edith Wharton used a male narrator and a man as the central character of her work. Ethan Frome is one of those greater natures which somehow ends up sacrificing itself to meaner and lesser people: a poor farmer whose bleak life is emphasised by its New England setting. This short, haunting novel is notable for its narrative technique and the portrayal of Ethan Frome. It brings the first phase of Edith Wharton's creative life to an end; as she says in her autobiography, "It was not until I wrote Ethan Frome that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements."⁷

The Reef shows James's influences in its French setting, the central quartet of characters and the novel's internal balance. Lovett saw George Darrow as ". . . Mrs. Wharton's answer to critics who affirm that she cannot draw men."⁸ He is a diplomat, whose worldly experiences appear to have been limited yet are infinitely wider than those of Anna Leath, whom he hopes to marry. Geoffery Walton feels that Darrow has a nasty egotistical side but is not a

⁷ A Backward Glance, p.209.

⁸ Edith Wharton, p.69.

strongly felt presence, even though part of the story is told from his point of view. He concedes, however, that "Darrow's moral stature has been growing as hers [Anna Leath's] has declined, and he ends with a dignified repentance as well as an implied condemnation of her."⁹

Published in 1913, The Custom of the Country features six rather interesting male characters who will be discussed in Chapter III. It was followed by Summer (1917), a rather different work with a similar setting to that of Ethan Frome. Lawyer Royall is a sharp contrast to Lucius Harney, Charity Royall's young lover, who is educated, artistic and destined to marry a rich, fashionable young woman. Older than Charity and her guardian, Lawyer Royall is flawed in that he has never achieved the things his abilities and intelligence suggest he might have done. Yet he is also kind and discerning and marries his pregnant ward when she is deserted by her more conventional young lover.

Edith Wharton was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 for The Age of Innocence. Her central character, Newland Archer, will be examined in Chapter IV. Some critics have argued that her work deteriorated after this point in her career. She continued, however, to furnish her readers with some interesting male characters. A Son at the Front

⁹Edith Wharton: a Critical Interpretation, (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p.69.

is a skilful study of a father/son relationship and the bearing which selfishness has on patriotism. The Mother's Recompense has a trio of male characters who let down its heroine in different ways, whilst Twilight Sleep contrasts Pauline Manford's two husbands. Arthur Wyant, the first, is of "old New York blood"¹⁰ and lacks the energy of his successor, Dexter Manford, a lawyer. In his ex-wife's eyes Arthur is "Such a brilliant figure--and nothing to show for it!"¹¹ When she married him her father philosophically advised her to look on him as a piece of jewellery. In many ways he is like Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell or Newland Archer. Dexter Manford has none of Arthur Wyant's advantages of birth but paid his own way through law school and glories in the work of his profession, apart from its material rewards: "There was pioneer blood in him: he was used to starting out every morning to hack his way through a fresh growth of prejudices and obstacles; and though he liked his big retaining fees he liked arguing a case even better."¹²

In Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, Edith Wharton uses her hero, Vance Weston, to make a final attempt to sum up an artist's life. He is not a portrait

¹⁰(New York: D. Appleton, 1927), p.11.

¹¹Ibid., p.23.

¹²Ibid., p.57.

of his creator, but there are many interesting parallels between them. Both have a "secret garden"¹³ and feel "Destiny" knocking as they write.¹⁴ These novels are explorations of aesthetic problems which had long fascinated Edith Wharton. They were also pursued in The Writing of Fiction. Louis Auchincloss also argues that Vance Weston is the first full-blooded man of her fiction, whilst Lewis Tarrant is "the most pathetic of all her dilettante characters."¹⁵ Halo Spear, heroine of both novels, would probably concur with this judgement as she deserts Lewis for Vance.

Edith Wharton's last novel, The Buccaneers was tantalisingly incomplete when she died. Guy Thwarte, who would probably have emerged as the most important male character in the novel combines the ancient courtesies and obligations of his class with a new managerial efficiency suggesting a possible balance of the old with the new. Louis Auchincloss declares:

Guy Thwarte in this unfinished tale is the thread that links it with so many of its predecessors. Although English, he is still the Wharton

¹³The Gods Arrive, (New York: D. Appleton, 1932), p.333 and A Backward Glance, p.198.

¹⁴Hudson River Bracketed, (New York: D. Appleton, 1929), p.418 and A Backward Glance, p.204.

¹⁵Edith Wharton: a Woman in her Time, p.175.

hero, tall and good-looking, a Gibson man, and, to the amazement of his family, though he has a "decent reputation about women" and is a "brilliant point-to-point rider", he "messes about" with poetry and painting.¹⁶

The notes which Edith Wharton left, planning the end of the book, indicate that he was to elope with the Duchess of Tintagel, an event which would show the triumph of love and that this hero, at least, did not fail the exceptional woman in his life.

As could be predicted, the type of male character which Edmund Wilson described does not confine his appearances to Edith Wharton's novels: he may be found in several short stories. "The Eyes" attacks the aloofness of this man: "The Dilettante" shows him to be capable of villainy in spite of his apparent weakness. "After Holbein" portrays a character growing old in the increasingly empty role of a gentleman in society. "The Fullness of Life" depicts a man who fails his wife and may parallel Edith Wharton's relationship with her husband, whom she bore with for many years, as did the heroine of her tale.

Why does there seem to be a preponderance of a particular type of male character in Edith Wharton's novels

¹⁶"Edith Wharton and her New Yorks", in his Reflections of a Jacobite, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p.27.

and short stories? One answer is that her background furnished her with plentiful examples of him, but some critics have seen a feminist point of view as the cause. On the other hand Winifred Lynskey posits the idea that Edith Wharton used herself as material for her heroes and employed her friend Walter Berry as a source for her heroines.¹⁷

Critics often take a biographical approach to Edith Wharton's work. Scholars looked forward to the 1968 release of her papers deposited in the Yale University Library. The complementary works by R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff represent the peak of this critical and biographical approach. Its justification lies in the fact that many of her novels and short stories were set in the New York she grew up in. As R. E. Spiller says, "It was the narrow culture, the rigid codes, and the lack of all but defensive vitality of this American aristocracy which stung her imagination."¹⁸ Indeed, Edith Wharton's autobiography, A Backward Glance, confirms this judgement.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, emphasises the importance of Edith Wharton's relationship with her father: "In general

¹⁷"The 'Heroes' of Edith Wharton", University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIII (1954), 354-361.

¹⁸Literary History of the United States, eds. R. E. Spiller, W. Thorp, T. H. Johnson, H. S. Canby, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1959), p.1209.

the little girl employed her growing affinity for literature to relieve her multiple difficulties with Mother. It drew her closer to Father, who 'by dint of patience, managed to drum the alphabet into me'.¹⁹ Edith Wharton's comment about her father in A Backward Glance could easily be applied to her heroes:

. . . I imagine there was a time when his rather rudimentary love of verse might have been developed had he had any one with whom to share it. But my mother's matter-of-factness must have shrivelled up any such buds of fancy; . . . and I have wondered since what stifled cravings had once germinated in him, and what manner of man he was really meant to be. That he was a lonely one, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained, I am sure.²⁰

Such a remark may have led Richard Lawson to say "This character type, perhaps reflecting Wharton's memory of her father or even her perception of the generality of upper-class New York males, reappears frequently in her novels."²¹ A number of her male friends--Howard Sturgis, Harry Cust, Geoffery Scott, Egerton Winthrop--seem to have provided material for her heroes too. Louis Auchincloss observes:

Of Egerton Winthrop she wrote that never had an intelligence so distinguished and a character so

¹⁹A Feast of Words, p.31.

²⁰A Backward Glance, p.5.

²¹Edith Wharton, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), p.36.

admirable been combined with interests so trivial. That she judged his type even more severely in her fiction than in her memoirs is attested by the long line of his prototypes in her stories: sterile, polished social parasites of perfect manners and little heart.²²

Percy Lubbock pointed out that she preferred the company of men, enjoyed being talked to as a man and liked to be surrounded by an attentive court.²³ The most important of these men was Walter Berry.

Edith Wharton summed up Walter Berry's value to her in this way: "I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him."²⁴ Margaret McDowell admits that "One can hardly overestimate the influence of his meticulous criticism since it pervaded her books over a thirty-year span."²⁵ Percy Lubbock is convinced that Berry was the hero who appeared perpetually in Edith Wharton's fiction. He assessed him as a man of the world, calm and strong, knowledgeable about men and especially women, a

²²Edith Wharton: a Woman in her Time, p.62.

²³Portrait of Edith Wharton, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p.57.

²⁴A Backward Glance, p.119.

²⁵Edith Wharton, (Boston: Twayne Publishers a Division of G. K. Hall, 1976), p.23.

master of himself and his fate, a bearer of the stamp and guarantee of authentic manliness and a cool, deliberate observer. Above all, however, he believed Berry to be only a shell of a man and declared, "That is what this novelist in all good faith has taken for a man, and in all seriousness has offered us as the flower of manhood."²⁶

The question of the extent to which Berry, her father, her husband or any of Edith Wharton's friends were used as material for her male characters is not open to a definite and final resolution. In the concluding sentence of A Backward Glance she admits the value of observing life: "The visible world is a daily miracle for those who have eyes and ears; and I still warm my hands thankfully at the old fire, though every year it is fed with the dry wood of more old memories."²⁷ Earlier in the memoir she confesses that " . . . the young gods and goddesses I used to watch strolling across the Edgerston lawn were the prototypes of my first novels."²⁸ Yet she realises that such figures undergo a metamorphosis in being used to create fiction: " . . . 'Real people' transported into a work of the imagination would instantly cease to be real; only those born of the

²⁶Portrait of Edith Wharton, p.207.

²⁷A Backward Glance, p.379.

²⁸Ibid., p.47.

creator's brain can give the least illusion of reality." She continues her argument with an effective metaphor: placing her friends and acquaintances in novels would be like glueing snapshots into a painting and concludes that she only ever employs fragments of real people in drawing her characters.²⁹

The Writing of Fiction furnishes us with further development of Edith Wharton's theories about fiction and its characters. She argues that an autobiographical tale is not a novel and defines the main types of novel as those of manners, those of character or psychology and those of adventure. Basically she is a novelist of manners and is aware of its special form " . . . with its more crowded stage, and its continual interweaving of individual with social analysis."³⁰ She saw that there is a temptation in the novel of manners to overcrowd the stage and to choose figures typical of each section of social background as the principal characters. This charge could be levelled at her by those critics who see her heroes as being of one particular type, the passive upper class man who fails to fulfill his potential promise. Many of these figures are fully-drawn characters though, rather than types and can be

²⁹A Backward Glance, p.210.

³⁰The Writing of Fiction, (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p.81.

seen working out their own destinies. Edith Wharton was one of the number she designated as "the novelist who lives among his creations in this continuous intimacy" to whom "they should pour out their tale almost as if to a passive spectator."³¹ As Anne Freemantle says, "For Edith Wharton, character was implacably destiny;" the doom of characters being both their own and their society's.³² This helps to explain why characters like Lawrence Selden, Ralph Marvell and Newland Archer, who have so much in common, still emerge as clearly drawn individuals. Her experiences provided the raw material for these figures, her creative power metamorphosised it into a number of diverse male characters.

Josephine Jessup seems to have been the first critic to consider Edith Wharton a feminist. She declares: "Seldom has a writer undertaken the enthronement of her sex with firmer consistency than Edith Wharton. For the space of twenty novels she attempts to show the woman preëminent, man trailing at heel."³³ The men are seen as standing as mortals in relation to the goddess-like female characters whose self-sacrifice underlines the men's unworthiness:

³¹The Writing of Fiction, p.88.

³²"Edith Wharton: Values and Vulgarly", in Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. H. C. Gardiner, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p.19.

³³The Faith of our Feminists, (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), p.14.

"The men, fickle in love and wavering in purpose, show only a steadfast puerility."³⁴ She notes that Edith Wharton bothers very little about what her men do for a living, but this is not necessarily feminist; occupation was unimportant for men of the class she usually writes about. The prevalence of substantial secondary masculine figures is seen as a deliberate part of the assignment of pre-eminence to the female. Her summary is that "No matter how weakly elaborated, her essential thesis remains: man is the lesser woman."³⁵

Three years after the appearance of Josephine Jessup's book, Blake Nevius detected what he termed a "lurking feminism" in Edith Wharton's work.³⁶ He based his judgement on her criticism of the double standard of sexual morality (in The Reef or The Age of Innocence for example) and the appearance of the unemotional and overscrupulous male protagonist like Lawrence Selden, distinguished by his air of detachment. He admits, however, that this type would be necessarily prominent in the peculiar world she inhabited.³⁷ This could mean that her male characters are

³⁴The Faith of our Feminists, p.16.

³⁵Ibid., p.20.

³⁶Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p.85.

³⁷Ibid., p.98.

not the product of consciously held feminist beliefs, although she was aware of the limits of a woman's position in society. This realisation produced a short story "The Valley of Childish Things". The piece shows that women have different and more difficult alternatives in life than men, and interestingly it was rejected by her publishers.

More recently, Margaret Mc.Dowell has looked for signs of feminism in Edith Wharton's work. Her view is that the author is sympathetic to her women characters who are generally admirable, firm, courageous, creative and dynamic without being idealised.³⁸ We are told:

If we are to judge by her ineffectual male characters, Wharton was as critical as any feminist alive of men in American society and of their privileges. Unlike most writers of her generation, who accepted the notion of male superiority, she created men who had feet of clay. Cultured, moderately rich, aristocratic by birth, educated for the law or commerce, her male protagonists pursue their careers in a desultory way.³⁹

Whilst it must be acknowledged that Edith Wharton was sensible of the plight of women in her society, if only because of her own experiences, it still does not negate the fact that there were probably far more examples of this wealthy, aristocratic, educated man in existence

³⁸"Viewing the Custom of her Country: Edith Wharton's Feminism", Contemporary Literature, XV (1974), 521-538.

³⁹Ibid., 526-527.

during the era she writes about. I would argue that her concern lies with social class rather than feminism. The conventions of society triumph in her work. Odo's reforming zeal dies away in the face of traditions and customs in The Valley of Decision and Vance Weston, hero of her last completed novels, is forced to take more and more notice of society as his career progresses. Ellen and May are both revealed to be more noble than Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence but the customs of New York society lie behind Newland's failure to elope with Ellen. One could also argue that no feminist could create such a monstrous heroine as the voracious Undine Spragg of The Custom of the Country in whom no redeeming characteristics can be discerned. She is too unpleasant for the argument that she is a satirical representation of society's effect on women and so an example of Edith Wharton's feminism, to hold good. Rather, Undine is an example of the new values of the invading mercantile class. As in The House of Mirth, criticism is aimed at fashionable society as a whole, not just its male or female members.

Winifred Lynskey's theory that Edith Wharton herself was the model from life of her heroes and Walter Berry the material for her heroines is not quite as bizarre as it initially appears.⁴⁰ She argues that Lawrence

⁴⁰"The 'Heroes' of Edith Wharton", 354-361.

Selden, Ralph Marvell and Newland Archer, who constitute a conspicuous male type in Edith Wharton's novels, are singularly bloodless and unappealing whilst being sensitive and high-souled. Rejecting Edmund Wilson's view that Edith Wharton used the Walter Berry she idealised as a model and then drew scornful portraits of him because he let her down and had defects, Winifred Lynskey points out that Edith Wharton was sufficiently devoted to Walter Berry to be buried next to him, and that her heroes would be heroic to her in any case. She says: "A Wharton hero has an integral part in the plot and theme of the novel. If he is not permitted to play the role assigned to him, if he is not permitted to carry the heavy burden of the novel's theme, then her novels become so distorted as to be meaningless."⁴¹

The heroes' deficiency is seen to lie in the fact that they are not really men but sentimental projections of their author. They are often struggling to escape from the stultifying environment of a wealthy society into a world of artistic and moral values, just as Edith Wharton had escaped from the world of her girlhood and marriage. Winifred Lynskey notes that they are often bookish as the author was, but I feel this is a quality which she would see as admirable in either sex, and not a reason for

⁴¹"The 'Heroes' of Edith Wharton", 355.

identifying her exclusively with her heroes. According to Winifred Lynskey the heroines in the novels often wake the hero to an awareness of his situation--Ellen has this effect on Newland Archer as does Halo Spear on Vance Weston--in the way that Walter Berry encouraged Edith Wharton in her career. And yet although Lily Bart moves Lawrence Selden, he is not in time to save her; Undine Spragg has no beneficial effects on her husbands. So this theory cannot be applied in either of these cases.

It is noteworthy that the admirable characters who enjoy Edith Wharton's approval have similar physical features. They are dark and slender, have thin, finely modeled, brown, nervous hands and are never particularly beautiful nor ugly. Ellen Olenska, Raymond de Chelles, Halo Spear and Justine Brent are among their number. These physical traits transcend barriers of sex, suggesting that ultimately there is no one-to-one correspondence between Edith Wharton and her heroes and Walter Berry and her heroines. As mentioned, there is a range even within the type of man predominant in the novels, apart from many other interesting male characters.

Both V. H. Winner and Frances T. Russell see Edith Wharton's male characters as being antithetical. The former says: "The male characters in Edith Wharton's fiction tend to be opposites: on the one hand, the man of power--brash, socially ambitious, plebian or plutocratic

--and on the other, the man of refined sensibilities-- artistic, aristocratic, too morally sensitive to succeed in a materialistic society."⁴² The latter sees the men in love as either Don Juan or Don Quixote, "There is the salacious possessive autocratic male, or the prudish cad, or the sentimental cavalier destined to fall"⁴³ Pairs of characters can be picked out in this way but this ignores those who lie between the extremes and is, therefore, an oversimplified view of the male characters.

Blanche Gelfant has detected a set of characteristics common to Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth, Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country and Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence. First they have affinities with the old conservative aristocracy though they mingle with the young rich set. Secondly, in spite of artistic leanings, they have enough detachment to see the cultural sterility of their world. They are gentlemen of modest incomes with no urgent necessity of making a living. Finally, each loves what is best in his female counterpart (Lily Bart,

⁴²"Introduction", to Fast and Loose: a Novelette by David Olivieri, p.xxv.

⁴³"Melodramatic Mrs. Wharton", Sewanee Review, XL (1932), 431.

Undine Spragg or Ellen Olenska) but cannot consummate this love; the relationship is essentially that of social mentor illuminating the ideals of old society for his pupil.⁴⁴ Undine and Ralph do not fit into this pattern completely, it also ignores the importance of May Welland and other characters such as Simon Rosedale or Raymond de Chelles. True on a superficial level, it overlooks many of the finer details of these three novels.

In considering Edith Wharton's novels, it is undeniable that their greatest moments are dominated by heroines rather than heroes. The latter are often more controlled by the heroines than is apparent. There is a re-occurring male "type" simply because Edith Wharton often depicted the society and class which she grew up in. She would have known this man well from her experiences and I contend that this made her skilful in his depiction, so that a development may be traced from Lawrence Selden to Newland Archer. It should be remembered too that her range was not limited solely to this type of male figure: there is a variety of men to be found in her work. Some examples will be discussed in the following chapters.

⁴⁴The American City Novel, (2nd ed.; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p.109.

CHAPTER II
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

The House of Mirth¹ was serialised in Scribner's Magazine between January and November 1905 and enjoyed the most rapid sale of any book published by Scribner's. It was Edith Wharton's first best-seller and marked the end of an accomplished apprenticeship. The title is taken from Ecclesiastes vii.4. "The heart of fools is in the house of mirth" and treats of her "great subject, the way in which her own 'innocent' and irresponsible class co-operated-- however involuntarily--with the new moneyed class that had emerged since the Civil War, to sacrifice the finer spirits coming within their orbits".² Geoffery Walton remarks that "There should not be any need today to apologise for the fact that Edith Wharton's great tragic novel, The House of Mirth, 1905, is placed in the world of the Four Hundred in

¹Edith Wharton, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905). All subsequent references to this work will be given as page numbers in the text.

²Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p.48.

the Gilded Age."³ And this setting, together with the novel's heroine Lily Bart, who is a part and a product of her environment, were probably what made Marie Bristol declare that the novel exhibits the influences of James and Dreiser, reflecting their respective concerns with manners and heredity and environment.⁴ On the other hand Blake Nevius feels that Edith Wharton was writing a realistic work, her view of reality being shadowed forth by a particular system of manners.⁵

Most critics, however, would agree with the author's assessment of her main male character: she told Sara Norton that Lawrence Selden was a negative hero, a sterile and subtly fraudulent figure whose ideas were not much to be trusted.⁶ An example of the upper class, a dilettante, a detached hero who re-occurs in her work, Lawrence Selden is contrasted with Simon Rosedale the Jewish financier who is trying to buy his way into New York's aristocratic society. Lily's father, Gus Trenor, and George Dorset also provide examples of the upper class male and contrasts with Selden.

³Edith Wharton: a Critical Interpretation, (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p.44.

⁴"Life among the Ungentle Genteel: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth Revisited", Western Humanities Review, XVI (Autumn, 1962), 371-374.

⁵Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, p.73.

⁶R. W. B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: a Biography, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.153.

An account of the Van Osburgh marriage in Chapter VIII of The House of Mirth (pp.137-157) affords us the opportunity to see Lily, Selden, Trenor and Rosedale simultaneously. Percy Gryce, whom Lily had intended to marry in order to secure a materially comfortable future for herself, also appears and the chapter concludes on an ironic note as she discovers that he is engaged to someone else.

Lily notices Selden first, during the wedding ceremony, and she reflects about his importance to her:

The sight of Selden's dark head, in a pew almost facing her, disturbed for a moment the balance of her complacency. The rise of her blood as their eyes met was succeeded by a contrary motion, a wave of resistance and withdrawal. She did not wish to see him again, not because she feared his influence, but because his presence always had the effect of cheapening her aspirations, of throwing her whole world out of focus. Besides, he was a living reminder of the worst mistake in her career, and the fact that he had been its cause did not soften her feelings toward him. She could still imagine an ideal state of existence in which, all else being superadded, intercourse with Selden might be the last touch of luxury; but in the world as it was, such a privilege was likely to cost more than it was worth. (p.141).

Her subsequent conversation with Gerty Farish supplies more information, but from another character's viewpoint.

Selden has always treated his dowdy, spinster cousin well and in consequence she worships him and is full of solicitude for his well-being. Later in the novel, however, he reveals a selfish side of his character when he takes a

very flattering interest in Gerty in order to elicit as much information as he can about Lily: "He had come to talk to her of Lily--that was all! There had been a third at the feast she had spread for him, and that third had taken her own place." (p.252). He has the guile not to talk about Lily straight away and Gerty's bitter realisation of his tactics reveals his more unpleasant, selfish side.

During the wedding reception, Lily "felt a desire for space and fresh air" (p.150), which she satisfies on the terrace where she meets Selden. This associates him with the idea of a physical escape from society life again (the first occasion was in Chapter I): "Between the relief of her escape from Trenor, and the vague apprehension of her meeting with Rosedale, it was pleasant to rest a moment on the sense of complete understanding which Lawrence Selden's manner always conveyed." (p.151). At the same time, Lily recognises "this real self of hers, which he had the faculty of drawing out of the depths, was so little accustomed to go alone!" (p.152). They are interrupted by Trenor, who has been introduced gazing at Lily "with undisguised approval" and is "looking stouter than ever in his tight frock-coat, and unbecomingly flushed by the bridal libations," (p.146). He has been trying to insinuate himself with Lily: "He had slipped insensibly into the use of her Christian name, and she had never

found the right moment to correct him. Besides, in her set all the men and women called each other by their Christian names; it was only on Trenor's lips that the familiar address had an unpleasant significance." (pp.146-147). He is becoming demanding and has changed from the malleable man whom Lily initially took him for and "she now began to feel that the reckoning she had thus contrived to evade had rolled up interest in the interval." (p.149); also "The prospect of the nice quiet talk did not appear as all-sufficing to Trenor as she had hoped" (p.149).

Whilst Lily is talking to Trenor, Edith Wharton skilfully introduces Simon Rosedale, whose wedding gift has already been mentioned and presents him as he comes to Lily's notice: "her eyes lit instead on the glossy countenance of Mr. Rosedale, who was slipping through the crowd with an air half obsequious, half obtrusive, as though, the moment his presence was recognised, it would swell to the dimensions of the room." (p.148). Trenor has asked Lily to be civil to Rosedale and when the pair approach her later, she is with Selden, who "still leaned against the window, a detached observer of the scene, and under the spell of his observation Lily felt herself powerless to exert her usual arts" (pp.153-154). Rosedale's reaction to Lily forms a contrast to Selden's or Trenor's: "He reddened slowly, shifting from one foot to the other, fingered the plump black pearl in his tie, and gave a nervous twist to

his moustache" (p.154).

Trapped like a fly in amber, Lily is surrounded by the three rather different men who exert such a profound influence on the course of her life. They are seen in relation to her in this scene and whilst the novel is written in the third person, there is no narrator and Edith Wharton's voice is generally unobtrusive, presenting much of the material from Lily's point of view. This is understandable, as she is the novel's heroine and central character. Yet some passages are recorded from the point of view of other characters. The end of Book I is seen through Lily's consciousness but Book II begins with an account of the story's new location in Monte Carlo as Lawrence Selden observes it. His consciousness is quite able to take the full weight of a situation when necessary; the opening and closing scenes of the book are seen through his eyes. He provides a suitable frame to set off the story of a beautiful creature like Lily Bart for he is a connoisseur whose key-note is good taste.

Chapter I (pp.3-22) opens with their meeting:

"Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart." (p.3). His role is soon established: "As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart" (p.5). The account of the incident through Selden's eyes reveals Lily to us without direct authorial intervention

in a way which also brings out Selden's tendency to look at life rather than to participate in it: a functional piece of characterisation. We see that he has the discernment to recognise that Lily is different from the majority of her sex, and not content to merely note this, he tries to account for it and "could never be long with her without trying to find a reason for what she was doing" (p.16).

His frequent observation of Lily and his appreciation of her during the course of the novel, help to establish both of them as characters. We are told for example that: "Selden had watched her manoeuvres with lazy amusement" (p.106); "when he leaned nearer and drew down her hands with a gesture less passionate than grave, she turned on him a face softened but not disfigured by emotion, and he said to himself, somewhat cruelly, that even her weeping was an art" (p.115); "And he saw other things too in her manner: saw how it had adjusted itself to the hidden intricacies of a situation in which, even after Mrs. Fisher's elucidating flashes, he still felt himself agroped" (p.308). Such passages tell us as much about the observer as the object of his gaze. From his attitude to Lily we find that he is capable of changing his opinions:

Selden was still looking at her, but with a changed eye. Hitherto he had found, in her presence and her talk, the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women. His attitude had been one of

admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfilment of her aims. But now the hint of this weakness had become the most interesting thing about her. (p.109).

Similarly, he can be aware of what is said of Lily "but he could separate the woman he knew from the vulgar estimate of her." (p.247).

Walter Rideout sums Selden up by saying that he "becomes, in fact, the author's *raisonneur*, admitting the value of the decorative side of life, yet excoriating the waste of human nature by which it is produced."⁷ Lily, fashion's ornament, is the epitome of this decorative side of life, and Selden patently appreciates this part of her whilst recognising her less superficial attributes. His eventual decision to rescue the worthwhile Lily leads him to a recognition of his most besetting fault: his detachment. As he hastens to see Lily "He had cut loose from familiar shores of habit, and launched himself on unchartered seas of emotion; all the old tests and measures were left behind, and his course was to be shaped by new stars." (p.524). But he is too late to save Lily the "exceptional woman . . . who is thirsting for something

⁷"Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth", in Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels, ed. Charles Shapiro, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958), p.160.

different and better" because he "is unable to give it to her".⁸ In spite of this he does arrive at a clearer understanding of himself and their situation:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her--had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her--and if the moment had been fated to pass from them both before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives. (p.532).

James Gargano points out that

In spite of her comparatively favourable portrait of Selden, Mrs. Wharton does not minimize his lack of faith, his timidity and subjection to appearances. All too ready to accuse Lily of self-interest, he suffers from a sort of moral snobbishness and aloofness that turn his republic of the spirit into an exclusive island for dilettantes. Even after he prides himself at having found out the "essential" Lily, he mistakenly assumes that she has made a clandestine visit to Gus Trenor's house.⁹

Obviously, his republic of the spirit is one of his ideas which Edith Wharton felt was not to be trusted! And

⁸Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", in his The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941), p.207.

⁹"The House of Mirth: Social Futility and Faith", American Literature, LXIV (1972), 142.

Gargano crystallises his problem when he says that "For all his intelligence and discrimination Selden cannot be simple enough to surrender to faith; he cannot rely on native trust."¹⁰

Louis Auchincloss takes a sterner view of Selden: the last of Lily's trials, a neutral in the battle of life. He argues that

An eye as dry as Selden's should be slower to be deceived. I incline to the theory that Mrs. Wharton really intended us to accept this plaster-cast figure for a hero, but that she had a low opinion of heroes in general. When Lily suddenly retorts to Selden that he spends a great deal of his time in a society that he professes to despise, it is as if the author suddenly slipped into the book to express a contempt that the reader is not meant to share.¹¹

In many ways the novel is not just the tragedy of Lily Bart, it is a satire of Selden's illogical self-deception. Cynthia Griffin Wolff has remarked that "Selden moves from a totality of adoration to a totality of disdain; and though Lily is, ironically, not guilty of the transgression he imputes to her, his capacity for understanding and his tolerance for imperfection are so slight that he is

¹⁰"The House of Mirth: Social Futility and Faith", 142.

¹¹Edith Wharton, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p.14.

rendered incapable of knowing her true situation."¹²

Grand and lofty ideas about the republic of the spirit (p.108) do not prevent Selden from being bound by society's conventions. They encourage the passivity which is his most damning fault. As Harry Cargas observes in an article in which he compares Lawrence Selden with James's Lambert Strether of The Ambassadors:

It is because Strether and Selden have not lived, have not confronted situations in a straightforward way, that each, ironically, misinterprets a key relationship. . . . Selden, because he refuses to confront Lily concerning either his relationship to her, or Gus Trenor's to her, draws unwarranted conclusions when he sees her leave Gus's house. Such things happen when one views rather than confronts life.¹³

Selden's passivity, like Lily's, has the result that both

are victims of the social and moral decline of New York Society. Both must refuse entirely to give in to it, and are thus defeated by it. Selden withdraws into the chaste and inviolate sanctuary of his library and his sensibility. It is in his library, symbol of the staying power of his decorum, that Lily comes to admit her love and burn the incriminating papers as a proof of her

¹²A Feast of Words: the Triumph of Edith Wharton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.126.

¹³"Seeing, but not Living: Two Characters from James and Wharton", New Laurel Review, I (1972), 6.

invincible integrity.¹⁴

As I have said earlier though, Selden does come to recognise this fault in himself and this development means that he cannot be dismissed as a sterile, static figure. Indeed, the range of critical opinion about him indicates the interest he holds for the reader.

Selden's rooms reflect his character and this particular environment is conducive to Lily's expression of her need for a truthful and objective friend. She says ". . . 'Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend--I don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you.'" (pp.12-13). At this point he provides Lily with a physical refuge as she waits for her train, just as he keeps her company when she seeks refuge from the crowd at the wedding (p.151). It seems as if Selden may provide her with a refuge from society's other pressures too, but as I have already pointed out, his offer is ultimately too late to help Lily.

Selden's slightly shabby and intimate apartment reflects an elegance of spirit lacking elsewhere. Walter Rideout has noticed how the details of the description of

¹⁴Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1963), p.18.

Selden's apartment which Edith Wharton gives us enable us to deduce some of his salient characteristics. He says "It is the apartment too, of a person who is fastidious, who prefers to observe rather than participate, and these are qualities which will influence Selden's attitude toward a woman who both attracts and puzzles him."¹⁵

The "small library, dark but cheerful, with its walls of books," (p.9) links Selden with Lily's father, from whom his daughter gained an interest in literature. He had enjoyed reading poetry "and among the effects packed off to auction after his death were a score or two of dingy volumes which had struggled for existence among the boots and medicine bottles of his dressing-room shelves." (p.54). Mr. Bart is seldom seen by daylight. For Lily he is "the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father [who] filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks." (p.45). He is dominated by his wife and the sketch we are given of him in Chapter III (pp.37-61) is as haunting as his ghostly figure.

Lawrence Selden's physical appearance contrasts with Mr. Bart's self-effacing greyness. He has those physical attributes with which Edith Wharton endows the characters she approves of: he is tall, dark and slender.

¹⁵"Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth", p.152-3.

The author tells us:

It was, moreover, one of his gifts to look his part; to have a height which lifted his head above the crowd, and the keenly-modelled dark features which, 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. Expansive persons found him a little dry, and very young girls thought him sarcastic; but this air of friendly aloofness, as far removed as possible from any assertion of personal advantage, was the quality which piqued Lily's interest. Everything about him accorded with the fastidious element in her taste, even to the light irony with which he surveyed what seemed to her most sacred. She admired him most of all, perhaps, for being able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met. (p.104).

His social background is not elaborated on until the middle of the novel and is a timely explanation of the attitudes which begin to need a fuller explication: "he had grown up in an atmosphere where restricted means were felt only as a check on aimless profusion: where the few possessions were so good that their rarity gave them a merited relief, and abstinence was combined with elegance" (p.245). From his mother "he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them." (p.246). Trained as a connoisseur, "The son grows up believing that life fully led must necessarily satisfy both his own moral

habit of self-righteous otherworldliness and the indulgence of his keenest sensitivities; and the fact that these two appetites might be mutually contradictory is a problem that Selden has no capacity to confront."¹⁶ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Selden's initial presentation of Lily in Chapter I, is an assessment of her external qualities.

Chapter I also introduces us to Rosedale, of whose background we are never told. The point of view of the narrative has moved to Lily, who sees him as "a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac." (p.21). She recognises him as a social climber (p.23) and as the novel progresses he becomes "one of the many hated possibilities hovering on the edge of life" (p.90) for Lily. He is typical of the self-made man trying to thrust himself into society. Yet we cannot but admire his steady, tactical advance and change our opinion of him as Lily comes to recognise his good qualities. She stops despising him when she sees the progress he is making and that he is gradually attaining his object in life: "With the slow unalterable persistency which she had always felt in him, he was making his way through the dense mass of social

¹⁶A Feast of Words, pp.120-121.

antagonisms. Already his wealth, and the masterly use he had made of it, were giving him an enviable prominence in the world of affairs, and placing Wall Street under obligations which only Fifth Avenue could repay." (p.387).

Later he is revealed in a paternal role "kneeling domestically on the drawing-room hearth before his hostess's little girl" (p.401). The most favourable impression of Rosedale, however, is our final one. Meeting Lily shortly before her death, her changed circumstances reduce him to a state of inarticulate emotion: "He brought out his sentences in short violent jerks, as though they were forced up from a deep inner crater of indignation." (p.482).

Like Selden, Rosedale recognises Lily's true worth and he has an intelligence on a par with the former's rather than with Gus Trenor's or George Dorset's, with whom he is usually linked. Edith Wharton checks any tendency to judge him incorrectly:

Because a blue-bottle bangs irrationally against a window-pane, the drawing-room naturalist may forget that under less artificial conditions it is capable of measuring distances and drawing conclusions with all the accuracy needful to its welfare; and the fact that Mr. Rosedale's drawing-room manner lacked perspective made Lily class him with Trenor and the other dull men she knew, and assume that a little flattery, and the occasional acceptance of his hospitality, would suffice to render him innocuous. (pp.185-186).

Yet Rosedale is also used as a contrast to Selden, in his

proposal to Lily (pp.282-288) and his walk with her (pp.407-419). At the commencement of the walk we are actually told that the landscape "recalled to Miss Bart the September afternoon when she had climbed the slopes of Belmont with Selden." (p.407).

Trenor, the third figure in Lily's downfall, also provides a contrast to Selden. V. L. Parrington sees their differences as those of plutocrat and aristocrat and adds that this sort of juxtaposition of characters is typical of Edith Wharton.¹⁷ Trenor is red, massive, dull and has small eyes (p.128). Lily allows him to give her money which he has supposedly made for her by speculation, confident that she is clever enough to control him by playing on his vanity (pp.136-137). Appreciative of Lily's looks he takes enjoyment from the prosaic fact that he has paid for her gown and opera cloak (p.187). Eventually he tries to force a reward from Lily, tricking her into visiting his house, hoping to seduce her (pp.226-238). Interestingly, Selden had already unconsciously recognised his capacity for this sort of behaviour when he met him earlier that evening at their club: "As Selden turned away, he noticed the dark flush on Trenor's face, the unpleasant moisture of his intensely white forehead, the way his

¹⁷Main Currents in American Thought, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1930), III, 381.

jewelled rings were wedged in the creases of his fat red fingers. Certainly the beast was predominating--the beast at the bottom of the glass." (p.248).

George Dorset provides a picture of another type of society man. He is almost a caricature, dyspeptic, grumbling, deliberately blind to his wife's infidelities. Edith Wharton characterises him through his conversation: in his exchange with Lily at the opera, for example:

'Well, here we are, in for another six months of caterwauling,' he began complainingly. 'Not a shade of difference between this year and last, except that the women have got new clothes and the singers haven't got new voices. My wife's musical, you know--puts me through a course of this every winter. It isn't so bad on Italian nights--then she comes late, and there's time to digest. But when they give Wagner we have to rush dinner, and I pay up for it. And the draughts are damnable--asphyxia in front and pleurisy in the back. (p.191).

Although he is a slight figure in the novel, George Dorset is well-drawn and evidence of the range of male characters which Edith Wharton is capable of drawing. Each of the masculine figures whom I have discussed makes a contribution to the novel and is a convincing portrayal of a male from the novel's milieu. Rosedale, for example, is allowed to develop from a wealthy, Jewish, social upstart into a man capable of sensibility as well as quick perception. He makes a good contrast to Selden, the most important male character who also functions as part of the

narrative machinery of the book. Edith Wharton puts his characteristic of observing life to good use: it enables him to record his impressions of Lily for the reader's benefit. He deliberately sets himself apart from his neighbours but comes to realise that his detachment is bad, a credible development in his character. It could be argued that Lawrence Selden palls into insignificance beside Lily, but his secondary role is patently a part of Edith Wharton's design and not a sign of the limitation of her power of characterisation. The novel's focus is firmly on Lily, it is her tragedy that concerns us; Selden suffers in losing her but comes to a realisation about himself, she loses her life. He may be the germ of Ralph Marvell and Newland Archer, the aloof, aristocratic, dilettante, but he is still an interesting and well-developed character who undergoes growth and change during the course of the novel and is complemented by the other varied male characters.

CHAPTER III
THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

Assessing Edith Wharton's career, Q. D. Leavis declared that "The Custom of the Country (1913) is undoubtedly her masterpiece"¹, and it received an excellent press when it was published, although today it is not so well-known as The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome or The Age of Innocence. The novel marks a return to the material of The House of Mirth, New York society, after some excursions into Jamesian territory in Madame de Treymes and The Reef and the New England settings of The Fruit of the Tree or Ethan Frome. The central character of The Custom of the Country² is again a woman, but unlike Lily Bart, Undine Spragg "is a beautiful, small-town girl with no taste, morals, or conscience who is out to get everything she can for herself; and she tries in every unscrupulous manner to attain her goal."³ As Carl Van Doren says, "Such beauty as hers can purchase a great deal, thanks to the desires of

¹"Henry James's Heiress: the Importance of Edith Wharton", Scrutiny, VII (1938), 267.

²Edith Wharton, (Toronto: McLeod & Allen, 1913). All subsequent references to this work will be given as page numbers in the text.

³Hilton Anderson, "Edith Wharton and the Vulgar American", Southern Quarterly, VII (1968), 20.

men, and Undine, insensitive to delicate disapproval, comes within sight of her goal."⁴ The novel's "central theme is her pursuit of wealth and power, cutting across the conflicts of groups and class, old and new."⁵ She is not a victim of society like Lily Bart but preys upon various male characters. Her relationships with her father Abner Spragg, her husbands Elmer Moffat, Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles and her son Paul, are aptly summed up by Louis Auchincloss: "A father is nothing to her but a checkbook, a husband a means of social advancement, a baby a threat to the figure."⁶ Her lover, Peter Van Degen, fits into the same category as her husbands. Only one of them, Elmer Moffatt, who is her first and fourth spouse, is a match for her.

The novel shares its title with a romantic Jacobean drama by Fletcher and Massinger about a land where woman's virtue is no more than a piece of property. Cynthia Griffin Wolff comments that "the drama is a lurid chaos of shifting identities and unsavory behavior--a world whose moral center has been lost--a world where everything is for sale. A

⁴The American Novel, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1940), p.277.

⁵Geoffery Walton, Edith Wharton: a Critical Interpretation, (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), p.109.

⁶Edith Wharton: a Woman in her Time, (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.101.

world like that of Wharton's novel."⁷ She goes on to say "The novel is, among other things, a wry and bitter commentary on the feminine possibilities for heroism in fiction."⁸ It could be argued that Undine is a victim of a society that forces her into this type of behaviour. Certainly, she is an unattractive heroine, yet as a man with similar qualities she might have become a successful businessman like Elmer Moffatt, for she exhibits the same sort of energetic and determined ability in her social manoeuvrings as he does in his business deals.

Other critics have seen the novel as a novel of manners⁹, of social criticism¹⁰, or a picaresque tale with Undine as its picaro¹¹, or a mixture of the novel of manners and a picaresque piece¹². The novel, however,

⁷A Feast of Words: the Triumph of Edith Wharton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.247.

⁸Ibid., p.255.

⁹Gary H. Lindberg, Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975).

¹⁰Olivia Coolidge, Edith Wharton 1862-1937, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p.117.

¹¹Richard H. Lawson, Edith Wharton, (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1977), p.48.

¹²Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p.158.

hardly lives up to the basic definition of a picaresque novel as a tale of Spanish rogue and vagabond life. R. W. B. Lewis advances an interesting theory, seeing the four main characters as different sides of Edith Wharton. Ralph Marvell embodies her feminine side and her growing tenderness for the New York of her childhood; Moffat is her masculine side, her energy and decisiveness, the vigour of her ironic humour; de Chelles represents her growing commitment to the traditional French way of life; and Undine "suggests what Edith Wharton might have been like if, by some dreadful miracle, all her best and most lovable and redeeming features had been suddenly cut away."¹³ It is obvious from Lewis's comments that the male characters are diverse and play important roles in the novel. Undine's father and Peter Van Degen are different again and each has a well-defined part to play. Edith Wharton also uses Charles Bowen as a commentator, a practice which was to be developed in The Age of Innocence.

Ralph Marvell is the novel's principal male character. In some ways he resembles Lawrence Selden of The House of Mirth. Both are from good New York families, they are professional lawyers (when it does not interfere with their social life) and each is deeply interested in the world of arts and letters: the former wants to write, whilst

¹³Edith Wharton: a Biography, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p.350.

the latter collects books and objets d'art. Yet Ralph Marvell is a more developed character than Lawrence Selden but he does not survive as Selden does. He is naïve enough to want to save Undine, becoming her victim in the process. Giving up his profession as a lawyer for a more lucrative job to support her extravagances, he finds he has no energy left to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer. When he is ill Undine does not respond, but asks for a divorce which he will not contest as he wants no scandal to damage his son's name; consequently he loses custody of the boy. Unable to raise the money for his voracious wife and so keep Paul, he is engulfed by despair and shoots himself. In this way he is akin to Lily Bart, who could not withstand the pressures of life either.

Ralph, however, lets down his cousin Clare, who seems far more worthy of salvation than Undine. She nearly manages to penetrate his inner world: "Once or twice already a light foot had reached the threshold. His cousin Clare Dragonet, for instance: there had been a summer when her voice had sounded far down the windings...but he had run over to Spain for the autumn, and when he came back she was engaged to Peter Van Degen, and for a while it looked black in the cave." (p.76). He decides never to marry whilst "she repented in the Van Degen diamonds, and the Van Degen motor bore her broken heart from opera to ball." (p.77).

Of course Ralph breaks his resolution and Clare is

a great support to him after his divorce and lends him money. At the news of Undine's coming marriage with Raymond de Chelles "Her face was vivid as a flower" (p.432) as she sees Ralph as being finally free of his wife and perhaps feels that this means he is more able to help her to escape her own unhappy union. The closest they come to this is when Ralph has borrowed money from Clare and they have planned how the funds to placate Undine will be secured: "her glance shot past him to her husband's portrait. Ralph caught the look, and a flood of the old tenderesses and hates welled up in him. He drew her under the portrait and kissed her vehemently." (p.455). Clare realises that she is trapped in her marriage and after this incident they revert to their close childhood relationship.

Ironically, Ralph makes a wilful misconstruction in taking Undine's ignorance for innocence, her selfishness as vigour, paralleling Clare's mistake in judging money to be the basis for a happy marriage. Here he obviously lacks Lawrence Selden's insight. As Blanche Housman Gelfant points out, he is unable to make Undine "see" in the Jamesian sense in which Lawrence helps Lily achieve a moral and social perception.¹⁴ Ralph is convinced he is

¹⁴The American City Novel, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p.109.

rescuing Undine: "he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse--just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce--to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue..." (p.84).

Ralph's gradual disillusionment with Undine and his marriage is skilfully portrayed. He realises that he was mistaken in feeling a call to rescue her from Van Degenism (p.82):

Fool as he had been not to recognise its meaning then, he knew himself triply mocked in being, even now, at its mercy. The flame of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone, but they had left an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch. His life had come to be nothing but a long effort to win these mercies by one concession after another: the sacrifice of his literary projects, the exchange of his profession for an uncongenial business, and the incessant struggle to make enough money to satisfy her increasing exactions. That was where the "call" had led him... (pp.217-218).

He realises that there were signs of the future during their honeymoon "more than three years earlier, in an Italian ilex-grove" (p.221) and he sees that "Since then he had been walking with a ghost: the miserable ghost of his illusion." (p.221). But he wilfully persists in his self-deception: "Looking back at their four years of

marriage he began to ask himself if he had done all he could to draw her half-formed spirit from its sleep. Had he not expected too much at first, and grown too indifferent in the sequel?" (p.309). When Undine divorces him, he is shocked by the newspaper account, "the coarse fingering of public curiosity had touched the secret places of his soul, and nothing that had gone before seemed as humiliating as this trivial comment on his tragedy." (p.343).

After this he begins to adapt himself to the new order of things. He starts his projected book, which together with his son Paul take Undine's place in his life. This restoration begins in Book IV and is recounted through Ralph's consciousness. As Millicent Bell has pointed out, Ralph has to give us a view of his story in his own terms because Undine is too limited in her observation and too primitive in her thinking to do this.¹⁵ This section of the novel concludes with a powerful account of Ralph's despair when he cannot accumulate the money to "buy" his son and finds that Elmer Moffat was Undine's first husband, a revelation that affects him mentally and physically, causing "the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions" (p.469) to tumble down around him. The upshot of this is that he commits suicide. Edith Wharton gives a

¹⁵Edith Wharton and Henry James: the Story of their Friendship, (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p.279.

final interesting touch of characterisation to Ralph in describing "a last flash of irony" which "twitched through him" (p.474) as he prepares for the shot. Blanche Housman Gelfant sees this as a recognition of Undine's victory and all she represents or destroys: "There is no place for a young man of moral and aesthetic sensibility in the rushing, pleasure-fevered new world, just as there is no place now for ideals of honor, social solidarity, and human dignity."¹⁶ Like Lily Bart, Ralph is a victim not of society but of his wife, who represents the moneyed, mercantile class who are invading the bastions of New York respectability. Ralph also resembles Lawrence Selden, in that he comes to an important realisation. In his case it is about Undine and his self-deception; in Selden's case it is a tardy recognition of his love and need for Lily. These men are alike in their stations in life, but Ralph's role is not confined to that of an observer, he takes an active role in the book and is consequently more developed as a character.

At the same time, he foreshadows Newland Archer who takes a similar anthropological interest in New York society:

Ralph sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened

¹⁶The American City Novel, p.115.

them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race. He was fond of describing Washington Square as the "Reservation," and of prophesying that before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries. (pp.73-74).

Reflecting on his coming marriage, Newland decides:

In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought . . . as when Mrs. Welland . . . felt obliged to simulate reluctance, and the air of having had her hand forced, quite as, in the books on Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read, the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent.¹⁷

Newland, however, does not repeat Ralph's mistake in thinking that he is free and independent of society's traditions and mores.

Raymond de Chelles, who succeeds Ralph as Undine's husband, does not have Ralph's human presence in the novel. This is obviously deliberate in order that he does not overshadow Ralph. Nothing is ever recounted from his point of view, yet he emerges as a well-drawn and admirable character. Edith Wharton reveals her knowledge and comprehension of the traditions of French aristocracy,

¹⁷Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence, (New York: Gosset & Dunlap by arrangement with D. Appleton & Co., 1920), p.42. All subsequent references to this work will be given as page numbers in the text.

transferring it to the reader, who then understands de Chelles's behaviour. Undine is clever enough to manipulate him into marriage but ultimately she cannot bend him to her will. He is more resilient than Ralph, with a stronger social tradition to fall back on; Undine "was gradually to learn that it was as natural to Raymond de Chelles to adore her and resist her as it had been to Ralph Marvell to adore her and let her have her way." (p.495). She also reflects that "Her husband was really charming (it was odd how he reminded her of Ralph!)" (p.480). This time it is her turn to realise the truth about a marriage as Raymond "simply left it to her to infer that, important as she might be to him in certain ways, there were others in which she did not weigh a feather." (p.505).

Like Ralph Marvell, Raymond de Chelles tries to educate Undine but sensibly gives up when she proves unresponsive. He becomes indifferent to her until their marriage is merely one of convenience and appearances: "To that semblance she knew he attached intense importance: it was an article of his complicated social creed that a man of his class should appear to live on good terms with his wife." (p.564). Their differences are painfully apparent in the scene in which Undine suggests Raymond should sell Saint Désert or some of its treasures: "He looked at her as though the place where she stood were empty. 'You don't understand,' he said again." (p.527). His sense of family

tradition saves him from the destruction which Ralph received at her hands.

Physically, Raymond is a contrast to Ralph. The latter is "Small, well-knit, fair . . . with kindly, almost tender eyes" (p.34); "The hand with which he stroked his small moustache was finely-finished too, but sinewy and not effeminate." (p.69) and "Marvell's eyes were grey, like her [Undine's] own, with chestnut eyebrows and darker lashes; and his skin was as clear as a woman's, but pleasantly reddish, like his hands." (p.70). The Comte de Chelles, on the other hand, is "straight, slim and gravely smiling" (p.273) with a "handsome brown moustache" (p.274). His nose has a "distinguished slant" (p.276) and when he enters the Tea-Rooms, Undine "perceived the figure of a slight quietly dressed man, as to whom her immediate impression was that he made every one else in the room look as common as Moffatt." (p.397). He is a true aristocrat and Elmer . . . Moffatt, the entrepreneur millionaire and Undine's first and fourth husband, makes a striking contrast to him and to Ralph.

Moffat is ruddy and a little stout, his "outline thick yet compact, with a round head set on a neck in which, at the first chance, prosperity would be likely to develop a red crease. His face, with its rounded surfaces, and the sanguine innocence of a complexion belied by prematurely astute black eyes, had a look of jovial cunning which

Undine had formerly thought 'smart' but which now struck her as merely vulgar." (p.108). He reminds us of Simon Rosedale, but does not have the stigma of being Jewish to contend with and his rise to prosperity is a little uncertain at times. Rosedale is a supplicant as far as Lily is concerned until he no longer needs her to achieve social success whilst Moffatt beats Undine in her power game, forcing her to re-marry him to obtain his help.

A worthy foil for Undine, as Richard H. Lawson points out, Moffat is not just a "well-heeled cracker-barrel philosopher abroad in high society"¹⁸. Later in the novel we see his growing appreciation for beautiful objects and his warm feelings for the neglected Paul. The first hint of Moffat's aesthetic appetite appears when he singles out an old brown and golden book which de Chelles had given Undine (p.416). Then Ralph visits his office, which has become quite opulent, and finds Moffatt drawing his attention to some pretty crystals (p.451). Finally, Edith Wharton allows him to explain to Undine his passion for collecting beautiful works of art. He concludes "'I mean to have the best, you know; not just to get ahead of the other fellows, but because I know it when I see it. I guess that's the only good reason,' he concluded; and

¹⁸ Edith Wharton, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), p.52.

added, looking at her with a smile: 'It was what you were always after, wasn't it?'" (p.538). He keeps his aesthetic emotions in their "own compartment of the great steel strong-box of his mind" (p.564), however, which helps to explain his business success.

Like Undine, he is unscrupulous. This is shown in his shady business dealings and the way in which he suggests that she use Paul to blackmail Ralph into giving her money. When he wants to marry Undine, she admits that "He knew what he wanted, saw his road before him, and acknowledged no obstacles" (p.575). She also gives us an account of their relationship as she re-lives her memories, and this helps to make their re-marriage plausible. At the same time she is, characteristically, dissatisfied with him, for Moffatt cannot give her everything, just as her previous husbands could not.

Peter Van Degen, a rich member of New York society, has a vulgarity akin to Moffatt's at times. Like Moffatt he sees through Undine too. He also bears a resemblance to George Dorset or Gus Trenor in The House of Mirth. We are told that he has an unpleasant appearance (p.49) and a "batrachian countenance" (p.66). Like Undine he "must have what he wants when he wants it!" (p.71) and she is impressed by his contempt for everything he does not understand or cannot buy (p.192). Whilst this is not the mark of a penetrating intelligence, Van Degen is quick

enough to notice Undine's negative response to her husband's illness and he manages to end their relationship. He achieves a measure of revenge in leaving her in Dakota to wait for him, where she is further humiliated by Mabel Lipscomb's courtship. Though his face looks "as small and withered as an old man's" (p.301) at the prospect of losing Undine, he has the sense to give her up when he is afforded a glimpse of her true character.

Abner Spragg, Undine's father, is another interesting character. He has had a chequered career and his dynamic business life contrasts with his passive domestic existence. Undine manipulates him, yet he is capable of independent thought in the matter of her divorce. He sides with Ralph and says "'I'd 'a' given anything--anything short of my girl herself--not to have this happen to you, Ralph Marvell.'" (p.335) and points out that Ralph can do nothing to change what has happened. He also asserts his authority when he demands that Undine should return her pearls to Van Degen, although his daughter outwits him. Like Mr. Bart, he is often at the mercy of his women-folk, but his role in the novel is a larger one and we see more sides to him than his domestic one.

Last but not least of the male characters is Charles Bowen, an anthropologist who observes life with a scientist's detachment and acts as a commentator. Seeing Undine threatening Ralph's domestic peace, he feels "the

pang of the sociologist over the individual havoc wrought by every social readjustment: it had so long been clear to him that poor Ralph was a survival, and destined, as such, to go down in any conflict with the rising forces." (p.280) He enjoys introducing Undine and Raymond to each other, feeling that he is bringing two cultures together and steps back to observe the results of his experiment better. Bowen is also sufficiently confident of his position to bow to Undine when many people ignore her at the opera. He is developed into two characters in The Age of Innocence: Lawrence Lefferts and Sillerton Jackson who have a fully-blown choric function.

The male characters in smaller roles such as Peter Van Degen, Abner Spragg or Charles Bowen, are an interesting addition to the cast of a novel that includes three very different male figures. Ralph Marvell of course, emerges as the principal male character in The Custom of the Country. Like Lawrence Selden he is a lawyer and sees himself as a detached observer in his society. But his role in the novel is bigger than Lawrence's and thus he is a more developed character. This is indicated by the way that Book IV is narrated from his point of view. Undine's other husbands, the aristocratic Frenchman Raymond de Chelles, and the nouveau rich Elmer Moffatt, provide interesting contrasts to Ralph. The former is able to withstand Undine's wiles by falling back on his cultural

background, whilst the latter is like her and strong enough to master her. Undine's husbands undoubtedly make a fascinating trio.

CHAPTER IV

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

The Age of Innocence¹ appeared as a monthly serial in the Pictorial Review during 1920. It gained Edith Wharton the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, awarded for the novel "which best presents the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood".² The book's mood is mellower than that of The House of Mirth or The Custom of the Country and its elegiac feeling is possibly due to the aftermath of the First World War. The novel is set in the New York society of the 1870's --the New York of her childhood. As Louis Auchincloss says:

She had been an intent observer of the assault upon this society of the heirs to the great new fortunes made after the Civil War, and she comprehended that this assault was bound to end less in defeat than in merger--a merger that she always regarded as somehow dishonourable. When she employed her talent upon this subject she became America's first-ranking novelist of manners.³

¹Edith Wharton, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap by arrangement with D. Appleton, 1920). All subsequent references to this work will be given as page numbers in the text.

²Robert Morss Lovett, Edith Wharton, (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1925), p.37.

³"Introduction", to The Edith Wharton Reader, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p.xv.

W. J. Stuckey, however, notes that "The Age of Innocence, though deeply critical, was urbane, good mannered and uncontroversial. One could read it without being aware that it dealt with anything more than the quaint past, for its attack on American life was not open and palpable."⁴ So it is not surprising that many of Edith Wharton's contemporaries attacked her novel, failing to detect any relevance to the modern world. Blake Nevius defends her against such charges in the following manner:

Edith Wharton found the main impulse of the post war generation in its desire to throw off every kind of restraint imposed on conduct, morals, religion--and literary expression. With no such faith in this vision of the individual, solitary and erect, bearing no taint of original sin and no past to encumber him, she found that the cast she had formulated against her parents' generation was applicable to their grandchildren's. Each sought in its own way to escape the common lot; each, in its effort to avoid pain and responsibility, had weakened its moral fiber. Where convention was concerned, freedom was no better than slavery; and so Edith Wharton continued to search for a compromise on which all of her energies as a novelist were habitually bent.⁵

⁴The Pulitzer Prize Novels, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p.40.

⁵Edith Wharton: a Study of her Fiction, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p.189.

Eventually, Edith Wharton felt it necessary to justify her book and wrote a protest about the narrow definition of what constitutes an American novel. She argued that:

Traditional society, with its old-established distinctions of class, its pass-words, exclusions, delicate shades of language and behaviour, is one of man's oldest works of art, the least conscious and the most instinctive, yet the modern American novelist is told that the social and educated being is an unreality unworthy of his attention, and that only the man with the dinner-pail is human, and hence available for his purpose.⁶

As she points out, how much of human nature is left if it is separated from customs, manners and culture?

The hero of The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer, probably had little idea of what a dinner-pail was, yet he is an interesting character, an integral part of the society which constitutes the novel's fabric and is his background. We learn that, "in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind" (p.29). His bond with his society is important to him and towards the end of his story, Edith Wharton tells us that "Newland Archer was a quiet and self-controlled young man. Conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost his second nature" (p.325).

⁶"The Great American Novel", Yale Review, XVI, n.s. (1927), 652.

Archer is the novel's central character and Louis Auchincloss sums him up as "the young Whartonian of brownstone lineage, the Marvell type, a lawyer, of course, with a leisurely practice and an eye for books and pictures. He marries conventionally, and the story of the book is that he does not leave his wife to go off with the Countess Olenska, New York born but emancipated"⁷. He represents the ultimate development in this type of male figure. The events of the novel are seen from his point of view and not from that of any of the other characters. Superficially, he corresponds to Edmund Wilson's description of the typical male figure in Edith Wharton's novels which was cited in the Introduction to this thesis; but his use as the central consciousness of The Age of Innocence and his relationships with May Welland and Ellen Olenska make him far more than this: he is a fascinating figure.

Newland Archer is simultaneously a reflector and a reflection of his society. As the novel's central consciousness he is seen more completely than earlier Whartonian heroes. Yet, although the point of view from which the tale is recounted is his, the novel is not narrated through his consciousness; we are always aware of the author's thoughts about his thoughts. She is constantly

⁷"Edith Wharton and her New Yorks", in his Reflections of a Jacobite, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p.20.

looking over his shoulder to point out interesting features of his New York.⁸ James and other critics would argue that by doing this she forfeited a richer picture of Archer's growth which would be afforded us if everything was viewed through his mind. Joseph Warren Beach developed this line of argument in 1932:

Everything is rendered through the consciousness of Newland Archer, but nothing is made of his consciousness.

Newland Archer is one of the palest and least individualized characters ever offered to the public by a distinguished writer of fiction. He is hardly more than a device for projecting a situation and characters much more real than himself. We do not dwell with him in the narrow prison of his predicament as we dwell with Fleda Vetch or Maggie Verver; we do not puzzle out with him the strange writing on the wall as we do with Merton Densher and Lambert Strether. The limited point of view is here a compositional device of great value; it serves to focus the attention upon the simple issues. It gives sharpness and precision. But it does not serve as in James for enrichment and deepening of the effect. It is not a means of steeping us imaginatively in the special and rare solution which is the essence of a unique personality.⁹

Perceptive as these comments are, Beach overlooks the fact that Edith Wharton was not trying to write like James: she criticised this great author's later works because the

⁸Louis Auchincloss, Edith Wharton, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p.31.

⁹The Twentieth Century Novel, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p.302.

sense of "felt life" was subordinated to his experiments in technique and design "so that his last books are magnificent projects for future masterpieces rather than living creations."¹⁰ The Age of Innocence is certainly a living creation, and Newland Archer is a plausible character even if his thought processes are not presented in the detail of those of James's characters. In short, Beach's comments show the folly of trying to judge Edith Wharton's work as if it was written by Henry James. Obvious parallels such as the names of Isabel Archer and Newland Archer, or Christopher Newman and Newland Archer; the theme of the arrival of a Countess or Baroness from Europe and her impact on American society; an American woman's unhappy marriage to a European or the theme of innocence and experience do not deflect her sights from "the scrutiny of society, the outward rather than the inward gaze", which means that the novel "is not after all, as close to his [James's] essential spirit as The Reef."¹¹

In recent years, Richard H. Lawson has argued that Newland Archer cannot be dismissed as a static character, but undergoes a transformation from stuffed shirt to man in

¹⁰The Writing of Fiction, (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p.117.

¹¹Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton and Henry James: the Story of their Friendship, (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p.296.

the course of the novel. He sees Archer's role in the structure of the book as that of a modified single point of view. As he grows older, Archer comes to a state of accurate self-perception, a process that began with the development of his emotional perception and has ended with an ability to see the reality of life.¹²

What sort of character, then, is Newland Archer? Like Lawrence Selden, he is an onlooker at life and like Ralph Marvell, he takes a detached, anthropological view of his society. He too is a lawyer whose profession plays a minor role in his life. In this novel, Edith Wharton supplies details of his attitude to his occupation and discusses the convention which made it incumbent upon a gentleman to have a profession, even if he did not have "much hope of really advancing in his profession, or any earnest desire to do so;" (p.125).

In Chapter I, Newland Archer is introduced going late to the opera, for "in metropolises it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the opera; and what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (p.2). He watches the drama of Ellen Olenska's appearance and listens to the comment that it excites;

¹²Edith Wharton, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), pp.20-22.

then unlike Selden, he acts, requesting the announcement of his engagement to Ellen's cousin May Welland be made prematurely to show his confidence in, and support for, the family.

Newland Archer accepts "that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences" (p.3). It seems as natural to him "as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole" (p.3). His attitude to May is similarly predictable: "a thrill of possession in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity" (p.5). Yet "He did not in the least wish the future Mrs. Newland Archer to be a simpleton . . . to attract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it" (p.5) is what he requires of her. He expects his wife to be a "miracle of fire and ice" (p.5) because this is the expectation of the gentlemen in his society. Masculine solidarity causes him to "accept their doctrine on all the issues called moral" (p.6) even though he feels himself their superior in artistic and intellectual matters.

Ellen's arrival makes waves in the nice calm little

pool of Newland's existence. His attitude to Ellen is initially ambivalent:

There was nothing mean or ungenerous in the young man's heart, and he was glad that his future wife should not be restrained by false prudery from being kind (in private) to her unhappy cousin; but to receive Countess Olenska in the family circle was a different thing from producing her in public, at the Opera of all places, and in the very box with the young girl whose engagement to him, Newland Archer, was to be announced within a few weeks. (pp.9-10).

He is shocked and troubled by Ellen's dress and "hated to think of May Welland's being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste" (p.12). When he speaks to her, he finds she is disrespectful in the way that she describes New York and is distastefully flippant. As Louis Auchincloss says, at this point in the novel "Newland Archer, in short, is about as fatuous a young man as one could conceive of, the roundest possible peg in the roundest possible hole."¹³ He suggests that the fact that Newland is such an egregious ass initially, explains why Edith Wharton leans over his shoulder to say the significant things about his society which he is incapable of saying.

It is not long, however, before we see Newland

¹³Edith Wharton: a Woman in her Time, (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.129.

beginning to rebel against his society and the catalyst in the reaction is Ellen Olenska. Talking to Sillerton Jackson over an after-dinner cigar, he bursts out:

"Living together? Well, why not? Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn't? I'm sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots."

He stopped and turned away angrily to light his cigar. "Women ought to be free--as free as we are," he declared, making a discovery of which he was too irritated to measure the terrific consequences. (p.39).

Ellen is obviously having an effect on him and the passion which he develops for her becomes part of the transcendent experience that he yearns for. He recognises that May might be incapable of responding to the enlightenment he intends for her: "What if, when he had bidden May Welland to open hers [her eyes] , they could only look out blankly at blankness?" (p.81). Ellen, though, is capable of independent thought. Newland, for example, "suddenly felt the penetration of the remark. At a stroke she had pricked the van der Luydens and they collapsed" (p.73).

Carl Van Doren is extremely critical of Ellen and Newland's relationship. He says that they

neither lose nor seek an established position within the Manhattan mandarinat as it existed in the seventies of the last century. They belong there and there they stay, but only by the sacrifice of instinct and happiness. They go through their drama like troubled puppets; they

observe taboos with dread but with respect. They are the victims of the innocence of their generation, and of a formalism which persisted after them.¹⁴

This is unnecessarily dismissive: both Ellen and Newland learn from their encounter. I would argue that their sacrifice is balanced by gain; the relinquishment of dreams means that they are accepting the responsibility central to maturity and individual integrity. The last chapter is, in fact, a confirmation of the values that Newland chose and Ellen endorsed.

Newland and Ellen's relationship is developed primarily in the five crucial conversations which they have. They occur in Chapter XII, when Newland advises Ellen against divorce; in Chapter XVIII, where their acknowledgement of their mutual attraction takes place; in Chapters XXIII and XXIV, when they spend the day together in Boston; Chapter XXIX, in which Newland meets Ellen at the station when she returns from Washington and Chapter XXXI, containing their final private meeting in the Metropolitan Museum. Together, these conversations also sum up the social and moral pressures of the novel.

By persuading her not to divorce her husband Newland has given Ellen the knowledge of what she terms

¹⁴The American Novel, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1940), p.277.

"how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice one's self to preserve the dignity of marriage...and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal?" (p.169). It is this, ironically, which has made it impossible for her to yield to his proposals. When they meet in Boston, Ellen again reverts to this theme, that Newland has made her understand the value of New York society's conventions (p.243). She is able to sum up their situation in a clear-sighted way, when for example she asks Newland, "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress--since I can't be your wife?" (p.292). This contrasts with his misty and romantic view of their relationship and how he would like it to develop. He identifies with a scene in a play (pp.112-113) and tries, unsuccessfully, to re-enact it when he is sent to fetch Ellen from the shore (pp.215-217). Later he sits in a summer-house with a parasol which he is mistakenly convinced is Ellen's and is sure that she will surprise him there. His vision is undercut with ironic humour when, "looking up he saw before him the youngest and largest of the Blenker girls, blonde and blowsy, in bedraggled muslin" (p.226). She claims her parasol.

When Newland tells Ellen he wants to escape to a world where categories like "mistress" and "wife" will not exist, "Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and

nothing else on earth will matter" (p.293), her prompt rejoinder is "a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear--where is that country? Have you ever been there?'" (p.293). He is slow to comprehend Ellen's practical point of view and still formulates a hazy plan for their elopement. Planning to meet her train, "he intended to join her, and travel with her to Washington, or as much farther as she was willing to go. His own fancy inclined to Japan. At any rate she would understand at once that, wherever she went, he was going. He meant to leave a note for May that should cut off any alternative." (p.307). He begins to realise, however, that in deceiving May he is acting like the despicable Lefferts, but feels that he and Ellen are different: "for the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case." (p.309). He cannot judge in types any longer, in the way that he saw Ellen as "the compromised woman" when he first met her.

Lest we should be in any doubt as to whether Newland should leave May for Ellen, Edith Wharton supplies us with images of precipices and falling to emphasise Newland's peril if he abandons his society's conventions. As Viola Hopkins points out: "Frequently, the precariousness of Newland's position in relation to the social world is rendered through images of falling, sinking and drifting." and that: "This imagery of precipice, abyss, and vortex

seems a psychologically crude method of expressing an emotional state, but it does effectively suggest the dangers of Newland's alienation from the social world."¹⁵ Finally, the situation is resolved when Ellen leaves for Europe, a decision probably prompted by the knowledge that May is pregnant.

In Chapter XXXIV, which ends the novel, Newland Archer reviews these events and the others which have filled the last quarter of a century. He had been "a good citizen", although "He had done little in public life; he would always be by nature a contemplative and a dilettante; but he had had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in; and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride" (p.349). "Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (p.350) and we learn that Ellen has become an abstract vision, a composite of all he had missed. He mourned his wife's death and saw the dignity of duty behind his marriage: "After all, there was good in the old ways" (p.350). As he thinks about May's inability to

¹⁵"The Ordering Style of The Age of Innocence", American Literature, XXX (1958), 356-357.

recognise change and compares it with their daughter's larger life and more tolerant views, he reflects that "There was good in the new order too" (p.352).

The novel closes when Newland has decided not to see Ellen again. He sits outside her flat in Paris, secure in the knowledge that, "It's more real to me here than if I went up," (p.364). The mood is one of acceptance and balance. Our hero has come to terms with himself, the limits of his nature, and the society to which he belongs.

At first sight it could be argued that Archer lets down an unconventional woman, Ellen, and is dominated by the conventional May, according to Edmund Wilson's formula.¹⁶ But Ellen comes to see the value of convention and will not elope with Archer, even though he is ready to leave May for her. May, on the other hand appears to keep him because of society's pressures. Yet after her death, Dallas tells his father that "She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be, because once, when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted" (p.359). Suddenly, Archer realises that May too had made her sacrifice, living silently with the knowledge that he preferred another woman. Her character takes on a new dimension as we realise that she was not so lacking in imagination as she appeared. It

¹⁶Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton", in his The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941), p.207.

also reminds us that she had enough perception to see that Newland became uneasy during their engagement and although she thought it was for his old flame Mrs. Rushworth, rather than Ellen, that he pined, she had the generosity to offer him his freedom then and there.

Naturally, the character of Newland Archer dominates the novel, but there are still some other interesting male characters to be found playing smaller roles. Dallas Archer, for example, is a specimen of the new generation, freed from many of their fore-fathers' fetters. His speech is confident, his manner bright and open. But he cannot understand the meaning of the feelings his father has known or the way in which his parents were able to sit and watch each other, guessing at what was going on underneath (p.359). Dallas, "for all his affectionate insight, would not have understood" (p.360) that the discovery that May knew Newland wanted to elope with Ellen, "seemed to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, some one had guessed and pitied. ...And that it should have been his wife moved him indescribably" (p.360). He leaves his father waiting outside Ellen's flat with an incredulous gesture of incomprehension.

Dallas is engaged to Julius Beaufort's daughter Fanny; it is a sign of the changing times and the fulfilment of Lawrence Lefferts's prophecy: "'we shall see our children fighting for invitations to swindlers' houses, and marrying

Beaufort's bastards.'" (p.341). Beaufort exemplifies the rich man who through money and a judicious marriage has bought himself a niche in New York society. He makes an interesting contrast to Newland Archer. His bad behaviour during his financial downfall highlights that correct behaviour which Archer exhibits eventually in his emotional crisis over May and Ellen.

May's father, Mr. Welland, is a man who tyrannises over his family through his hypocondriacal behaviour. Women may lay down social conventions and force their menfolk to adhere to them, but men have ways of asserting their authority. Even the strong-willed Catherine Mingott depends upon her male relatives and her lawyer for advice on important matters, such as her financial investments.

Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts take a choric function on society's behalf. Margaret McDowell states that "Symbolizing the most hypocritical aspects of the establishment, Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts become censorious, unsympathetic observers of the scene around them."¹⁷ The former is an authority "on 'family'" (p.8) whilst the latter is an authority "on 'form'" (p.6). Sillerton Jackson is always ready to mention that he has frequented the Tuilleries: Lawrence Lefferts has moulded

¹⁷Edith Wharton, (Boston: Twayne Publishers a division of G. K. Hall, 1976), p.100.

his wife completely to his convenience "As became the high-priest of form" (p.42). At times they produce a comic effect, as for example when Jackson dines with the Archers:

Mr. Jackson had helped himself to a slice of the tepid filet which the mournful butler had handed him with a look as sceptical as his own, and had rejected the mushroom sauce after a scarcely perceptible sniff. He looked baffled and hungry, and Archer reflected that he would probably finish his meal on Ellen Olenska. (p.36).

When Lawrence Lefferts is a wedding guest, his "sleekly brushed head seemed to mount guard over the invisible deity of 'Good Form' who presided at the ceremony" (p.182). He makes Newland realise that his priorities have changed, and we see him at his most pernicious when he denounces the bankrupt Beaufort (pp.340-342). These characters also serve as examples of the figures in Newland Archer's New York milieu.

The central figure of The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer is obviously a well-developed character. Bearing a "family" resemblance to both Lawrence Selden and Ralph Marvell, he comes to see the value of his society's conventions. The events are narrated from his point of view and he is more than adequate for this role. There are no secondary male characters of the stature of Raymond de Chelles or Elmer Moffatt here, for this would deflect attention from Archer unnecessarily; but, there are some

well-drawn figures like Beaufort or Mr. Welland. Neither should Sillerton Jackson and Lawrence Lefferts who function so pleasingly as chorus figures, be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Clearly Newland Archer of The Age of Innocence is the fullest development of the type of character who appears as Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth and Ralph Marvell in The Custom of the Country. Edith Wharton would naturally draw this type of male figure: a dilettante and a gentleman of breeding and independent means, for he was an indigenous figure in the New York society she writes of in these novels.

Lawrence Selden's role is a subsidiary one, for The House of Mirth is essentially Lily Bart's tragedy, although he comes to recognise his dangerous trait of detachment when he is too late to save her. Ralph Marvell has a larger part to play in The Custom of the Country. He is permitted to narrate the end of his story in Book IV. Similar to Selden, he is not a carbon copy of this earlier character. In many ways he is like Lily Bart: another victim. He comes to see that he was deluded about Undine but cannot cope with this realisation when it is coupled with the loss of his son's custody and the knowledge that he was not her first husband. By way of contrast, Raymond de Chelles can come to terms with his disillusionment over Undine, whilst Elmer Moffatt is never under an illusion

about her. This trio of male characters is well-balanced and augmented by the well-drawn figures of Peter Van Degen and Abner Spragg; just as Simon Rosedale, Gus Trenor, George Dorset and even Mr. Bart made an interesting range of male characters in The House of Mirth.

In The Age of Innocence the hero, Newland Archer, emerges as a creation that is on a par with such memorable figures as Lily Bart and Undine Spragg. Like them he can hold the centre of the stage in the novel that he appears in. He belongs to the same social group as Lawrence Selden and Ralph Marvell, but of course we learn far more about him due to his prominent position in the novel. For the same reason, he undergoes more development as a character. Again he is supported by other skilfully presented male figures such as Lefferts or Jackson.

These men conform to Edmund Wilson's description of the typical male figure in Edith Wharton's novels, but they are also far more than this description. Coming from the same social milieu, Selden, Marvell and Archer are essentially three well-drawn male figures who undergo development within and between each novel, serve different functions and have individually tailored roles in each of these three novels. Furthermore, they have a strong supporting cast of masculine characters. Any novels considered beyond these three simply furnish further evidence of Edith Wharton's unquestionable facility for

the creation of male characters.

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