

WRAPPED UP IN BOOKS:
THE INNER LIFE OF NEWLAND ARCHER
IN THE *AGE OF INNOCENCE*

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Master of Arts
in the Department of English
Indiana University

May 2007

Accepted by the Faculty of Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Master Thesis
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Acknowledgements

Much thanks to my thesis advisors:

Dr. Jane Schultz for encouragement and faith above and beyond any I had ever thought to receive from a professor and her attention to detail that brought out every nuance in my writing; Dr. Jon Eller for his wonderful stories, great advice, and kind and gracious manner; Dr. Karen Johnson for her willingness to help an unknown student and her invaluable comments.

My unending gratitude to my wonderful friends and family who encouraged and believed in me: Eric Musall, Jim Pavlik, Shannon Schiller, Johanna Resler, Amy Johnson, and my lovely parents Glenna and Lloyd Treece.

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Chapter One: A Life of Books

*“Hitherto my best beloved companions had been books, and to leave one out of this record seems like omitting the name of a human friend”.*¹

~Edith Wharton

In her article “Rereading Wharton’s ‘Poor Archer’: A Mr. ‘Might-have-been’ in *The Age of Innocence*,” Emily Orlando states that by “unshelving” Archer’s library it would be possible to get a pure reading of his character.² Orlando does not pursue this theme, contenting herself with analyzing a few works from Archer’s library and spending the bulk of her writing focusing on how Archer is a poor reader of people. While it is undoubtedly true that Archer is a poor judge of those closest to him, I think as much could be learned from pursuing her original assertion – that it is Archer’s library, as much as the narrative itself, that will reveal him for what he is.

In a time when being well-read was a symbol of education and refinement, Archer stands out from his contemporaries. He turns the pages of his books “with the sensuous joy of the booklover,” and after he receives a shipment of books he prefers “the prospect of a quiet Sunday at home with his spoils” to a fashionable house party.³ Archer is not a fake bibliophile who pretends a love of books to live up to his family’s reputation as being attached to “the best fiction.” He is, rather, a character who is in significant ways defined by the books he acquires and reads. Each book has been picked with such care it is possible to get a good idea of what type of person Archer is merely by looking at what

¹ Edith Wharton. *A Backward Glance*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998, 91.

² Emily J. Orlando. “Rereading Wharton’s ‘Poor Archer’: A Mr. ‘Might-have-been’ in *The Age of Innocence*.” *American Literary Realism*, 30:2 (1998), 57.

³ Edith Wharton. *The Age of Innocence*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, 111, 120. Subsequent references to the novel will be included parenthetically in the text.

he reads. It is therefore important to ask what his reading list says about him and why Wharton would have invested so much time in building this list.

Wharton's analysis of reading material as a reflection of the self is not unique to *The Age of Innocence* or even her writing. Wharton's personal life story, like Archer's, can be seen through her love affair with books. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton lists page after page of the reading that influenced her youth and later life. In one memorable portion, over one hundred authors and books are mentioned as being indispensable to her upbringing.⁴ Quite often her strongest relationships with people start out with a good discussion about books and are maintained through this same practice. Teddy Roosevelt, a great friend of Wharton's, is always identified by Wharton by what he has read or is reading, instead of comments on his political accomplishments. Indeed, this seems to be the main bond between them. When meeting Wharton at a state dinner during his presidency, Roosevelt pulled her into a corner exclaiming, "Well, I am glad to welcome to the White House some one to whom I can quote 'The Hunting of the Snark' without being asked what I mean."⁵ This type of relationship, built on a love of fine literature, is more common than not in Wharton's life.

Wharton grew up in a family that highly prized classic literature, but spent very little time reading it. Wharton describes her parents as "little preoccupied with letters" and her mother in particular as a woman who rarely read anything of substance.⁶ Like Archer's mother, Lucretia Jones read nothing that would expand her mind or increase her knowledge.⁷ Wharton felt her father could have been a poet if he had had someone more

⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 66.

⁵ Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 145.

⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 49.

⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 68.

encouraging than Lucretia Jones as a wife, though this may be a way for Wharton to excuse a father she loved and accuse a mother whom she found difficult at best.

Reading came naturally to Wharton as did story telling. The shaping of stories constitutes some of Wharton's earliest memories, with her not being able to remember a time when she did not "make up" tales.⁸ As a child she would carry a book about, pretending to read from it, while actually making up her own nonsense stories. The words came hard and fast, making transcription impossible. Amused at first, Lucretia became increasingly worried, eventually calling Wharton's need to make up stories a "devastating passion" and a "perilous obsession."⁹

From an early age Wharton took everything she read much too seriously. As a small child the story of Red Riding Hood had such an effect on her that Wharton would only read it (or look at the pictures) in the presence of her mother or "Doyley," her nursemaid.¹⁰ While recovering from a bout of typhoid fever, the innocent gift of a children's story, a genre which Wharton rarely, if ever, read, (she went straight from the nursery to her father's library) so provoked her imagination that she had a near fatal relapse. Even as an adult, books had a powerful hold on her imagination. Until the age of twenty-seven Wharton refused to sleep in a room which contained a volume of ghost stories. At times she even burned books that intruded too much on her well being, destroying what she loved best.¹¹ Books had both a mental and physical hold over Wharton that she was not able to control. Archer seems to suffer from this same

⁸ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 53.

⁹ Shari Benstock. *No Gifts From Chance*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994, 27.

¹⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 28.

¹¹ Benstock 27.

condition, falling under the influence such works as *Faust* and *The House of Life*, as if in a spell.

Though not avid readers themselves, Wharton's parents had a great influence on her reading life. Indeed, literature seemed to play a part in their life as well. Wharton's father, George Frederic Jones, was so influenced by Washington Irving's *Alhambra* that he made the whole family travel across central Spain (a tedious undertaking) to see the Moorish countryside and the palace fortresses of Granada.¹² Lucretia, an "indolent" woman by nature, was dismayed to find that she was expected to oversee Wharton's reading habits. To make matters easier, Lucretia never allowed Wharton to read a book without asking permission and she never gave permission for anything but the classics.¹³

This childhood shaped by reading had such an impact on Wharton that she was able, over fifty years later, to remember every volume that her father's library did and did not contain. Indeed, in her autobiography she makes it clear that her childhood is inseparable from the library. "Whenever I try to recall my childhood it is in my father's library that it comes to life."¹⁴ But from the beginning, Wharton felt that she was quite alone in her world of fiction. Throughout her life, no more than a handful of people were ever allowed into her "sanctuary," as Archer calls his inner life of books (228). But these few people made life a wonderful place for Wharton, as they did for Archer, never to be forgotten. Often Wharton would plunge into despair when she was not able to be with her "inner circle," people who shared her "republic of the spirit," a term Wharton used in *The House of Mirth* to denote freedom from money, anxiety, and the material world.¹⁵

¹² Benstock 19.

¹³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 66-69.

¹⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 66-69.

¹⁵ Edith Wharton. *The House of Mirth*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985, 68.

While Wharton had a number of positive intellectual influences on her as a child, her German governess Anna Bahlmann and her friend Emelyn Washburn being prime among them, it was not until after her marriage that Wharton felt she had been given real intellectual companionship. However, this companionship did not come from her husband Teddy Wharton but from Egerton Winthrop, an old friend of the Jones family. Winthrop was a cultivated, intellectual gentleman of leisure twice Wharton's age. To Wharton he was a "lover of books and pictures," an "accomplished linguist and eager reader," and the man who first taught her "mind to analyze" and her "eyes to see." He introduced her to the French novelists, historians, and literary critics of the day, as well to nineteenth century science, all but unknown to Wharton at this time. In her later years Wharton calls her friendship with Winthrop "the happiest I was to know" and Winthrop "the most perfect of friends."¹⁶

Wharton had a weakness for men like Winthrop: well educated and dilettantish with cultivated tastes and "marked social gifts." She grieved for their squandered potential but respected them as a class. "Grouped together they represented 'New York'" (7). Like Newland Archer, Winthrop was a cut above his class when it came to taste and the intellect, but remained a victim to its social whims to the end of his days. In creating Archer, Wharton was honoring her old friend for what was the best and the worst in him.

As Wharton slowly came into her own as a writer, first with short stories and later with novels, she began to collect around her the people who would make up her inner circle. With the publication of her first book, *The Greater Inclination* (1899), Wharton finally felt that she had acquired a real personality and began to break away from the society life that was the only existence she had ever known. What she wanted most of all

¹⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 94.

was to meet people like herself; she wanted “to be welcomed among people who lived for the things I had always secretly lived for.”¹⁷

While Wharton and expatriate novelist Henry James were the only writers of lasting renown in Wharton’s inner circle, she had indeed found a group of men who cared as much as she did about literature and the other beautiful things in life. With James and herself as the nexus, Wharton was able for the first time in her life to be part of a group that talked about literature, history, and architecture with ease and interest. She found encouragement for her writing pursuits and spent delightful nights grouped around the fire while James read aloud from Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Baudelaire, and Leconte de Lisle.¹⁸ Wharton was finally able to sample true literary companionship and the impact it had on her personal and professional life was enduring.

While Wharton’s circle had its share of artists and writers, it was also home to intelligent men of business who admired the life of letters without being a part of it.¹⁹ Walter Berry was an expert in international law while John Hugh Smith was a successful banker. It was enough that these men knew the value of a life led for art. But it was not always possible, as Wharton knew, for both social and economic reasons, to devote oneself to what you loved best. This is a recurring theme in Wharton’s writing, usually centered on well-educated but weak men like Newland Archer and Lawrence Selden.

Out of Wharton’s inner circle Walter Berry shines forth as the companion of her heart. While they never had a sexual relationship, Wharton and Berry’s bond was often

¹⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 112,123.

¹⁸ Benstock 144.

¹⁹ Howard Sturgis was the author of three works of fiction and Percy Lubbock wrote two novels as well as being the editor of numerous letters and diaries. As Goodman states in his book, *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle*, “perhaps the success of the other members looks modest only in comparison to that of James and Wharton” (4).

like a marriage, especially in later years when Wharton was divorced from Teddy and Berry was forced by ill health to take a step back from his demanding career. In her autobiography, Wharton is speaking of Berry when she writes, "I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul."²⁰ Wharton credits Berry, who was a lawyer by trade, for teaching her to write. Their long talks about the nature of writing enflamed Wharton to write more and better novels, and his tireless appreciation of beauty in art, literature, and the world opened her eyes to much she had not seen before. He was a companion who was always able to keep pace with her own keen mind.²¹ Percy Lubbock felt that Wharton modeled her heroes solely after Berry.²² In *Newland Archer*, we can see Berry's love of literature and art, if not his drive to rise above a dilettantish lifestyle.

With this opening of her eyes to a new world, Wharton became in many ways intolerant of her old life and the people who chose to live without art and literature. When Lady Sybil Cuffe, a woman Wharton would come to hate in later life, admitted to Wharton that she had not had time to meet any "literati" on her recent trip to New York, as she had been occupied with balls and large parties, Wharton's disdain was almost palpable.²³ But perhaps the biggest break Wharton made from her old life was in her divorce from Teddy Wharton.

²⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 115.

²¹ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 116-117.

²² Susan Goodman. *Edith Wharton's Inner Circle*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, 28. It is worth noting that Lubbock thought this habit a fault and felt it was partly responsible for what he saw as the ultimate failure of her novels. Lubbock personally was not fond of Berry and was jealous of the time Wharton spent with him.

²³ Benstock 137.

Even before Teddy's mental illness robbed him of his good humor and charming ways, it was obvious that he and Wharton were not compatible. Teddy enjoyed sporting and Old New York society. Wharton's literary life, which settled around London, depressed and dissatisfied him. Wharton felt that Teddy was "indifferent" to everything she cared about, especially her writing. According to Wharton, "the only interest my works ever excited [in Teddy] was purely mercantile."²⁴ In one of Wharton's earliest stories, "The Fulness of Life," a woman explains to the Spirit of Life that her husband had never been a true companion to her. Among the reasons the woman lists for her husband's never touching the core of her being are that "he never reads anything but railway novels and the sporting advertisements in the paper....in short, we never understood each other in the least."²⁵ It is easy to see Wharton's frustrations with Teddy in this story.

The core of Wharton's marital problems was Teddy's indifference to literature and his lack of an active inner life this indifference represented. Teddy cared about sporting and spending his evenings at his social club. He never made any effort to educate or better himself. He resisted all efforts to take part in Wharton's life of letters and could never understand the appeal it held for her. On a trip to Lennox, Wharton held out a book to Teddy, asking him to read a passage that was of special interest to her. After a pause, he replied, "Does that sort of thing really amuse you?" "I heard the key turn in my prison-lock," she confided to her diary.²⁶ Teddy's complete lack of interest in learning and literature gradually made his company a punishment for Wharton. Indeed,

²⁴ Benstock 252.

²⁵ Edith Wharton. "The Fulness of Life." *Collected Stories 1891-1910*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001, 15.

²⁶ Benstock 186.

Wharton felt by the very act of writing that she was “struggling for an individual existence” from the suffocating social obligation Teddy had become.²⁷ In Wharton’s relationship with her husband the genesis of Archer and May’s relationship can be seen. Like Wharton, Archer is distressed at the shallow, bookless life May leads, full of lawn tennis, archery, and dancing with no time or inclination to read the books he sends her. Madame Olenska is in a similar situation, saddled with a husband who “never writes,” as that is what one has secretaries for (201). To Wharton, the base of a loveless marriage is intellectual inequality.

Wharton’s one and only lover, Morton Fullerton, is a sharp contrast to Teddy Wharton. Good-looking, intelligent, and well-read, Fullerton and Wharton had an instant rapport. On their first meeting, in 1907, they bonded over literature and their shared friends. Later, Wharton was to describe their first meeting with a phrase from Sophocles, which she gleaned from an Emerson essay: “The moment my eyes fell on him I was content.”²⁸ This calls to mind Madame Olenska’s reaction to Archer’s sudden appearance in Boston, after months of being separated, a startled look giving way to “a slow smile of wonder and contentment” (200). Wharton and Fullerton initially kept in contact over the pretext of his helping her arrange serialization of a French translation of *The House of Mirth*, but over time their relationship became much more. Wharton and Fullerton’s affair lasted through the last years of Wharton’s unhappy marriage, (she was granted a divorce in 1913) eventually petering off into a fragile but lasting friendship. While Fullerton undoubtedly caused Wharton much heartache and trouble over the years, with his

²⁷ R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. *The Letters of Edith Wharton*. New York: Collier Books, 1998, 261.

²⁸ Lewis, *Letters* 129.

numerous affairs causing Wharton heartache and financial worries, he also provided her with a taste of what a relationship with an equal was like.

From the beginning Wharton and Fullerton's relationship was rich in literature. Wharton's letters to Fullerton are full of lists of books she is reading and thanks for books he has suggested. Her casual historical and literary allusions are given with the air of someone who has no doubt of their being understood. Soon after their first meeting Wharton began a Love Diary, where she wrote of her passion in both prose and poetry. Sometimes she sent Fullerton lyrical declarations of her love. Fullerton was often to be a vehicle for her writing: their first night of sexual consummation inspired her most passionate poem, "Terminus."²⁹ In her biography of Wharton, Shari Benstock refers to literature as "the vehicle of her lovemaking" with Fullerton and Dante's *Divine Comedy* as the "sacred text."³⁰

Wharton's empathy with people who worshiped learning and literature in the same way she did can't be overstated. Often stiff and empiric with strangers, Wharton would thaw at once if a topic of interest to her was introduced. She once spent an entire dinner party discussing famous literary kisses with a man whose name she never caught and whose good looks went unnoticed. She loved giving books as presents and invested much time in picking the perfect book to match the receiver's tastes and needs. Wharton felt a deep communion with other writers, such as Vernon Lee and George Sand, even though she disapproved of their personal lives. She would forgive much in people of taste and genius that she would not tolerate in others.³¹

²⁹ Lewis, *A Biography* 259-260.

³⁰ Benstock 182.

³¹ Benstock 76, 161, 195, 201.

With all this in mind, it's not surprising that she spent so much time developing the literary proclivities of her characters. Wharton's fiction shows a recurring theme that centers on people being laid bare by what they hold dearest or by what they disdain in the literary world. As early as *The House of Mirth* in 1905, Wharton develops the character of three people simply by how they view Americana. When Lily quizzes Selden about Americana, he confesses that such artifacts are out of his line. He is not a "collector"; rather, he is a person who just wants to be surrounded by the books he loves best. This foreshadows his eventual rejection of Lily, the ultimate collectable. Americana is "horribly dull" and strictly the domain of people who collect only for the joy of having something no one else can find or afford.³² When it is revealed that Lily's matrimonial target, Percy Gryce, is a great collector of Americana, the reader can infer that he is one of those horribly dull people who collect books not to improve their minds, but to own what no one else has. As for Lily, the reader sees that she seems willing to sacrifice herself at the altar of dull books, but it is Selden's first edition of La Bruyère over which her hand lingers. La Bruyère was a seventeenth-century French essayist known for his sarcastic wit and attacks on hack writers of his time. He would be an avowed enemy of Americana, as would his admirers. Lily's admiration for La Bruyère over the Americana shows how she will eventually reject the dull and conventional Gryce for the more exciting companionship of Selden. In "His Father's Son," a short story published in 1910, Wharton shows Mr. Grew, a middle-class man who has become rich through what would then be considered vulgar means. He has hopes of his son becoming a rich and refined gentleman, but his own very common origins are reinforced by "the illustrated Longfellow and the copy of Ingersoll's lectures which represented literature to Mr.

³² Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 11.

Grew.”³³ Mr. Grew is a man starved for good talk and ideas; he craves literature and music, but does not have the knowledge and education that would allow him to acquire such things. He does not know what to read or what to listen to, and is left with only the popular work of Longfellow and Ingersoll.

In *The Age of Innocence* literature is used throughout to show Archer’s character, with the reading proclivities of his family, friends, and contemporaries shedding further light on what Archer’s past and eventual fate will be. From Julius Beaufort who never reads to the sophisticated French tastes of Rivière, each of these people and the books they clutch, draw the reader ever closer to a better understanding of the mystery of Archer.

Wharton’s intertextual use of literature can be clearly seen in chapter five of *The Age of Innocence*, in which the reader is introduced to Archer’s mother, Adeline Archer. Mrs. Archer can be depended on to talk to her guests “about Alpine scenery and *The Marble Faun*” (29). Penned by American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* is a book-length romance set in an idealized Italy. Today few people would question Hawthorne’s importance and talent as a writer, but in the 1870’s his reputation was still being established and Wharton herself was no fan. In a 1906 letter to Sara Norton, Wharton calls Hawthorne “overrated” and seems to lump him in with Longfellow and other American authors that she disliked.³⁴ Two years later, in a letter to William Crary Brownell, her Scribner’s editor and an industrious literary critic, she wrote that she was “counting the minutes until I see the egregious Nathaniel expire without shedding of blood,” and that Hawthorne’s prose was “about as classic as a bare hotel parlor furnished

³³ Wharton, “His Father’s Son” *Collected Stories, 1891-1910* 722.

³⁴ Benstock 153.

only with bentwood chairs.”³⁵ Sarcastically, Wharton refers to *The Marble Faun* as “the last word on Spain and Italy” for the “well-to-do traveler.”³⁶

So what was Wharton saying by having Adeline admire *The Marble Faun*? By 1920 when *The Age of Innocence* was published, Hawthorne was a respected author, helped in part by the book-length critical essay written by Wharton’s friend and contemporary, Henry James.³⁷ Was Adeline a literary prophet, an admirer of flavor-of-the-moment literature, or a devotee of American writing, no matter what the quality? An answer might be reached by looking at what other works are respected, and disdained, by Adeline and Archer’s sister, Janey. Is Hawthorne alone on their reading list as a writer Wharton held in contempt, or is he joined by what Wharton would consider popular or lesser scribes? Alone, Hawthorne does not say a lot about Mrs. Archer and Janey, but shelved with the rest of their library, the reader is able to get a clear picture of what type of literary family Archer comes from.

Mrs. Archer and Janey read the novels of Ouida, the pen name of English-born author Maria Louisa Rame. Ouida is known for her flashy, romantic novels that were often condemned for inferior writing and moral compromises.³⁸ A young Edith Wharton would never have been allowed by her family to read such compromising fiction. However, despite Ouida’s bad reputation, both as a writer and as a rather eccentric character, she did have an abiding cultural impact. Her early novels, *Chandos* and *Under Two Flags* most notably, are still read for their fine character studies.³⁹ However, Mrs. Archer and Janey read Ouida “for the sake of their Italian atmosphere,” a characteristic of

³⁵ Lewis, *A Biography* 237.

³⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 64.

³⁷ Henry James. *Hawthorne*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1956.

³⁸ Eileen Bigland. *Ouida, The Passionate Victorian*. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1951, 13.

³⁹ Bigland 13.

her later, more flamboyant romances (29). That Mrs. Archer and Janey feel they need to have an excuse for reading Ouida shows they know it is not in the best taste, but they continue to read her anyway. Wharton herself never had reason to regret that she was not allowed to read such “ephemeral rubbish” as that of Ouida, as it encouraged her reading of the classics.

In addition to reading the works of Ouida, Mrs. Archer and Janey subscribe to *Good Words*, an extremely popular nineteenth-century magazine that specialized in serial fiction. Created by the Scottish publisher and magazine proprietor, Alexander Strahan, *Good Words* was devised to supply the large evangelical population with reading material lighter and more entertaining than theology and church news.⁴⁰ While there are no records of Wharton’s opinion of *Good Words*, the historical context offers some evidence for speculation.

Wharton never submitted a story for publication to *Good Words* which, considering her high reputation as a short-story writer and the prodigious amount she published in serial journals, is telling. The strong evangelical and instructional bent of the magazine would not have appealed to Wharton, whose own stories were often rejected from comparatively less conservative magazines for their “risqué” ideas.⁴¹ Also, it is possible that Wharton would not have enjoyed having her stories run in the same magazine with the likes of Ouida and Norman Macleod, a hero of the Established Church of Scotland who contributed many of the journal's most pious stories. Anthony Trollope, a writer Wharton considered in league with Tolstoy and Balzac, published in *Good Words* at the beginning of his career, but was banished from its pages in 1863 due to the

⁴⁰ John Sutherland. *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction*. London: Longman, 1998, 252.

⁴¹ Benstock 428.

alleged anti-evangelical satire in his novel *Rachel Ray*.⁴² If anything, this would have biased Wharton even more against the magazine.

However, the most telling clue is the use Wharton makes of *Good Words* in her short story, “The House of the Dead Hand.” The villain of the tale, Doctor Lombard, is an intelligent, superior man who is constantly mocking his slow-witted wife in the guise of praise. Mrs. Lombard was raised by her aunts who, according to Doctor Lombard, are “very superior women” who “borrow *Good Words*...from the curate’s wife.”⁴³ There is no mistaking the scorn in Doctor Lombard’s tone when he speaks of his wife’s aunts and their reading habits. Doctor Lombard may be spiteful, but the reader has reason to believe his intellectual opinions are sound.

By combining contemporary opinions of Ouida, Hawthorne, and *Good Words* with Wharton’s own opinions on the subjects, the reader is left with a good idea of the impression Mrs. Archer and Janey are intended to give as characters who may either reinforce or stand in counter-point to Archer’s character. The women do not feel the urge to go beyond the mere motions of loving literature, even though they feel the motions are necessary. They give the appearance of being intellectuals, with their refined dinners where people can “talk about Alpine scenery and *The Marble Faun*,” but their flat, society-influenced criticism speaks disparagingly of their deeper understanding of the subject. Their opinions on other authors enforce this rather bleak view of their reading habits. Mrs. Archer and Janey speak “severely of Dickens, who had never drawn a gentleman” and consider “architecture and painting as subjects for men, and chiefly for learned persons who read Ruskin” (29). Even more damning, Mrs. Archer and Janey

⁴² Lewis, *Letters* 575.

⁴³ Wharton, “The House of the Dead Hand” *Collected Stories 1891-1910* 540.

“considered Thackeray less at home in the great world than Bulwer” (29). To consider Bulwer (the originator of “it was a dark and stormy night”) superior to Thackeray in anything would go against all of Wharton’s own inclinations. To her Thackeray was one of the “great novelists” of the world and she holds him up again and again as a great example of the art of writing.⁴⁴ Archer is a great reader of Thackeray, further proof of his good taste. To Mrs. Archer and Janey literature is a world as strictly bound by class and tradition as their own narrow lives. If it does not conform to their elite living patterns, to the rules that have always governed their lives, there must be something wrong with it. By showing us the milieu in which Archer was raised, Wharton is making it clear that he has risen above the shallow intellectualism of his family, if not all their traditions and social customs.

In Wharton’s world, a person’s taste, intelligence, and spirit are reflected in what they read. Books show so much about a person: what they are interested in, where their priorities lie, the extent of their education, the richness of their mind. Even the arrangement of books on tables and in libraries shows a person’s taste, breeding, and social bent. More than any other character, Wharton has subjected Newland Archer to this treatment, and for good or ill, books line the path to his true nature.

⁴⁴ Edith Wharton. *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Touchstone, 1997, 28, 49, 58, 60, 70-1, 76, 91, 102.

Chapter Two: The Nature of Man and Books

*“Insensibly, he formed the most delightful habit in the world, the habit of reading: he did not know that thus he was providing himself with a refuge from all the distress of life; he did not know either that he was creating for himself an unreal world which would make the real world of every day a source of bitter disappointment.”*⁴⁵

~W. Somerset Maugham

On December 12, 2005, Edith Wharton’s personal library sold for \$2.6 million. The buyers were the custodians of the Mount, Wharton’s estate in Lennox, Massachusetts, now a museum devoted to Wharton’s life and work. “It is the most important acquisition we could possibly make,” Stephanie Copeland, head of the Mount’s restoration project, said in an interview just before she signed the deal. Hermione Lee, a prominent Wharton scholar, called the library “a form of writer’s autobiography”:

Her whole social milieu, her private affairs and her literary career can be discerned from her collection. Wharton's flyleaves show her progression from Edith Jones to Mrs. Edward Wharton to Edith Wharton, as she turns herself from a society girl into the much-admired and somewhat daunting internationally famous author.⁴⁶

George Ramsden, the British bookseller who collected and sold the library, feels that Wharton’s library “reflects her life so well.”⁴⁷ If Wharton’s physical library can be valued so highly, what price can be placed on the mythical library she constructs for Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*? Archer’s library, like Wharton’s own, shows the

⁴⁵ W Somerset Maugham. *Of Human Bondage*. New York: Double Day, 1915, 29.

⁴⁶ Alan Cowell. “After a Century, an American Writer’s Library Will Go to America.” *New York Times* 15 December 2005 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/15/books/15whar.html?ex=1175054400&en=bcddf7d0a69f00ad&ei=5070>>.

⁴⁷ Cowell.

possessor's tastes, private affairs, and career. Wharton has made Archer's library his autobiography.

Unlike the rest of his family, reading is more than a façade for Archer. When he enters a room Archer instinctively seeks out whatever literature is available, devouring titles with the voracity of a true booklover. He seeks out companions, such as Ned Winsett and Monsieur Rivière, who are inmates of the literary world that Archer both yearns for and is afraid of. That Archer inevitably turns his back on such company is proof only of the hold society has on him and not a lack of enduring interest in the subject. Indeed, much of Archer's interest in Madame Olenska can be seen as that of the frustrated artist reaching out toward the only symbol of art and beauty his society can produce.

Archer's simplest thoughts are a manifestation of his reading habits, real life only a reflection of something that has already happened in a book. While discussing the possibility of divorce with Madame Olenska, he has trouble dealing with the situation, feeling that the vocabulary was "unfamiliar to him, and seemed to belong to fiction and the stage" (94). Earlier, when pressuring May to advance their marriage date, he replies to her sensible if unromantic question, "We can't behave like people in novels, though, can we?" with the impassioned repetition, "Why not—why not—why not?" Archer is giving voice to his desire to live in the artificial safety of fiction (72). Madame Olenska is adept at this game, asking Archer if he thinks the hero from *The Shaughraun* will send his love "a bunch of yellow roses tomorrow morning," mirroring their own situation (102). In Archer's eyes Madame Olenska's understanding proves that she is worthy of reigning in the inner chambers of his mind. But Madame Olenska is able to pull back

from this fictional world when the realities of life become too pressing. Neither May nor Madame Olenska will allow Archer the luxury of losing himself in fiction. Madame Olenska is too aware of the cruelties of the real world and May has no desire to know the interior Archer, the man who lives in books and plays.

The first time the reader witnesses Archer's habit of picturing the real world as a scene from a novel or play is when Archer places the love scenes from *Monsieur de Camors* in Mrs. Mingott's bedroom. Published in 1867, *Monsieur de Camors* is a fairly recent book in Archer's time, and also serves as the first indicator of Archer's practice of keeping up with the most recent developments in writing. No less than twelve books and authors are alluded to by Archer as "just out," the "latest," or "new." This pre-occupation with the newest works might be perceived as Archer's scrambling to keep in touch with the latest fashions in the literary world, but it is more likely a booklover's delight in new acquisitions. After all, Archer reads all the books he buys.

Archer is obviously well acquainted with *Monsieur de Camors*, a novel that is considered the finest work of French author Octave Feuillet. Known for his wit and his fine analysis of motives and emotion, Feuillet achieved great fame in his time, becoming a favorite of the 19th century French royal court and the aristocracy. Indeed, the upper class made up the bulk of his readers and characters. In his novel *The Princess Casamassima*, Henry James has his titular character refer her would-be lover and aristocratic wannabe, Hyacinth Robinson, to the latest number of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* which contains a story by Feuillet. To Hyacinth, reading Feuillet in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (a journal used as a symbol of high-brow intellectual "chic" throughout French fiction) was the height of elegance and breeding. In each of the three reviews

James wrote on Feuillet novels, he comments on how “Feuillet’s novels are invariably situated among the highest aristocracy and his heroes and heroines are always young, elegant, dashing, charming, handsome, and rich.”⁴⁸

Like the Princess Casamassima and Hyacinth, Archer is part of the aristocracy, at least within the narrow bounds of New York, and his delicate breeding can be detected in his taste for Feuillet. In his review of *Monsieur de Camors*, James writes that Feuillet’s “works treat almost wholly of fine ladies, and seem as if they were meant to be read by fine ladies.”⁴⁹ While Archer is no fine lady, he does take his position in society, and the responsibilities that come with it, very seriously. *Monsieur de Camors* is just another indicator of Archer’s need to conform to society and his own innate desire for order and tradition. He would never appear in public without a flower in his buttonhole or part his hair without “using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel” (5). Archer may question the limitations women live under in society, but he never questions his own place within that society. It is easy for May and the rest of the elite to trap Archer in New York, as he is never in doubt that he owes them his loyalty and obedience simply by being born an Archer.

Although *Monsieur de Camors* deals extensively with women of questionable morals, Feuillet draws the women with dignity, indulgence, and understanding, much like Wharton does with her own “fallen women.”⁵⁰ Feuillet is both a romantic and a realist; by reading him Archer is indulging in the romanticism he wishes his own life had, while staying true to the conservatism that is at the core of his being, the practical part of him

⁴⁸ Pierre A. Walker. “The Princess Casamassima’s ‘Sudden Incarnation’ and Octave Feuillet.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 31:3 (1989), 258.

⁴⁹ Henry James. “Camors; or, Life under the New Empire.” *Nation*, 30 July 1868, 92.

⁵⁰ Walker 259.

that marries and stays with May. In his article “The Princess Casamassima’s ‘Sudden Incarnation’ and Octave Feuillet,” Pierre A. Walker says that James “considers that Feuillet situates his stories in an “unreal world”. So, in *The Princess Casamassima* when Hyacinth pictures the princess as a Feuillet heroine, “he transposes her out of his everyday real world into an ideal one.”⁵¹ Archer is constantly guilty of this offence, pulling Madame Olenska, May, and, by picturing her bedroom as the scene of a torrid love affair, even the staid Mrs. Mingott into his fantasy world.

Octave Feuillet is not the only French author Archer patronizes. Guy de Maupassant, Mérimée, Balzac, and Daudet all make appearances in Archer’s library. Among other things, Archer’s predilection for French authors alerts readers to his education, as Archer would need to be fluent in French to enjoy most French books in the early 1870’s. Credible translations often took years to arrange and produce and would only be done if the financial payoff seemed worthwhile to publishers.⁵² Janey, puzzling over the “archaic French” of Balzac’s *Contes Drôlatiques*, exclaims to her brother, “What learned things you read!” (74). To Janey and indeed to Archer’s world in general, being able to read fluently in French was in itself a great accomplishment. Archer could have been reading a torrid French romance and Janey would have admired him in the same manner. Wharton, who rebelled against the “sentimental theory that children must not be made to study anything that does not interest them,” was always bitter that she had not been taught Greek and Latin as a child, as her brothers were.⁵³ However, due to spending so much time abroad as a child and her own determination, Wharton was fluent in

⁵¹ Walker 258.

⁵² Stephen Kinzer. “American Yawns at Foreign Fiction.” *New York Times* 26 July 2003
< <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40711FE3B5B0C758EDDAE0894DB404482>>.

⁵³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 49.

French, German, and Italian, a formidable accomplishment for an American girl in an era when very few Americans spoke any language outside of English. Archer mirrors Wharton in both his desire to learn languages and his accomplishments.

Critics often observe that Archer tends toward Romanticism in his French readings, and in part this is true.⁵⁴ Known as one of the founding fathers of Realism, Balzac guided fiction away from the chivalry of Walter Scott and the decrepit castles of Gothicism. However, the archaic French of *Contes Drôlatiques* is employed in a collection of amusing stories, full of gallant knights and lovely ladies, told by a merry vicar. In contrast to Balzac's other works, *Contes Drôlatiques* is more a throwback to Rabelais and Boccaccio than a foray into contemporary fiction.⁵⁵ *Contes Drôlatiques* was written in the nineteenth century in imitation of the style of the sixteenth, and is perfect in its verisimilitude. To write such a work the author "must have been at once historian, linguist, philosopher, archaeologist, and anatomist, and each in no ordinary degree."⁵⁶ Even to read such a work required more than an ordinary command of French. According to the translator of the first English language edition of 1874, "the difficulties of the language employed, and the quaintness and peculiarity of its style, have placed it beyond the reach of all but those thoroughly acquainted with the French of the sixteenth century."⁵⁷ Just being able to read a novel in French would have placed Archer among the intellectual elite of New York. To be able to read, understand, and enjoy *Contes Drôlatiques* proclaims Archer a serious student of foreign literature.

⁵⁴ Orlando 58.

⁵⁵ Orlando 58.

⁵⁶ Honoré De Balzac. *Droll Stories*. "Translators Preface." New York: Random House, 1874, ix-xi.

⁵⁷ Balzac x.

While *Contes Drôlatiques* is written in the romantic style, it still contains many of the qualities that made Balzac an innovator in the school of Realism. The traps of society, moral accountability, and the constantly shifting human drama are followed with a sharp eye, and his characterization is as astute and brilliant as in any of his realist tomes. *Contes Drôlatiques* rides the line between Balzac's earlier, more romantic and fantastic works, and his later *comédies humaines*. The appeal of such a work to Archer is undeniable. He is a dreamer, always looking for a better world. It is Madame Olenska and May who must make him look at realities. But when he is shown the truth of a situation, he rarely denies its veracity. He may run away, as he does from Madame Olenska when she tells him there is no place they can be together away from the eyes of society, but he soon returns, ready to hand over his hotel key and make Madame Olenska his mistress (251-271). He wants something better, but is willing to settle for the path of least resistance.

Most of the French writers that attract Archer have this same blend of realism and romanticism that is reflected in Archer's character. Guy de Maupassant, whose "incomparable tales" Archer admires, wrote in both the high-realist and fantastic modes and has often been compared to Balzac for the ease with which he blends the styles. Archer is also a reader of Alphonse Daudet's "brilliant tales," depending on which text of *The Age of Innocence* is studied.⁵⁸ Daudet was a devotee of Naturalism, a branch of French Realism, but his tales featured Tartarin who, like Don Quixote, often deceived himself with his own fiction.⁵⁹ Orlando states that there is a "similar vein of self-

⁵⁸ Some versions read: The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of *the prolific Alphonse Daudet's brilliant tales...*" while others read: The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of *Guy de Maupassant's incomparable tales...*" Both are French authors that were read by Wharton. In 1870, when the action of the book takes place Daudet was more popular and widely known than Maupassant, but in 1920 when the book was published, the reverse was true.

⁵⁹ Orlando 58.

deception running through Archer's character" and that this would explain his attraction to the book.⁶⁰

In addition to the French writers admired by Archer is the romantic Prosper Mérimée. In the style of Walter Scott, Mérimée authored fantastic tales that more often than not had passionate, destructive love as their theme. However, it is not his short stories but his *Lettres à une Inconnue* (*Letters to an Unknown Girl*) that is one of Archer's "inseparables." (89). Published posthumously (1874), *Lettres à une Inconnue* shows the long correspondence between Mérimée and the much younger woman, Jenny Dacquin. In his letters Mérimée is shown as he never was in life: warm, genuine, loving, and soulful. In Jenny Dacquin, Mérimée found a companion to whom he could show his true self, the tone of his letters wavering from that of a lover to a close friend. His relationship with Jenny Dacquin was probably never consummated and remained that of a warm, trusting friendship, much like that of Wharton and Walter Berry.⁶¹ The title itself can be seen as a pun, with Jenny Dacquin being "unknown" to Mérimée in the biblical sense. Mérimée is famous for stating that there is nothing sweeter in the world than "the society of an intelligent woman of whom you are not and cannot be the lover."⁶² This comment is probably a reflection of his relationship with Jenny Dacquin.

The correlation between Mérimée and Jenny Dacquin and Archer and Madame Olenska is unmistakable. Both sets of lovers share a deep bond: they are able to see each other as more than the beings created by society, but are never to bring their love to a physical plane. That Wharton would have Archer think of *Lettres à une Inconnue* at the moment he is about to talk Madame Olenska out of getting a divorce, and so setting in

⁶⁰ Orlando 58.

⁶¹ A.W. Raitt. *Prosper Mérimée*. New York: Scribner's, 1970, 110.

⁶² Raitt 110.

motion the events that will forever keep Archer and the Countess apart, is telling. Their love, like Mérimée's and Dacquin's, moves beyond the platonic, but never becomes merely carnal and physical. Both Archer and the Countess find revolting the thought that their relationship could sink to such a level. Madame Olenska begs Archer to not "let us be like all the others," with their sordid affairs and dishonest ways (269-270). It is not the actual physical affair that Madame Olenska shrinks from, but the deceit that must inevitably accompany it.

All the books Madame Olenska has scattered around her drawing room are by French authors, but this is no surprise considering her background. Though she is American, Madame Olenska has spent most of her life abroad and is "not wholly at her ease in English" (110). She is used to the French salons where drawing rooms are "dominated by talk of Mérimée, of Thackeray, Browning, or William Morris" (89). French is the language of the literary elite at this time, and Madame Olenska has spent her adult life in a culture dominated by art. The Countess's reading material labels her as French. Indeed, her reference to Edgar Allan Poe affirms the very Frenchness of her nature. In the 1870s it is the French who admired Poe and regarded him as the grandfather of the Symbolist movement in French poetry. In America, Poe was all but forgotten, and was certainly not seen as a writer of genius.⁶³ Wharton's use of the name "Edgar Poe," as the French call the writer, as opposed to the more American "Edgar Allan Poe," is itself a symbol of Madame Olenska's, and possibly Wharton's, French cultural awareness.

⁶³ John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. *The Purloined Poe*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988, XI.

It is possible that Wharton intends Madame Olenska's reading to be a foil to Archer's, as she has mostly naturalists on her reading list: Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers. As Orlando points out, these writers are known for their "refusal to idealize experience and an aim to paint life as it is" and their "refusal to live in fantasy."⁶⁴ However, it is worth noting that Huysmans' earliest work, *Le drageoir à épices* (*The Sugar-Coated Container of Spices*), was published in 1874, making it the only option available for Madame Olenska to read in the "early seventies" (3). *Le drageoir à épices* is a collection of prose poetry, heavily influenced by Baudelaire, a leading Decadent author who saw poetry as a pure, superior beauty that should focus on aesthetic ends and not necessarily be intended to teach or to convey a political message. Not until his next work, *Histoire d'une fille* (*Story of a Daughter*), was published in 1876, could Huysmans be considered a naturalistic writer. It is possible, as Orlando contends, that the inclusion of Huysmans in Madame Olenska's drawing room is an anachronism, and that Wharton meant for her to be a reader of Huysmans' better known naturalistic work. But it is just as likely that Madame Olenska has a taste for romance just like Archer. It is unlikely that a woman who enjoys the company of artists, singers, and actors and who is so often perceived as an actress herself could sup solely on hard realities.

Wharton was, like Archer and Madame Olenska, a great reader of French fiction. In 1898 Wharton made a list of her favorite books. The top spots were dominated by non-fiction, but when fiction did appear, almost all the authors were French: Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and his correspondence; Stendhal's *Le Chartreuse de Parme* and *Le Rouge et le noir*; Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*; and

⁶⁴ Orlando 66-67.

Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*.⁶⁵ Wharton's reading is a mixture of Realism and Romanticism. In Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction*, a guide to the art of the short story and the novel, Balzac is repeatedly praised for his superior characterization, style, and narrative technique and placed among the greats of novel writing, while Mérimée is considered a master of the short tale and Maupassant a writer of psychological masterpieces.⁶⁶

Second only to Archer's love of French literature is his admiration for poetry. Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, William Morris, Dante, Petrarch, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti are the poets that capture Archer's mind and heart. His desire at the beginning of his relationship with May to share this love with her is touching, if a bit condescending. He imagines them reading *Faust* together "by the Italian lakes," blending reality and fiction together by confusing his honeymoon with the text of *Faust*, an action typical of Archer's rather active imagination (6). Later, when Archer comes to know May as more than an idolized image, he realizes that he is not "able to picture [May] in that particular setting" (168). May neither has nor wants a place in Archer's imaginary world. She is willing to listen to "the beautiful things that could not possibly happen in real life," but she is content to live in the present (127). It is obvious that May's interest in poetry is for Archer's sake alone. At the beginning of their engagement, Archer delights in the "shy interest in books and ideas that [May] was beginning to develop under his guidance" (127). She has learned to ridicule *Idylls of the King*, but not yet to appreciate "Ulysses" and "The Lotus Eaters." Undoubtedly these are

⁶⁵ Lewis, *The Letters* 86.

⁶⁶ Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* 9, 12, 13, 20, 42, 47, 49, 53, 58, 61, 67, 70-6, 90-2, 102.

Archer's opinions of Tennyson's works. Later, Archer realizes that May was merely echoing his own opinions, furthering his disillusionment of her.

Archer's attempt to interest May in Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a transparent attempt to recreate the love of the two great poets in his own rather mundane courtship. Even at the height of his romance with May, Archer is only "sincerely but placidly" in love. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's romantic correspondence, built on a shared understanding of the beauty and power of words, would undoubtedly have appealed to Archer's starry-eyed spirit, as would the equality of their relationship. From the beginning of their letters, it is obvious that the Brownings are intellectual and spiritual equals and that they regard each other as such. *The Age of Innocence* is set in a time when Elizabeth Barrett Browning was far more famous than her husband. In her autobiography, Wharton notes that Elizabeth Barrett Browning appears in her parents' library, whereas Robert Browning does not. Further, an anthology of the time describes him as "the husband of Elizabeth Barrett, and himself no mean poet." It is therefore no surprise that May's friend Kate Merry had never heard of a poet called Robert Browning.⁶⁷

Archer both craves and fears this type of equality with a woman. He admires Madame Olenska for her fine mind and independence and feels that "women ought to be free," as free as men (36). It is this very feeling of respecting his wife that is missing from Archer's marriage, which contributes to its being such an emotional failure. He wants to "emancipate" May, but she has not "the dimmest notion that she was not free" (169). Or so Archer's supposes. His total lack of understanding of what it means to be a free

⁶⁷ However, not to discount Robert Browning, when Wharton is finally exposed to Browning she refers to him as "one of the great Awakeners of my childhood." Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 66.

woman is pathetic, as is his inability to see that he is not free himself. May is always guiding him: away from friends such as M. Rivière, to the new greenish-yellow house, to Newport, and away from Madame Olenska. But she is unable to understand poetry, so Archer sees her as a rather feeble personality, unable to see where her real strength lies. Madame Olenska has the kind of mind and strength that Archer admires: she cares “immensely” for art and poetry, and yet he is always working against her freedom (95). He wants her to move to a better neighborhood, to follow his advice, to stay married. For Madame Olenska a divorce would be the supreme freedom and it is Archer who puts an end to that hope. In Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Archer sees not only what he wishes May and Madame Olenska could be, but what he wishes that he could be as well: two people willing to go against familial and social conventions to be happy.

One of the first things Archer ever reads to May is Browning’s “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” and she plans to memorize it, not from any particular love of the poem, but for the sentimental value it holds. This is a romance that passes over Archer’s head. He focuses on how May has not had time to read “the little vellum book,” *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a romance that passes over *her* head (123). It must seem odd to Archer that a woman in love would not savor the sweet romance in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnets and instead turn toward the unromantic Robert Browning poem. Romance to Archer and May is two different things, a dichotomy they are never able to repair. Later, after it has become evident that May has no poetry in her soul and no real understanding of its meaning, Archer refrains from reading poetry to her or trying to interest her in his favorites. His attempt to turn them into Robert Browning

and Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a failure, indirectly leading to his passionate, if chaste, affair with Madame Olenska.

While Archer tries to interest May in poetry, he does not associate her or their relationship with it. May is a product of the real world and will always remain so. But Madame Olenska, forever beyond his reach, belongs in poetry. Archer does not try to get her to read poetry, he makes her a part of poetry by placing her in the pages of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet sequence *The House of Life*. Critics have commented that *The House of Life* owes much to *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.⁶⁸ The connection for Archer is apparent, as his efforts to interest May in the innocent *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was a failure, but Madame Olenska's unwitting immersion in the sultry *The House of Life* is successful.

The House of Life is a complex series of poems tracing the physical and spiritual development of an intimate relationship. In Archer's time *The House of Life* would have been newly published. The puritanical backlash at that time was savage, the voluptuous nature of the poems and Rossetti's lack of reserve offending "the temperate and controlled spirit."⁶⁹ Archer himself reads the poems as though in a stupor, caught up in words that give "new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions" (120). One critic commented that it is "well nigh impossible not to fall under the almost magical spell of the long-drawn, solemn beauty of the words."⁷⁰ Archer does indeed fall under Rossetti's, and Madame Olenska's, spell, but by morning he has returned to himself and the sight of his familiar world makes that of *The House of Life* seem all the

⁶⁸ Paul Franklin Baum. Introduction. *The House of Life*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928, 8.

⁶⁹ Arthur C. Benson. *Rossetti*. London: Macmillan & Co., LTD, 1911, 135.

⁷⁰ Benson 135.

more impossible. Rossetti's poems, with their lack of decorum and their weary fever are "far outside the pale of probability," as is Madame Olenska. The feel of the poems linger, making "the taste of the usual...like cinders in his mouth," and Archer is haunted by a feeling of "being buried alive under his future" (121). Overwhelmed by his own feelings, Archer flees to St. Augustine and to May. He would like to deny his taste for the voluptuousness of Rossetti just as he would like to deny his attraction to Madame Olenska.

Rossetti described the sonnet form as a "moment's monument," implying that it sought to contain the feelings of a fleeting moment. This is the exact use to which Archer has put Rossetti's poetry. Archer and Madame Olenska's relationship is a small moment in both of their long lives but, at least for Archer, it is the most important, the only time he experiences "the flower of life" (36). Archer finds in *The House of Life* "an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books" (120). As Orlando points out, this phrasing shows that "Archer wants to dwell—literally 'breathe'—in 'an atmosphere' that he finds in his books."⁷¹ He wants a world where he and Madame Olenska can be together without fault or blame, a country, as she points out, that does not exist (251). By having Archer replace Rossetti's beloved in *The House of Life* with Madame Olenska, Wharton is showing the reader early on that only in books can Archer and Madame Olenska be together.⁷²

Dante Gabriel Rossetti is as close as *The Age of Innocence* gets to Dante, a writer who held great importance for Wharton. During her intimacies with Walter Berry and

⁷¹ Orlando 59.

⁷² Wharton's use of the terms "atmosphere" and "breathed" for Rossetti's poems brings to mind Archer's feelings on first being omitted into Madame Olenska's home, where "the *atmosphere* of the room was so different from any he had ever *breathed*" (61). It is the essence of Madame Olenska that Archer feels in *The House of Life*.

affair with Morton Fullerton, literature was “the vehicle of her lovemaking” and the “sacred text” was Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.⁷³ Archer is echoing this practice, but with a more contemporary Dante as his guide. Archer is familiar with Dante, as he “puts together a phrase out of Dante and Petrarch” in order to communicate with Madame Olenska’s maid (60). This suggests that Archer may only have learned Italian to be able to read Dante and his like, as Walter Berry did.

Even though five hundred years divide Dante and Rossetti, their similarities, or, more accurately, Rossetti’s emulation of Dante, neatly parallel Archer and Madame Olenska’s relationship with that of Wharton and Berry/Fullerton. Rossetti took Dante as his first name out of respect and admiration for the poet and spent a good part of his early life translating Dante’s poetry. Rossetti’s poetry and art was highly influenced by the Medieval and one of his most famous paintings, “Beata Beatrix,” was a portrait of his own dead wife idealized as Dante’s Beatrice. Through literature Wharton has devised a series of idealized and impossible loves that link to her own life and her own impossible love: Dante and Beatrice, Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, Archer and Madame Olenska, Wharton and Berry/Fullerton. With this in mind, Archer’s identification with Rossetti tells more than might be supposed. Rossetti has foreshadowed the impossibility of Archer and Madame Olenska’s situation at a time when the reader still has hope. By making Rossetti the “sacred text,” Archer is shown to be in the same trap that Wharton was in her life: married (or nearly married) to someone he did not love, and forced to chase his actual beloved through the pages of literature.

A darker side of Archer can also be seen in his choice of poetry, as the inclusion of Swinburne’s *Chastelard* shows. Swinburne was an intimate friend of Rossetti and

⁷³ Benstock 182.

other Pre-Raphaelites and his writing was considered highly controversial in its day. *Chastelard*, a play in verse, was influenced by the sadomasochistic philosophy of the Marquis de Sade, as were a number of Swinburne's other works. While *Chastelard* was praised by critics for "the genius and magic" of its verse, it was criticized as having a "doubtful" moral tone, being "inherently vicious," and being "a lamentable prostitution of the English Muse."⁷⁴ Its plot of a young man who wishes for nothing more than to be the victim of a beautiful and cruel woman's rage, to be puppet and plaything in the hands of a more experienced woman, can be seen as Archer's yearning to be dominated by Madame Olenska. *Chastelard* ends with the poet-courtier blissfully going to his own execution while his vicious mistress looks on. Madame Olenska would never have allowed Archer to plummet to such depths even if he had been willing, but Archer's submissive streak can be seen when he kisses the Countess's feet and later her (supposed) umbrella, and in his wordless surrender to his fate when Madame Olenska leaves for France and May tells him that she is pregnant. Like Swinburne, Archer is drawn to the romance of being dominated.

Orlando writes that Archer is drawn to Rossetti because of his idolatry of the ideal, and that this same fascination is what attaches him to the art of Renaissance Italy. Archer admires the "struggle for perfection" embodied by the Renaissance and is "enamored with beauty for its own sake."⁷⁵ He prides himself on his knowledge of Italian art, his boyhood being "saturated with Ruskin," who was a major influence on Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites. Archer does indeed "read all the writers of his day who treat the Renaissance": John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee, P.G. Hamerton, Walter

⁷⁴ Philip Henderson. *Swinburne: Portrait of a Poet*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974, 109.

⁷⁵ Orlando 58.

Pater (61). In this Wharton has made him a mirror of herself and her own childhood. Wharton too read Ruskin as a child, her parents' library containing *Modern Painters*, *Seven Lamps*, and *Selections*. *The Stones of Venice* and *Walks to Florence* were added to the library by Wharton's father for her especial benefit. Wharton writes that "Ruskin fed me with visions of the Italy for which I had never ceased to pine," inspiring a life filled with European travel and numerous essays and books on Italy and Italian architecture.⁷⁶ Ruskin has cast the same spell on Archer, making him, on his honeymoon, point southward and comment rather wistfully to May, "There's Italy" (169). But Archer is only allowed to live out his dreams in books. May "disliked to move except for valid reasons," which surely would not include architectural trips to Italy (303). It is Dallas, the son of Archer's heart, who becomes an architect and marries an unconventional woman. Dallas designs Italian gardens and frequently travels to Europe just to enjoy its beauty. Archer lives to see the next generation easily attain everything that was out of his grasp and he is left with nothing but second-hand experiences gleaned from books and memories that have taken on the tone of books, such as Madame Olenska, who has become to Archer an "imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed" (300).

Walter Pater was greatly influenced by Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* and was a friend and contemporary of the Pre-Raphaelites, nicely adding to the holistic feel of Archer's reading list. Such touches show the skill with which Wharton built Archer's library, making him a fully realized person whose interests naturally lead him into related fields. This also reinforces the close connection between Archer and Wharton's libraries. Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, and P.G. Hamerton are all listed by Wharton as

⁷⁶ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 91.

favorites, though none of these writers of Italian art and architecture had as big an influence on her as Vernon Lee.⁷⁷

Wharton met Lee in 1894 and the two became fast friends, though Wharton always felt a little in awe of Lee. Wharton regarded Lee as “the first truly cultivated woman” she had ever met.⁷⁸ In response to a very positive review Lee had written on *The Valley of Decision*, Wharton wrote a letter that shows how Lee’s approval influenced her:

To tell you what pleasure your article on my book has given me I should have to go back to the days...when your *Euphorion* and *Eighteenth Century Studies* were letting me into that wonder world of Italy which I had loved since my childhood without having a key to it. To rehearse all this in detail would be delightful to me but tiresome to you; so you must take for granted the sensations with which I read your article, unless you can look back to a moment in your literary life when you heard yourself approved by the one person whose opinion you most value.⁷⁹

Lee’s influence was strong on all of Wharton’s Italian works, *The Valley of Decision* in particular. Lee also gave practical help with research for *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* and encouraged Wharton in all her writing throughout their long friendship. Lee and Wharton were both women of genius, haunted by difficult families, loneliness, and sexual repression.⁸⁰ Their bond was one of successful women finally having someone who could understand and support their art, albeit at a distance. By having Archer read *Euphorion*, the first book by Lee that she was touched by, Wharton has both paid a tribute to her friend and given a compliment to Archer.⁸¹ That Wharton admired Lee cannot be denied, and it is unlikely that she would have given her friend’s book to a literary pretender to

⁷⁷ While it almost certainly means nothing, it is interesting to note that all of the writers on the Italian Renaissance that Archer reads, with the exception of P.G. Hamerton, were homosexual.

⁷⁸ Lewis, *A Biography* 75.

⁷⁹ Penelope Vita-Finzi. “Italian Background: Edith Wharton’s debt to Vernon Lee.” *Edith Wharton Review*, 13:2 (1996), 16.

⁸⁰ Vita-Finzi 15.

⁸¹ *Euphorion* was not published until 1884, so its inclusion in *The Age of Innocence* is an anachronism. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

peruse. In that same vein, Archer is shown to have good taste and the same longing for the beauty of Italy that was so strong in Wharton.

Wharton pays tribute to another of her favorite authors by having Archer include her in his library: George Eliot. Wharton was a great admirer of Eliot, with *Middlemarch* being high on the list of her favorite English novels.⁸² In *The Writing of Fiction* she lists Eliot among “the great writers of fiction,” and calls her a writer “born with the richest gifts of any English novelist since Thackeray.”⁸³ Eliot lived a life of controversy, turning her back on her puritanical upbringing to live with a married man, George Henry Lewes. This mode of life is in stark contrast to her representations in fiction and the morals of her characters, especially those in *Middlemarch*. In an article Wharton wrote for *Bookman*, reviewing Leslie Stephen’s biography of Eliot, she comments that the novelist was

a conservative in ethics. She felt no call to found a new school of morals. A deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the claims of slowly acquired convictions and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books....All George Eliot’s noblest characters shrink with a peculiar dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism; yet her own happiness was acquired at such a cost.⁸⁴

This last sentiment is true of Wharton as well. She had a passionate affair with Morton Fullerton and left her loveless marriage, but Archer and Madame Olenska are not allowed such violations of social propriety. Archer shrinks from it, as if sins against decorum were as awful as murder. Better to miss “the flower of life” and to live a life of restless desperation than to go against the social norms (300). How conscious Wharton might have been of this connection between herself and Eliot is unknown, but it may be the reason she has put *Middlemarch* in Archer’s hands.

⁸² Lewis, *A Biography* 75, 86.

⁸³ Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* 49, 76.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *A Biography* 108.

The obvious parallels between Archer and Madame Olenska's situation and that of Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw make Archer's ownership of *Middlemarch* a form of life-reflecting fiction within the world of *The Age of Innocence* and that of fiction reflecting fiction in the real world. In Eliot's work Dorothea Brooke is caught in an unhappy marriage of her own making while pining away for her husband's nephew, Will Ladislaw. Ladislaw also loves Dorothea, but both are so honorable that they never even discuss their emotions, let alone act on them. With the death of Casaubon, Dorothea's husband, she and Ladislaw should have been free to act on their inclinations, but the fear that society might think that they had been lovers when Casaubon was still alive keeps them apart. Eventually, they are both able to overcome such morbid sensitivity and live happily ever after. By contrast, Archer is never able to jettison society's expectations. Unlike Dorothea and Ladislaw, Archer's opportunity to act comes before he is married. He has numerous opportunities to break his engagement with May, but never does so because he cannot stomach this breach of convention. Later, when Archer is about to ask May for release from their marriage bonds, she tells him of her pregnancy and her confession of it to Madame Olenska weeks ago. Like Casaubon and his will that stipulated that Dorothea could never marry Ladislaw and keep her money, May has trapped Archer at the moment of his release.

Middlemarch is part of the shipment of books Archer receives from London, along with *The House of Life*. It should be noted that Archer never reads *Middlemarch* during the action of the novel, instead being distracted by Rossetti's verses. It is interesting to consider what would have happened if Archer had read the stolid *Middlemarch* instead of the decadent and dreamy *The House of Life*. Would he have

learned anything from Dorothea and Ladislaw? Instead of going to St. Augustine and reinforcing his ties to May, would he have answered Madame Olenska's note and changed the direction of all three of their lives? Wharton has played on Archer's susceptibility to literature, placing two paths before him and letting that choice shadow him the rest of his days.

Along with *Middlemarch* and *The House of Life*, Archer received "a new volume of Herbert Spencer" in his bundle of books from London. Spencer was an English philosopher and prominent classical liberal political theorist, best known today for coining the phrase, "survival of the fittest." Spencer had a strong influence on the literature of his time, with many novelists addressing his ideas. George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Aldous Huxley, and D. H. Lawrence all referenced Spencer in their work. In the America of Archer's time Spencer's theory of social justice was popular among the wealthy, especially those within the Republican Party.⁸⁵ Spencer's idea that "each adult should accept the consequences of his nature and actions according to supply and demand" and that "people could not be protected from the results of their own folly" may resemble Wharton's view of Archer and the subsequent failure of his life.⁸⁶ Wharton was herself a reader of Spencer, and her characters who "struggle pathetically and unsuccessfully against their stifling surroundings" are the product of such philosophers as Spencer.⁸⁷ By reading Spencer and other works of anthropology and history Archer is able to see his society in its proper perspective, but he never translates his knowledge into action.

⁸⁵ James G. Kennedy. *Herbert Spencer*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978, 120.

⁸⁶ Kennedy 120.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *A Biography* 56-57.

Plays hold a certain amount of interest for Archer, though they do not have the same sway as books. By their very nature plays are social, especially in Archer's society, and they would not be able to function as an escape in the same way books can. With the exception of *Chastelard* (which is a closet drama and not meant for performance) and *Le Voyage de M. Perrichon* (which Archer saw while traveling alone in Paris), *Faust* and *The Shaughraun* are the only plays mentioned and they are both social events in the lives of The New York elite.

Much has been written on the use of *Faust* and *The Shaughraun* in *The Age of Innocence*, so I won't go into detail other than to stress how Archer's appreciation of these works show his true enjoyment of the arts and how willing he is to picture his real life as a reflection of these plays.⁸⁸ When *The Age of Innocence* opens, Archer is entering a theater during a production of *Faust* just as Madame Nilsson is singing the Daisy Song. As Madame Nilsson sings "He loves me—he loves me not—he loves me," Archer ponders how fitting this song is for his and May's new engagement (4). Indeed, he has no idea how fitting this song is to become, as his love for May flickers and fades throughout the novel. Archer then pictures a honeymoon in which he and May read *Faust* together, confusing the honeymoon with *Faust* itself. At this point Wharton introduces the parallel between Archer and Faust that is to continue throughout the novel. Archer himself does not seem to be aware of the similarities, though he is able to compare his and Madame Olenska's relationship with that portrayed in *The Shaughraun*.

⁸⁸ See James W Gargano. "Tableaux of Renunciation: Wharton's Use of *The Shaughraun* in *The Age of Innocence*." *Studies in American Fiction* 15 (1987): 1-11, Edwin M. Moseley. "The Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton's Weak Faust." *College English* 21 (1959): 157-160, and Linda Wagner. "A Note on Wharton's use of *Faust*." *Edith Wharton Newsletter* 3 (1986): 1-8.

A *New York Times* article written about the particular performance of *The Shaughraun* Wharton had in mind calls the play “one of the most original and brilliant [dramas] which the present generation has had the opportunity of seeing.”⁸⁹ While Wharton does not seem to think quite as highly of the play as the *Times* does, she comments on the “hackneyed sentiments and claptrap situations,” there is one particular scene in her opinion that elevates the play (98). Wharton describes the parting scene between the lovers in great detail, lingering over Montague’s secret kiss of Miss Dya’s hair ribbon. It is for this scene that Archer attends the play, mirroring Wharton’s own opinion of *The Shaughraun*.

On this occasion, despite the lack of any similarities, the parting scene reminds Archer of his previous leaving-taking of Madame Olenska. He is once again placing himself and Madame Olenska in a story that is not their own, looking for romance in a relationship that has not yet reached that level. Archer blames this on the Countess’s “mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience,” ignoring his own tendency to see his life reflected in fiction (100). Madame Olenska, an astute reader of both fiction and Archer, is able to see the comparison Archer is making and retorts in kind: “Do you think he will send her a bunch of yellow roses tomorrow morning?” It is here that Archer’s heart is lost. Madame Olenska is like himself, able to live in fiction. From this point on, Archer lives his life as a character in a tragic romance, feeling that he has the unspoken sanction of Madame Olenska. Archer is always to associate Madame Olenska with *The Shaughraun*, the ribbon scene coming to his mind as he watches her watching the ships pass by from her grandmother’s summer house. Only later is he to find out that she was aware of his presence the whole time,

⁸⁹ Gargano 3.

invalidating the comparison between her and Archer and that of the hero and heroine of the play. Archer later reenacts the ribbon scene with what he believes to be Madame Olenska's parasol, only to find it belongs to the largest of the Blenker girls. This humiliating parody shows how deeply Archer had fallen under his own delusions.

Orlando is correct in stating that Archer's "conception of life is fundamentally literary."⁹⁰ Books are part of his daily experiences; they provide a measure of how he judges himself and others, and how he gauges the progress of his own life. Through books the reader is shown that Archer is a romantic, well-educated, sometimes delusional and masochistic, product of his society who will never be able to break free. Books are both his freedom and his prison, showing him a better world and reinforcing his place in 1870's New York society. In the end books are all Archer has, his former life with Madame Olenska nothing more than a thrilling passage in an Octave Feuillet novel. Madame Olenska, the one symbol of a life lived in Archer's history, has become as distant and unattainable as a character in a book. Has Archer's literary life betrayed him into becoming a paper tiger or did it elevate him, for one brief moment, beyond what a man of his time, place, and experience could expect? He has loved more deeply than Lawrence Lefferts, seen beyond the social axioms of Sillerton Jackson, risen above the cruelty of Beaufort, and lived more than anyone else in his narrow social circle. Without a mind that craves literature, without the romance, knowledge and recklessness books fostered in him, Archer would not have had even this modest bit of experience to live on. Without books there would have been no sanctuary to become "the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities" (228). Archer would have had no inner life and no resources. He would have become all that he despises.

⁹⁰ Orlando 74.

Chapter Three: The Presence of Absence

You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture.

*Just get people to stop reading them.*⁹¹

~ Ray Bradbury

As in a murder mystery, Wharton left the reader clues about who Archer is through the volumes that populated his library. Like a modern day Dupin, the reader can gather titles and at the same time gather information about Archer's character. It is now time to track down what is omitted from this book list, or what seems to be omitted, and thereby explore the presence of absence to discover what these gaps of avoidance reveal about Archer's character. The relevance of this analysis derives from a basic insight that is implicitly at play throughout the novel: What readers feel is beyond them intellectually, what is below them socially, and what will simply bore them contributes to their makeup. Often what a person does not read is as important as what they do.

There are two types of writers that appear to be missing from Archer's library: Americans and women. In this he is an echo of Wharton, who rarely praised or patronized American or female writers. Much has been made of the biographical links between Archer and Wharton, similarities some scholars feel she deliberately insisted upon. More than any other novel she wrote, *The Age of Innocence* drew on Wharton's childhood, and Archer's age at the conclusion of the book is fifty-seven, the same as Wharton's age at the time she published the novel.⁹² In a very tangible way, Wharton and Archer grew up in the same society. Both were expected to read Hawthorne, marry

⁹¹ Ray Bradbury. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1953.

⁹² Cynthia Griffin Wolf. "The Age of Innocence : Wharton's 'Portrait of a Gentleman.'" *The Southern Review*, 12 (1976), 641.

someone in their set, and spend their holidays in Newport. Reading was a form of revolt for both author and character. Wharton's own passion for history, science, art, and fiction is reflected in Archer. In this way her own defiant intellectual loves are confirmed.

Clearly, a link between Archer and Wharton can be seen in the books they both admire, and this bond is strengthened through the books they both chose *not* to read. However, the omissions from Archer's library also show the point where Wharton and Archer split from one another – where Wharton continued to develop as a person and an artist, and where Archer began to stagnate and allow himself to be dominated by New York. The novel is, in a way, her own cautionary tale.

Among the elite of 1870's New York it was rather a scandalous thing to be a writer. It was not considered a suitable occupation for a gentleman and only a very few American writers were considered proper. As a child Wharton was not allowed to read Melville because of his "deplorable Bohemianism," Poe because he was a drunk, and Harriet Beecher Stowe because she was "common." Wharton's parents, like Archer's, "held literature in great esteem," but "stood in nervous dread of those who produced it."⁹³ In Mrs. Archer's view, the writers of the early 1870's might have "gentlemanly sentiments, but their origin, their appearance, their hair, their intimacy with the stage and the opera, made any Old New York criterion inapplicable to them" (88).

Maybe in part because of this bias, Wharton was never a great admirer of American writers. She had some regard for American poets and essayists, but American fiction never made her lists of favorite books. A notable exception is Henry James, whose novel *The Portrait of a Lady* appeared low on her list in 1909.⁹⁴ However, James did not

⁹³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 68.

⁹⁴ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 86.

consider himself an American writer, having spent his youth shuffling back and forth between Europe and American, and settling permanently in England at the age of 33. He became a British citizen in 1915. Regardless of James's status as an expatriate, Archer would not have had the chance to read him, as James's first novel was not published until 1875.⁹⁵ However, Wharton was still able to put James in *The Age of Innocence*, the title itself being a sly reference to his *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Archer's name an homage to James's heroine, Isabel Archer.⁹⁶ Ned Winsett, Archer's literary-minded friend, clinches James's presence in the novel by calling Archer and type "pictures on the walls of a deserted house: 'The Portrait of a Gentleman'" (108).⁹⁷

Other than Henry James, American writers were ignored almost entirely in *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton's treatise on good writing. In it, she calls Hawthorne "overrated" and Melville a "concocter of gallant yarns."⁹⁸ This is the only notice American writers are given. In *The Age of Innocence* only two American writers appear, and neither of them is on Archer's reading list. Both Archer and Wharton disliked Hawthorne, but he is one of the few American authors read by Janey, Mrs. Archer and other fashionable New Yorkers. Madame Olenska briefly discusses Poe, and Wharton's letters show that she had some appreciation for his writing. However, in the 1870's Poe's countrymen disdained him, due to poor editing of his work and the vilification of his

⁹⁵ In 1871 James published *Watch and Ward* as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly*. It was published in book form in 1878. *Watch and Ward* was scorned by both critics and James himself. James considered the more impressive *Roderick Hudson* to be his real first novel. Regardless, *Watch and Ward* was slight enough that it is very unlikely to have ever come to Archer's attention.

⁹⁶ According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Age of Innocence is the title of a well-known portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds which hangs in the National Gallery. It is the portrait of a lady...a pun that [Wharton] almost certainly intended." Wolff 642.

⁹⁷ Wolff 642.

⁹⁸ Benstock 153.

character, and he was read almost exclusively abroad.⁹⁹ Wharton was an admirer of Emerson and Whitman, both of whom she did not read until later in life, when she had left New York behind her.¹⁰⁰ Only after Wharton became an author herself was she able to rid herself of the prejudice of her narrow social circle. Archer shows a similar early gap in his reading. Both Emerson and Whitman would have been readily available to him in the early 1870's, but he does not seem to have taken any interest in them. For the most part he shadows his creator's early passion for continental literature. But these correspondences have a larger purpose in the novel, for Archer's dedication to foreign authors to the exclusion of his own countrymen reveals a fault in his library and in his character.

Archer is already part of the New York elite, but this is not enough for him. Archer "felt himself distinctly the superior ...of Old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even see a good deal more of the world than any other man of the number" (7). Because of his European travels and reading Archer feels that he is special, more seasoned and open-minded than his peers. He has cut off ties with the still new and struggling American literature scene. He reaches toward European literature, with its promise of ease and beauty, and the social benefits that come with it. To his peers he is seen as an educated and refined man with a full knowledge of the world. In Madame Olenska this promise of European sophistication is made real. Here is a woman who "lives for" art and beauty and to whom "poetry and art are the breath of life" (137, 140). By possessing Madame Olenska, Archer will reap the same benefits that he has taken from European literature. And in reaching for her over the very American May, Archer is

⁹⁹ Muller X.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *A Biography* 29.

motivated by the same impulse that causes him to choose European literature over American. By ignoring American writers, Archer has shown that he is not always a well-rounded reader and that he is easily swayed by the opinions of those around him. He may have an intimate knowledge of the drawing rooms of Octave Feuillet and Ruskin's Italy, but he knows very little of America outside of his own narrow circle. The transcendentalism of Emerson and the romanticized American spirit of Whitman are more foreign to Archer than the histories of Michelet. He is an American who knows nothing of the social forces that are shaping his country, a gap in knowledge that symbolizes his naivety and inability to truly know himself.

Archer might like to imagine that he is unconventional, but his reading habits have shown him to be a product of his time and of his elite social circle. He may read more than his peers, but he lets them dictate what he reads. Even when he thinks he is breaking the rules, by reading Rossetti instead of Hawthorne and by pursuing Madame Olenska while tied to May, Archer is conforming to social norms. Educated Americans read European literature and fashionable men pursued women other than their wives, as Archer's contemporary Lawrence Lefferts shows. Archer is well aware of how his class views writing and writers, and "accepted them as part of the structure of his universe" (89). He might dream of the literary salons of Europe, but Archer finds such things "inconceivable in New York and unsettling to think of" (89). He toys with the musical and theatrical clubs of New York and amuses himself with Ned Winsett, but to him they are not part of real life. He is no different than May, who likes to hear "him read aloud out of his poetry books the beautiful things that could not possibly happen in real life" (127). It is enough for her to dream of an early marriage and a trip to Europe, and it is

enough for Archer to dream of literary salons, but neither of them would want such events to happen in real life. They are content to follow American convention.

For Archer, a literary salon would be too foreign and bohemian to fit into his picture of New York. He mocks the Blenkers' literary nights, full of "fervid and dowdy women," but never thinks of enlivening the salon with his presence (89). He goes out of his way to set himself apart from the Blenkers, even though they would seem to be the only family in New York to which he would be able to relate on an intellectual level. It would horrify him to be classed with such literary reformers. Archer is upset when Madame Olenska patronizes Mrs. Struthers's Sunday nights, even though they are no different, more or less, than the European salons he romanticizes and likes to picture her participating in. To Archer, such activities are fine in Europe, but when in New York Madame Olenska should conform to New York ideas. He is indulgent of her living in a quarter given over to "people who wrote," but he understands why her family does not want her there and is worried about the image such an abode might give her (90).

European literature is far away and safe. American literature is dangerous in its nearness. You never know when you might come face to face with a dissipated author.

Despite his fear of the bohemian lifestyle, it is only in the company of men who have embraced this life that Archer is able to truly converse. Archer enjoys his talks with Ned Winsett, the only person with whom he can discuss literature and art, but keeps his distance and pities Winsett for his inability to understand how a true gentleman acts. He never reaches out to Winsett as an equal, and would never consider inviting him for dinner. Winsett may only be a failed author, but that is still too unrespectable for the New York drawing room. In Europe, Archer makes a connection with M. Rivière, another

failed writer, though one with better connections than Winsett. Archer is dazzled that M. Rivière has met Maupassant and Mérimée and can't imagine what a man of such distinction would do in New York. It is no place for a man "to whom good conversation appeared to be the only necessity" (174). To Archer, New York is both too good and not good enough for such a man. And as M. Rivière would never be in the inner circle of New York society, as Archer sees it, he might as well stay in Europe. Later, when Archer broaches the subject of inviting M. Rivière to dine, May dismisses the idea by calling M. Rivière "common," as Archer knew she would (175). Despite the true enjoyment he took in M. Rivière's company, Archer is willing to accept May's decree, as it is the only one someone of their social class can have. To Archer and others of his class, it is better to have a clear line separating people of quality and artists, no matter how entertaining the artist in question may be.

Wharton has used Archer to trace "how sedate and yet how unfulfilled she might have become had she failed to break free of that curiously attractive social prison."¹⁰¹ Archer's reading list reflects what Wharton's would have been if she had not had the courage to leave New York society and become a writer in her own right. This in turn reflects the kind of person she would have been: intelligent and well-read, but frustrated and unfulfilled; an American with no idea of what America really was; as unable to see change as May, incapable of growth, thinking all people are alike. Archer is Wharton's early-life doppelganger, one who never leaves New York and never has the courage or inclination to shelve Melville next to Mérimée in his library. Archer is all that Wharton feared for herself, but also what she misses in her middle and late-life expatriate status. The rules of Old New York might have been intellectually and emotionally stifling, but

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *A Biography* 431.

they were also safe and secure. By embracing a writing life Wharton turned her back forever on the innocent society of her youth. Like Madame Olenska, Wharton could never go home again. Archer is the part of Wharton that found home more important than the republic of the spirit.

When it comes to women authors, Wharton and Archer's reading habits are more complex. Emily Orlando points out that there are no American women writers in Archer's library, but this can be classed with Archer's avoidance of American literature in general. Wharton also had a certain disdain for American women, considering them "concerned with trifles, their interests narrow, their manners, taste, ideals, and judgments unformed."¹⁰² This opinion of American women is also unconsciously present in Archer, who considers May a child to be educated and led, but the Countess, who is French in all but name, as "mysterious" and full of "authority," "sureness," and "conscious power" (53). At the van der Luydens' dinner party Archer is struck with how "immature" the other women's faces look when compared to Madame Olenska's (54). It is the European woman that is worthy of attention and respect. Wharton may have left New York behind, but she was not able to dismiss the idea of other women, especially American women, as competition. Like Archer, Wharton had few close friends of her own sex and, while in New York, preferred the library to the ball room.

Orlando goes on to say that the women who do make it onto Archer's list have male pseudonyms.¹⁰³ This is true for George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) and Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), but Elizabeth Barrett Browning, except for some early poems and essays, always published under her own name. Barrett Browning was one of the most well-

¹⁰² Lewis, *A Biography* 348.

¹⁰³ Orlando 74.

known poets of her day and was respected by women, men, and fellow writers. She was a strong woman who defied her father by marrying and wrote in support of abolition and the Tuscan struggle for freedom. She was encouraged and supported by her husband in all her literary endeavors.

While Vernon Lee and George Eliot both published under assumed names, they did so only from the desire to be taken seriously, and were outed as women soon after they gained public notice. George Eliot revealed her sex after the publication of her immensely popular novel *Adam Bede*, published in 1859.¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that Archer, a reader who keeps up with literary news, would not know of a discovery already ten years old.

Vernon Lee's inclusion in *The Age of Innocence* is an anachronism, as she did not publish her first book until 1880 and *Euphorion* was published in 1884. Therefore it is impossible to know if Archer would have been aware that Lee was a woman. However, even though she adopted a pseudonym, Lee never took any pains to conceal her sex, giving a series of public lectures and signing her name Vernon Lee or Violet Paget as the mood took her. By the time *Euphorion* was published most critics were referring to Vernon Lee as "her."¹⁰⁵ It is logical to assume that if Archer is able to read *Euphorion* he would also be aware of the facts about the author that were available at the time of its publication.

Orlando surmises that Archer "doesn't seem terribly impressed" by *Middlemarch*, as he passes it by in favor of *The House of Life*.¹⁰⁶ However, this seems unfair, as Archer

¹⁰⁴ Rosemary Ashton. *George Eliot*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, x.

¹⁰⁵ Vineta Colby. *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, 147.

¹⁰⁶ Orlando 75.

also chooses not to read “a new volume of Herbert Spencer” and “another collection of Guy de Maupassant’s incomparable tales” (120). Since it was a “new volume” of Spencer, the reader can assume that Archer has read earlier works, and Archer must admire Maupassant if he considers his tales incomparable. Archer passed by *Middlemarch* and the other works not because he did not admire them, but because his state of mind was only open to Rossetti. Like Spencer, whose devotion to Newton’s ordered and mechanistic universe ignored the latest advances in cosmology, Archer preferred to follow the established literary pantheon of writers. Yet this pantheon included English women of letters and there is no reason to assume he does not return to *Middlemarch* with great enjoyment.

Orlando seems to be insinuating that Archer is sexist in his reading choices. While three women writers may seem rather scanty for a reading list today, in 1870 it in no way constituted a true bias. Wharton’s own reading list, as an educated person growing up in New York, includes few women, including Barrett Browning and Lee, both of whom Archer reads.¹⁰⁷ Both Wharton and Archer only read women whose work could be considered true literature. They did not read popular or domestic fiction by women, Wharton because her mother would not allow it and Archer because his reading list is a reflection of Wharton’s. Archer is not a sexist, but an elitist, a man who only reads the best fiction. Undoubtedly he missed a lot of good fiction because of this bias, but it was a bias built on snobbery and convention, not sexism. *The Age of Innocence* only depicts a slice of Archer’s life, little more than a year. In that time Archer reads three works by women, two of them brand new (beyond new in the case of *Euphorion*). It is not

¹⁰⁷ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 66.

unreasonable to assume that Archer's past contains the Brontes and that his future holds Virginia Woolf.

Though widely differing in their writing styles and subjects, the three women writers read by Archer have one thing in common: they lived uncommon lives. Barrett Browning defied her father by marrying and became a successful poet and activist, and a peer of the greatest male poets and writers of her time. George Eliot was the head of a literary journal, a rare occupation for a woman, and lived as the wife of a man who was married to another woman. Vernon Lee wrote serious aesthetic works and was open about her lesbianism. Wharton admired these women and acknowledged their freedom to live their lives as they wanted. Archer judged Barrett Browning, Eliot, and Lee as they would have wanted to be judged: by their literary value. Wharton believed that "only in a civilization where the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other" is it possible for men and women to mature.¹⁰⁸ Archer is irritated and surprised when he discovers in his own mind the conviction that "women ought to be free—as free as [men] are" (36). This idea goes against all his teaching and the way he has lived his life thus far. He can only have gotten the idea from books. It is this feeling that draws him to Madame Olenska who, more than any other woman he knows, lives her life as she wishes. Because of this her life is troubled and often unhappy, but she is her own person. She married who she wished and when that did not work out, acknowledged that she had made a mistake. Like Archer, she often succumbed to her family's wishes, but when it really counts, she follows her own inclination. Archer admires her intelligence and strength, the same qualities that draw him to accomplished women writers. He can admire them without

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *A Biography* 348.

disrupting his life. Archer is progressive enough to read and admire women writers, but he is not able to get over his bias of Americans. He is a man on the cusp, able to get over some of the biases of his society, but forever trapped by others.

What Archer does and does not read is strongly influenced by Wharton's own childhood in New York. Wharton did not read American literature and so Archer does not read it. Wharton read few women writers, and Archer follows suit. In Archer, Wharton wanted to explore the kind of person she would have been if she had remained content to follow convention and stay in New York. Her desire to have Archer's reading parallel her own was so strong she had him read Vernon Lee's *Euphorion*, an important book in her educational development, despite the fact that it would not be published for many years after 1870. What Archer did not read shows the gaps in his education, his biases, and his conventionality. Archer is an object lesson: an intelligent, well-read person who allows himself to be smothered by the rules of his society. He is Wharton before she leaves New York and becomes a writer, what Wharton could have become.

Madame Olenska is the second reader in *The Age of Innocence*, a follower of Poe and a reader of Realism, and a woman who lives her life in Europe because she is too big for New York. This is who Wharton became. While Madame Olenska has a wider, more exciting life than Archer, where she is able to live for art and beauty, she is forever an exile from her home. Madame Olenska's turbulent return to America may very well parallel Wharton's own experiences or at least her fears. While never embroiled in any illicit love affairs with New York socialites, Wharton's life of letters would have forever made her an oddity in New York, and her divorce would have confirmed this opinion. By the time of Wharton's divorce in 1913 it had become more common in America, but

Wharton, like Old New York, could only see it as ghastly. She was worried about how she would be viewed by the social circles at home and shrank from any contact with her American peers.¹⁰⁹ Her fears took the form of a short story, “Autres Temps...,” about a woman returning to New York, years after her scandalous divorce, to comfort her daughter who was going through her own divorce, only to find that she is still an object of scorn and embarrassment.¹¹⁰ While Wharton and Madame Olenska may have experienced life in a way that Archer can only dream about, they are forever homeless. Archer’s life is boring and confined, but he is part of a close knit society, he is accepted by and part of Old New York. Like Madame Olenska, a part of Wharton might have wished she could “forget everything” and “become a complete American again,” to become the person she was when she scorned American writing and read Vernon Lee (56). To go home again.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, *A Biography* 333.

¹¹⁰ Wharton, “Autres Temps...” *Collected Stories 1911-1937*.

Chapter Four: The Library

“I would be most content if my children grew up to be the kind of people who think decorating consists mostly of building enough bookshelves.”¹¹¹

~Anna Quindlen

The revelation of character through books in *The Age of Innocence* extends beyond the actual books and into the rooms – especially the library – in which the books are kept. The library serves as an introduction to the characters, with predilections, values, and social status being revealed through the decoration and use of the room. Where are books placed in a home? What is the setup of the library? How important is this room to the family? All these questions play an important role in separating the actual booklovers from the merely pretentious. Archer is always in his library: reading, thinking, discussing, making decisions that never hold. His dependence on books has made the library the inevitable center of his life. The library has become almost a confidant to Archer, the only place where he can be comfortable and freely express himself.

Wharton was immersed in the world of interior decorating, and the aesthetics of a house held great importance for her. Throughout her life she owned many homes, usually more than one at a time, and dedicated huge amounts of time and money to their adornment. Wharton’s first book, *The Decoration of Houses*, was a how-to manual. Libraries in particular held a special significance for Wharton, with pages of her autobiography and her letters being dedicated to the descriptions of libraries she inhabited and those belonging to her friends and acquaintances. This is not surprising, considering

¹¹¹ Anna Quindlen. “Enough Bookshelves.” *New York Times*, 7 August 1991.

how much of Wharton's childhood was spent in her father's library, her clearest memories always being set in that room, "squatting on the thick Turkey rug...and dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion."¹¹² To Wharton, like Archer, the library was "a secret retreat" where she wished always to be alone, away from her mother and the social pressures of Old New York.¹¹³ Wharton's identification of the house, especially specific rooms, as the extension of an owner's personality, can be seen in *The Decoration of Houses*, and later in her fiction. By contrast "The Fulness of Life" likens a woman's nature to "a great house full of rooms," a comparison she makes throughout her literary career.¹¹⁴ Considering the importance her father's library played in her life, and the great amount of time and care she lavished on her own homes, the transition from the actual decoration of houses to the metaphorical role it played in her fiction was inevitable.

Wharton's preoccupation with interior decorating has not gone unnoticed. In her article, "The Moral Significance of Living Space: The Library and Kitchen in *The House of Mirth*," Keiko Beppu shows how the library at Bellomont is a mirror of its occupants' casual dismissal of books and learning, with its outdated decorations and lack of contemporary literature.¹¹⁵ It is merely a meeting place for lovers and gentlemen who want a quick nap. In contrast, Archer's libraries (in his mother's home, and in his and May's home) play a much more intellectual and spiritual role. They are places for discussion, for revelations, for watching children grow up. They are the center around which everything important in Archer's life revolves. In *The House of Mirth*, Lawrence

¹¹² Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 69.

¹¹³ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 70.

¹¹⁴ Wharton, "The Fulness of Life" *Collected Stories 1891-1910* 14.

¹¹⁵ Keiko Beppu. "The Moral Significance of Living Space: The Library and Kitchen in *The House of Mirth*." *Edith Wharton Review*, 14.2 (1997), 5.

Selden's library has the same appeal, acting as a social and spiritual nexus. The library is where Selden and Lily first get to know each other and where Lily burns the letters that might have saved her life. It is the place that shelters an intelligent and well-read, and ultimately a cowardly, man from the world.

Every library in *The Age of Innocence* is revealing. Beaufort's library is the height of New York fashion, furnished with "Buhl and malachite" and richly hung with "Spanish leather" (19).¹¹⁶ No mention is made of the books or even the book cases. This is a room where gentlemen chat and put on their dancing gloves. According to Wharton, "the richly adorned room in which books are but a minor incident is, in fact, no library at all."¹¹⁷ To Archer, Beaufort's library, like Beaufort himself, is vulgar and an intrusion upon the values of Old New York. It is later shown that Beaufort's library spoke truly of him, when he is called "illiterate" and considers writers nothing more than "paid purveyors of rich men's pleasures" (89). To Beaufort writing is merely another way men make money, no different than the law or money lending. Literature has no intrinsic value in his eyes, no value at all beyond the price paid at the booksellers. His crass library where books are no more important than the chairs or wall hangings symbolize the purely mercantile value of literature to Beaufort. Books are present because he is clever enough to understand what props he needs to appear part of Old New York culture, but there is no feeling or understanding of what place books are supposed to play in the life of a gentleman.

However, while Beaufort may have no care for literature, he is not uncultured. He has lived a wider life than Archer, is able to regard local prejudices with "careless

¹¹⁶ Buhl is an inlaid decoration of tortoiseshell, yellow metal, and white metal made famous by French cabinetmaker Andre Charles Boulle.

¹¹⁷ Edith Wharton. *The Decoration of Houses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, 152.

contempt” and associates with artists and actors (119). Beaufort has seen life from all angles, has associated with rich and poor, has risen from humble origins to become the richest man in New York. Beaufort is a kindred spirit to Mr. Rosedale from *The House of Mirth*, too rich and well married to have his ancestry called into question any longer. Beaufort has experience and self-confidence, qualities Archer both admires and scorns. Archer despises Beaufort for consorting with dancers and singers, for his sexual ease that is implicit in his hanging of the much-discussed nude “Love Victorious” in his drawing room, and for having no roots in New York. This dislike of Beaufort comes from more than distaste for his many affairs; it comes from his intrinsic dislike of any foreign presence in New York, especially one that does not follow the rules. Archer is astute enough to understand what advantages Beaufort has over him and why he might be appealing to a woman of the world such as Madame Olenska. In Beaufort’s library Archer is surrounded by what he sees as proof that Beaufort will never belong in New York and will never be an equal, socially or intellectually. While Archer can’t strike out at Beaufort, he can take a malicious joy in his hollow library.

Madame Olenska’s use of books in her home reflects her character just as surely as Beaufort’s library does his. Archer notes that Madame Olenska has “books scattered about her drawing room (a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of place’)” (90). In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton discusses drawing rooms that are “treated as a family apartment” by having books scattered about. Conversely, she feels that drawing rooms that ban books and other articles of life give a “vague feeling that no drawing-room is worthy of the name unless it is uninhabitable.”¹¹⁸ Unlike the library, drawing rooms are not usually places where real life happens. They are

¹¹⁸ Wharton, *Decoration* 126.

showrooms, with dust covers on the furniture and gauze on the mantel, as in the van der Luydens' Madison Avenue drawing room.

Madame Olenska is both a booklover and a revolutionary housekeeper in the fashion of Wharton herself. By having books in the drawing room she is showing that books are not dangerous or compromising. She is also breaking down the barriers between the library, the traditional male room, and the drawing room, the domain of the female. With an artistic turn of the hand and a graceful grouping of chairs and tables, Madame Olenska has created a warm and inviting space, a direct contrast to the chilly drawing rooms that dominate New York. In the absence of an actual library, she has created a hybrid, a room where both men and women can feel comfortable and intimate. Archer is charmed by the Countess's little room and makes himself at home, claiming an armchair, choosing which will be his corner, as Madame Olenska points out (64). Archer is not the only one to feel the allure of this appealing room. Winsett refers to the house as "an oasis" and the Duke, the van der Luydens' British cousin, urges Mr. van der Luyden to go see how "cleverly she's arranged her drawing room." Mr. van der Luyden is struck by her gift for arranging flowers and wonders why his gardener is not as talented (77). Madame Olenska's drawing room is one that naturally makes people call the current fashions into question.

While enjoying the simple comforts of this room Archer wonders how May will arrange her drawing room and imagines it will be a copy of her mother's, with "purple satin and yellow tuftings" and "sham Buhl tables" (62). He can expect nothing revolutionary from May. The drawing room in his house will remain a cold, insipid space. When Archer hears that Madame Olenska is to leave her little house, "a pang shot

through him at the memory of his lamplit hours in the low-studded drawing room” (134). This library/drawing room has been more of a refuge for him than his own home will ever be. The peculiar makeup of the room attracts Archer, much like the foreignness in Madame Olenska calls to his hidden self. Archer is attracted to the touch of otherness in the everyday. Madame Olenska is American, and so has essentially the same values as himself, but is different enough that she stands out from her contemporaries. Archer is pleased at Ned Winsett’s tale of Madame Olenska’s kindness to his little boy, not because it is anything extraordinary (he thinks that “any woman would have done as much for a neighbour’s child”) but because the Countess was in such a hurry to help that she “rushed in bareheaded” and “dazzled poor Mrs. Winsett into forgetting to ask who she was” (106). Madame Olenska and her cozy library/drawing room are a perfect blend of the familiar and the unique. There is no conscious effort on Madame Olenska’s part to build such a room; it’s an organic growth, an extension of her personality, without design or artificiality. In this room, so different than the ones that have been the backdrop of his everyday life, Archer can let the part of him that yearns for more than New York and an alliance with a nice girl, breathe.

Beppu notes that May also breaks down barriers by asserting her right to be in Archer’s library. Unlike Archer’s sister who “hovers on the threshold, afraid to intrude [on] his studies,” May makes a place for herself.¹¹⁹ By asserting her right to be in Archer’s library, May is securing her place in Archer’s life and stressing the improbability of Madame Olenska taking her place. She has been a part of Archer’s library since the beginning of the novel, with her picture adorning the corner table of Archer’s library in his mother’s house and later in his library in the house he and May

¹¹⁹ Beppu 6.

share. Archer might find her presence stifling, but he has the foresight to install moving curtains in the library, allowing him to get a breath of fresh air and a respite from May's company. As a married woman, May has a right to be in her husband's library. It is her "vigilant hand" that trims the lamps and keeps the fire alive (37). May might intrude with her workbasket, but to Archer the library will always be his, with May nothing but a domestic presence "seated beside *his* table, under *his* lamp" (256, my emphasis).

Archer's library in his mother's house, which he inherited from his father, is "Gothic" in appearance with "steel statuettes of The Fencers" and "photographs of famous pictures" on the mantelpiece (36-37). This library mirrors Wharton's father's library, the library where Wharton learned to love books, with its "heads of vizored knights" on the mantel and "green damask" walls.¹²⁰ The libraries in Wharton's fiction often emulated her father's, from Archer's Gothic library to Lawrence Selden's "dark but cheerful" library, "with its walls of books" and "pleasantly faded Turkey rug," all details that mirror exactly her childhood library in New York.¹²¹ Wharton's childhood library was small, but full of well-chosen volumes that aimed at a classical education. Both of Archer's libraries are well-filled, with "rows and rows of books," and "the writing table heaped with books" (37, 74). We have seen that Archer's reading habits were eclectic and that a library of his building would not be a "book-dump," Wharton's term for libraries built with no eye toward stocking them with the best literature available.¹²²

When Archer and May move into the greenish-yellow house after their marriage, May sets to decorating with a fury, cramming the drawing room with knickknacks of all description and placing the Jacqueminot roses in a large "mound" on the piano, the same

¹²⁰ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 64.

¹²¹ Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 6-7.

¹²² Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 326.

type of flower Madame Olenska scatters tastefully around her own drawing room (61, 284, 288). Wharton abhorred the “modern litter of knick-knacks” and the last chapter of *The Decoration of Houses* is dedicated to convincing people to go without them.¹²³ May decorates her home exactly as everyone else in her set has. There is no “scent of some far-off bazaar” or flowers in slender vases as at Madame Olenska’s (62). As he predicted, Archer has spent his life passing “through a Pompeian vestibule into a hall with wainscoting of varnished yellow wood” (62). Archer has lived in a house that goes against his own aesthetic, one that does not say anything about his character. However, he does have the library to drape as he pleases.

As Lily Bart said, lamenting the lack of a place of her own, “If I could only do over my aunt’s drawing-room I know I should be a better woman.”¹²⁴ Having a place of your own and the power to do what you will with it, can make up for a lot of ills. Archer may have only one room that he controls, but he makes the most of it. Going against “family doubts and disapproval,” Archer decorates his library with “a dark embossed paper, Eastlake bookcases, and ‘sincere’ armchairs and tables” (178). He rejects the “immense glazed bookcases of mahogany” that adorn the “venerable” houses on Fifth Avenue for a fresher, contemporary look (23). Archer, like many educated people of his time, may have read and admired Charles Locke Eastlake’s controversial book *Hints on Household Taste*, published in 1872. According to Eastlake, furniture should be “functional, unostentatious, simple” and “honestly constructed without sham or pretense.”¹²⁵ Eastlake’s style was a reaction against the bric-a-brac of the Victorian era. It

¹²³ Wharton, *Decoration* 153.

¹²⁴ Wharton, *The House of Mirth* 8.

¹²⁵ Mary Jean Smith Madigan. “The Influence of Charles Locke Eastlake on American Furniture Manufacture, 1870-1890.” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 10 (1975), 1.

goes against all style in New York in 1870, though soon enough the rest of America would follow Archer in his emulation of Eastlake. What is important is that the library is the one room that reflects Archer's tastes and desires, a true reader's library, while the rest of the house, and of Archer's life, belongs solidly to May. To Archer the library is "homelike and welcoming" in a way the rest of the house never will be (37). When May tidies the library in preparation for Madame Olenska's farewell party it appears to Archer as an "alien countenance composed into a polite grimace," a reflection of how Archer feels under May's gentle but firm hand (284). That this relentless tidying takes place before the party that will send Madame Olenska out of Archer's life is telling. May is asserting her place in Archer's life with a vengeance, invading the most male of rooms with her own ideas of what is permissible. Her presence is so strong that Archer abandons the library, where he often dreams of Madame Olenska and a life outside of New York, for that night, taking shelter in his dressing room.

To Archer the library is a place of reflection and peace, a port away from the storm of life. Before and after the great and small events of his life Archer can be found in the library, as though gathering his strength for the trials ahead. Books and the room that housed them became so closely intertwined to Archer that each became a symbol for the other. While there might not always be time to escape into a book, the library is always convenient. Before his and May's engagement is announced at the Beauforts' ball, Archer lingers in the library, a free man for the last time (19). It is in the library that Archer first realizes that his and May's marriage could become like those he sees all around him: "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (38). This sham state of marriage terrifies

Archer, who aches for something real in his life. It is this fear that drives him to Madame Olenska, as she has the freedom of judgment that May has been trained not to possess, but this fear also keeps them apart. Archer abhors the idea of becoming another Lawrence Lefferts, flitting from one meaningless affair to another. In the library he can see the person he wants to become and the life he wants to lead; outside he once again becomes Newland Archer, obedient to the rules of New York. In his library Archer feels the hopelessness of his and May's marriage and the possibilities that exist for him and Madame Olenska. He stays up all night "pursuing" Madame Olenska, but in the morning, away from his library, such hopes seem nothing more than dreams (120-121). He thinks of his office, the family pew, and above all May: the things that seem to be the "truth" and "reality" of his life, but are actually phantoms (122). Life with May will not be marital bliss and a respectable place in the community will not make up for the lack of intellectual stimulation such a life promises. Later in the novel such ideas prove to be as much delusion as the world where he and Madame Olenska will "be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other," where "nothing else on earth will matter" (251). Archer speaks truly when he tells the Countess "I don't know what you mean by realities" (251). To Archer reality is ephemeral, his own actions constantly changing what is and what is not possible. Archer's dream in the library of a life with Madame Olenska is possible, until he presses May to move up their marriage, making a break with her almost impossible. As soon as Archer realizes a reality requiring disruption of his circumscribed world, he changes it.

While individual books appear less often in the narrative after Archer and May's marriage, the library becomes a stronger force in Archer's life. After his meeting with

Madame Olenska in Boston, Archer finds sanctuary in his club's deserted library, drawing strength from the mere presence of the books (213). Later, after his fight with Sillerton Jackson over Madame Olenska's alleged links with Beaufort, Archer retreats to his library to nurse his wounded feelings (230). Indeed, Archer's appearance in a library can always be linked to Madame Olenska and a battle he is fighting with himself or someone else over her. Archer is not only fighting to justify Madame Olenska to others, he is justifying her to himself, weighing whether she is worth throwing over New York for. His two natures are struggling to reconcile, to decide once and for all what he will do with his life. Archer's fight with Sillerton Jackson and others represents his own internal struggle about what his eventual fate will be.

Archer can be found in his library after his final private meeting with the Countess, and it is there that he finds out that she is leaving New York for Paris, breaking off their long-anticipated rendezvous (272, 279). And it is in this room, where Archer has come to "shut himself up," that May reveals that she is pregnant, and the final lock is put on Archer's prison (295). May has shown Archer that the library is not always a haven, a place away from realities. He must face the harshest reality of his life, that there is indeed no world for him and Madame Olenska to escape to, in the very room that has been a shelter and comfort to him. In that instance the library, like his marriage, has become a comfortable prison, where he can do nothing more than pretend he is free. The library, like books themselves, is a place of knowledge. Archer should have been prepared for the eventual revealing of ugly truths and inevitable compromises. He allowed himself to imagine that he would somehow escape with Madame Olenska without hurting May or offending the rules of his society. His imagination, like his library, has become a prison,

distracting him from making positive changes in his life. By this crucial point in the narrative, all of Archer's coping mechanisms have turned on him.

The last chapter of *The Age of Innocence*, set twenty-six years after Madame Olenska's departure from New York, opens with Archer in his library. While the rest of the house has remained the same, much as May had done before her death, the library has been "done over" by Archer's son Dallas. The new style reigns, except for the "old Eastlake writing table," a remnant of Archer's youth and a tie to the library where he spent so much time thinking of Madame Olenska (301). Archer's inability to give up this desk implies that it is Dallas's will, not that of his father, that is the catalyst for the library being made over. Like May, Archer might wish for some things to stay the same. His refusal to allow his library to be completely changed foreshadows his refusal to enter into a new relationship with Madame Olenska. He might allow Dallas to lead him to the brink of total chance, but in the end he will choose to keep his desk and to not visit Madame Olenska. He is, as he says to Dallas, "old-fashioned" (312). After years of dreaming in his library it is safer for Archer to sit outside Madame Olenska's house and imagine the scene within. It is "more real" to dream than to act (313).

The place the library has taken in Archer's life over the last twenty-six years, and all it symbolizes, is made perfectly clear by Wharton. It has been "the scene of [Archer's] solitary musings and of all the family confabulations" and "the room in which most of the real things of [Archer's] life had happened" (298). Archer's private life, his family life, and his professional life have played out in this sacred room. And, while "sitting alone at night in his library," Archer also dreams of once again meeting the Countess Olenska and of "the life of art and study and pleasure that filled each mighty artery to bursting" (307).

Archer might dream of freedom, but he will spend his life in the library, no longer a fortress of solitude, fulfilling his obligations to his family and his society. Archer has learned to fuse together the two parts of his life by making one nothing more than a dream. He is now, like May was earlier, the one who is content to listen to poetry and dream of “the beautiful things that could not possibly happen in real life” (127).

To most men of Archer’s time the library is nothing more than a masculine hideaway, a place to smoke and put their feet up. But to Archer the library is the beating heart of his life, the only place where he can both remain himself and still function as May’s husband (even after her death) and the representative of the Archer family. The library is more than a place; it is a state of being where Archer retreats when the world is bleak and unforgiving. To underscore the importance of the library, Wharton has Archer build an inner library, deep in his soul, that is very dear to him and to which he withdraws when Madame Olenska is cut off from his life.

...he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions. (228)

Like the woman in “The Fulness of Life” Archer’s nature has become a series of rooms, and “in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits along and waits for footsteps that never come.”¹²⁶ It is within this inner library that he shelters all he holds dear. Since his physical library has shown itself to belong to May and the children as much as it does to him, Archer is forced to push Madame Olenska into a tiny space in his brain where no one can get at her. He has done such a good job of hiding Madame Olenska and all she

¹²⁶ Wharton, “The Fulness of Life” *Collected Stories 1891-1910* 14.

symbolizes that he is shocked that Dallas knows of his connection to her. She belongs in his mental library, not in the real world where his memory might be tainted. That his imagery would take the form of a library shows his deep affection for the institution of books.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

*I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.*¹²⁷

~Jorge Luis Borges

Few in the world value books more than writers do. They have an understanding of literature that it is hard for a non-writer to grasp – an awareness of the importance of words and stories, and their place in society. Writers are inspired by books to produce fictions of their own, and their opinions of books are sought by magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction writers. A casual perusal through any bookstore will reveal shelves of books about what writers read – lists of their favorite books, and essays on what writing has inspired them. Therefore, when a writer has one of his own characters read a book, it generally means something. To pass over such a detail, to ignore the clues carefully placed, is to deprive oneself of the full meaning of a work. Every action, item, and movement in a novel contributes to the end, to the purpose and meaning of the work. A character in a novel might toss a book aside, think nothing of having an empty library, or merely note a title in passing. But to the writer, and so also to the reader, these actions are of great significance. Books are almost universally important to writers, and so their presence in fiction is rarely casual and is almost always going to have a meaning beyond that of a mere prop. Books and reading contribute to and define the thematic structure of whatever fiction they appear in.

There can be little question of the value of books to Edith Wharton. In her autobiography she lists pages of books and authors that were important in her

¹²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges. “Poem of the Gifts.” *Selected Poems*. Trans. Alastair Reid. New York: Penguin, 2000.

development. Throughout her life she made lists of her favorite books, wrote often to her friends about her latest literary finds, and personally cataloged her entire library. As illustrated in Chapter One, her letters and writing show how books were a coping mechanism, a channel for lovemaking, and the path to finding herself. Through reading Wharton was able to see that there were societies much broader than her own, a whole world where a woman of her interests and talents could flourish. In this world peopled with writers she found friends, acceptance, and success beyond whatever hollow societal triumphs she had been raised to expect. Wharton loved the material culture of reading and writing, turning it into a ritual that brought her comfort and pleasure. Every morning she would lie in her ornate bed, propped up by pillows and dressed in a fashionable dressing gown, and write until noon. Not until this ceremony had been observed, often even while traveling or visiting friends, would she begin her day. She took joy in the simple, tactile act of writing: reeling off pages of fiction, composing endless letters, or making lists of her favorite books and authors. This was the center of her real life, a life where books always played a central role, and this is reflected in her fiction.

This study has analyzed only one work by Wharton, but I believe a look at the majority of her novels will show the same attention to books that can be seen in *The Age of Innocence*. Newland Archer is not Wharton's only creation to share the author's love of reading. Many other characters have been changed, as Wharton was, and set aside from their peers by that love. Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, Ralph Marvel in *The Custom of the Country*, Laura Testvalley in *The Buccaneers*, Ethan Frome in the novel of the same name, and Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* can all be defined by their love of reading and writing, and their attachment to their libraries. In *Summer*,

Charity Royall is trapped in a library she hates, surrounded by books she has never read, while Harney knows all the books intimately and so knows how their romance must end. A more in-depth study of these characters' reading habits, and that of dozens of other characters spread throughout Wharton's books and short stories, can lead to a better understanding of the individual works and of Wharton's oeuvre. Throughout her writing Wharton has built a world where people can be defined by what they are able to find in books. To some people books are ornaments, and these people are largely ornamental themselves. To others books are objects of hate or distaste, and these people will never understand the world around them, never break through the thin shell of their own wants to see how much life has to offer. There are people who want to learn from books, to access the life of the mind, but are incapable of higher thought and understanding. And then there are people like Wharton herself, who are inspired by books, who live in books, and, for good or ill, can't live without them. To Wharton, the true book lover reacts to life differently than the casual or popular reader or the person who does not read at all. The human condition is reflected in what, how, and why her characters read and what they do with that knowledge.

This is not to say that it is only through books that Wharton has given her characters depth and intelligence. The majority of her short stories never mention books, and many of the liveliest and brightest characters in her novels are not prone to reading (e.g., Mattie Silver, Sophy Viner). I only mean to say that when books are present in her fiction, Wharton puts them to good use. Writers can use books to flesh out their characters or imply meaning they don't want to show through action or state through narration. Books can also reinforce ideas and perceptions of characters that have been

shown through other vehicles. We don't need to see Ahab's reading list to know that he is monomaniacal, but a library full of titles like *Pursuing the Whale*, *Nimrod of the Sea*, *Men and Whales*, and "On the Capture of Whales by Means of Poison" would provide valuable clues.

In my research I have found only one scholar, Emily Orlando, who discusses the link between Newland Archer and his reading material. Indeed, Orlando's article seems to be the only work that analyzes what *any* Wharton character reads, and this is not the main focus of her study. Numerous biographers have commented on Wharton's laundry lists of titles in her autobiography and letters, and researchers have written on the connection between Wharton and her characters (especially Newland Archer), but these elements have never been brought together. Why has such an important element of Wharton's writing, with obvious links to her own life, been left unexamined? One obvious answer is that characters are fictional and so they never really make any choices when it comes to reading. Their reading is passed over, while Wharton's own is analyzed under a microscope, because their reading can never rise beyond the fictional. In a superficial analysis of fictional characters, books might appear to be nothing but props put in their hands. But this is not true. To Wharton, books and libraries have their own stories to tell. In *The Age of Innocence* books function as symbols, allusions, and metaphors. They are living material in the text, speaking for the characters and the writer who has placed them.

As I have shown through my study of Newland Archer, in Wharton's fiction books define the man. Archer has used books his whole life to set himself apart from his contemporaries: he is a bit smarter, deeper, and worldlier than the rest. His is a mind

wasted in Old New York, and he uses this power, often subconsciously, to assert his superiority over the rest of his social group, especially over the women in his life.

Archer's mother and sister, as well as May, are all impressed by his reading tastes, and Archer does not discourage their admiration. They never question his superiority or the fineness of his mind and never attempt to reach the same great heights of learning. They are content with the fiction deemed appropriate for their station and leave Ruskin and Spencer to Archer, who has grown a bit lonely in his academic tower. Archer is caught in a society where he has no one to discuss his interests and passions with; he has no close friends or confidants. His intellectual loneliness has caused him to live inwardly, to pursue the fullness of life in the pages of books, rather than in the real world.

In contrast Madame Olenska has lived her whole life among art and books, among people she could discuss such things with. She has not been stunted in her growth the way Archer has. A fully realized person, Madame Olenska is able to meld her two halves, artistic and practical, into an aesthetically pleasing whole. She serves as a reading counterpoint to Archer, one whose literary awareness extends rather than constrains life's opportunities. Her reading life heightens the reader's awareness of Archer's tragic limitations. Archer's love of books, his infatuation with Rossetti and Dante, have prepared him to love Madame Olenska, to worship her as the only physical representation of art and beauty his society has produced, but it has also left him unprepared for the realities of life. In the end, books can only take Archer so far. They have given him the desire for a wider world, but his insular existence has taken that desire and warped it, turning him into a man who can neither live in the stifling environment of Old New York or in the freer world beyond. His unconsummated romance with Madame Olenska is like

a play, a fantasy of seduction that keeps him alive in a stultifying society, but must eventually come to an end. Archer had a chance at a life lived for art and beauty, a chance few in his society have, but his inability to use the knowledge he gleaned from books has left him trapped. Archer is forever a man who will live across two broken planes, the literal dimensions of society and the figurative dimensions of literature, always running side-by-side but never intersecting.

Wharton has used books to represent both Archer's triumphs and failures in life. He read and understood enough to know that life held more than he was capable of getting in Old New York, but not enough to show him how to escape. Books showed why Archer reacted differently from the people around him to his marriage, to Madame Olenska, and to his society. He has learned that there is more to life than marriage to a charming girl: there is the stimulation of companionship with an equal, the thrill of learning, and the joy of creating. To his mother and sister his marriage can only bring joy, as he is aligning himself with his own type. Such a marriage only appeals to half of Archer's nature. The part of Archer that has been nurtured on books rebels against this practical and uninspiring arrangement.

It is natural that Wharton would explore the human condition in such a way, as books are the reason she was able to escape from a life similar to that of Archer. Archer and May's marriage can be seen as a reflection of Wharton's parents: a practical, unimaginative woman and a bookish man who could have been a poet if not for his discouraging wife. Through her marriage with Teddy, Wharton almost fell into this same trap, only her brief encounters with Walter Berry giving her "a fleeting hint of what the

communion of kindred intelligence might be.”¹²⁸ This hint is all important and Wharton turned it into the focal point of *The Age of Innocence*. Madame Olenska is Archer’s Walter Berry. Both Berry and the Countess inspire Archer/Wharton to leave society and uninspiring marriages behind, but it is only through the mechanisms of Archer/Wharton that this can be done. The core of Wharton’s marital problems was Teddy’s indifference to literature and his lack of an active inner life that this indifference represented.¹²⁹

Archer is disillusioned with May for the same reason; he sees her as a hollow half-person, unable to see beyond her narrow social circle. Wharton was able to find a kind of freedom by following “the fleeting hint” toward a life peopled with intellectual equals. She struggled “for an individual existence,” letting her writing lead her away from Teddy and the social obligations he represented.¹³⁰ Archer allowed himself to be led down a different path, a life of social obligations with snatched moments of beauty in the library, a life that could so easily have been Wharton’s. It took her years to find the courage to divorce Teddy and live a life in Paris, often with Berry. This is a courage Archer never found. Paris and Madame Olenska are forever beyond his reach.

Wharton’s own experiences taught her the versatility of books, the part they play in establishing character and in defining a person’s part in life. A life of nothing but literature led Ralph Marvel to suicide; a touch of literature gave Ethan Frome a wretched marriage; and a life of teaching literature led Laura Testvalley to loneliness and wandering. In Wharton’s writing, books give depth to characters but they can’t repair loneliness. Often a love of literature only makes characters more cognizant of their solitude and wretchedness. According to the Wharton scholar Hermione Lee, Wharton

¹²⁸ Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 107.

¹²⁹ Lewis, *The Letters* 261.

¹³⁰ Lewis, *The Letters* 261.

“in many ways had an unhappy life, but she found great satisfaction in her work.”¹³¹ Like her fictional characters, Wharton’s love of literature did not give her a perfect life, but it did give her a deeper one.

For a lover of books it’s a joy to be admitted into someone’s library: to run your hands over familiar spines, the sense of superiority when your fingers snag a cover that you would never bother to open, feeling a connection with another person through the well-worn binding of a book that perfectly matches one in your own library. You know a person better after seeing what they enjoy reading. A part of them has been uncovered in a few moments that hours of conversation might never have shown. For fictional characters, painstakingly crafted not only by book lovers but creators of that very art, a book in the hand can say more than pages of dialogue or exposition. The use Wharton makes of books in her fiction leads to a better understanding of her characters, her narratives, and of Wharton herself.

¹³¹ Hermione Lee. Interview. *The Eleventh Hour*. RTE Radio 19 Feb. 2007.

Appendix

List of books and authors mentioned in *The Age of Innocence*

Work and/or Author	Page #	Type of work	Context	Appearance in other Works by Wharton
<i>Faust</i>	3	Opera	“On a January evening of the early seventies, Christine Nilsson was singing in <i>Faust</i> at the Academy of Music in New York.”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73
<i>Monsieur de Camors</i> by Octave Feuillet	25	Novel	“It amused Newland Archer (who had secretly situated the love scene for <i>Monsieur de Camors</i> in Mrs. Mingott’s bedroom) to picture her blameless life led in the stage setting of adultery...”	
<i>The Marble Faun</i> by Hawthorne	29	Romance	“At Adeline Archer’s you could talk about Alpine scenery and <i>The Marble Faun</i> .”	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 28, 90
<i>Good Words</i>	29	Magazine	“In an unclouded harmony of tastes and interests they cultivated ferns in Wardian cases, made macrame lace and wool embroidery on linen, collected American Revolutionary glazed ware, subscribed to <i>Good Words</i> , and read <i>Ouida’s</i> novels for the sake of the Italian atmosphere.”	“The House of the Dead Hand”
Ouida	29	Novels	“In an unclouded harmony of tastes and interests they cultivated ferns in Wardian cases, made macrame lace and wool embroidery on linen, collected American Revolutionary glazed ware, subscribed to <i>Good Words</i> , and read <i>Ouida’s</i> novels for the sake of the Italian atmosphere.”	
Dickens	29	Novels	“...though in general [Mrs. Archer and her daughter] liked novels about people in society, whose motives and habits were more comprehensible, spoke severely of Dickens, who had never drawn a gentleman, and considered Thackeray less at home in the great world than Bulwer—who, however, was beginning to be thought old-fashioned.”	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 28

Thackeray	29, 40, 89	Novels	“...though in general [Mrs. Archer and her daughter] liked novels about people in society, whose motives and habits were more comprehensible, spoke severely of Dickens, who had never drawn a gentleman, and considered Thackeray less at home in the great world than Bulwer—who, however, was beginning to be thought old-fashioned.”	<i>Letters</i> 603 <i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 28, 58, 102, 49, 60, 70-1, 76, 91
Bulwer	29	Poetry, Novels	“...though in general [Mrs. Archer and her daughter] liked novels about people in society, whose motives and habits were more comprehensible, spoke severely of Dickens, who had never drawn a gentleman, and considered Thackeray less at home in the great world than Bulwer—who, however, was beginning to be thought old-fashioned.”	
Ruskin	29, 61	Essays	Mrs. Archer and her daughter consider “architecture and painting as subjects for men, and chiefly for learned persons who read Ruskin.” “Newland Archer prided himself on his knowledge of Italian art. His boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin,”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 52, 66-73
<i>Idylls of the King, The Odyssey, and The Lotus Eaters</i> by Tennyson	39	Poems	“[May] had advanced far enough to join him in ridiculing the “Idylls of the King,” but not enough to feel the beauty of “Ulysses” and “the Lotus Eaters.”	
Dante	60	Verse	“...Archer, having meanwhile put together a phrase out of Dante and Petrarch, evoked the answer...”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73 <i>Letters</i> 108, 257, 259
Petrarch	60	Poetry, essays, letters	“...Archer, having meanwhile put together a phrase out of Dante and Petrarch, evoked the answer...”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73
John Addington Symonds	61	Essays	“[Archer’s] boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee’s <i>Euphorion</i> , the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called <i>The Renaissance</i> by Walter Pater.”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 91

Vernon Lee's <i>Euphorion</i>	61	Essays	"[Archer's] boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's <i>Euphorion</i> , the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called <i>The Renaissance</i> by Walter Pater."	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 91, 102
P.G. Hamerton	61	Essays	"[Archer's] boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's <i>Euphorion</i> , the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called <i>The Renaissance</i> by Walter Pater."	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73
Walter Pater's <i>The Renaissance</i>	61	Essays	"[Archer's] boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's <i>Euphorion</i> , the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called <i>The Renaissance</i> by Walter Pater."	<i>The Letters</i> 101, 150
<i>Chastelard</i> by Swinburne	74	Play	"He lifted his head irritably when his sister Janey entered, and then quickly bent over his book (Swinburne's <i>Chastelard</i> —just out)."	
<i>Contes Drôlatiques</i> by Balzac	74	Humorous tales	"She [Janey] glanced at the writing table heaped with books, opened a volume of the <i>Contes Drôlatiques</i> , made a wry face over the archaic French, and sighed: 'What learned things you read!'"	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 204 <i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 9, 13, 47, 49, 53, 58, 61, 67, 70-3, 76, 90-2, 102
Mérimée	89, 173	Short stories, histories, plays	"...he [Archer] had often pictured to himself what it would have been like to live in the intimacy of drawing rooms dominated by the talk of Mérimée (whose <i>Lettres à une Inconnue</i> was one of his inseparables), of Thackeray, Browning, or William Morris." M. Rivière had "been advised by Maussasant not to write and had often talked with Mérimée in his mother's house."	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 20, 42 <i>Letters</i> , 278

“How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” by Browning	89, 123	Verses	<p>“...he [Archer] had often pictured to himself what it would have been like to live in the intimacy of drawing rooms dominated by the talk of Mérimée (whose <i>Lettres à une Inconnue</i> was one of his inseparables), of Thackeray, Browning, or William Morris.”</p> <p>“...but she was learning by heart “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix,” because it was one of the first things [Archer] had ever read to her;”</p>	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73
William Morris	89	Poetry, short stories	<p>“...he [Archer] had often pictured to himself what it would have been like to live in the intimacy of drawing rooms dominated by the talk of Mérimée (whose <i>Lettres à une Inconnue</i> was one of his inseparables), of Thackeray, Browning, or William Morris.”</p>	
Paul Bourget	90	Essays	<p>“...the books scattered about her [Ellen] drawing room (a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of the place’), though chiefly works of fiction, had whetted Archer’s interest with such new names as those of Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers.”</p>	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 104, 239
Huysmans	90	Poetry, fiction, art criticism	<p>“...the books scattered about her [Ellen] drawing room (a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of the place’), though chiefly works of fiction, had whetted Archer’s interest with such new names as those of Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers.”</p>	
Goncourt brothers	90	Naturalistic novel, social history, and art criticism	<p>“...the books scattered about her [Ellen] drawing room (a part of the house in which books were usually supposed to be ‘out of the place’), though chiefly works of fiction, had whetted Archer’s interest with such new names as those of Paul Bourget, Huysmans, and the Goncourt brothers.”</p>	

<i>The Shaughraun</i> by Dion Boucicault	98	Play	“He [Archer] thought the adieus of Montague and Ada Dyas as fine as anything he had ever seen...On the evening in question the little scene acquired an added poignancy by reminding him—he could not have said why—of his leave-taking from Madame Olenska ...”	
<i>Le Voyage de M. Perrichon</i> by Labiche	111	Play	“...he remembered M. Perrichon’s dogged and undiscouraged attachment to the young man whom he had pulled out of the glacier.”	
Poe	118	Poetry, short stories	“This struck from all three allusions to Edgar Poe and Jules Verne, and such platitudes as naturally rise to the lips of the most intelligent when they are talking against time and dealing with a new invention”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73 <i>Letters</i> 45 <i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 28, 30
Verne	118	Fiction	“This struck from all three allusions to Edgar Poe and Jules Verne, and such platitudes as naturally rise to the lips of the most intelligent when they are talking against time and dealing with a new invention”	
Herbert Spencer	120	Philosophy	“The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant’s incomparable tales, and a novel called <i>Middlemarch</i> , as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews.”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 94
Guy de Maupassant	120, 173	Father of the modern short story, novels	“The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant’s incomparable tales, and a novel called <i>Middlemarch</i> , as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews.” M. Rivière was advised by Maupassant not to write and had often talked with Mérimée in his mother’s house	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 12, 20, 75

<i>Middlemarch</i> by Eliot	120	Novel	“The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant’s incomparable tales, and a novel called <i>Middlemarch</i> , as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews.”	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i> 49, 60-61, 68-9, 76
<i>The House of Life</i> by Rossetti	120	Verses	“The box was full of things he had been waiting for impatiently; a new volume of Herbert Spencer, another collection of Guy de Maupassant’s incomparable tales, and a novel called <i>Middlemarch</i> , as to which there had lately been interesting things said in the reviews.”	
<i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> by Elizabeth Barrett Browning	123	Verses	“All this kept her very busy, and she had not had time to do more than look at the little vellum book that Archer had sent her the week before (<i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i>)...”	<i>A Backward Glance</i> 66-73
<i>Lady Geraldine’s Courtship</i> by Mrs. Scott-Siddons	197		“Doesn’t [Ellen] remind you of Mrs. Scott-Siddons when she reads <i>Lady Geraldine’s Courtship</i> ?”	
Michelet	255	History	“...Archer lit a cigar and took down a volume of Michelet. He had taken to history in the evenings since May had shown a tendency to ask him to read aloud whenever she saw him with a volume of poetry...”	

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