

INFINITE REGRESS: THE PROBLEM OF WOMANHOOD
IN EDITH WHARTON'S LESSER-READ WORKS

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Dedication

For Charles.

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Introduction

Edith Wharton's feminism is a unique brand of its own. It opposes any sort of radical feminism, yet it is still uniquely concerned with women's identities. Many women writers of the time, like Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, and perhaps most notably Kate Chopin, critique the authoritarian nature of gender constructions and the sexual inequality that resulted. These writer's works deal with women who successfully assert their sexual and material independence in many ways. Their social critiques were necessary and timely, since women had few legal or reproductive rights during this time, but Wharton adds a different perspective to gender inequality.

Unlike other authors, who are concerned with a woman's physical and political rights, Wharton's feminism is a bit more muted and veiled. In fact, it may be dangerous to describe Wharton as a feminist. In a letter to the mother of Ray Strachey, suffragist and author of *The Cause* (1928), Wharton states, "I, who think that women were made for pleasure & procreation, note with satisfaction that the leaders of the movement, judging from their photos, all look unfitted for the first, & many for both functions" (Lee 606). Wharton clearly distances herself from any movement advocating the political empowerment of women, and several critics have suggested that Wharton possessed an almost misogynistic attitude. William Tyler, for example, finds in her work "a systematic personal hostility" to women (94), and Percy Lubbock hears in Wharton's "remark that she was a 'self-made man,' a certain self-satisfied pride" (qtd in Goodman 1). More

recently, Janet Malcom has argued that Wharton was “the woman who hated women.”¹

It is clear that Wharton was not an advocate for women’s political rights, but it is nearly impossible not to see a cathartic concern for the treatment of women. What Wharton provides, then, is a portrait of female intellectual independence and agency that transcends limiting views of women’s worth.

Wharton’s heroines are ordinary women who fight to secure material comfort and create selves that satisfy their emotional and sexual needs. These women often find that the two goals are mutually exclusive, since society strictly dictates appropriate behavior. This code of behavior stems from their relation to men: as objects to be won, as wives, and as mothers. In many instances, women are not even aware of their prescriptive roles and confuse their search for self with a search for security. Material comfort does not nurture Wharton’s heroines’ inner selves and they feel a metaphysical dissatisfaction, often seeking to find contentment through divorce or affairs. What they find in either case is that the cure to their ennui is not material, but mental. Wharton’s women seek a transcendent self—a self that is not dependent upon popular notions of respectability; a spiritual state that is independent from any attachment to social imperatives.

The difficulty becomes how these women, as beings programmed to value marriage, celibacy, propriety, and conformity, might develop their own set of beliefs and live a life based on the new precepts. A transcendent self can be realized, but, as Wharton suggests, this self is most easily maintained in a space of social ambiguity. A woman who transgresses marital fidelity and gains insight into the social structure must live as an exile, risk surrendering her newfound independence to the pressure to conform, or find a

¹ Janet Malcom. “The Woman who Hated Women.” *The New York Times* 16 November 1986.

way to live within the system while maintaining the rebellious spirit. There are many choices, and Wharton presents many variations of women's struggles to reveal the hurdles they face and imagine ways they might exert agency.

The experience of the individual woman is necessarily unique, but with each new narrative, finer nuances of womanhood are uncovered. Edith Wharton might be criticized for using a similar narrative in a majority of her works in which a woman rebels against society and must come to terms with the consequences. This narrative framing transforms Wharton's body of work into a sort of hypertext that examines a variety of women's lives from slightly different angles, allowing a fuller picture of the ways women fight to construct a satisfactory self to emerge within the confines—physical or mental—of a social structure built by men. Though each woman might react differently to the same social stimuli, the same forces broadly affect each woman, and each of Wharton's stories reveals new insight that allows a closer investigation of women's lives, while more fully illuminating the social forces that affect a woman's ability to create a self that allows the individual a modicum of independence and personal satisfaction.

A comparison of three characters from some of Wharton's most widely read works—Lily Bart from *The House of Mirth*, Susy Branch from *Glimpses of the Moon*, and Undine Spragg from *The Custom of the Country*—serves to illustrate how the search for financial security compromises the fulfillment of personal agency and selfhood. Lily Bart finds herself without money or an immediate family to provide for her and therefore is unable to lead the life of leisure and consumption her forbears did. She has several opportunities to marry men with money—Percy Gryce and Simon Rosedale, for example—which would secure her social position, but she is unable to marry for money

and bring herself to marry Lawrence Selden, the less affluent man she loves. Lily's ability to choose love over security might signal the creation of her own system of values since she would in effect be rejecting the system of value that privileges material wealth over everything else. Similarly, Susy Branch marries Nick Lansing with the understanding that, after the money they received for their wedding is gone, either individual will allow the other to divorce for a more financially advantageous match. Though the two split for a while, each believing the other to have accepted this opportunity, Susy ultimately chooses to remain married to Nick and makes the decision Lily Bart did not—for love over money.

These two novels feature women who want a marriage that will provide them with the opportunity to remain conspicuous consumers, but they find themselves more compatible with men that do not provide them with the means to buy houses, wear expensive clothes, travel, and consequently secure them a high social standing. While Susy is willing to give up wealth for Nick—and find an arguably happy ending that is rare in Wharton's fiction—Lily is unable to reconcile her sense of self and desire for “a republic of the spirit” with her desire to remain among the social elite. Ultimately, Lily's conflict results in her death, which suggests the danger of un-reconciled selfhood.

Conversely, Undine Spragg, who might be seen as Wharton's twenty-first century feminist icon, is able to ruthlessly navigate the social structure and marry men of means: Old New Yorker Ralph Marvel; the European aristocrat Marquise Raymond de Cheles; and new money tycoon Elmer Moffatt. As Jean-Michel Rabate argues, Undine might be seen as “a Nietzschean heroine who is not afraid of destroying a semblance of order as she struggles for her independence and freedom. Her weapons are the only ones that

society provides for a woman – appearances” (196). His analysis is intriguing and Rabate himself admits that Wharton’s depiction of Undine is at best morally ambiguous. Though Undine’s disregard of what Rabate describes as order allows her to remain in the upper echelons of the moneyed class and maintain a degree of financial and marital agency, Undine constantly desires whatever seems unattainable and never creates a stable or moral self. Nor does she cultivate the ability to engage in introspection. If Undine’s character had been written by another writer, Rabate’s reasoning might be more persuasive, but when read in tandem with Wharton’s other works, women need more than enough money to assure them fulfilling lives. Wharton emphasizes that these women have rich, inner selves that require sexual expression, intellectual development, and some individual expression.

Lily’s, Susy’s, and Undine’s stories illustrate Wharton’s attention to the way each woman’s response to similar social forces affects her inner self. Specifically, many of Wharton’s women are forced to forge a self in conflict with a society that “compels women to sell themselves” (Orlando 11) as marriageable commodities. For Wharton’s contemporaries, who did not have independent wealth or a total disregard for social rules,² agency might only be found in marriage, divorce, or re-marriage. Consequently, Wharton’s heroines often confuse the search for a self with the search for stability and they must balance material security against a desire for authentic self-expression. Seeking

² There are women in Wharton’s canon that can be seen remaining within society, while ignoring social convention. Granny Mingott in *The Age of Innocence* can break many minor social imperatives. The ability to ignore social mores and avoid becoming a pariah, though, is dependent upon the individual’s possession of material wealth and prestige. In other words, Granny Mingott can live as she likes because she has been married to a wealthy man who dies and leaves her with a fortune and a respected name. Without this rare combination, women have little ability to disregard social rules and still remain in society.

financial security is a noble cause in itself, but the singular pursuit of money ultimately leaves the individual unfulfilled. It does not nurture Wharton's women's inner selves and leads to feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction.

In addition, women are faced with the prospect of creating selves that have been formed by patriarchal structures. As feminist scholar Muriel Dimen explains, "every time a woman goes for a walk, her mind and her body are invaded by a social definition of her femininity that threatens to disconnect her from her own experience" (37). In other words, modern western women are compelled to see themselves as objects of desire because they have historically been valued for their beauty and reproductive abilities. As mediums of exchange, they trade their independence for prestige and financial security. She concludes, "this is the experience of domination, the loss of one's sense of and wish for autonomy, as a result of processes that play on one's doubts about the reality and validity of one's self, one's perceptions, and one's values" (37). Wharton's women have been raised and socialized to value themselves as beautiful objects. Thus, creating an independent self requires remedial effort and grants knowledge that cannot be unlearned. As Ellen Olenska demonstrates in *The Age of Innocence*, a woman must face a metaphorical gorgon who "fastens their eyelids open, so that they're never again in the blessed darkness" (175). An independent self forged out of convention requires emotional pain and social castigation, and Ellen hints that darkness, or ignorance, is in many ways a blessing. Ellen is accepted by New York until she demonstrates her willingness to disregard the performance that was required of her, and she must ultimately leave New York because she understands the impossibility of maintaining her self among those who

demand conformity. A transcendent self is obtainable, but it is most easily realized within a space of social ambiguity.

Wharton's women must navigate a dizzying maze that requires them to balance financial security against personal satisfaction while battling social prescription in an attempt to form a self: a task that is difficult or nearly impossible. By presenting the reader with textual variations of women's struggles, failures, and rare successes, Wharton provides the reader with a keener sense of the unseen forces that shape a woman's experience. Ultimately, Wharton does not present a prescriptive formula for what makes a "good" woman, and there are no paradigmatic women in her canon that can easily be classified as "bad" or "evil." Wharton presents realistic, nuanced women, who embody characteristics that might be seen as traditionally positive and negative. In fact, Wharton relates in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, that even as a child she was only interested in writing about what she "thought of as 'real people'" (43). That never changed. She presents women who are faced with difficult circumstances who do the best they can to exert some control in an attempt to form a tolerable life. Success, then, must be determined by each woman's evaluation of her own happiness. This is not to suggest that the women do not have a responsibility to those around them: these women are not solipsistic. Rather this idea moves women away from any sort of temporal feminism that might condemn them as cowardly or complacent.

Edith Wharton is best remembered as the social critic of upper-class life. Blake Nevius asserts, "in a sense Edith Wharton's fiction represents a continuous effort to define the good society" (78), and Nancy Bentley considers Wharton's works "an

ethnography of manners.”³ Carol Wershoven observes, however, that “the label of social historian or novelist of manners seemed to minimize Wharton’s achievement” (12) at the time she was writing, a characterization that lessens the impact of her work today and neglects its universal applicability. Though Wharton did write a majority of her stories and novels about men and women in the upper-class, she wrote several notable works—“Mrs. Manstey’s View,” “Bunner Sisters,” *Ethan Frome*, *Summer*, and *The Fruit of the Tree*—that either feature working-class people or deal with issues affecting working-class individuals. Wharton’s depiction of working-class women and the struggles they face invites a comparison with her fiction about leisure-class women. This comparison demonstrates that, although the problems the women face are often different in specifics, they are similar in nature.

A short analysis of “Bunner Sisters” serves to demonstrate the democratic nature of her depiction of women. Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner run a small shop that sells needles, thread, hats, and other commodities their contemporaries find valuable. At the opening of the story, the sisters are “content with” their “humble prosperity” (167). Though not rich, they have built a life that allows them to live independently and relatively comfortably. Furthermore, they show an ability to create personal and interpersonal meaning through their enjoyment of simple pleasures: enjoying a modest party for Evelina, walks that are “the chief events of [Ann Eliza’s] life” (172), and the sisters’ “euphemistic name” (178) for their cherry brandy. The birthday scene is a particularly good example of their comfortable domesticity. Ann Eliza wears her best silk, and the two banter about their ability to give gifts and celebrate. Even though they

³ Nancy Bentley. *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

seem to worry about money—“Evelina’s seeming indifference was alive with unexpressed scruples” (170)—their relative security allows them to use the thought of material safety as a pretense and veil for their deep affection for one another. Though the narrator might describe the lives of the sisters as “narrow” (171), the narrowness of experience (travel, social engagement, etc.) determined by their relatively meager means and their low social status allows them a degree of independence that upper-class women do not enjoy. The women do indeed follow a set of social rules—Ann Eliza’s dislike of Mrs. Hochmuller being a chief example of what they find acceptable—but the rules are largely self-imposed. Furthermore, within the narrowness of life, the sisters’ relationship is an example of human connection that most of Wharton’s characters seek but never find.

Though the sisters value each other and their financial independence, they experience the same sexual desire and social compulsion to marry that upper-class women do. Indeed, in “the original plan of things, [Evelina] had been meant to marry and have a baby, to wear silk on Sundays, and take a leading part in a Church circle” (176). Both sisters believe that a truly satisfying life is dependent upon marriage, and Evelina “still permitted herself the frivolity of waving her pale hair” (169) in hopes of attracting a mate. Their chance comes when Ann Eliza meets a man, Herman Remy, from whom she buys a clock for her sister’s birthday. The introduction of the clock into their small apartment signals the sexual and social awakening of both sisters to the powerful pull of phallogocentric imperatives. The timepiece is representative of “a biological clock whose warning tick is ignored at the woman’s peril” (Fleissner 526). Because the woman necessarily embodies the “reproductive aims of the race as a whole” (526), the clock

becomes a reminder of the passage of time, which emphasizes the women's ongoing degradation as marriage commodities.

But the clock does not only represent motherhood. It also suggests an awakened sexuality. If women feel a biological and social compulsion to reproduce, they also feel a sexual desire that is independent of the need to be a mother. The sexual desire of the sisters is veiled in symbolism, but discernable. Ramy comes into their room to examine the broken clock—the first penetration of a man into their domestic space—and Ann Eliza feels the need to suggest to Evelina that “we might manage to buy a screen to hide the bed” (“Sisters” 180), a suggestion that is “vaguely embarrassing” (180). Their feminine abode, which they had always thought to be “so comfortable,” becomes “hateful” (180) because it highlights their untransformed sexual potential and consequent failure to become wives. In describing the beauty system Sherrie Inness suggests, “beauty is only constituted through the admiring and observing eyes of others, particularly through the gaze of men” (139). Therefore, beauty, which might also be read as desirability or sexual identity, can only be understood as a signifier created by a social system constructed primarily by men. It is not until Evelina and Ann Eliza imagine themselves as objects of Herman Ramy's gaze that they can truly consider their status as sexual commodities. The identities the sisters once possessed—founded upon bonds of sisterhood, independence, and love—are displaced by the social imperative to be desired by a man, which subsequently affirms their value as sexual objects.

The damaging effect of a woman's valuation as a commodity becomes apparent as the sisters' once close relationship begins to break down. After Ramy reveals that he really wishes to marry Ann Eliza, she feels for the first time that she and Evelina “at

last...were equals” (204). The social system pits women, even sisters, against each other and obstructs close, meaningful relationships. For the first time, Ann Eliza is able to criticize Evelina, and “was frightened at the insidious change in her attitude toward her sister” (205). Not only does Ann Eliza’s newfound dependence upon her desirability to a man erode her relationship with her sister, it begins to affect her relationship with her self. She can see the change and she despises it. Everything she found important, like family and independence, begins to become secondary to a socially prescriptive identity. After Evelina gets engaged to Ramy, she further reveals the hierarchy of women in society. Ann Eliza attempts to give Evelina advice, but Evelina states, “I guess a married woman’s the best judge of such matters” (207). A woman who can prove her value as an object of male desire immediately possesses more prestige than a woman who is not married. Ann Eliza’s advice, which has always been in her sister’s best interest, becomes irrelevant.

The damage the beauty system causes is most fully manifested when, after moving to St. Louis with Ramy, Evelina returns destitute and abandoned by her “drug-fiend” (227) husband. Evelina is ill, and Ann Eliza, the shop having declined in her sister’s absence, is forced to borrow money in order to get a doctor for her sister. Ann Eliza reveals, “the transaction had cost her one of the bitterest struggles of her life.” Borrowing money “had always been classed in her mind among those shameful extremities to which Providence does not let decent people come” (237). Self-sufficiency, which had seemed unimportant in light of sexual desire and the desire to marry, reasserts its value, yet it is too late. More importantly, perhaps, Ann Eliza loses her personal connection to her sister. During Evelina’s illness, she has a baby that lives only one day,

but during that time the baby is christened and Evelina became a Roman Catholic because she wants to “be where the baby is” (240). For Ann Eliza, this makes Evelina “a stranger...Ramy and the day-old baby had parted her forever from her sister” (240). The consequences of marriage and womanhood control Evelina’s destiny, even though she is still ultimately single. Compelled by social dictates to marry, Evelina is then forced by biology and religion—other forms of social control—to alter her identity and beliefs.

The story ends with Ann Eliza closing the shop after the death of her sister. As she ventures out in search of new work, she attempts to answer an ad for a saleswoman position. She finds that they “want a bright girl: stylish, and pleasant manners.... Not over thirty, anyhow; and nice-looking” (246), another harsh reminder of a woman’s worthlessness as an older, single individual. Ann Eliza has lost her sister, her store, her connection to humanity, and her financial independence. Being awakened to sexual desire is natural, but, in “Bunner Sisters,” Wharton suggests the damaging power of sexuality when co-opted by a system of social valuation that idolizes youth and beauty and privileges women serving prescriptive roles as mothers and wives at the cost of personal agency and self-determination.

“Bunner Sisters” presents a tale of working-class women’s lives, unlike those of the upper-class characters in *The Age of Innocence*, *The House of Mirth*, or *The Reef* Still the forces that affect a woman’s ability to form a satisfactory self are parallel. The material possessions and day-to-day activities of working-class women differ from those of women in the upper class, but their narratives are aligned by the oppression women face. The stories Wharton writes about women in the upper class contain themes that resonate for all classes of women and address the fundamental issues affecting gender

inequality. Wharton's determination to give a myriad of women's perspectives, connected by recurring themes, connects her works and explains her repeated use of a narrative in which women face the task of balancing personal conviction against social imperatives.

Much of Wharton's work hinges on women awakening sexually and emotionally. Alluding to awakenings raises the specter of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel of that name. Elaine Showalter claims that though *The Awakening* was censored, buried in obscurity, and remained "unread by several generations of American women writers" (34), the novel is a "revolutionary" text as it "went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation" (34). Though Showalter's assertion is debatable, as evidenced by its popularity and repeated anthologization, *The Awakening* has become a paradigmatic feminist text and might therefore be used as a sort of touchstone against which other texts exploring the development of womanhood and, more specifically the female self, might be read. *The Awakening* also becomes a sort of foil for Wharton's works because it deals with the impossibility of female freedom and the possible merit of escape through death. Chopin's heroine, Edna Pontellier, like many fallen women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature,⁴ dies. Several of Wharton's women do die—most notably Lily Bart—but, overwhelmingly, her heroines live. This distinction is important because it demonstrates Wharton's commitment to demystifying the forces barring the creation of a self instead of making a statement about women's positions in general. Therefore, an

⁴ The death of fallen women is well documented in literature in characters like Stephen Crane's Maggie, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, and Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary.

examination of *The Awakening* is useful in explicating Wharton's unique use of "awakening" in her works.

From Chopin's title, the concept of awakening, or returning to consciousness from a sleep or from ignorance, has served metaphorically to describe the emergence of socially aware womanhood. Indeed, awakening is the perfect signifier of the first step necessary if a woman is to gain emotional independence. In a system that perpetuates "certain stereotypes of feminine beauty" (Inness 136); that impresses female bodies with the "conviction of lack, insufficiency, [and] of never being good enough" (Jagger and Bordo 14); and that emphasizes worth only "in the eye of the male beholder" (Sweeny 140), social self-awareness is paramount if a woman is to have any chance of creating an independent self.

Edna Pontellier becomes aware that her self is a product of social construction. She finds that her identity has been inscribed through gendered socialization, and she must work "daily casting aside that fictitious self which she [assumed] like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Chopin, 75). Edna refers specifically to a "fictitious self," which implies an opposition to the authentic self. Her fictitious self is defined by her duty as a mother, wife, and woman, so to cast off these prescriptive roles, she feels she must shed these identities. If we consider that Edna's life ends⁵ when it becomes apparent that she cannot be the person she wishes to be, the construction of an authentic self in her contemporary society seems impossible. Peter Ramos attributes her death to a "search for an unrestricting, undefined and, ultimately, impossible state—a freedom from identity" (147). Ramos supposes that Edna's life ends because she lacks a

⁵ Scholars debate whether Edna's death can be accurately called suicide. If Edna does not swim out to intentionally end her life, suicide might not be an appropriate term.

readily available identity, but identity is not necessarily the problem: her unavoidable socialization and consequent inscription as wife and mother is. As Katherine Kearns reveals in "The Nullification of Edna Pontellier," "she is awakened to the damning imperative of a sensuality which repudiates her intellectual, spiritual, and artistic worth as they are defined within the system to which she subscribes" (63). This system bases her worth upon her ability to effectively play wife and mother, and her art and womanhood cannot coexist because the former must be subordinate to the latter. Consequently, to assert agency she casts off her womanhood and adopts the only other identity that is available to her: manhood.

Edna's dissatisfaction and death might then be seen as a conflict of two opposing poles of gender identity, which Susan Bordo describes. Men are generally seen as "individualizing..., connoting autonomy, agency, and singularity," the "kind of adult who is responsible for himself and no one else" (39). Conversely, women form an identity through "relatedness," which "then connotes the personal and the interpersonal, the particular and the pragmatic, care and nurturance, an invisible, ephemeral process of feeling." Therefore, relatedness "paradoxically represent[s] a dependency and loss of self" (39). As Edna demonstrates, neither identity is acceptable. Her relatedness to her children and husband, who are in her last thoughts, prevent her from ever finding a truly individualized self. The solution, then, is "relatedness in tension with individualizing," which "might produce another, although rarely realized, cultural ideal of personhood: a person simultaneously distinct, autonomous, and related to others" (47). Edna Pontellier, who is unable to imagine a possible self that exists within her society, provides no hint that a "transcendent self" might be formed.

Wharton was aware that women were often seen as commodities. Emily Orlando suggests that “[Wharton] exposes and interrogates the way in which women are represented as objects rather than agents, as voices that are secondary, not primary” (9). The complex net of social obligations and taboos that govern how a woman might act severely limits the amount of agency she might exert. Just as Edna Pontellier might leave her children and live independently, Wharton’s heroines might also exercise free will. But free will is not the same as agency. Lydia Tillotson aptly demonstrates in “Souls Belated” that her divorce and subsequent flight with her lover turn out to be nothing more than “another form of deception” (981). Edna Pontellier can “awaken” and begin to form a new self, but ultimately she lacks agency because she cannot maintain a satisfactory “self” within the bounds of society. Likewise, Lydia must ultimately reintegrate herself into the society she fled from because she cannot create an alternate value system based on personal conviction, which might allow her to escape the draw of respectability. In effect, Lydia and Edna illustrate the two choices society proffers women: conform or die. And these are the choices Wharton’s characters face. A third state of being that Wharton proposes—albeit a difficult one to attain—is the development of a “transcendent self.”

Wharton’s notion of the transcendent self is most directly addressed in *The House of Mirth*. In a conversation between Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden, Selden describes “freedom” as freedom “from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit” (68). Freedom from everything necessarily lies in a relinquishing of attachment: in Lily and Selden’s case, the attachment to social status and how material wealth manipulates the individual’s valuation of his or her self. Creating a republic of the spirit, or a self,

requires the individual to create some sort of headspace in which he or she can exist apart from socially constructed institutions while existing inextricably within them.

Transcendent selfhood, then, might also be defined as the point of tension Bordo describes: the point between relatedness and individualizing.

Ultimately, Wharton's use of the awakening metaphor operates much like Chopin's. Women recognize sexual desire and their inability to act on the desire in ways of their own choosing. But Wharton's use of awakening also suggests a need to awaken to the reality of inequality. Dying is an option that might even be interpreted as an act of agency, but for those who choose to live, reality requires the woman to acknowledge the temporary futility of her acts of rebellion. Women might affect changes to social mores simply by quietly living as they desire, and therefore defying the social system while nurturing their independent selves. "Infinite Regress: The Problem of Womanhood in Edith Wharton's Lesser-Read Works" will demonstrate how this tenuous passage might be achieved, though the path is difficult. In chapter one, "The Virtue of Ignorance: Burgeoning Selfhood and the Teleological Paradox in 'Souls Belated,'" I consider Lydia Tillotson's choices in the short story. Lydia confronts the imperative that women must marry and demonstrates the supreme difficulty of extricating oneself from the structure that has informed the self's prejudices and desires. Chapter two, "The Many Awakenings of Margaret Ransom: Transcendent Selfhood in 'The Pretext,'" concerns Margaret Ransom's creation of a transcendent self, which does not always require an outward act of rebellion. By internalizing the revelations sexual desire imparts, Margaret is able to forge a self, even if that self is fragile and cracks when exposed to the reality of fading beauty. Finally, in chapters three and four, I turn to a novel and a short story that employ

a similar narrative frame to analyze the effects of changing American prejudices. This leads to an examination of how the past, as much as the realities of the present, control the destiny of an individual who is unable to create a transcendent self.

The women presented are not machines who feel no connection to the culture they were raised in. Instead they feel remorse and fight to find alternatives within the structure that binds them, even at the cost of their personal happiness. These works provide several versions of personal choice for the female characters under consideration. The characters' ability to adapt to social pressures or not creates a kind of feminism that, although not progressive, points to less confining modes of consciousness and ways of being.

Chapter One:

The Virtue of Ignorance: Burgeoning Selfhood and the Teleological Paradox in “Souls Belated”

Wharton’s “Souls Belated” serves as a perfect front piece to a discussion of the way selfhood struggles under a regime that places women in restrictive circumstances regardless of their socioeconomic opportunities. The examination of one woman’s response to an unhappy marriage and the personal consequences of divorce demonstrate the insidious nature of social imperatives that construct and shape personal desire. “Souls Belated” suggests the limits of freedom when the individual is unwilling to completely throw off the compunction to appear respectable. As long as the individual places value upon the system that has formed his or her personal beliefs, some sort of compromise is necessary, and a unique introspection that leads to the development of an authentic self becomes imperative. Lydia Tillotson, a woman who leaves her husband for Gannett, a young writer, faces these hurdles and must choose to conform her self to the culture that fixes a woman’s identity in relation to a man, or leave and face exile from all that she has known.

Although Cynthia Griffin Wolff refers to “Souls Belated” as “one of Wharton’s best stories” (85) and R. W. B. Lewis finds it to be “one of three or four of her finest stories” (81), relatively little critical attention has been given to this work. As one of the first stories Wharton published, “Souls Belated” was a part of her 1899 collection entitled *The Greater Inclination*. This story, the critics concur, is about women’s “obligation” to marry (Raphael 243). But this simple gloss neglects the nuances that make this tale so

useful in explicating Wharton's understanding of the difficulty a woman faces in aligning her personal desire for sexual freedom with the imperative to marry. Blake Nevius suggests that Lydia Tillotson's "decision sets the precedent for her fictional successors...who sooner or later heed the voice of respectability, bow to the conventions, accept the compromise" (19). Nevius observes that much of Wharton's fiction highlights the individual inability to escape conventions without providing hope that these conventions might be circumvented. The question then becomes whether or not Wharton writes a sort of determinist fiction that professes the futility of human agency, or if it provides hope for the individual.

As Lydia's predicament attests in "Souls Belated," she escapes a conventionally stifling marriage only to discover that she and her lover have no choice but to duplicate the union she has just fled" (Goodman 6-7). Though dissatisfying marriages might be abandoned, the social structure that marriages stem from remains intact. Most of Wharton's characters are not content to be isolated from the friends they know and the communities they grew up in and want to maintain some sort of connection to. It seems, then, that Wharton writes for the more typical woman, the social woman, a woman like Lydia Tillotson who wants a divorce without losing her self-respect to the stigma that is attached to adulterers. But Lydia encounters the barrier that each and every woman in Wharton's fiction faces. These individuals live in a society that constructs women's identities morally so they impose guilt upon themselves if they transgress the social code. In other words, a woman's teleology, or her purpose in the world, is dependent upon her ability to adhere to a code of sexual purity. Once they cross the line in the sand that brands them immoral, they face not only physical exile, but also a metaphysical exile

from themselves. These women lose their ability to respect and love themselves because they cannot imagine an identity that transcends their preprogrammed image of the paradigmatic woman. Lydia Tillotson cannot separate her desire to be respectable from her desire to form an independent set of morals because the two are essentially irreconcilable. Wharton's criticism, then, is not aimed at Lydia for her inability to dismiss the society that brands her. She is not wrong for wanting it both ways: to be valued for her sexual freedom within the confines of New York. Wharton levels her judgment at the system that requires a woman to maintain her purity at the expense of a personally satisfying life.

Lydia recalls that before she met Gannett, "if she had never, from the first, regarded her marriage as a full canceling of her claims upon life, she had at least, for a number of years, accepted it as a provisional compensation" ("Souls" 966). Lydia reveals that she was not completely unhappy in her marriage to her husband. She was perhaps at some unconscious level aware that she was not fulfilled, but the material wealth and community were enough to keep her complacent: "she had made it 'do'" (966). Her dissatisfaction is not quite believable, however, and smacks of anachronism. "She had preferred to think that Tillotson had himself embodied all her reasons for leaving him" (966), but she is not even aware of her weariness before she meets Gannett. Her desire to preserve her "self-esteem" causes her to want to believe she made the decision for herself, but "the fact that she was free" was sweet, "not so much that freedom had released her from Tillotson as that it had given her to Gannett" (966). Lydia has, in effect, constructed her memory of dissatisfaction with her former husband and his family as an

excuse for leaving him and garnering criticism. This distinction is important because it shows that Lydia only begins to criticize her marriage and the life that “had been reduced to a series of purely automatic acts” (966-7) after she met Gannett. He is the catalyst of her awakening and transformation.

Lydia was socialized to be an extension of her husband’s life, and the fact that her life before her marriage is mostly a mystery serves to emphasize this point. “Coming from a smaller town, and entering New York life through the portals of the Tillotson mansion had mechanically” formed her view of what was normal, which reveals how she was raised to be pliable and unthinking. Lydia’s “normal” was defined for her by her husband, who testified “to his sense of their importance by the regularity... punctuality... and elaborate precaution against burglars and contagious diseases” (967), and her mother-in-law, who “dreaded ideas as much as a draft on her back” (967). Lydia became accustomed to what she sees as dullness after she met Gannett, whose “coming made” her life “appear like one of those dismal Cruikshank prints in which the people are all ugly and all engaged in occupations that are either vulgar or stupid” (967). Interestingly, Lydia imagines her life as a painting by Isaac Cruikshank, the English cartoonist. His prints are colorfully vivid and depict politicians and aristocrats as caricatures, who seem strained and unreal. Lydia describes the pictures as “ugly” and “vulgar,” but fails to observe that Cruikshank pictures were “graphic social satire” (Dorothy 13) that often criticized the lives of monarchs and the rich. The dislike Lydia feels for the paintings is therefore linked to the underlying disgust she feels for the boring and pointless nature of her life in which “lumbering about in her mother-in-law’s landau had come to seem the only possible means of locomotion” (“Souls” 967). She has literally lost the ability to

even walk on her own, which metaphorically demonstrates her willingness to be guided by upper-class conventions.

Lydia's description of her class' lifestyle as art is also a criticism of that set's uselessness in another way. Emily Orlando connects "the representation of women" in art "as akin to sexually overpowering them" (28). In other words, when an individual is depicted in art, she becomes an object to be observed by men. She is specifically objectified because women are valued for their beauty and sexual potential. The logic of this argument might be applied to upper-class society and extrapolated to a larger context. As a member of the upper class, Lydia feels useless because she is exclusively ornamental: she has no purpose or job other than to be a mannequin that displays her family's financial power. Consequently, the lifestyle she leads becomes a capitalist fetish that advertises the desirability of acquiring more money. Individuals, male and female, therefore become dehumanized, and Lydia is doubly overpowered. As a woman Lydia feels the male gaze appropriating her identity, and as an upper-class woman, she feels trapped by the necessity of being a beautiful, idle accessory. In both situations, Lydia is expected to be an unthinking automaton. She has not been raised to think as an individual, and without even the ability to imagine a different life, Lydia is an example of just how small a woman's world was designed to be.

Lydia's awakening comes at a price, and she "knew what would be said" about her: "she had heard it so often of others" ("Souls" 967). From the start of the affair, Lydia is aware that her social set marks women who break rules and that her reputation will suffer. To stray from the prescribed path makes her a perpetrator of sexual deviancy, and the result of her adultery and divorce marks her as a social pariah. Knowing what will

result from her infidelity, Lydia makes a conscious decision to run away with Gannett after weighing the personal costs of staying in a stifling marriage. That situation is untenable and she prefers to experience sexual expression, even if it means her contemporaries will temporarily reject her. She has tasted the stygian waters of New York upper-class complacency and rejected this life. If she were an Undine Spragg, she could marry Gannett after she receives a divorce and be reintegrated into society. But Lydia possesses a degree of self-awareness, which causes her to examine the system that makes a woman's reputation dependent on her relationship to a man. Once she embarks on this journey of self-discovery, she cannot turn back. She has become aware of "all sorts of invisible threads" controlling human action—especially those pertinent to her female status. The more she thinks about how socially constructed humans are, the less she believes in the myth of individualism.

Lydia first criticizes marriage in general and later regards remarriage as inauthentic. Even as an unenlightened socialite, she recalls how her peers' "eyebrows would emphasize the worthlessness of such enforced fidelity" (967), and she recounts how "the so-called rehabilitation of" a woman by re-marriage to her partner in adultery "seemed the only real disgrace" (967). She questions why marriage should be viewed as sacred if everyone knows that marriage is, in many instances, only temporary. She further criticizes how the myth of the sanctity of marriage dictates a woman's life. Gannett describes Lydia's divorce as "freedom" (969), but for Lydia, freedom from her past marriage is only the freedom to give her marital independence to another man. In fact, there is more freedom in being separated than divorced. While the two are in an ambiguous space in which a sexual relationship can be pursued without the possibility of

marriage, Lydia can, as Hermione Lee suggests, “establish new terms for a sexual relationship” (186). In this liminal space there is no gendered inequality or expectations, and both parties can feel connected without the boundaries of marriage compromising their freedom.

Lydia and Gannett are controlled by the imperative to marry. “She had put herself in a position where Gannett ‘owed’ her something; where, as a gentleman, he was bound to ‘stand the damage’” (967), but staying together and marrying simply to rehabilitate their reputations will turn their marriage into a farce and make it no more fulfilling than her marriage to her first husband. She feels that “what was needful was the courage to recognize the moment when, by some word or look, their voluntary fellowship should be transformed into a bondage” (968). Lydia’s idea of authenticity is radical. She wants to create a new kind of sexual relationship in which two people can be romantically involved until the moment they no longer find the relationship advantageous. Lydia feels that this is a more genuine relationship because it is not dependent upon expectations to create a legal contract binding them together.

Lydia’s desire to create a new system that normalizes sexual freedom is also a result of her knowledge of gender inequality. Being allowed to marry Gannett does nothing to assuage her guilt because it does not change the fact that she committed adultery and transgressed her essential identity as a woman. Sexual freedom would change, at the most fundamental level, the definition of womanhood. If being a woman is dependent upon a woman’s perceived fidelity, which is simply a product of her possession by a man, the removal of sexual taboos makes marriage unnecessary. Conversely, remarriage only further cements the necessity of marital fidelity and celibacy

because it places her in the same position that her marriage with Tillotson did: nothing has changed.

But, realistically, as Lydia and Gannett both realize, the space in which the two might conduct a sexual relationship without boundaries can only exist temporarily. It can only be maintained as long as the couple is isolated from marriage-granting institutions—in their case, New York and the United States. Gannett tells Lydia, “we shall have to live somewhere,” to which Lydia responds, “Je n’ en vois pas la nécessité!” (968-9) Her desire to “live everywhere” (969) is, as she knows, naïve. The two must eventually settle somewhere and, as Gannett reminds her, he “shall have to get at [his] work again” (969). Considering the impending end of their ideal relationship, Lydia “had the exasperated sense of having walked into the trap of some stupid practical joke” (968). After all the freedom she felt and the awakening she experienced in light of her divorce, Lydia understands the futility of her actions. She has escaped one unfulfilling marriage only immediately to be faced with another. Critic Jerome Loving describes “Souls Belated” as a story about a “protagonist...hopelessly imprisoned by the convention of marriage, if not the particular one Lydia Tillotson abandons in the story” (102). Loving’s abbreviated synopsis accurately describes the predicament Lydia is in. Lydia leaves Tillotson, but cannot escape marriage altogether.

Marriage also veils the truth of individual agency. She tells Gannett that the misery of the situation lies in “being made your wife in this way” (“Souls” 970). Marrying him after being his mistress transforms their marriage, not into an act of love, but into an act performed out of obligation. They do not even have the option of not marrying because without remarriage, Lydia cannot find atonement and will continue to

wear her scarlet letter. Thus, it seems that marriage is inevitable. But she reveals that she feels their marriage could only be real if “I’d known you as a girl” (970). If she had met Gannett when she was a girl, and not a married woman, she might have maintained the illusion of choice because she was still innocent of adultery. The problem then lies in Lydia’s personal knowledge of the emptiness of “till death do us part.” She has been programmed to believe that an authentic romantic relationship only exists within the marital bond, but she has been divorced and can no longer maintain the illusion of a permanent relationship. She has not only been divorced from her husband, she has been divorced from her conception of her self as a woman.

Gannett does not understand her objection to remarriage and supposes that they ran away together for love and not “to found a new system of ethics” (970). Gannett fully embraces that “life is made up of compromises” (970), but Lydia cannot condone the hypocrisy of their situation, perhaps because of their different experiences as man and woman. Gannett is expected to marry her in order to be seen as a gentleman, but he does not face the same consequences because he is not a woman. Her respectability would be destroyed by the affair, but his reputation would not bear a permanent mark.

Lydia has considered the affect of adultery upon her reputation and her self, and wonders, if “it may be necessary that the world should be ruled by conventions...why did we break through them?” (970). If, as Gannett suggests, conventions are inescapable and necessary, the two really have sinned by conducting an extramarital affair, thereby making a mockery of an institution that is sacred for its ability to prevent disorder. Lydia weighs the value of social uniformity against the rights of the individual to act in ways that are selfish because they invite anarchy. Lydia’s question, “Is it honest to take

advantage of the protection [conventions] afford?" (970), suggests the paradoxical nature of her rebellion. Any recognition of a social institution such as marriage condones the stupefaction of individual will for the sake of harmony, but the necessity of rejecting social imperatives preempts any inclusion in a social space that is familiar. In other words, reintegration into society would come at the price of relinquishing her burgeoning selfhood.

Any movement to formalize their relationship becomes impossible for Lydia as long as she views her self as necessarily independent from the desire to be respectable or accepted by friends and family. In some ways, as Hermione Lee suggests, Lydia finds "'free union' is a disappointment" (679) because it exists only in the liminal space the two inhabit. Furthermore, free union is disappointing simply because it is unobtainable. Gannett is open about his desire to settle down, and Lydia, as the hopelessness of her situation becomes apparent, also relishes any distraction that allows them to "be less abnormally exposed to the action of each other's thoughts" (971). The impending imposition of their union into a space inhabited by others causes Lydia to view the honesty and transparency of their relationship as an exposure or nakedness that has become unpleasant. Her awakening allows her to see the damage prescriptive identity imposes, but her powerlessness to change her situation suggests the merits of ignorance. The passion and closeness she experienced with Gannett were the stimulants that roused her out of complacency, but her love for him makes her vulnerable.

She retreats from their connection because she fears not only "unwillingly involving Gannett in the trammels of her dependence" (968), but also "look[ing] upon him as the instrument of her liberation" (968). Marriage to Gannett would make a

mockery of her newfound moral code—because it transgresses her new self—and sullies what she finds to be the beauty of their relationship: its unorthodox nature. The loss of the uniqueness of their relationship, which causes her to encourage an emotional distance, ironically spurs her realization that she values respectability more than she imagines.

Lydia and Gannett spend a night in Hotel Bellosguardo on the border between Switzerland and Italy, and Lydia finds that “the mere fact that in a moment or two she must take her place on the hotel register as Mrs. Gannett seemed to weaken the springs of her resistance” (971). Immediately after she re-enters a space in which American/English codes of conduct are present, Lydia becomes less sure of her desire to resist. The hotels that are “queer little microcosms” (971) that mimic New York intoxicate Lydia, and the familiar and comfortable atmosphere works like a narcotic that invites her to return to the path of least resistance. The English and American expatriates that inhabit these hotels, though nearer to the more liberal spaces of France and Italy, have created insular communities that reproduce their countries’ prejudices against adulterers and unmarried cohabitation. Though Lydia theoretically abhors the idea of being remarried to Gannett because it inadvertently reinforces a system that subjugates the individual will to legal control, she is perfectly willing to play the part of wife to avoid any scandal. Lydia has awakened to the difficulty of maintaining a self in an environment suffused with conventional notions of identity. Though she is able to criticize the social structure from the outside, once inside she shows little desire to throw off the pretense of respectability and face the consequences.

Lydia’s desires for a less raw communion with Gannett and her guilt for “having too long interfered with the fulfillment of [Gannett’s] promise” (972) as a writer, spurs

her to suggest they remain at the hotel for an extended period. Gannett warns Lydia that the hotel “is full of old cats in caps who gossip with the chaplain” (972) who would shun and embarrass the couple if they found out they weren’t truly married. Lydia plays the valiant hero, asking, “do you suppose I care?” (972), but there is little substance to her pronouncement. In fact, as the two get to know the members of the hotel, they begin to feel at home with the same inanity they left in New York. At the head of what Miss Pinsent calls their “little family” (973) sits Lady Susan Condit, the daughter of an earl, whose royal title gives the group ““a certain tone”” (972) of superiority.

Lady Susan’s key role seems to be maintaining her flock’s exclusivity by ignoring any newcomers on the basis that they are strangers. Miss Pinsent tells Lydia and Gannett that “one might almost say [Lady Susan] disapproves of [newcomers] beforehand, on principle” (973). This senseless snobbery reflects Lydia’s criticism of her family and friends in New York whose motivations “had been reduced to a series of purely automatic acts” (966-7), and whose lives were “carefully screened and curtained” (967). Lydia became aware of the purposelessness of her life after she met Gannett because it left no room for discovery, variety, or personal choice, yet she quickly takes up the hotel group’s prejudices as soon as she and Gannett are admitted. Both Lydia and Gannett are flattered because they were thought to be “charming and interesting” and “intellectual” (973). This flattery and the comfort of finding a surrogate family and community are enough to entice Lydia into giving up any sort of free thought, and she quickly loses sight of her newfound convictions.

Lydia and Gannett’s performance does not continue undisturbed for long, though. The Lintons, a man and a woman who arrive shortly after Lydia and Gannett do, are

immediately ostracized because “their looks are against them” (973). Though Miss Pinsent’s language indicates that both individuals have looks that offend Lady Susan’s conventional sensibilities, it is really only the woman who is described in detail. Lydia comments on the woman’s good looks and Miss Pinsent replies that it is just because “she’s too handsome” (973) that they won’t be accepted into their community. The woman’s “handsomeness” is most certainly a comment about her virtue. She is described as “loud” (973) and is held accountable for her looks because, unlike “other people” who “manage to” (973) mute their beauty, she embraces hers. Though she has recently championed the merits of free love, Lydia reproduces the prejudice and refuses to talk to the couple in order to protect the secret of her own infidelity, while securing her membership in the exclusive clique. The narrator reveals that “it was generally found expedient” (974) to follow Lady Susan’s example, and if Lady Susan owed it to the others not to speak to the Lintons, the others clearly owed it to Lady Susan to back her up” (974). The cost of being accepted is blind obedience, and the suppression of an independent self. Lady Susan, by right of birth, has the social capital to create the rules and include or exclude anyone according to her discretion. Lydia is well aware that the only way to maintain the guise of respectability is to follow the group’s dictates.

After some time, Mrs. Linton approaches Lydia in the garden as she is reading and reveals that her real name is Mrs. Cope. The man she is with is not her husband, but Lord Trevanna, an English gentleman, and Lydia recalls that the two “had figured in a flamboyant elopement which had thrilled fashionable London some six months earlier” (975). Mrs. Cope fears that his family, who is “always writing to him and setting him against” (975) her, will convince Trevanna to leave her before she can divorce her

husband and marry him. Since Mrs. Cope saw Trevanna talking to Gannett, she asks Lydia to find out what they spoke about. Lydia coldly refuses and does not relent even when Mrs. Cope appeals to her womanhood, asking, “you call that spying—for one woman to help out another?” (976). At last, Mrs. Cope tells Lydia, “I saw that you and I were both in the same box” (976), and threatens to tell Lady Susan that Lydia and Gannett are not married if she won’t get her the information she needs. In shock, Lydia “stayed there for a long time, in the hypnotized contemplation, not of Mrs. Cope’s present, but of her own past” (977). Though she attempts to play the dutiful wife in order to maintain her guise of respectability, she is in a similar situation to Mrs. Cope and again becomes cognizant of her hypocrisy. She admits that “in the last months” at the hotel, “she had lost the habit of introspection” (977), and re-emphasizes the narcotic effect of respectability on individual selfhood. Outside of the social structure, by contrast, it is easy for Lydia to maintain a degree of self-awareness and metacognition, but when among her social peers, she finds “how like home it had all grown” (977). Lydia’s attachment to “home” is the crucial component of her conundrum. She is comfortable with the people at the hotel and has an attachment to the class and prejudices of her set. She either has no desire to give up her old way of life or she cannot imagine creating another satisfactory one. The rules that prevented Lydia from divorcing Tillotson when she met Gannett led her to question the foundation upon which her whole identity was founded, and she found joy in the ability to experience unfettered sexuality. But this episode reinforces the impossibility of maintaining the self she developed in a space of social limbo within the boundaries of New York society.

Lydia tells Gannett about her conversation with Mrs. Cope and his response is only to say he is “sorry that you should have been exposed to all this” (978). Even though Gannett is aware that his situation is similar to Trevanna and Mrs. Cope’s, he expects Lydia to preserve the illusion of a happily married, respectable couple by pretending that they are as morally superior as Lady Susan. Though Gannett reveals that Mrs. Cope received her divorce papers that very same afternoon and the couple left by the evening boat, Lydia knows that her adulterous past might be revealed and the same fate might befall her. Lydia tells Gannett, “I’ve behaved basely, abominably, since we came here: letting these people believe we were married—lying with every breath I drew” (979). The performance has taken its toll and she feels the guilt of relapsing into the person she learned to despise when she met Gannett. Because her fundamental identity is dependent on a moral code that requires decorous action, she judges her worth by the same standards her New York contemporaries do. Lady Susan and Miss Pinsent, “the very prototypes of the bores” she left in New York, have become the symbols that demonstrate her love of respectability, “the one thing in life that I was sure I didn’t care about” (980). She craves the feeling of acceptance so much that she does not even “feel some pity for others who had been tempted in the same way” (980). Lydia’s interaction with Mrs. Cope wakes her from a sort of trance and allows her to once again think about the danger of complacency, but the internalized standards of behavior are so ingrained in Lydia that she is unable to apply her criticism of gendered behavior and actually make changes in her worldview. Because her conception of her essential self is so thoroughly entrenched, she is unable to imagine a transcendent self that recognizes the arbitrary nature of social mechanisms of control and must therefore choose to either suppress her desire to create

an independent self based on a personal moral code or build a new life in a more liberal location.

Lydia's guilt and judgment of herself grows when Gannett reveals that he doesn't "like playing the sneak any better" (979) than Lydia, and suggests they leave for Paris the next day to be married. To Lydia, though, their marriage would be "only another form of deception and a meaner one" (981). She might be a wife, but to those who didn't know she had never been divorced, she would be a fraud. Lydia has taken the commandment to be chaste and has followed the guilt to its logical end. Neither truthfulness nor deceit will solve the problem. The same issue Lydia and Gannett faced while pretending to be married at the hotel would be repeated in an actual marriage. Lydia explains to Gannett, "you'd have to pretend that I'd never been anything else" (981) but your wife, "and our friends would have to pretend that they believed what you pretended" (981). Since Lydia and Gannett were vilified at one time for adultery, any attempt to replicate a marriage becomes a performance that requires all parties to ignore their back story. Furthermore, since they don't believe in the sanctity of marriage, to marry is to become complicit in the continued emphasis on its supreme importance as a marker of respectability.

Yet marriage and divorce are of peripheral importance to Lydia; she is searching for something more universal. Five years after Wharton published "Souls Belated," her story "The Other Two" was released. In this short story, the protagonist Alice Haskett/Varick/Waythorn is able to divorce and remarry several times while maintaining her respectability. Lydia can do the same thing, but for Lydia divorce and remarriage highlight the arbitrary nature of social dictates. A woman is temporarily castigated and branded untouchable if she sleeps with a man other than her husband, but is rehabilitated

when she becomes that man's wife. In this way, a woman becomes objectified by her inability to exert sexual agency without continually remarrying. Morality is flexible and is adjusted to maintain social equilibrium. As "The Other Two" demonstrates, divorce might be normalized, but this normalization only extends the promise of more sexual freedom for women, while reinforcing the imperative to marry. In other words, like Lydia, a woman is only free, once divorced, in the sense that she is free to be married again. Lydia cannot therefore be rehabilitated until she is remarried, and the only other option is exile.

Lydia is disturbed by women's willingness to repeat the same rituals that promise permanent fidelity without any real belief in its authenticity. There is an element of dishonesty in constantly perpetuating the insubstantiality of any institution designed to be permanent. Lydia knows that sexual desire fades and wants the freedom to move on to someone else for both herself and Gannett. She is, in effect, advocating for free or open marriage. She tells Gannett that the real sin has been that "we've seen the nakedness of each other's souls" (980). They have been so close and have understood how each feels about the trappings of marriage and divorce that any attempt to marry violates the true feelings they have. In fact, she reveals that she feels marriage is designed "to keep people away from each other" (980). With expectations like "children, duties, visits, bores, relations" (980), the partners cease to be individuals and perform their duties like automatons. Like Lydia and Gannett, who fall into a routine at the hotel that allows them to ignore the fact that they are not married, marriage acts as a leveling agent, which blunts personal desire and creates conformity. Lydia has a difficult time accepting this reality when faced with a catalyst that prompts critical thinking—like Gannett during her

first marriage or her mistreatment of Mrs. Cope—but it is difficult for her to maintain her selfhood because she sincerely finds that when she is among those like Lady Susan, she “loves it” (980). Consequently, Lydia sees no way to maintain an authentic self while staying with Gannett, and she informs him she intends to leave him.

At this point, the narrative shifts to Gannett’s perspective. While focusing on Lydia, the reader is given a direct look at her struggle and decision-making process. Once the perspective becomes Gannett’s, her narrative functions differently: the reader sees a male perspective on a woman’s struggle. Gannett does not believe that Lydia will actually leave and reflects on the “feminine cast of her mind.” He suggests the real tragedy comes from “detaching her from the normal conditions of her life” (982), which is the source of her “insight” and “real cause of their suffering” (982). Gannett’s gendered perspective highlights the contemporary view of a woman’s proper behavior. The awakening, which has certainly upset Lydia’s worldview, causes her to question her ability to return to the life she cherishes. For Lydia it symbolizes her ability to be an independent person with choices and purpose, but for Gannett her developing selfhood only represents her unfitness to be a proper wife. A woman who questions her place threatens discontent, and his analysis again suggests the virtue of ignorance. Gannett wonders, “what would her life be when she had left him?” (983), understanding that “she asked so much out of life” (983). He knows that Lydia can do nothing to transform the role she is expected to perform, and he knows that she has little desire to be a reformer or exile. In effect, he feels she is better off not cultivating an intellectual life at all.

He further reflects on the fact that “even had his love lessened, he was bound to her now by a hundred ties of pity and self-reproach” (982). In some ways, Gannett acts

like a gentleman: certainly by his contemporary standards. He still loves her and is willing to do his duty. But to be a gentleman is to limit her independence. Though she thoroughly explains her desire to remain attached only by their continued love for each other, Gannett seems to have taken little stock in her assertion. He does feel “that he must let [Lydia] go if she wished it” (982), but also reflects as he watches her go, that though they were “not made one,” they were “bound together in a *noyade* of passion that left them resisting yet clinging as they went down” (982). His earlier assertion that his feelings for her have not faded seems less certain as he considers in rather unromantic terms the state of their relationship. Just as Lydia feared, he feels obligated to stay with her, even though the relationship is capsizing. His description of a relationship as confining and claustrophobic evokes Lewis’ description of “Souls Belated” as a tale “of the prison cell as life’s characteristic setting” (87).

Interestingly, their obligation to each other is only emotional. “There was money enough” for Lydia to live independently, but she is no Ellen Olenska who can forge a new and evidently satisfying life outside of the United States. Gannett pictures her—and not unrealistically—alone in the world, “walking barefooted through a stony waste” (983). In this description of Lydia, who is ultimately not able to reject comfort for an authentic self, the crux of Wharton’s view of women becomes manifest. Perhaps as Susan Goodman proposes, “Wharton knew how a woman could be grown-up—leaving a marriage could achieve that—but then she did not realistically know what to do with her” (143). Indeed, many of Wharton’s stories end with a woman more confused and hopeless or as blind to the forces binding her as when the work begins. But does Wharton really provide no hope for the women she writes about? What Wharton likely reveals is not the

final hopelessness of women's lives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the necessity of developing a transcendent self within or apart from a familiar community.

The last glimpse of Lydia reveals her buying a ticket to leave Gannett, but at the last minute turning back to the hotel "with slow steps" (983). Her return is not triumphant and in many ways might be read as a defeat. She has been unable to assert a self that will survive her return to New York, and she returns to an impending marriage with Gannett who "began looking out at the trains to Paris" (983) upon seeing her return. Her return might be read as more tragic than Edna Pontellier's death, for it might be argued that Edna's last act is one of agency that grants her the most acceptable future. But Wharton, an intellectual woman herself, understands the power of the mind. While Lydia's predicament is tragic because it exposes the dissatisfaction implicit in a life with "the same fenced-in view...the same keep-off-the-grass morality, the same little virtues and the same little frightened vices" (980) she was bred to observe, the fact that she does not die in the end suggests a grain of hope. Lydia's sexual and intellectual awakening has informed the construction of a new self that might perhaps find a way to transcend prescriptive marital norms and allow her a modicum of enjoyment. Indeed, as Margaret Ransom demonstrates in "The Pretext," a woman does not necessarily have to become an exile to build a substantial self.

Chapter Two:

The Many Awakenings of Margaret Ransom: Transcendent Selfhood in “The Pretext”

In one of Edith Wharton’s neglected short stories, “The Pretext,” Margaret Ransom is awakened to the possibility of sexual desire that leads her to a new and profound love of life that insulates her from the opinions of others. Her character suggests a different vision of female “awakenings” than Wharton’s other heroines who assume divorce is the answer to their personal dissatisfaction. Margaret develops self through an assertion of personal desire and agency within her marriage, one example of Wharton’s mature acceptance of women’s limited ability to live independently. Though a transcendent self can be imagined in this text, Margaret’s confidence collapses when another woman suggests that she cannot, as an older woman, be sexually desirable to a younger man. Her awakening exposes her to the price of sexual desire in a society that values youth and beauty.

“The Pretext” is a prime example of the possibility of transcendence and the difficulties involved in achieving selfhood. Most critics have either ignored “The Pretext” or have read it as an autobiographical reflection of Wharton’s relationship with Morton Fullerton. R. W. B. Lewis finds it to be “not her best” fiction (193) and “essentially an oblique statement about her relationship with Morton Fullerton” (193-94); Hermione Lee finds in Mrs. Ransom “Wharton’s own feeling of being too old for love, of returning to a ‘phantasmal,’ lonely life after the end of the affair” (348); and Susan Goodman finds “The Pretext” to be about a “moment of revelation and subsequent disillusionment” (88),

the result of the pain caused by Fullerton's withdrawal of affection.⁶ "The Pretext" was published in *Scribner's Magazine* in August of 1908, only two months after her last entry in "The Life Apart," the private diary she wrote in the form of letters to Fullerton. Biography aside, the lack of critical attention, perhaps affected by the rather dour reviews, neglects a story concerned with a woman's attempt to reconcile notions of age, beauty, and desirability with her sense of authentic selfhood and self-worth.

The first glimpse the reader gets of Margaret Ransom is a picture of her in motion. After meeting with Guy Dawnish, the younger man she loves, she rushes upstairs to look at herself in the mirror. Margaret's movement is important because it contrasts with her pace of life up until this point. She has led a life in which "there had not been much to hurry for, save the recurring domestic tasks that compel haste without fostering elasticity" (Wharton, "Pretext," 633). The stark difference between the elastic, youthful movement of a lover and the movement required of a wife at work aptly describes Margaret's first awakening: an acknowledgment of sexual desire.

Before Dawnish, Margaret's life was defined by orthodoxy, an orthodoxy mirrored by the university town in which her husband teaches: "Wentworth, with its 'tone,' its backward references, its inflexible aversion and condemnations, its hard moral outline preserved intact against a whirling background of experiment, had been all the poetry and history of Margaret Ransom's life" (638). As she describes, she builds her life upon unchanging, prescribed notions of respectable womanhood, an identity she valued. For example, "it had been the proudest day of her life when, without consulting her, [her

⁶ Other biographers and scholars address this story briefly, but in terms of the connection to Fullerton or as a story given to her by Henry James: Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance*, 187; Millicent Bell, "A James 'Gift' to Edith Wharton."

husband] had refused an offer of partnership in an eminent New York firm because he preferred the distinction of practicing in Wentworth” (638). Margaret’s revelation demonstrates that the Ransoms value moral continuity over urban sophistication and financial reward. Working at an elite law firm in New York would mean more money and status for the Ransoms, but in their estimation, preserving traditional values is a worthier object. This rejection of greater wealth and status in effect places them on a higher moral plane than those who simply seek a fortune and diversion.

Margaret’s approval of her husband’s choice of a job further reveals that she is satisfied with having no voice in the decisions being made for her. Being predictable, subservient, and unthinking is the measure of Margaret’s self. In a town where “husbands and wives gradually grew to resemble each other” (634), the absorption of her self into her husband seems to be the ultimate reward for those willing to perpetuate conservative models of respectability. In other words, individuality and metacognition are simply inconsequential to a woman of her set.

Margaret’s self and moral code, which had seemed of “much consequence” (638), are never questioned until she meets Dawnish and experiences sexual desire. As Margaret observes herself in the mirror, she finds a “face which had grown middle-aged while it waited for the joys of youth” (633). This causes her to see “how a little colour helped” (633); she realizes “why bad women rouged” (633). The bad women Margaret refers to are women who are sexual beings: prostitutes, adulterers, or simply those who choose to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage. In this statement the reader might find hints of Wharton’s biography, which might be important in deciphering the text. When Wharton would ask her mother about the nature of sexuality, she was told “it isn’t nice to

ask about such things” (Lee 30), and Wharton further revealed in *A Backward Glance* that a play in which any sexuality was discussed might be described as about “one of those women” (31), a variant of “women who rouged.” All sexuality is veiled and referred to only through euphemism. Sexual desire is acknowledged, however, even if it cannot be represented outright.

Wharton characterizes Margaret as not easily sexually awakened because she must battle “the specter of her rigid New England ancestry” (“Pretext,” 634).⁷ Having built her entire life upon respectability, a respectability that she endorses and loves, Margaret debates the validity of a personal desire that conflicts with her constructed identity and feels guilty for doing so. When her husband comes into her room as she looks in the mirror, Margaret “turned quickly to face him, lest he should suspect her of trying to avoid his eye... to what duplicity was she already committed?” (636). Her husband’s gaze neutralizes her erotic feelings. She might feel sinful because she has romantic feelings for Dawnish, but part of her guilt comes from simply wanting to feel like a sexual being—a desire that her respectability-loving husband does not satisfy.

Margaret’s sexual awakening is essential, just as it is important to consider the role sexuality played for Wharton. As Gloria C. Erlich suggests in *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, far from the twenty-first-century view of sexuality as something X-rated, sexuality or sexual education is a “life long process of coming to terms with the role of love and sensuality in human experience” (ix). Erlich reveals the healing and self-affirming possibilities of awakened sexuality, but an awakened sexual desire might be

⁷ Similarly, Hermione Lee in *Edith Wharton*, states that Wharton “liked to refer occasionally to the curse of a Puritan ancestry” (36). Wharton’s inclusion of such a strong link to her own life suggests her own disappointment at her inability to shake the feeling that sexuality should not or could not be discussed.

just as damaging to the creation of an independent self as sexual suppression. Susan Elizabeth Sweeny theorizes that for a woman, staring in a looking glass might “signify moments of self-recognition or self-discovery” (141), but they might also indicate a self-imposed “objectification by a male gaze” (147). In other words, Margaret’s awareness of her physiognomy might become the stick by which she begins to measure her new self. The danger lies in whether or not her perception of her worth is tied to the standards of the beauty system. As Jenijoy La Belle posits, “the mirror claims for itself a voice, a separate identity, and power over the woman who looks into it” (1), which suggests that there is no person who is immune to prescriptive identities: to be human is to be subject to social constructions. But self-awareness allows the individual a modicum of agency.

Margaret is subject to both possibilities that the mirror represents. What she first finds is that “her fair hair had grown too thin...her mouth was too thin...her lips were too pale; and there were lines in the corners of her eyes” (“Pretext,” 633). For the first time Margaret feels inadequate because she is aware that she might not be physically desirable to Dawnish, the man she loves. Margaret feels inadequate not only because of the changes time had wrought on her visage, but also because her life compared to Dawnish’s, “a life so rich, so romantic, so packed...with historic reference and poetic allusion” (640), was as “flat as the pattern of the wall-paper” (364). This comparison has nothing to do with physicality at all. Instead, she observes that she is “destitute of personal experience” (639), a critique derived from the static nature of her social position. In fact, as Els Van Der Werf observes, throughout Wharton’s fiction “cramped, dark, excessively clean, and unimaginatively decorated houses are symbolic of... a restrictive society in which Wharton’s adulterous women lack spiritual fulfillment and

emotional freedom” (192). Her love for Dawnish is therefore not simply about carnal attraction. Aside from sexual desire, his love awakens in her the desire to have her own experiences. She wants to travel, learn about history, and engage intellectual pursuits. The role sexual desire plays for Margaret, then, is invaluable because it allows her to think in opposition to socially prescribed behaviors. Before Dawnish, Margaret’s relation to her husband and to Wentworth defined her, but she now begins to see the personal cost of constructing an inner self without considering what she might find personally satisfying.

Margaret never feels the sexual desire for her husband that is kindled by Dawnish. In fact, she reveals that “a scrupulous traditional prudery had miraculously survived this massacre of all the privacies” (“Pretext,” 636). Margaret and Ransom were close in proximity and shared ideals, but in effect they were nothing more than roommates. Furthermore, Margaret describes Ransom’s physical body as “thick and yet juiceless” (637). Her statement suggests that he is not virile. A man’s masculinity might be directly tied to his ability to reproduce, but Ransom does not possess the ability to sexually stimulate Margaret, nor has he impregnated her. In the end Ransom becomes sexless and consequently functions as a reminder of what Margaret once founded her identity upon: respectability and prudery. This becomes a symbol not only of Margaret’s selflessness, but also her entrapment in a sterile marriage.

Throughout much of the text, Margaret describes Ransom with his back turned to her. Previously she was “proud to associate her husband’s retreating back...with backs literary and pedagogic” (639), but after meeting Dawnish, she finds “the look of [Ransom’s] back—heavy, round-shouldered, yet a little pompous” (648)—somewhat

repulsive. Her description of him from behind suggests the psychic distance that perhaps has always existed between them. When she thinks of him, they are not facing one another or interacting, and sometimes he is actually moving away from her. Though at one time she believed them to be in perfect harmony, she reveals that the relationship was founded upon shared conservative values and not a deep emotional and spiritual connection. Ransom becomes distant and impenetrable to both Margaret and the reader. In many stories (“Sanctuary,” “Souls Belated,” etc.), Wharton changes the narrative lens to give the reader multiple perspectives, but in this text, the reader is given only Margaret’s point of view, which reveals that Ransom, to her mind, is more an embodiment of ideals than an actual personage. Wharton’s preoccupation with Margaret’s point of view further suggests that Ransom, and even Dawnish, are merely ancillary actors, and the real thrust of the story lies in Margaret’s developing selfhood.

The event which leads to Margaret’s second awakening is Dawnish’s departure from Wentworth. Before he leaves, Dawnish meets with Margaret alone by the river on campus. Believing that Guy wishes to proclaim his love for her, but unable to imagine a possible relationship, Margaret asks him to “leave everything undisturbed...without trying to say: ‘It’s this or that’” (647). Margaret’s unwillingness to throw off her marriage to be with Dawnish might suggest that her newfound psychic freedom does not extend to her physical, and still outwardly orthodox, world. Consequently, it might be argued that Margaret has not really committed to creating any sort of “republic of the spirit.” In fact, Wharton provides many examples of women who run away with other men (Kate Clephane, Lydia Tillotson, Mrs. Lidcote), and these women do not necessarily find independence or personal satisfaction in their temporary escape from prescriptive social

roles. Instead, they find themselves simply social outcasts. Margaret thus provides a helpful addendum to Wharton's exploration of women's agency: By not asking Dawnish to run away with her, she either indicates a fear of the social consequences or an awareness of the ultimate futility of choice granted to her gendered social set. Whichever motive we might attach to her, Margaret demonstrates the possibility of developing an inner self.

Dawnish complies with Margaret's request to leave things unspoken and departs, leaving Margaret to wonder if "the moment in which she might have sounded the depths of life, for joy or anguish" (649) had passed for good. Where she had been at first ashamed of her "vague reminiscences of French novels and opera plots" (647) in proximity to him, she was only "ashamed now of her shame" (649). Margaret echoes her deeply ingrained prudery, but with the feelings that Dawnish's departure occasion, she begins to accept her blossoming sexuality, and more importantly establishes herself as an independent thinker.

Dawnish's absence initially causes Margaret to experience two conflicting emotions: first, that their relationship had given "her a secret life of incommunicable joys, as if all the wasted springs of her youth had been stored in some hidden pool and she could return there now to bathe in them" (650). But a second feeling arose soon after—that of intense loneliness and dissatisfaction with her physical circumstances. As time passed and "Dawnish continued to write" (650), but without much intimacy, she relates that she now knew how "the dead must feel thus, repeating the vain gesture of the living beside some Stygian shore" (650). Margaret compares herself to the shades of Greek mythology, mere ghosts of their living selves, attempting to find some pleasure but

unable to find any in gestures meant for those with physical bodies. Margaret's association with shades or ghosts begs a comparison to her earlier assertion that "ghosts vanish when one names them" (647). In the initial context, the ghosts are simply the intangible feelings of connection Margaret lavishes on Dawnish. But ghosts are generally thought to be frightening, and in many of Wharton's ghost stories, they are often "a metaphor of internal fears" (Zilversmit 296). Wharton wrote in her unpublished autobiography that after having a particularly bad fever as a child, she "was to enter a world haunted by formless fears...some dark indefinable menace" ("My Life and I" 16-18). Consequently, Margaret's feeling like a ghost might be read as her fear of never finding happiness or satisfaction again. Her belief that ghosts vanish when named also hints that Margaret has the opportunity to form a fuller self by facing her fear, anxiety, and alienation.

This is ultimately what she does. After a time, she finds that she was not "thinking of him at all" ("Pretext," 651), and the unmentioned declaration of love between herself and Dawnish was an acknowledgement "of the terms" that allowed "their transcendent communion to continue" (654). The elevated language used to describe Margaret's second awakening seems at first glance to be romanticized and self-protective; because Guy was willing to let her go, he somehow was solidifying the superior spiritual connection they had formed. What Margaret has discovered is not necessarily a more sacred connection with Guy, but a fuller realization of selfhood. For example, Margaret connects the place by the river where she last spoke alone with Guy to the love she felt for him, but after she ceases to think of him, she finds that that same place provides "an hour from which she went back fortified to the task" (651) of living. As the source of her

sexual and social awakening, Guy seems to be the object of her newly developing self, but what she has really found is that having been “extraordinarily loved” (654) has given her access to a depth of emotion before unplumbed, which ultimately makes her feel as if she has had experiences worth living for: she is no longer a ghost.

This realization lets Margaret find joy and satisfaction in an internal life. This enjoyment of the metaphysical evinces itself in her appreciation of daily “tasks, which had once seemed colorless and irksome” (654), and her appreciation of art in the context of her architectural studies. Wharton scholar Lev Raphael does not find Margaret’s involvement with Wentworth’s Higher Thought Club to be of value, however. He asserts that they are “no doubt a group of women like those Wharton satirizes in ‘Xingu,’ who pursue Culture in bands because meeting it alone is dangerous” (126). Raphael’s comparison of Margaret to the women from “Xingu” is intriguing but flawed. Unlike the women in “Xingu,” Margaret does not read to simply appear knowledgeable. She is learning for her own personal enjoyment and growth. In fact, she finds that her reading makes her feel “like some banished princess who learns that she has inherited a domain in her own country.... She will never see it, yet feels, wherever she walks, its soil beneath her feet” (654). Margaret has found that intellectual improvement gives her access to a mental capacity she never imagined. Her orthodoxy and the submersion of selfhood into a sterile marriage thwarted the discovery of her own capabilities. As she reads she finds that her mind, or “her inherited domain,” makes her feel strong. In reality, Margaret is only truly like the women in “Xingu” when she is a Wentworth wife whom some “called... intelligent” (645), a puppet of seemingly intellectual ideals. She asserts no measure of independent thinking and merely values knowledge because it suggests a

moral and intellectual superiority. Her ability to develop a new self is facilitated by her work in the Higher Thought Club, which demonstrates that mental independence creates in Margaret the agency to seize ownership of her own thoughts for the first time.

Margaret's third awakening, though not an awakening like the others, occurs as she embraces her burgeoning selfhood. Dawnish's aunt, Lady Caroline, arrives and asks Margaret to help her find the woman who caused Dawnish's advantageous engagement to be called off. Upon seeing Margaret, Lady Caroline asks if she "*could* see Mrs. Ransom at once" (656), apparently unable to believe Margaret could be *the* Mrs. Ransom she is looking for. Because Margaret is older, less attractive, and therefore less conventionally desirable, Lady Caroline clarifies and asks to "see Mrs. *Robert* Ransom, not Mrs. Ransom," adding, "I understood that in the States you don't make those distinctions" (657). Lady Caroline is unable to fathom that Margaret could be an object of desire and repeatedly insists that there must be a daughter-in-law or a "Mrs. Robert Ransom *Junior*" (658). Lady Caroline reveals the age-prejudice that prevents older women from being seen as anything other than wives or mothers. Margaret still feels sexual desire, but Lady Catherine's words transform her into a sexless entity according to age and social position.

Finally resigning herself to the fact that Margaret is the only Mrs. Ransom in Wentworth, Lady Caroline suggests that Margaret might still "help us to find out *who it is*" (659) and further states that "because, as it's not you, you can't in the least mind what I've been saying...if it *had* been, you might have been annoyed" (659). Logically then, Lady Caroline posits that Guy was using Margaret's name as a pretext for ending his engagement and states that "the important thing now is: *who is the woman, since you're not?*" (659). Lady Caroline's insistence on emphasizing the words—denoted by italics in

the text that indicate Margaret absolutely could not be Dawnish's object of desire—calls into question her true motives. Lady Caroline may be telling the truth and might simply be trying to find the woman Dawnish fell in love with while he was attending the University. Conversely, she might suspect that Margaret and Dawnish had some kind of relationship that affected his decision to break off the engagement. If the latter is the case, Lady Caroline might be attempting to force a confession from Margaret, or she might be manipulating the situation to convince Margaret that Dawnish could not really love her, effectively ending any interference Margaret might provide.

Ultimately, Lady Caroline's motives are unclear. What is more important is Margaret's immediate willingness to believe that she is merely a "pretext," "to screen someone else—or perhaps merely to escape from a situation of which he was weary" (660). Before her conversation with Lady Caroline, Margaret was aware that "she was protected by her age...and her [respectable] past" (635), but she could still believe that she could be seductive and seduced. The mere suggestion that she bears no sexual value, however, alters her perspective and causes her to feel that all the beauty she found in life and all the growth she experienced were based upon a lie. Her third and final awakening, then, is found in her recognition of the inescapable power of social conditioning. Margaret's hard-won agency is easily crushed by her willingness to internalize and re-impose the socially constructed beauty system that fetishizes youth and physicality. Awakened to sexual desire and reappraisal of social standards, Margaret now "identifies with others' uninspired images of her" (Sweeny 143). In other words, as an older woman, she has little value in the beauty exchange, and devalues her desirability to the opposite sex. Thus she believes her selfhood to be based on falsehood.

After Lady Caroline departs, Margaret climbs the stairs to her room and “remembered how she had sprung up the same steep flight after that visit of Guy Dawnish’s when she had looked in the glass and seen on her face the blush of youth” (660). The narrator refers the reader to the beginning of the story, but the reminder merely suggests regress. Indeed, Margaret feels “an unspeakable sadness” (660). She once again picks up the book on architecture and begins to read “slowly and painfully, like a child” (661). Her state of being is literally described as a reversion to immaturity, and the act of learning that a short time ago made her feel confident and powerful vanishes as the psychic pain of feeling unappealing seems to destroy the personal progress she has made.

Furthermore, after Margaret is led to believe that she is merely a “pretext” for Dawnish’s philandering, the reader is finally given a description of Ransom from the front. As she looks out of the window, she recalls that she would soon be “sure to see her husband’s figure advancing...she would see it for many years to come” (660). From behind, her husband is merely a figure in her life, but after losing her internal agency, his imminent approach becomes the unavoidable fact that “nothing was changed in the setting of her life, perhaps nothing would ever change” (660). The respectable, orthodox life she constructed again looms over her and exerts its pressure, but the pressure is now unbearable because she has tasted personal satisfaction and has begun to construct a self that affirms her desirability.

Margaret Ransom is an often ignored, yet essential character within Wharton’s canon because she demonstrates the power and possibility of creating a transcendent self that is not dependent upon an act like divorce or physical escape. While characters such

as Lydia Tillotson in “Souls Belated,” Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, and Kate Clephane in *The Mother’s Recompense* attempt to find personal satisfaction through divorce, remarriage, or running from society. Margaret demonstrates that these acts of rebellion do not solve the problems caused by phallogentric constructions of womanhood. Chopin’s concern with illuminating the problems caused by gender inequality was a concern of the women’s right movements, but as Wharton knew—and perhaps inadvertently encouraged—sexism was a daily reality for women of the time.

The ending of “The Pretext” suggests that Margaret still achieves a victory of sorts. She has awakened a self she did not know existed, even as she also discovers the price of wanting to be desirable. Margaret acknowledges both her sexuality and her desire for intellectual independence, but the reader cannot forget the ever-present social forces that determine a woman’s worth as an object of desire. Consequently, Wharton reveals the ultimate importance of constructing a self that is immune to and independent from chauvinistic imperatives. Within the beauty system, all women become less valuable in time. Therefore, Margaret’s singular psychological achievement in “The Pretext,” which allows a woman to find satisfaction and meaning that transcend social control becomes far more important than a temporally untenable desire to be beautiful.

Chapter Three:

Biological Imperatives: The Mother-Woman in *The Mother's Recompense*

The Mother's Recompense and “Autre Temps...” in the subsequent chapter provide two permutations of the mother-daughter bond in the wake of divorce, using a similar narrative frame. Hermione Lee reveals that “Autre Temps...” written in 1908—thirteen years before the novel—“would be reworked for *The Mother's Recompense*” (349). But the novel is not simply a longer version of the short story. Indeed, the two stories differ in crucial ways. In *The Mother's Recompense*, Kate Clephane is welcomed back into society because her daughter, Anne, becomes the head of the influential Clephane family, following the death of her father and grandmother. In command of a substantial fortune and free from her elders' social prejudices, Anne has the ability to invite her mother to return and reintegrate into society.

Mrs. Lidcote in “Autres Temps...,” on the other hand, returns to the United States to be with her daughter, Leila, after she divorces her husband. Remembering how difficult her own divorce was, Mrs. Lidcote hopes to help her daughter adjust to the social ostracism. Upon arrival, however, Mrs. Lidcote finds that Leila's divorce neither thwarts her remarriage nor her place in upper-class society. Though her cousin and close friend tell her that she will also be forgiven, now that divorce is no longer grounds for exile, she finds she is still shunned. Because Mrs. Lidcote's daughter is not in a position of social power, she is vulnerable to arbitrary opinions and cannot resuscitate her mother's damaged reputation.

Since these two works have striking differences, it is fruitful to examine them as independent works. Yet the similarities make them a prime example of Wharton's dedication to modeling similar stories of women's struggles in an attempt to explicate the forces that affect women's agency. The juxtaposed stories provide Wharton with an opportunity to examine how two identities are formed and smothered by a phallogocentric society that demands obedience to marriage over personal or sexual fulfillment. Though the prejudice against divorce is ultimately temporary, arbitrary social forces shape the women's lives, and the stories transcend the exigencies of divorce. They highlight the reality of oppression and invite awareness, while suggesting the cost of internalizing social prescriptions to the detriment of the self. Unlike Margaret Ransom, who finds some internal satisfaction, Kate Clephane and Mrs. Lidcote are unable to overcome prejudice, discrimination, and intrigue and subsequently return to Europe, having made little progress in forming more independent or transcendent selves.

The Mother's Recompense opens *in media res* with Kate Clephane in France, having lived there a number of years. A glimpse into her mind makes it apparent that her physical life and development of self were strongly molded by her connection to two individuals. The first individual is her daughter. Their mother-daughter relationship is irrevocably shaped by Kate's divorce from her husband and abandonment of her daughter. Kate reveals that leaving Anne "left her with a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibres, and yet a sense of unutterable relief, because to do so was to escape from the oppression of her married life" (*Mothers* 13). For Kate, giving up motherhood is worth escaping from a marriage that is unfulfilling, but her choice to leave her daughter complicates Kate's escape; initially the act seems selfish and perhaps unwomanly. Kate

might be seen as a monster, or she might be viewed as a victim of patriarchal tyranny who faces a choice of sacrificing her motherhood or her selfhood. Without the ability to have both, her actions become morally fraught.

Ann Cvetcovich, who reads *The Mother's Recompense* as a version of Victorian sensationalism, finds that "this kind of ambivalence animates a genre uncertain about whether to classify the sexual mother as 'transgressive adulteress' or as victim" (Cvetcovich 97 in Tamar Heller 138). Wharton presents Kate's character with a great degree of moral objectivity, and though the novel's theme aligns it with Victorian sensationalism, Wharton positions *The Mother's Recompense* in ironic opposition to literature that celebrates traditional womanly behavior. The novel's title is that of Grace Aguilar's 1851 novel of the same name, which Hermione Lee finds "was a pious, sentimental celebration of feminine virtues" (627). Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* might be read as a parody of genres associated primarily with women: sentimentalism and sensationalism. Kate's abandonment of her daughter, then, carries with it no judgment from Wharton. In fact, her flippant dismissal of sensational or sentimental tropes might signal her insistence that socially defined morality is irrelevant to the entrapped mother for whom moral certainty is a luxury. Kate is the only character who might rightfully pass judgment on her actions, a dynamic that suggests the personal nature of guilt and the independent development of a self and moral code.

Kate's act of abandoning her daughter reveals that she requires no journey to self-awareness: she already possesses a degree of metacognition. Kate admits that she left her child "to escape the oppression of her married life," and she realizes that she uses the euphemism "lost" instead of abandoned because no mother could confess that "she had

willingly deserted her child” (*Mother’s* 13). Still she knows “that was what she had done” (13) and is willing to face the consequences. She attempts to gain custody of her daughter a year later in a letter to her husband, begging, “Let me see Anne...I can’t live without Anne” (14). She wants to reclaim her maternal role but not the marriage bed. She wants to be a mother but not a wife. Though she promises to live with Anne anywhere with her husband’s sanction, she does not offer to become his wife again. Her request, proffered on the grounds of motherhood, is ignored. Nicole Tonkovich suggests that “when women refuse to cooperate in the regulated sexual circulation and exchange that perpetuates patriarchal marriage, they must be punished” (13). The distinction between wife/object and mother/creator is important because it highlights the nature of the society Kate defies. Women are valuable when they perpetuate not only the genetic line but also social conformity. In Kate’s case, wifhood trumps motherhood because she is unwilling to perpetuate social stability. Thus, the alienation of mother from child is used to punish the deviant. For most of Wharton’s upper-class women,⁸ the influence of the wealthy family trumps the individual woman’s maternal rights, and a choice between independence and motherhood becomes necessary.

Kate’s inability to remain a mother once she becomes a social deviant suggests “the problematic relationship between daughter and mother, in which the maternal realm ‘represents a horrifying stasis’” (Honer and Beer 15). In other words, motherhood often marks the end of the mother’s sexual identity. Socially, a mother has accomplished her task of perpetuating the biological line and is then required to act as a standard bearer of

⁸ Not all of Wharton’s characters lose their children when they divorce. Undine Spragg, for example, takes her son with her to France, where he learns to see the Italian Marquis as a father figure.

the status quo. There is no provision for a married woman's sexual desire to be recognized. Kate is not the only Wharton heroine who faces this dilemma. In "Madame de Treymes," Madame de Malrive finds that she is also unable to both divorce her philandering husband and retain control of her children. Both Kate and Madame de Malrive face exile if they attempt to invoke their sexual autonomy while in possession of their children. Sexual desire then becomes a tool with which misogynistic social standards limit female agency. Kate abandons her daughter, which is a source of regret and pain, but her freedom leads to the birth of a new self: "at thirty-nine her real self had been born" (*Mother's* 15). Ultimately the sacrifice of her motherhood is overshadowed by her relationship and subsequent loss of a lover.

The second relationship that shapes her creation of self comes from a sexually satisfying relationship, but not with the man she leaves her husband for. After choosing to leave her husband, Kate runs off with another upper-class New Yorker, but finds that the immediate dislocation does little to cure her psychic claustrophobia. She recounts that at first, when leaving with Hylton Davies on his yacht, "the asphyxiation was of a different kind, that was all" (14). Kate describes her feeling of entrapment as an inability to breathe. This word choice is important because it indicates that Kate not only feels trapped and suffocated, but also voiceless, which is often associated in Wharton's works with ghostliness. Later in the text, for example, Kate exhibits this phenomenon when she sees Anne with Chris: the "silence fell. Kate struggled to break it...but there was an obstruction in her throat, as if her voice were a ghost vainly struggling to raise its own grave-stone" (103). The surprise and horror Kate experiences while straining to comprehend the truth of the triangular relationship between herself, Chris, and her

daughter obstruct her ability to be authentic and honest. Consequently, silencing, suffocation, and voicelessness are connected with ghostliness, and Kate's asphyxiation on the yacht might be read in the same way as a direct reference to an apparition.

Kathy A. Fedorko explains in her analysis of ghosts in Wharton's works that "Wharton's Gothic is also about this nightmarish inability to acknowledge one's knowledge, to face the secret, to claim one's darker self" (85). Feeling ghost-like or silent often signals an internal struggle, a struggle to unite two incompatible desires or the inability to face truths that suppress the individual's ability to form an authentic self. Wharton herself writes in the preface to *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* that "what the ghost really needs is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry, but only continuity and silence" (9). Kate, then, who feels breathless as she sails away with Hylton Davies, is still silenced and oppressed because she has done nothing to change her situation or to face the source of her suffocation: the change is superficial.

Like Lydia Tillotson, Kate finds that personal satisfaction requires more than spatial distance, and escaping from her marriage does not cure her of her feelings of entrapment. This suggests that Kate's dissatisfaction with her situation does not lie in the physical realm but in the metaphysical. Because she finds that running away with Hylton Davies does not remove her from the influence of the society that condemns her, she is still literally and figuratively oppressed. In the end she leaves Davies and journeys to France where she finds not a transcendent self but temporary satisfaction forged from a relationship with a younger man, Chris Fenno.

Kate Clephane, like Margaret Ransom, is an older woman. Unlike Margaret, however, Kate has experienced sexual satisfaction. Satisfaction "taught...not by her

husband, nor even the lover with whom she made her escape from New York, but by a man 14 years her junior” (Horner and Beer 21), a man “who had loved and waked her” (*Recompense* 16). While Margaret Ransom’s rejection of sexual intimacy (which does not preclude sexual desire) works as the stimulant that allows her to criticize mindless chastity and subsequently her entire identity, Kate seems to develop her moral code in alignment with Chris’ standards. This is not to suggest that sex limits the creation of a self. Wharton herself found an awakening in mid-life through her relationship with Morton Fullerton. In a much-quoted letter she reveals, “You woke me from a long lethargy, a dull acquiescence in conventional restrictions...one side of me was asleep” (to Fullerton, August 26, 1908 in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*). Similarly, Kate reveals that “for the first time, when she met [Chris], her soul’s lungs seemed full of air. Life still dated for her from that day” (*Mother’s* 15). Kate’s emerging self is the product of a sexually satisfying experience, which allows her to recognize the narrowness of her life in New York; a life of comfort but also an existence that required the suppression of her sexuality and the automatic acceptance of other rules that make women respectable. Kate further asserts that “without him she would never have had a self” (15), which would be unproblematic if Kate could use her sexual awakening as a springboard for greater personal growth. Kate’s recognition of her sexual desire is healthy and necessary because it allows her to explore all aspects of her humanity, but she neglects to form her own opinions, which puts her in a position of dependence upon her memories of Chris. Her relationship with him dominates too large a share of her psyche. Even years after Chris leaves her, she still expresses her view of the world in terms of “what Chris [would] say” (17). Ultimately, it is Kate’s inability to form personal meaning independent of her

relationship to others—both Chris and her daughter—that prevents her from creating a fully actualized identity.

Kate's dependence on her relationship to others is further evidenced in her constant need to alter her life history. As the narration begins, Chris is the defining feature of her life, but once she sees Anne, she declares Anne to be "that other half of her life, the half she dreamed of and never lived" (60). Kate refers to the life she might have lived if she had chosen to stay married and raise her daughter, and she reveals that she can only imagine a life where motherhood and sexual freedom mutually exclude one another. Hermione Lee finds that "even when [Kate] is telling the truth, she still fabricates and hedges.... She can hardly control or understand her own feelings," and "her emotions for her daughter are as strong as those for her lover" (629-30). Kate has no concept of a life where the two aspects can coexist, and her two identities—lover and mother—are constantly battling for control. Kate may be a pragmatist, but her desire to lead two separate lives—the one she found with Chris Fenno and the one she gave up when she left her daughter—shows that her time abroad has not helped her to reconcile the two. The problem lies in the fact that, to be a mother, Kate feels she has to hide her past and adopt the same social position she gave up years ago. She does not return as the woman she has become, she returns as the mother she thinks her daughter requires, in effect placing herself in the same position she held as a wife.

Kate's life as a married woman is brought into even sharper relief when Anne returns "old Mrs. Clephane's jewel-box" (*Mother's* 63). As Kate examines her old jewelry she reflects on "the sight of one more odd survival in the museum of the past which John Clephane's house had become" (63). Kate's old home feels more like a

gallery containing fragments of her past than it does a place that she might call home. Furthermore, by returning to live in her former home, she becomes another artifact of her past life; Kate is stuck in the past even as she reclaims her place. The self she formed in Europe has been built upon an identity formed in opposition to New York society's cosmopolitan standards of conduct. As a divorced woman, she became a pariah, which allowed her to exist outside of the social structure and begin to develop her own moral code. In other words, while living outside of the United States, and outside of its moral confines, she feels no qualms about living a sexually free life with Chris. When she returns and dons the robe of motherhood, however, she forfeits that part of herself. Because she has not reconciled her past and present, she cannot feel fully alive or in sync with her present situation and simply assumes the proper role of a moral mother-woman. Though she had once rejected the role of wife and mother, she later praises "all these scrupulous self-controlled people" who "had taken up the task she had flung aside" (65). Kate then returns the jewels to Anne, citing the fact that "they're only a trust...till your wedding" (67), reenacting the same ritual her mother-in-law performed with Kate upon her marriage and subsequently affirming the sacredness of marriage and re-imposing the guilt of the morally suspect woman upon herself.

Kate's fractured psyche, evidenced by the slips in her inward narration, suggest that she is unable to imagine a self that transcends the social morality she was taught. For example, while questioning her old friend Fred Landers about Anne, she finds that during "the very act of thinking of her daughter," her thoughts "strayed away into thinking of Chris" (73). The two separate images, which are connected on a subconscious level, cannot coexist in her conscious mind, and they feel like a "sort of profanation" (73). Re-

embracing her maternal role necessarily prevents her from thinking of herself as a sexually vital woman, and by her own logic, a complete and awakened person. Consequently, Kate's inability to propitiate her past and present suggests that though she was willing to act in opposition to marital standards and leave her husband, that act did not create in her an ability to examine that code of morality and make independent choices. Indeed, before returning to New York, Kate goes to buy a new hat and finds the one she had chosen is "absurdly youthful, even ridiculous.... What would [Anne] think of me if I arrived in a hat more youthful than hers?" (16). As soon as Kate considers becoming a mother again, she internalizes social codes and immediately begins to form a new identity that embodies, materially and mentally, a respectable mother-woman. The youthful clothes she wears, which might symbolize her sexual energy, must be replaced with more conservative ones in order to perform the role of mother. Kate's impending return exposes her mutability. She still seeks to perform the roles prescribed for her, regardless of the cost to her independence.

Upon returning to New York, Kate finds she is adapting to the role of mother and finds a measure of comfort and satisfaction in her new life. As motherhood asserts itself, Chris, the symbol of her sexual identity, "seemed to have receded to the plane of the past: from his torturing actual presence her new life had delivered her" (63). Though Kate feels "old-fashioned" (77) in light of a new social permissiveness, the adjustment is not unmanageable and she seems willing and able to accommodate herself to the new climate. Though some critics—Lee (629), Beer, and Horner (35)—read Kate's eventual departure from America as a result of her inability to reconcile past and present standards of morality, the fracture springs from the divide between her identities as mother and

sexual being. Kate struggles to adapt to new technology and the “new women,” embodied by Lilla, but she would ultimately have remained with Anne, if not for the fact that her former lover is engaged to her daughter.

As soon as Anne tells Kate that she is engaged to Chris, Kate gets on a train to Baltimore and confronts Chris. Though Chris professes that he did not know Anne was Kate’s daughter when he met her, Kate insists that “nothing can change the facts, can change the past. There’s nothing for you now but to go” (*Mother’s* 135). Kate threatens to tell everyone of their former relationship if he does not leave, and Chris assents after he considers what the news would mean to his mother. There are many explanations for why Kate feels compelled to stop the wedding of her daughter and former lover. Nicole Tonkovich finds Kate’s attempt to keep Chris and Anne apart to be founded in her disgust of marriage. Tonkovich believes that “Anne will be condemned to follow a pattern of submission so similar to hers” (25) and that she will be miserable. Kate might wish to prevent her daughter from feeling trapped in a marriage, but divorce has become acceptable and Kate herself is willing to consider a marriage with Fred Landers. The problem stems from jealousy and her fear of her past and present colliding. In fact, a relationship with Chris, “a man who may, at best, be a fortune hunter” (25), was not un-recently the thing Kate desired most. Kate imagines the telegram that is actually from Anne asking her mother to return to New York, to be from Chris, the message “for which she had waited for two years... ‘*Take me back*’” (*Mother’s* 7). Kate’s intentions are suspect and a simple disgust of marriage is an insufficient explanation for Kate’s opposition to her daughter’s and former lover’s impending marriage.

Avril Horner and Janet Beer argue that “Kate... does not now love Chris Fenno” and is only “haunted by the desire that he awakened in her” (27), and Kate herself claims that “she didn’t love him any longer” (*Mother’s* 92). But neither Horner and Beer’s argument nor Kate’s own assertion is convincing. Indeed, Kate’s unreliability makes her statement questionable. Kate will, as Horner and Beer assert, always associate an awakened sexuality with Chris, since he was the conduit for her awakening, but he still remains an object of sexual desire. As she considers marrying Fred Landers, Kate compares the experience of seeing him in the mirror with the time “Chris had come up behind her, and they had laughed at seeing their reflections kiss” (231). It might be argued that comparing her new romantic relationship to her first satisfying sexual relationship is simply Kate’s way of processing the new experience, but this scene mirrors the scene a few pages earlier in which sexual desire and emotional longing for Chris are clearly evident. Standing “like a ghost” (221), Kate observes Chris and Anne kissing and wonders if she “was...jealous of her daughter” (221). Jealousy is not a feeling Kate would experience if she were not still in love with Chris, suggesting that her feelings for him have not changed as much as she professes. She still fancies him, and his marriage to Anne does nothing to change that.

The reemergence of the ghost imagery signals the impossibility of her re-assimilation into the social structure as a maternal figure and nothing else. While Chris remained an unobtainable part of her past, she was easily able to forfeit her sexual identity in favor of her maternal one. But Chris’ return forces Kate to face the convergence of her two identities. The singular role Chris played in her sexual past makes his union with Anne abhorrent because it will force her to relinquish the self that

she has defined in relation to Chris. Becoming her ex-lover's mother-in-law would force Kate to give up her sexual identity completely in favor of her identity as respectable mother, which would effectively require Kate to suppress her sexual past. Kate's erasure of her past would symbolize her return to the role of the same non-being—or dissatisfied being—she inhabited before she met Chris, an identity that was unbearable.

Her inability to acknowledge her self—a self that is dependent upon Chris but still a self she values—and her powerlessness to be truthful about her past are initiated by her guilt for abandoning her daughter and complicated by her desire to be a part of society again. Kate values her relationship with Chris and her sexual awakening, but her awakenings don't cause her to criticize the nature of a society that strips a woman of her motherhood for acting in opposition to its mandates. Some part of Kate, in effect, still considers New York home, even though it castigated and exiled her. Consequently, the perverse triangle formed by Anne, Chris, and Kate, labeled as “some incestuous horror” (221), makes it impossible for her to force Chris to stay away. Kate could only prevent the marriage by having to reveal her own past relationship to him and she is unwilling to do this. Chris is aware of this fact, calls her bluff, and returns as Anne's reinstated fiancé.

Kate realizes that “remaining silent about her relationship with Chris would place [her] almost in the position of a mother who colludes with her husband's seduction of her daughter” (*Older Woman* 23). She feels guilt for withholding information about her past relationship with Chris but fears losing her daughter again if she tells the truth. Looking for advice, if not absolution, Kate goes to a priest, Dr. Arklow, who tells her that he “should never want any one to be the cause of sterile pain” (*Mother's* 237). The thought of sterile pain—pain from which nothing positive comes—helps Kate to convince herself

that keeping the secret is the best course of action. Tamar Heller suggests that Kate's refusal to tell Anne about her former relationship is a "preservation of the daughter's purity at the cost of arresting her development" (140), but Kate's silence is as much an act of self-preservation as it is an act of maternal protection. Revealing the truth to Anne would unmask the real Kate Clephane, who is both mother and lover, identities Kate knows cannot coexist if she wishes to remain in New York. Kate is welcome as long as she buries the past, affirms social power, and performs her new role. She still loves Chris, but she also worries about her relationship with Anne and her own reputation. She reveals that "it was so sweet being her mother—I couldn't bear to give it up...it turned me once more into the person I was meant to be—or thought I was meant to be" (*Mother's* 257). Her divorce has finally been forgiven, and she does not want to be branded again by her sexual choices. She chooses to remain silent, but by choosing to preserve her relationship with her daughter, Kate perpetrates her own silencing and becomes complicit in taking from Anne the agency to choose her own course. Kate is indeed "arresting her development" ("Mothers and Daughters" 140) and "stifling her sexual identity" (*Older Woman* 23). Though she has already shown that she is willing to sacrifice her sexual identity in favor of motherhood, the choice, until now, principally only affected Kate herself. The real tragedy comes from the fact that she perpetuates the silencing of another woman, her daughter, by refusing to claim her sexual past and form a self in opposition to marital conventions.

In the end, Kate is unable to imagine a life in New York as mother to Anne and mother-in-law to her former lover. Fred Landers, who "had always loved her" (*Mother's* 217), proposes to Kate, and she nearly makes up her mind to marry him. Fred "might yet

be her refuge” (217), but not as someone she could love like she loved Chris. A relationship with Fred Landers only guarantees that “there would always be some one between herself and her thoughts” (243). He does not, for Kate, symbolize any sort of forward movement or self-development; he merely offers her the ability to remove the stain of adultery. She tells him about her relationship with Chris, and though he momentarily is shocked (“she saw the dawn of the old kindness” (259) in his eyes), he maintains that he wants to marry her. She has no secrets from Fred and therefore can claim authenticity with one person for the first time since Chris. In fact, she feels as “for the first time in her life she had been picked up out of the dust and weariness” (259). But Kate doesn’t see a relationship with him as an opportunity to form a self that is not based upon illusion. He simply becomes the instrument of her re-assimilation as a mother. Fred offers respite from personal turmoil and social expulsion because he guarantees her material comfort and an opportunity to be respectable again, but marriage to him also requires her to bury the memory of her past relationship with Chris by pretending, like Lydia in “Souls Belated,” that she had never been anything else but Fred’s wife. Becoming Kate Landers would solidify her emotional comfort but force her permanently into the role of a mother. She finds that a personal disinheritance of her past is unacceptable, and she must therefore reject Fred Landers’ marriage proposal and return to Europe.

Nicole Tonkovich reads Kate’s flight as an act of agency, which allows Kate “[to remain] outside the systems of exchange and retribution that characterize the patriarchal system Anne married into” (28). Kate does maintain independence, but at the cost of any sort of authentic self: the self she maintains is stale and does not provide personal

satisfaction. The narration ends in much the same place it begins. When she ponders Fred's invitation to simply "come with yourself", she wonders "what self had she left to come with" (*Mother's* 251). Without even the possibility of a renewed relationship with Chris or her daughter, the two people who gave her life meaning and purpose, she has even less self now than formerly. As the narrator intones, "much was changed for the better in Mrs. Clephane's condition; in other respects, she had the feeling of having simply turned back a chapter, and begun again at the top of the same dull page" (261). Materially, she has improved her position, but "she had got back into her old habit of lingering on every little daily act...spreading it out over as many minutes as possible, in the effort to cram her hours so full that there should be no time for introspection or remembrance" (264). Kate packs her life full of meaningless tasks so she does not have to think about the present and she cultivates a lifestyle that leaves little room for reflection or mindfulness. Kate is still dissatisfied and comes no closer to creating a life that she enjoys. In fact, her attitude towards life recalls the words of Samuel Newell in "The Last Asset:" "If you make up your mind not to be happy there's no reason why you shouldn't have a fairly good time" (602). Kate maintains comfort and apathy at the expense of truth and the possibility of forging real relationships.

Her retreat into the safety of social immersion acts as a sort of narcotic that allows her to avoid thinking about the past or the present, but at the cost of any future. Kate's final thoughts reveal that by refusing Fred's proposal and moving away from her daughter, "once at least she had stood fast, shutting away in a little space of peace and light the best thing that had ever happened to her" (*Mother's* 272). She preserves the memory of her relationship with Chris, but the preservation of this memory further

suggests her stagnation. “In choosing to return to her life abroad she is able to hold on to that time when she felt most alive, most herself” (*Older Woman* 34), but this places her in the position of an accessory to Chris’ awakening. By choosing to return without an internal change, she forfeits any chance at happiness. Adeline Tintner suggests that Kate “has a new identity, the woman without a traditional role. She is faced with the task of finding a new one” (126), but Tintner’s observation suggests the possibility that eludes Kate. She has the opportunity to create a new identity precisely because she is in a position of social non-being. But she does not attempt to create a hybrid identity and instead places herself spiritually in the same position she was in before she received the letter from Anne asking her to return. When she was forced from New York, she had no ability to be a part of a family. At the end, she has no ability to be part of her family because she fears losing relationships that she doesn’t really have. Kate lacks substance because she prefers the pretense of being a mother to actually taking a stance that would cause her daughter discomfort but would give her truth.

Unlike Margaret Ransom whose struggle at least suggests the possibility of eventual greater self-knowledge, Kate’s offers none. She continually works to cement “her resolve... whenever she began to drift toward new uncertainties and fresh concessions” (*Mother’s* 272). She actively works against her desire to forge a new self in opposition to her past because it necessitates a level of truth-telling and transparency. She is described as having many births and rebirths throughout the novel, but they function differently from awakenings or enlightenments. An awakening is only possible when there is sleep, in this case an ignorance of socially prescriptive identities. In this sense, an awakening suggests a permanent state of awakened knowledge. A birth simply connotes

a beginning. Kate, who is born when she meets Chris and reborn “on the gang-plank of the liner that had brought her” (56) to her daughter, is being reborn, but she never matures. She is trapped in a cycle of rebirth, but does not achieve any forward motion. Kate’s birth on the gangplank might also be compared to death—execution at sea. Kate’s series of births and deaths, social, emotional, or otherwise, speaks only of a cycle: an endless, karmic cycle where the individual might never reach enlightenment. For Kate births are deaths, and both connote stagnation.

Without any personal development or attempt to form meaning independent of externals, Kate re-imposes social exile upon herself. Her choice to willingly return to exile, instead of risking deportation if Anne were to find out about her relationship with Chris, might be read as an act of agency or as an act of cowardice. Kate could choose both to assert her sexuality and her maternal role and become a sort of feminist icon, but Wharton’s characterization of her does not present this feminist paradigm. Instead she presents a woman who faces an impossible situation and fails. Kate “had begun to be aware that she was slipping back without too much discomfort into the old groove” (262) of not thinking about what is unpleasant, which necessitates a kind of performance. She constantly struggles to reconcile her two opposing identities, but she never achieves any sort of authenticity. In fact, she states, “I seem never to have done anything but pretend” (250). Kate feels stuck between two unrealized selves, weighs her options, and chooses the path of least resistance, which happens to be the path featuring the least authentic self. Kate’s inability to exert control, evidenced by her continued silence, acceptance of her daughter’s nuptials, and her return to Europe, might be seen as her acceptance of a sort of social Darwinism in which she recognizes her powerlessness and is content to die a death

without ever having lived. She believes that she cannot maintain two contradictory identities as lover and mother, and therefore chooses to live a life that she finds most sustainable. Yet her fate is the worst punishment of all. Because society offers no solution to her predicament and she cannot imagine a transcendent self, she seizes neither identity. Kate's recompense ultimately becomes self-imposed and highlights society's ability to subdue a woman by playing upon her desire for community.

Chapter Four:

Womanhood Is a Trojan Horse: The Limits of Sexual Autonomy in “Autres Temps...”

Like Wharton's other characters, Mrs. Lidcote finds that an act of sexual independence imprisons the individual as much as it liberates her. Mrs. Lidcote willingly leaves her husband for another man and experiences a modicum of sexual satisfaction. But she finds that the code of morality, which is easily disobeyed in a physical sense, is not so simply discarded. Mrs. Lidcote attempts to assert agency through adultery and finds that though unfettered sexual expression seems to offer independence, it is also used to subjugate women. Women who transgress conventional morality are marked and persecuted. As Mrs. Lidcote discovers, the imperative to be moral is innate in her psyche, and she imposes as much guilt upon herself as any external source does. In other words, sex might spark an awakening, but it also presents a stumbling block because it pushes up against a woman's ethos and sense of self.

Kate Clephane demonstrates the danger of a woman overvaluing a sexual experience that does not lead to a change in ideology. She is trapped because she does not realize that her sexual relationship with Chris Fenno makes her unfit as a mother and sexual being. Though she knows the true value of sexual fulfillment, she has internalized the guilt associated with adultery and never transcends the conventional thinking that requires a respectable woman to be sexually submissive. Mrs. Lidcote finds, somewhat similarly, that the personal and public cost of adultery unfits a woman to be a fulfilled member of society. Once she has seen the hypocrisy of sexual suppression and felt its effects, it is difficult to re-assimilate and pretend that an authentic existence is possible

within the narrow limits imposed on women of her class. Paradoxically, even if a woman becomes aware of gender inequality and how this affects her ability to create an authentic self, it does not necessarily imply an ability to overcome the native system of belief. Though Mrs. Lidcote leaves the United States and lives as an exile in Europe, she does not develop a more liberal code of ethics. She might indeed achieve self-transcendence most easily as a social pariah in a space of social ambiguity, but Mrs. Lidcote is a product of American social conditioning and subsequently absorbs the ideology and conception of womanhood from the social structure. As Mrs. Lidcote's story demonstrates, the deep-seated, insidious nature of prescriptive identities makes true transcendence nearly impossible.

Mrs. Lidcote's tale begins aboard a ship on its way to New York, where she travels after finding out that her daughter Leila has been divorced. Remembering how "it took...a long time—to get used to" (63) the rejection of family and friends, Mrs. Lidcote loses no time in returning to New York. The name of the liner carrying her, the *Utopia*—utopia, from the Greek, meaning "no place"—foreshadows Mrs. Lidcote's inability to find a place either spiritually or physically that provides healing from the past.

Eighteen years earlier, Mrs. Lidcote left her husband and began a sexual relationship with another man. Wharton merely alludes to this union and provides little insight into the particulars of the relationship. Leaving out this background gives the story a different feel from that of *The Mother's Recompense* where such details are crucial to the reader's understanding. While Kate's narrative invites speculation about women's sexual agency, Mrs. Lidcote's relationship is simply a historical fact that has led to her exile. She recounts that "she had had what she wanted, but she had had to pay

too much for it” (73). Mrs. Lidcote did not find any personal liberation in her sexual awakening, and the awakening came at the cost of her relationships both to her family and friends. Consequently, “Autres Temps...” is the story of a woman’s struggle to survive in the face of sexual disappointment and social stigmatization. Focusing the story on social forces rather than on female sexuality per se also challenges Kate Clephane’s dependence upon a sexual awakening to create a self. Mrs. Lidcote has experienced free sexual expression, but finds that it does not liberate her in the way she might have expected. Sexual agency is important for self-realization and independence, but sexual acts do not ultimately free the individual.

Indeed, her banishment more than her relationship with any one individual defines her identity. Mrs. Lidcote is “*the Mrs. Lidcote*” (59), the fallen woman who dared to defy social norms and who is punished by New York for breaking her marital vows. This identity, though she “had learned to accept the fact that it would always be there” (59), looms over her, “huge, obstructing, encumbering, bigger and more dominant than anything the future could ever conjure up” (59). Sadly, like Kate Clephane, Mrs. Lidcote’s time in Europe does not alter her personal sense of morality. Mrs. Lidcote escapes from the realities of a sexually and emotionally unbearable marriage, but she is a product of a Puritan ethos that causes her to internalize the guilt that comes from an adulterous relationship. Because Mrs. Lidcote is unable to move beyond this system of belief, she cannot reassess her moral code and critique the limiting sexual mores that prevent her from finding contentment.

Wharton writes in *French Ways and Their Meaning* that “American women...are ‘developing their individuality,’ but developing it in the void...that comes of contact with

the stronger masculine individuality” (102-3). This suggests that the gendered environment in the United States that causes upper-class women to be valued as beautiful objects instead of intellectual beings, does not allow them the opportunity to develop a strong sense of self. Her privileging of “masculine individuality” is only one way for Wharton to speak about the value of experience reserved for men. Susan Goodman posits that Wharton was “considered an anomaly as a woman pursuing intellectual and artistic interests and as a woman writer publishing ironic, unsentimental stories” (1-2). Wharton’s valorization of masculine traits, then, is founded upon her knowledge of the intellectual emptiness of socially prescribed womanhood.⁹

Removed from America and exposed to a different standard of acceptable behavior, Mrs. Lidcote does not assume a European sensibility. Instead she internalizes her metaphorical scarlet letter and continues to determine her value by a system of belief that branded her an undesirable. Without an inner reserve of personal agency, she remains a sort of Hester Prynne, forever living in the terrible moment that defined her life. Having left New York as a self-described “exile” further suggests that she was never disenchanted with her society and still subscribes to her native code of conduct. Unlike Margaret Ransom or Lydia Tillotson, who find themselves dissatisfied with a system of prejudice that condemns the individual for resisting conformity, Mrs. Lidcote does not speak out against the same stifling regulation.

⁹ Wharton might be seen poking fun at women who pursue shallow intellectual lives as a way of emphasizing their social standing in her short story “Xingu.” The two women in the story who escape much criticism are the writer, Osric Dane, and the socialite who recognizes her literary ineptitude, yet still finds a way to embarrass the other women who are professedly literary. It might be argued that Wharton does not judge women who are products of a social system that perpetuates women’s ignorance. Wharton’s objective narration often asks the reader to consider the cost of gendered identities that cripple personal growth. Instead, she criticizes those that have pretensions but no real substance.

We should not condemn Mrs. Lidcote for her acceptance of marriage and morality, however. Mrs. Lidcote represents a class of unexceptional women who are not defined by a great romance or act of rebellion. They are women who have been shaped by heredity and social class and come up against leviathan forces that limit their independence. We might well see “Autres Temps...” as an example of naturalistic tendencies in Wharton’s fiction, given its emphasis on inescapable social forces. Although Wharton is not primarily known for her depiction of literary naturalism—like Stephen Crane, Jack London, or Theodore Dreiser—naturalistic elements in her fiction are well documented.¹⁰ Eric Carl Link points out that “a trend in recent scholarships has been to examine the relationship between literary naturalism and...women” (“Defining American Naturalism” 74). For Wharton, features of naturalism are implicit and become helpful in examining Mrs. Lidcote’s actions.

The title “Autres Temps...” initially indicates Mrs. Lidcote’s powerlessness. “Autre temps” translates as “other times.” This concept speaks to the temporal position Mrs. Lidcote occupies between old and new standards. After hearing of the ease of her daughter’s divorce, Mrs. Lidcote becomes angry, thinking of “the senseless waste of her own adventure..., perceiving that the success or failure of the deepest human experiences may hang on a matter of chronology” (“Autres...” 73). Had she lived a few decades later, her life would not have been defined by an incompatible marriage and she could have had emotional and sexual satisfaction while still retaining respectability. A second translation of the title, “other weather,” suggests a more complex reading of the text and the passage. The human linear understanding of time equates with forward motion, but weather comes

¹⁰ Nearly fifty articles have been written directly identifying elements of naturalism in Wharton’s fiction.

and goes, threatening or helping humans without any purpose. This suggests a more cyclical sense of being in which the individual succeeds or fails simply because of conditions over which he or she has no control. Mrs. Lidcote is a product of her time and faces the Herculean task of rethinking her conception of morality because she must reconsider how a valuable woman is defined on her own.

The unique use of ellipsis in the title also connotes a sense of the tenuous position of the individual human experience. In his study of “Edith Wharton’s Art of Ellipsis,” Jean Frantz Blackall argues that the ellipsis in the title “signals the backward gaze, the setting of the ‘then’ against the ‘now’” (154). While this explanation is useful, Blackall finds that ellipses in Wharton’s works often “invite the reader to follow up the line of thought, the consequences, the possibilities of a relationship, unassisted” (146). Used in the title, ellipses do more than postulate a split between past and present. They seem to emphasize the larger results of temporal and social change. They invite an analysis of the effect of change on the individual and the futility of individual will. The story’s title lacks a definite end, and the ellipses suggest that the changing and callous society with which Mrs. Lidcote contends is only a microcosm of the larger naturalistic environment. In his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Henry Adams discusses the status of the individual in an industrial world. He found, “one controlled no more force in 1900 than in 1850, although the amount of force controlled by society had enormously increased” (325). Though Henry Adams is an elite male, he describes the general shift in the view of the individual, and Mrs. Lidcote, as a woman, feels the isolation much more keenly. While she never had the power to reevaluate the position of women to ensure her value and happiness, the elapsed time has left her not only powerless but less significant.

Mrs. Lidcote, then, reacts to uncontrollable forces in an understandable way and simply resigns herself to her fate, which at least she “knew how to reckon with” (59). Though her past is comprehensible and familiar, her return to New York re-emphasizes the arbitrary nature of circumstance and her increasing insignificance within her social sphere. Upon arriving in New York, she finds that the social structure that dismissed her has embraced progressivism. Specifically, she is shocked by the ease with which an individual might get a divorce, which even allowed married men and women to “announce their [new] engagements before they get their decree” (64). The change allowed her daughter to easily divorce her first husband, Horace Pursh, and marry Wilbour Barkley the next day. Perhaps even more shocking to Mrs. Lidcote is the fact that “there’s no bad feeling” between the divorced parties (“Autres” 71). Furthermore, the divorce is of such little consequence that Horace willingly connects Wilbour with his influential uncle who might get him a secretaryship in Europe. In many ways this news bodes well for Mrs. Lidcote’s future. As Franklin Ide and her cousin, Susy Suffern, try to convince her, her own divorce should be forgiven because of increasingly liberal definitions of socially acceptable behavior.

Being forgiven for her crime would allow Mrs. Lidcote to become a true mother again, not at a distance but as a part of her daughter’s life. She might also marry again, something her friend Ide proposes the day she arrives in New York. Ide had been in love with her for years and hinted at the prospect of marriage after her divorce, but Mrs. Lidcote rejected his advances, having “seen what it did to one man” (69). The strain of being a social pariah destroyed the relationship Mrs. Lidcote pursued after leaving her husband. Feeling the impossibility of maintaining a romantic relationship under these

conditions, she began existing “only for her daughter” (69). In effect, Mrs. Lidcote represses her sexuality and becomes solely a mother: as long as she cannot be a respectable individual in New York, sexuality and motherhood are mutually exclusive categories. Because Mrs. Lidcote draws her beliefs directly from the New York moral code, she cannot imagine herself as a marriageable commodity as long as she is vilified as an adulteress. As long as she also castigates herself for her lapse of marital fidelity, she can still be a good mother, if only as an object lesson. Now that Leila is happy and does not need her, she imagines that she might “accumulate new stores of happiness” (71) as a wife and a reintegrated member of society. She knows that “the rich arrears of youth and joy were gone” (71), but she is hopeful that she might form a meaningful relationship with a man she loves, or at least likes, and find some comfort and stability.

Though Mrs. Lidcote finds joy in the prospect of coming home, redemption is bittersweet, and she finds herself “lonelier than ever” (67). Because her sense of morality did not evolve with New York’s, she remained in a sort of social stasis in which her taboos and prejudices remained the same. For example, while talking to Susy Suffern, who “used to represent the old New York” (66), she is told that “every woman had a right to happiness and that self-expression was the highest duty” (66). To the twenty-first century reader, it seems that Mrs. Lidcote should be a supreme defender of this idea, having been crushed for her desire for self-expression. But, in fact, as Susy Suffern suggests, her “point of view was,” and is, “conventional” (67). Mrs. Lidcote is willing to become part of society again if she can adjust her ethics, but on some level her forgiveness and re-assimilation into society are undesirable because they mean the loss of the social stigmata with which she identifies. She questions, where “is there a corner for

me...for a character fashioned by slower sterner processes and a life broken under their inexorable pressure?” (71). If there is no fragment of old New York left where even her sins still matter, the proof of her existence is nullified. In the past, even if she could not be a part of the social body, she could at least feel like she was connected by her trespass. In other words, as long as she is snubbed, she still has a community, even if, and precisely because, that community rejected her.

In addition, Mrs. Lidcote’s pardon not only nullifies her former identity, it minimizes her importance to her daughter. As long as Leila was unhappy—and one might imagine even more so if she had also been outcast because of her divorce—there is “one person who wouldn’t be able to get on without” (68) her. Like Hawthorne’s Wakefield, Mrs. Lidcote might feel consequential if she matters to one person in her life. But as Wakefield finds, “by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever,” becoming “the Outcast of the Universe” (82). Indeed, Mrs. Lidcote stepped aside from her social set and her daughter’s life and finds that she has little connection to anyone or anything because of her prolonged absence and the liberal social changes that have occurred.

She eventually arrives at her daughter and new son-in-law’s house and attempts “to fit herself into the new scheme of things” (“Autres...” 72). As she enters the drawing room, she imagines “a too-sudden hush had fallen on the assembled group of Leila’s friends” (73). Hopeful, but not totally convinced that she has been forgiven, Mrs. Lidcote still senses she might not be completely welcome. Her suspicions are founded, though she does not realize it at the time, and Charlotte Wynn, “whose mother had been among [Mrs. Lidcote’s] closest friends” is forced to leave Leila’s after Mrs. Lidcote’s presence

becomes known. Mrs. Lidcote acts upon the assumption, as Ide and Susy Suffern repeatedly assure her, that her divorce has been forgiven and logically believes she should take part in the gathering. But Lorin Boulger, an American ambassadress, is to dine with the family and Leila fears her mother's presence will affect her husband's chances of getting his diplomatic position. The conversation that follows, with veiled meanings and convoluted requests, recalls Newland Archer's observation in *The Age of Innocence* that "they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (38). Though Mrs. Lidcote finds that much in New York society has changed, the lack of honest communication and the desire to avoid unpleasantness remains. She finds that she is not quite as far from the old New York as she imagines.

Later in the afternoon, Susy comes to Mrs. Lidcote's room with a tea tray and tells Mrs. Lidcote that Leila "was afraid you were feeling tired" ("Autres..." 76) and thought it "would be cozier" (76) to take tea in her room. Susy waits on Mrs. Lidcote and explains how all of "our contemporaries" (77) are coming to dinner. She explains that the party has been arranged for Mrs. Boulger and says to Mrs. Lidcote, "You see, it's very important that she should—well, take a fancy to Leila and Wilbour" (77). Susy's "you see," asks Mrs. Lidcote to look past the words and understand what is being intimated: she is still unwelcome and would seriously hurt her son-in-law's chances of gaining his appointment if she is seen. Though suspicious, Mrs. Lidcote does not cooperate and insists that she is coming to dinner, even after Susy further emphasizes "it's actually on *your* account" that they want to go to Rome "so that they may get a post near you" (78). Without directly conveying her intentions, Susy buries her meaning and even resorts to

guilt by making Mrs. Lidcote feel she ought to be grateful that her daughter is working so hard to be near her. Susy impresses upon Mrs. Lidcote that she should be glad to hide herself away for her own sake. Mrs. Lidcote does indeed understand and with an “icy light-wave” (79) propels Susy out the door.

After Susy leaves, Mrs. Lidcote “could not recall...having ever had so strange a sense of being out alone, under the night, in a wind-beaten plain” (79). This naturalistic phrase emphasizes Mrs. Lidcote’s isolation and insubstantiality in relation to the larger social machine. Susy’s refusal to speak plainly demonstrates her friend’s loyalty to social convention, a convention that still excludes Mrs. Lidcote. Susy is willing to remain friend and informant, but she ultimately does not “defy the world for” (67) Mrs. Lidcote and still represents the group that rejects her. Susy understands that Mrs. Lidcote’s sentence is life-long. Instead of simply being honest, she colors her true meaning and essentially asks Mrs. Lidcote to pretend she has been accepted by society. Since the upper-class penchant for comfort at the expense of all else was preserved even as marriage was de-sanctified, Mrs. Lidcote must pretend that her exile has been revoked for the sake of emotional ease. Consequently, she becomes even more psychically isolated. Her identity, which was dependent upon her transgression, tied her to her daughter and her community. The easing of modern prejudices about divorce strips her not only of her ability to re-integrate into society but of her ability to live honestly. In other words, while in the role of divorce-stained woman, she at least had the option of living authentically. Now she is forced to play-act, even with her family, in an attempt to assuage their guilt and preserve the new status quo.

The truth of her situation, which she senses after Susy's departure, crystallizes when Leila comes to her mother's room and emphatically says, "you *do* look tired" (80). Leila is no longer the daughter figure. Her observation serves more as a command than a sympathetic observation, and the roles are reversed, making Mrs. Lidcote the naughty daughter who is told to stay in her room. Leila truthfully relates that her visitors know that Mrs. Lidcote is in the house, and that they "*all* understand" (80) why Mrs. Lidcote won't be at dinner. Indeed, the guests understand that Mrs. Lidcote has the right to stay in her daughter's house without affecting her daughter's social standing as long as Leila enforces her mother's outcast status. Leila has money and social standing, but she does not have power like Anne Clephane to affect any real change. Though Leila refuses to stand up for her mother, Mrs. Lidcote does not blame her. After blatantly asking if the guests "will think it odd if I *do*" (80) come down to dinner, she sees the blushing "conflagration" (80) on Leila's face and feels remorse. Mrs. Lidcote understands the consequences of disobeying social rules and submits to stay in her room, enjoining Leila not to "have me on your mind" (80). Realizing her new position, Mrs. Lidcote acts her part and remains in her room until her daughter's guests have gone.

After Mrs. Lidcote finds that she is still a social pariah, she is oddly relieved. Indeed, she "had the feeling that she had just escaped with her life from the clutch of a giant hand" (82). She immediately decides to return to Europe and her "little place in Florence...the one spot where the past would be endurable to look upon" (82). She has learned that all her "traditions... have lost their meaning" (85), and all the prejudices and customs that shaped her personality have disappeared. Her suffering is meaningless, and she has, in effect, become homeless and irrelevant. Like Kate Clephane, she finds it

preferable to preserve her memory of the past in order to perpetuate a self that no longer exists. Though the future looks somewhat grim, Mrs. Lidcote's flight to Europe might also be read as an act of agency. Like Ellen Olenska, arguably one of Wharton's more authentic and actualized characters, the only way Mrs. Lidcote can maintain any sort of authentic self is to separate herself from those who insist she pretend that she is no longer an outcast.

As she prepares to sail the next morning, Franklin Ide visits her hotel and attempts once again to convince her that the rejection she feels "is based on preconceived theories" (86). Ide's refusal to speak the truth marks him as another individual who wants Mrs. Lidcote to pretend she has been redeemed so he can include her in his life with a minimal amount of discomfort. Mrs. Lidcote realizes that to accept Ide's proposal would make her a woman who would be perpetually banished to her room, making excuses to herself and others as to why she cannot take part in social activities. Though she might pretend to be a part of society again, nothing authentic could ever really occur in her life. Furthermore, her marriage to Ide would force her into a situation similar to that of her first marriage. When Mrs. Lidcote was married, she was expected to act as if there were no problems, even though she was emotionally and sexually dissatisfied. Similarly, Ide asks her to pretend she is happily ignorant of her true position. In either situation, she is required to enact a performance based on a lie.

The thought of living a disingenuous life is more unbearable than experiencing the pain of reality. She feels as if "a painted gauze [had been] let down between herself and the real facts of life and a sudden desire seized her to tear the gauze into shreds" (87). Ide plans to dine with Margaret Wynn and her mother, so Mrs. Lidcote expresses her

intention to “go down and see Margaret Wynn for a half hour” (87). Ide implores her to let him “go first and see” (88) if they are available, but Mrs. Lidcote persists and Ide only drops the pretense when Mrs. Lidcote moves to leave the room. She sees the “blood rise slowly through his sallow skin, redden his neck and ears” (88) and feels the same pity she did for her daughter. Mrs. Lidcote turns the conversation away from seeing the Wynns, but has made her point and has shattered the illusion her friends and family sought to impose upon her. This act allows Mrs. Lidcote to preserve some authenticity, but it does not allow her to reevaluate her observance of social standards, which might allow her to reconcile the past with the present.

Returning to Europe does not provide a new start for Mrs. Lidcote. She has not overcome her attachment to her New York social identity, and she admits, “we’re all imprisoned, of course—all of us middling people, who don’t carry our freedom in our brains” (86). Mrs. Lidcote speaks directly to the need for a transcendent self that provides the individual with an ability to reevaluate social mores. If she were able to disregard the guilt imposed on her for her infidelity, she would be able to begin to build a new life that was not overshadowed by her past guilt. Though she possesses the habit of introspection, her self-awareness also demonstrates her conscious inability to change. Hermione Lee suggests that Mrs. Lidcote “is trapped inside her own past” (350), and “Autres Temps...” is indeed a story “about being buried alive” (351). Mrs. Lidcote is ultimately a tragic character, not because she is shunned and lied to about her position, though these circumstances make her pitiable. Her story is tragic because she does not have the ability to transcend her past. She understands that she is dependent upon outward stimuli and affirms that she depends too wholly upon the whims of a fickle, uncaring society. She

also understands that she might never escape. Her return to Europe, then, like Kate Clephane's, is a lateral move. She returns to the same life she left and is more isolated and alone because she no longer feels a connection with her daughter and cannot live authentically among her family and friends.

“Autres Temps...,” like *The Mother's Recompense*, invites closer consideration of what each woman achieves or learns, and further emphasizes the damaging power of an evolving but unfeeling social structure. Both Kate Clephane and Mrs. Lidcote finally exert a modicum of personal agency, but neither woman finds peace or mental liberation. Whether the exiled woman is seemingly accepted or openly shunned, both women find that they have little social worth because they were so long removed from the social machine and failed to evolve with its new demands. It might be argued that Mrs. Lidcote more than Kate seems to have accomplished something. Kate would easily be able to stay in New York and live a physically comfortable life, but leaves because living with hidden secrets is more bearable than potentially losing her daughter. Kate's secret-keeping protects her daughter from “sterile” pain, but this choice comes at the expense of her daughter's ability to make an informed choice. Mrs. Lidcote, on the other hand, returns to Europe; to stay in New York, interacting with friends and family, requires her to assume a persona that does not fit her. That is, Mrs. Lidcote affirms a self based on truthfulness and transparency. Even though she remains trapped in the past, she does so with authenticity.

Ultimately, both women find that they have little power to fight a complex social machine. While part of the larger body, Kate and Mrs. Lidcote are blind to their limited agency and the disposability of women who transgress. Once outside they find, like Lily

Bart, that “when one only fits into one hole,” she “must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap” (*Mirth* 308). Highlighting the social Darwinism that essentially kills the myth of the individual demonstrates that society provides little room for an individual—and especially a woman—to develop a self in opposition to social norms. Lily dies, unable to assimilate or evolve, and Kate and Mrs. Lidcote secure a kind of death in Europe, which provides comfort if only because it grants distance from reality and obscurity. These works might ultimately be considered unfortunate because neither Kate nor Mrs. Lidcote judges herself happy or even content in the end. Each internalizes her status as an outcast and builds a self upon the detritus of that valuation.

Though all women’s stories differ slightly, Kate Clephane’s and Mrs. Lidcote’s stories demonstrate the process by which female individuals are devalued. This sense of worthlessness, which permeates Wharton’s works, suggests the necessity of a sort of existential transcendence that enables a woman to live a fulfilling life within a system that objectifies, commodifies, and smothers her emotionally, sexually, and intellectually. Furthermore, these works emphasize the importance of stories about women who do not or cannot make a powerful statement, like Edna Pontellier. Wharton’s depictions of the lives of ordinary women show the difficulty of overcoming a teleology that makes a woman’s worth dependent upon her ability to reproduce conventional morality. Finally, Wharton’s cannon becomes a collection of stories about women who battle, fail, and persist in order to demonstrate the dignity and value of all women, not just those who fight for rights publicly and politically.

Conclusion

Wharton's portrait of women's agency is not immediately hopeful. Wharton ruthlessly depicts how expectations of marriage, divorce, and sexual conformity curtail her heroines' emotional independence. She provides little optimism that any one woman might change the social climate that trains women to be paragons of virtue. She even clearly opposes any political or legal liberalism like women's suffrage or abortion¹¹ that her contemporaries lauded as advances in women's rights. But Wharton's critique of gender inequality reaches much deeper than changes to legislation. Wharton demonstrates with her many narratives the root of the problem: sexual Puritanism. As long as a woman's social identity is dependent upon her chastity, she can never be an equal partner with men.

When read as a whole Wharton's canon demonstrates how firmly entrenched social behavior is in a woman's psyche. Every story that reflects on how a woman attempts to exert sexual agency, whether by running away with another man or by fanning a flame of independence within her marriage, further demystifies the myth of women's independence. Wharton's critique is still relevant today. A woman's identity is still largely dependent upon her relative sexual fidelity. While women might win the right to vote, like they did in 1920, gender inequality persists.

Wharton's women are driven by a desire for stability and happiness and imagine they can find both by indulging their desires. They might obtain wealth and prominence

¹¹ In *Summer* Wharton characterizes a woman doctor who gives Charity Royal the opportunity to end her pregnancy as an immoral woman. Though birth control or abortion rights might give women more control over their biology, Wharton does not reflect favorably on either of these in her 1916 novel.

by using their bodies as currency—like Lydia Tillotson in her first marriage who finds she can even marry again—but they do not find peace because they must still perform prescriptive roles and become respectable again through serial marriage. Their time as social pariahs shows them the depth of their bondage, and although they might be rehabilitated, the glimpse of truth often unfits them for their prior positions (Mrs. Lidcote being a prime example). Though these women’s cases might not immediately suggest positive change, but their ability to see the structures that define their lives at least suggests the potential for greater authenticity.

Wharton’s close examination of women’s struggle to create emotionally satisfying lives, then, presents more of a critique than a solution. Lydia Tillotson’s journey to create a self demonstrates just how trapped American women are in their conventional sense of morality. Lydia can logically determine the most equitable and tolerant system for sexual relations between men and women, but she cannot apply that system and change her fundamental identity as long as she remains within that society’s bounds. Ellen Olenska or perhaps Wharton herself might seem to offer some hope. Both were able to leave America behind and build new, less conventional lives in Europe. But both of these women were raised in Europe, and perhaps only those who were socialized in that more liberal climate can ever flourish there. As Kate Clephane and Mrs. Lidcote show, Europe might represent a more tolerant arena in which a woman can exist, but only those who, as Mrs. Lidcote suggests, “carry [their] freedom in their brains (“Autres” 86) can take advantage of European mores and truly develop transcendent selves. Take, for example, Margaret Ransom, who experiences an intellectual awakening through her

sexual desire for Guy Dawnish but crumbles when exposed by another woman to the standards of beauty and their direct link to a woman's sexual worth.

Sexual worth is so much a part of Wharton's women's identity that it has the power to destroy even the most powerful ties between women, and Wharton points out just how strong sexual identity is in the formation of the female self. Like the characters of Ann Eliza and Evelina in "Bunner Sisters" demonstrate, it is the awakening to sexual commodification that destroys the almost idyllic relationship between the sisters. Though Susan Goodman optimistically writes that in Wharton's fiction, "sorority flourishes under the women's competition, as they become allies in the process of reshaping themselves," a pessimistic view of Wharton's work is necessary. Her stories are designed to bring to light the forces that curb women's ability to form an independent self. By showing the many ways women's identities are controlled, Wharton demonstrates how change might be effected. Without realistically viewing the damage women do to themselves and their contemporaries, Wharton's critique would fall flat. The psychic pain and suffering her heroines experience illuminates the problems of gender equality at the most fundamental level. And until these women learn that much of their guilt is self-imposed, they cannot begin to form a new code of ethics that frees them to live more authentically.

Wharton's canon is ultimately not nihilistic, though. It is filled with caring and cathartic concern for her heroines. She shows how society pits women against one another by basing a woman's identity upon her sexual purity and subsequently creates a community of individuals who might find the corollary comfort of learning they're not alone. In addition, this sense of community also allows women to reevaluate their notions of womanhood by humanizing the "fallen" woman. The portrayal of conventionally

immoral women in literature, who are characterized without judgment, provides a visibility that asks the reader to reconsider what makes a woman valuable. An engagement with women's interiority invokes the reader pity and pathos—the ingredients necessary for social change to begin. Viewed in this light, Wharton becomes the scaffolding upon which modernist writers were able to stand.

Wharton herself embodies her belief in the possibility of a woman's authentic selfhood. Though she battled depression and pain when her relationship with Morton Fullerton fell apart, she proves that a woman might reject Puritanical standards of virtue, even if it means escaping to Europe. Her work, more than any of her contemporaries, locates the problem of female identity by providing such a close reading of the impediments that cause women to self-impose guilt. Her repeated telling of similar narratives proves that a woman, like herself, can break the rules without dying. The consequences of adultery are not imposed by some supernatural force, and the only real punishment comes from the woman's own valuation of her self.

While Wharton scholarship exploded in the 1980's, most of the criticism has been focused on a few popular texts. For the true impact of Wharton's canon to be felt, more critical attention needs to be placed on her lesser-known work. If, as I have shown, the many iterations of Wharton's narratives depicting women's struggle to create an independent identity are brought into focus, how we think about women and womanhood might change. Wharton's novels and short stories, when put into a conversation with each other, provide a lens through which the economic, sexual, emotional, and intellectual needs of women can be brilliantly illuminated. The everyday women in Wharton's fiction are just as important to the literary canon as other more radical characters who seek to

forcibly topple misogynistic constructions. All of Wharton's women who fail and crumble under the pressure of social conformity have voices that contribute to the greater understanding of what it means to be a woman.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

M.A. English, Indiana University Purdue University of Indianapolis, August 2015

Graduate Certificate in Teaching Literature, Indiana University Purdue University
Indianapolis, August 2015

B.A. English, Indiana University Purdue University, May 2013, with highest honors

Teaching and Research Interests

19th and early 20th century American literature, feminism, realism, gender studies, queer theory

Thesis

The Virtue of Ignorance: Marriage, Divorce, and Naiveté in Edith Wharton's Works
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jane Schultz, IUPUI

Teaching Experience

ENG-L 352: Survey of American Literature 1865-1914, Spring 2015
Teaching Assistant with Dr. Jane Schultz

Publications

"Gender Journeys: Exemplary Texts in Contemporary Young Adult Transgender
Fiction." Under review at *The ALAN Review*

Fellowships

Research Assistantship, Frederick Douglass Papers, 2013-2014, 2014-2015.
Duties: Research and write literary annotations, transcribe original documents,
verify transcribed documents against original, function as in-house copy editor,
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Awards

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, English Department

2013 Best Literature Student award

Conferences

"Working 'Gays?': Practical Applications of Queer Theory." Midwest Modern
Language Association, Detroit, MI, November 2014

Professional Memberships

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Spanish: intermediate reading and writing